

Human-centred design and the need for new ideas

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It is always an eye-opener to talk to people about their daily experiences, with a view to coming up with ideas for design.

Photo • Courtesy Marika Shioiri-Clark

The process of finding ideas for improving urban design so that it caters for the needs of children has to start with understanding what children and families want from their cities. Drawing on her experiences with IDEO.org and the Nike Foundation, Marika Shioiri-Clark shares ideas from India to Nigeria and the United States, and discusses how design teams might solicit ideas from people who are not English-speaking or internet-connected.

At the time of writing, I am en route to Tanzania and India to trial an innovative approach to gathering people's thoughts on the latest OpenIDEO Amplify challenge¹: how might parents in low-income communities ensure that children thrive in their first five years? This is Challenge Two in a series of ten that Amplify will be presenting in the coming months,

in a programme funded by the UK Department for International Development which invites ideas on the most urgent challenges facing the billion people living in extreme poverty around the world. The best ideas will receive seed funding and design support.

Challenge One was about how we might make low-income urban areas safer and more empowering for women and girls. The five ideas that qualified for funding and design support have recently been announced: training for women setting up small-scale local childcare businesses; training women leaders as 'community concierges' to spread information and build support networks; peer-to-peer education among men and boys on gender-based violence; holiday camps for schoolgirls to provide training on life skills; and a school for girls in a red-light area².

These five Funded Ideas were among over 500 submitted to the challenge. On a research trip to India and Nepal, for example, I heard about proposals for ‘walking buses’, in which women could coordinate the timing of their routine journeys on foot between different points in the city, so that they could travel in numbers and minimise the chance of abuse. Another suggestion, in Islamic areas where women worry about road traffic in badly-lit areas at night, was for reflective stripes on burkas.

It is always an eye-opener to talk to people about their daily experiences, with a view to coming up with ideas for design. I heard about mothers, for example, ensuring their girls always carry safety pins when travelling on public transport. The reason? To jab a man with them if he tries to take advantage of the crowded space for inappropriate touching.

However, these kinds of insights can be difficult to tease out when you are appealing for ideas to be submitted online, and making that appeal in the English language. While internet access is spreading quickly in the developing world, it still misses large swathes of the population we are trying to reach. Hence the project in Tanzania and India, which we hope will be part of a larger project to include a wider range of the population in designing solutions for this second challenge.

Local-language hotlines

The idea we are trialling, which is based on a model we saw used in Delhi to campaign against violence on buses, involves an automated phone response system: many of those who lack internet access to submit their ideas in writing still have access to mobile phones. A hotline number will be publicised in the local language through community radio and television. Contact will be free of charge, as the system will immediately return calls.

Callers will then hear a two-minute drama illustrating the specific topic on which we are seeking responses – for example, ‘What are your hopes and dreams for your children?’, ‘Where do you go for advice?’ – following which they will be invited to record their message. A

team of volunteers will then transcribe the message, translate it into English and post it on the website. If the message receives comments, volunteers will record an audio version of the comments in the local language and send the caller an SMS inviting them to hear them. At the halfway stage in the project, we have already received over 1800 responses from callers in Tanzania and India.

Only by getting as much input as possible from people who actually live in the locality can you hope to come up with ideas that work there. In a separate project for the Nike Foundation in northern Nigeria, for example, I researched ideas for creating safe spaces for girls. From spending a lot of time talking to girls and understanding what their daily life was like, it became clear that any idea would stand a chance of working only if it had the support of parents and community members and chimed with the strict Islamic culture.

Parents didn’t like the idea of a club for girls, for example – something that would serve a valuable purpose in giving them an outlet other than school and household chores, and enabling them to learn life skills. But when I proposed framing much the same idea as a ‘marriage preparation class’, it was enthusiastically accepted.

Safe spaces for children in cities don’t have to be physical spaces. Another idea was the forming of a union for the many girls who work as hawkers, selling items on the streets. Hawking has its positive aspects: the girls are earning money and learning how to be entrepreneurs. But it is stigmatised and unfairly associated with prostitution, meaning that these young hawkers often feel ashamed and isolated. A type of union membership could help to legitimise the activity by giving the girls an identifiable numbered vest to show that they are part of a network, and providing access to a phone number that they could call for help if a man tried to take advantage of them. Unfortunately, this idea may be seen as too radical to have a chance of implementation, at least in the traditional northern Nigerian context.

Parenting where parents are

The importance of understanding the daily lives of the people for whom you are designing spaces or interventions applies just as strongly in developed countries as in the context of developing countries. With IDEO.org and the Bezos Foundation, I worked on looking for ways to help low-income parents in the USA to engage more with their preschool-age children.

From talking to these low-income parents, it became clear that parenting advice that doesn't take account of their circumstances can be positively alienating. We heard of parents who had been told by healthcare professionals that they needed to spend an hour a day reading to their children. Lacking either the time or often the literacy skills to do this, these parents concluded that the healthcare professionals understood only middle-class parenting paradigms and because of that their advice couldn't be trusted in other ways.

To avoid this unfortunate situation, we need instead to emphasise the spirit of the advice – engaging with your children, something you can do with a book but also in other ways – and to find ways in which engagement can be incorporated into activities these parents are doing anyway. Shopping is one example: there could be signs in Walmart suggesting a game to play or a song to sing, related to products in that aisle. Another possibility is the laundromat, a place where parents and children often spend a lot of time waiting – the children get bored, and that makes the parents irritable. Could we find ways to set up play centres in urban laundromats, with suggestions for parent-child activities, thereby turning the waiting time into an opportunity for parenting with a capital P?

What all these ideas about kids and cities have in common is the concept of human-centred design – you come up with ideas by meeting with real people and understanding a broad picture of their lives, what barriers they face, and where there are opportunities to make things better. Cities can be large and overwhelming if taken as a whole, and human-centred



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design is a powerful tool to remind us of their real purpose: to serve the parents, children and families living within them.

Notes

- 1 Amplify challenges are described on the IDEO.org website, at <http://www.ideo.org/amplify>
- 2 Read more about these Funded Ideas at http://www.ideo.org/field_notes/announcing-our-funded-ideas