# A designer's dedication to caring for people's needs

# 設計師的堅持 — 關心人類所需



reddot design award

**Red Dot Awards: highlight a design expert's commitment to making people's lives better.**

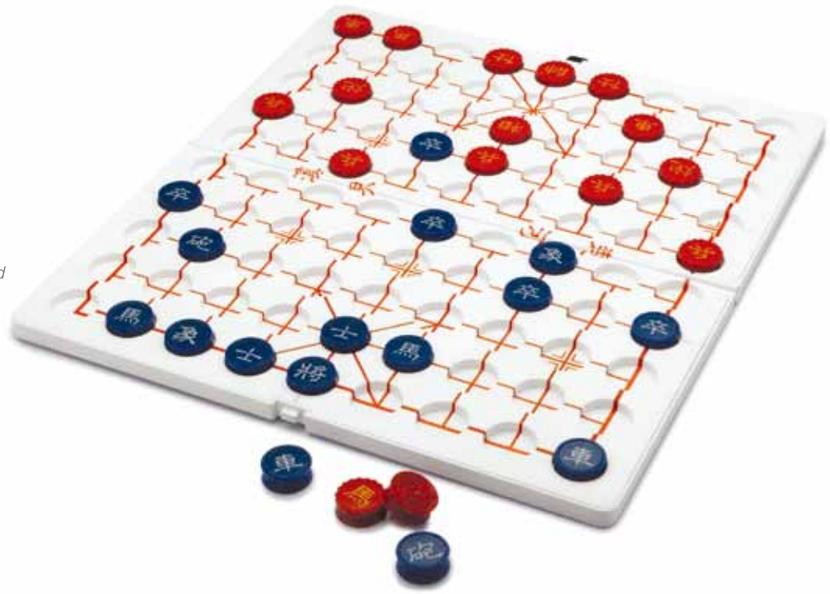
**紅點設計大獎：表彰設計師對改善人類生活的承擔。**

Michael Siu is no ordinary designer. A professor with two PhDs, one in Design and the other in Design Education, his horizons move beyond how people interact with products individually to cover how groups, or the public as a whole, interact with their environments. When asked to describe the designer's central role, he replied that each designer should always be asking "how to make people's lives better".

Quality of life, argued Prof. Siu, is related to broad considerations such as "culture, physical environment, social matters and ideological thinking". The designer's main task should be making those conditions better in ways that can appear less than obvious at first.

This sort of thinking was certainly at work in the two projects Prof. Siu led that attracted attention at the Red Dot Design Awards 2011. The prestigious German awards are amongst the design profession's most coveted. Receiving the top product design award in the sports and games category, Chess.*, created by the School of Design's Public Design Lab under Prof. Siu's leadership, allows visually impaired people to play Chinese chess with others who have full vision. The design has been adopted as the national standard in chess competitions for the blind. At one level the new set of tactile dots and forms of the chess pieces are simple aids that help less sighted people play a game. Yet at a broader level, this innovation is designed to promote an inclusive society by encouraging interaction and eliminating discrimination, and to assist the visually impaired people to be more independent.

Receiving an honourable mention in the life science and medicine category at the awards was another Public Design Lab innovation, Filtainer. A container for the treatment of drinking water, the device had its genesis in a World Bank project Prof. Siu undertook using an MIT science invention to provide potable water to extremely poor Nepalese households. Recalling how his team re-designed the original container so that it could be produced simply and at a lower production costs, Prof. Siu described the project as "very meaningful".



*Chess.* — Chinese chess set designed for the visually impaired people*
*為視障人士設計的中國象棋*

Although the device was originally meant for domestic water filtration, the final design catered to both private and public use. In Nepal, Prof. Siu was deeply touched by the poverty he saw around him and the people's thirst for clean drinking water. He then set out to understand the villagers, "their behaviour, their beliefs and also their values". The result was a device modelled specifically to "fit the people's needs".

In all of his design thinking, Prof. Siu takes an inclusive approach, recognizing that given circumstances and other variables, "people have different kinds of capabilities and preferences and have to face various difficulties". He tries, in short, to "bring the biggest benefit to the largest population of people and provide design service for those easily being ignored". An original inclination to look for alternative solutions has evolved over an outstanding career into the challenge of offering choice to people who otherwise have none.

In Prof. Siu's field of pubic design, choice is often very limited at present. He explained that the people living in any city have few options in relation to the public environments and facilities they need to use. If they do not like the facilities provided, the only real choice is to move elsewhere, which is rarely practical. Designers, he observed, need to pay more attention to how people interact with the living environment and facilities. For instance, a public bench designed for sitting might have people lying on it. "It's a different interpretation" of the design and the result of interaction, he said, but many designers do

not realize, respect and care for the needs of certain people. Yet, designers should trust in the public's wisdom to use designs in the way that make sense to them but might not fit organizational or societal norms.

Prof. Siu's efforts with the Public Design Lab at the School of Design are certainly helping in that regard, but he observed that most people in his profession still work on personal products. Part of the problem, he suggested, is a lack of importance given to public design locally. If Hong Kong is to truly reach the status of a design hub, it will need to invest more resources in the design of the public environment. He offered the example of Seoul in South Korea, which focused on enhancing public design when it was designated a 'design capital'. Other world cities such as London "realize this need", he said.

