

Assignment 7

Ethnographic Description

Capital District Community Gardens



Fence outside the community garden

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The Garden on 8th Street

Both a independent project, as well as a part of a grand scale youth outreach program, The community garden on 8th street tries to help high-school kids while growing produce. Our first visit to the garden was an hour sit-down with two of the leading forces: Matthew and Hannah. Matthew Schueler is the center planner and has a managing role while Hannah is the gardener, that takes care of the plants. The around fifteen high-school kids that work in the garden was not there at the meeting, and meeting them must therefore wait until a second visit. This visit was by that standard a look into the organizers hopes and visions for the garden and this entire project. Due to the fact that the visit basically was a presentation of the gardening project,



Meeting with Hannah and Matthew

we were not able to do the participatory interviews that we wanted. Neither were we able to get into contact with the kids, and this report will therefore be based on rather one-sided information. This report will however assume that a second visit where the kids are in focus is imminent.

Ethnographic of the Employees

By description the kids seem to feel reluctance against their education, and are generally not enjoying school.

“The kids here are NOT into school” - Matthew

This has to be kept in mind whenever designing for this demographic. Everything that directly references to school-work could be completely rejected by the kids. The approach of any design should be selected carefully, the key will be finding a common ground between inspiring the kids, and showing them that education is important. Something that pushes their imagination, and tries to speak their language.

On the other hand it is important not to give up on the cause of engaging the kids in education.

“Show them how to lead a life without having to read and you’re good” - Matthew

As Matthew says with a hint of sarcasm the kids would like nothing more than to hear that they actually do not need the school. That they could get a better life without it. However we must not neglect that some of the kids are at the garden because they are afraid that they would otherwise get into trouble. The kids here are in desperate need of motivation and safety, and that is what the garden provides for them.

Project Expectations

When talking to Matthew and Hannah it becomes obvious that their expectations of the project involves solving practical and not social issues. Being engineering students it is expected of us to make time-saving alterations to the garden. Matthew says that if each group could come up with something that could save them 5 minutes a day, then that would be fine. With this



Practical Issues: The decay of this wooden plank has rendered the hightower useless.

said, the practical issues are many and some are quite easy to approach. Solving these issues could grant the organizers more time on their hands. Likewise, when Matthew is asked what he wanted most in the world, he simply wanted to give Hannah more time.

“The best you could do is to make Hannah replicators, or bend space to give her more time” - Matthew

It is clear that a design in this environment should be time saving for the instructors like Hannah and Matthew. This could be in the form of products that that enables task to be performed more efficiently. Yet it could also be products that enforces the kids to be more independent and self reliable.

The Most Intriguing Tasks

The visit revealed a couple of very concrete areas with potential of innovation. The first being the remay in the hightowers. The remay is a special cover for the plants that have to be layed out every evening and taken of every morning. This is a task that takes around 15 minutes if you are alone, and a automated system would be a big help. This automation could be controlled by an arduino, that based its action on parameters like: time of day, moisture, light level and temperature. The arduino could even be controlled or monitored over the internet.

Another place where innovation is needed is in the field of garden hose attachments. Some



Hightower roof is filled with possibilities for smarter solutions

of the issues with the garden hose is that it needs someone to hold it, when produce are being cleaned. An attachment that included a clamp would help out here. A more challenging problem is to keep the hose from freezing and making it usable for multiple purposes.

Inspiring Through Everyday Design

However This all leads to the question of how design can be both functional and be socially constructive. One of the answers could be to make everyday design that inspires the imagination and maybe even a thirst for knowledge. The term everyday design is used to describe designs that are not rocket science, but are intelligent solutions to everyday problems. Design that makes you wonder, what else could be enhanced or remade.

“The biggest poverty in their life is the poverty of their expectations” - Matthew

If we could get the kids to think that the solution and the project is cool, and see that they themselves have something to offer. Then a big step would have been made towards a destruction of the barrier that exists between the kids and their education.

Conclusion

Based on the meeting with the organizers of the garden, technical solutions seems to be wanted. However, for a solution to fit into the concept of a community based social outreach, more is required. A design for this environment needs to be complimenting and/or extending the social outreach. Dealing with kids that in many cases dislike their education at the high-school, makes this ever more challenging. It is like trying to sell a product to a consumer that repels the very idea of the product. If we however could brand the product as a technical solution to a practical problem. We might be able to do it in a way that inspires kids to see applications of knowledge and education in everyday problems. This could be a way of reaching the kids, and if done right it could also be a bridge between the students of RPI and the high-school.

This project is only in its very early stage, with the next step being a participatory interview of one or two of the kids. In an effort of seeing things from another perspective, we could discover which social factors we should consider in the design. Properly though, we will find a completely new approach, that better fits with the needs and wants of the kids.



Beautiful sunflowers overlooking Troy

References

- [1] *Human Centered Design - Toolkit, 2nd Edition.*