In his teaching Prof. Siu encourages that sort of foresight on a personal level. When giving instructions to students on problem solving, he emphasizes on leading them toward problem identification. Offering a familiar instance in product design, he noted that nobody went to Apple Computer asking for a multi-touch phone interface – the design team had to identify the problem and the need before it released the iPhone and iPad. Designers need to develop a talent for foresight, which is intimately related to caring about how different people could improve their lives.

"Through design I want to convince people that they need to consider other people's needs and preferences", Prof. Siu reflected.




*Filtainer — a container for the treatment of drinking water*
*能過濾食水的容器*

邵健偉教授有兩個博士學位，一個是設計學，另一個是設計教育學。這些學術背景與研究經驗使他與其他設計師有些不同，他不單着眼個人如何與產品互動，甚至延伸至群體或大眾市民如何與他們所處的環境互動。當被問及設計師的核心角色時，他回答說：「每位設計師都應常問自己，怎樣令人們的生活更美好？」

邵教授認為，生活質素與文化、實際環境、社會事物和思想認知是息息相關的。設計師的使命就是提升這些條件的質素，有些時候他們所用的方法並不明顯，這正正就是挑戰所在。

這種思維正好反映在邵教授率領的兩個項目中，而這兩個項目更奪得二零一一年度「紅點設計大獎 」。該項著名獎項由德國頒授，是設計界最崇高的獎項之一。在設計學院公共設計研究室邵教授的領導下，名為「對弈‧共融」的設計項目在體育及遊戲類別獲得「紅點設計大獎」。這套中國象棋讓視障人士與視力正常的人一起下棋，更被採納於全國盲人象棋比賽中全面採用。棋子的設計應用了一套創新的凸點系統，以簡單的形式輔助視障人士進行此遊戲。在更廣的層面上，這項創新發明透過鼓勵互動和消除歧視，促進社會共融，並幫助視障人士更加獨立地生活。

另一公共設計研究室的設計「Filtainer-能過濾食水的容器」，則在生命科學及醫學類別獲得優異獎。邵教授與美國麻省理工學院合作，配合該學院的創新過濾技術重新設計出Filtainer，作為處理飲用食水的新容器。這設備被世界銀行在尼泊爾推行的一個項目採用，以提供飲用食水給非常窮困的家庭。為了令製造過程更簡單及減低成本，邵教授的團隊花了不少時間改良設計，他回顧時形容：「這是一個非常有意義的項目。」

雖然這產品最初只供家用濾水之用，最終的設計卻能迎合家用和公共用途。眼見尼泊爾的貧困境況及對清潔食水的渴求， 邵教授感受至深。他於是深入當地山區了解村民之需要，探究他們的行為、信仰和價值觀，結果設計出能迎合他們所需的設備。

邵教授的所有設計理念都本着一種共融的取向，他意識到在特定的情況和變數中，人會有各種不同的能耐及喜好，也面對不同的困難。簡單來說，他嘗試為最多的人帶來最大的得益，也為容易被忽略的一群提供設計服務。他原本傾向找尋設計上的替代解決方案，但卻演變成為人提供前所未有的選擇，這更令他在研究及設計成果上創出高峰 。

在邵教授的設計範疇，目前的選擇是非常有限的。他解釋說，居於任何一個城市的人，在公共環境中使用公共設施，往往只得很少選擇。他們若不喜歡所提供的設施，唯一的選擇，就是移居其他地方，但實際上卻不甚可行。 他察覺到，設計師必須更關注人們怎樣與生活環境及設施互動。例如，有人喜歡躺臥在一張原本設計供人們坐着的公共長椅上。 他說：「 這就是對設計的不同理解和互動的結果， 但很多設計師卻未能留意、尊重及關心某些人的需要。」 因此，設計師應該相信公眾有智慧地使用設計，雖然使用的方式可能不符合機構或社會的一些標準。

在這層面上，邵教授於公共設計研究室的工作，確實起着很大的作用。但他觀察到，設計專業範疇中的大多數人仍然熱衷於設計個人產品。他認為，問題的部分原因，是公共設計在本地行業中不受重視。因此，香港必須投放更多資源在公共設計上，才有機會真正達致設計樞紐的地位。他舉例說，南韓首爾被譽為「 設計之都」，並致力重點推動公共設計，而倫敦等其他世界城市亦意識到這種需要。

在個人層面上，邵教授將這些遠見應用到教學中。他在指引學生解決問題時，強調引導他們如何識別問題所在。他舉出一個有關產品設計的實例，從來沒有人要求蘋果電腦研發多點觸控的手機界面，但它的設計團隊在設計iPhone和iPad之前，就能識別到問題及需求所在，並加以研究解決方案。作為設計師，必須有遠見，同時具備洞察能力，並關心不同的人怎樣可以生活得更好。

邵教授說：「透過設計，我希望說服人們必須顧及其他人的需要及喜好。」