

# INTENSIVES AND EXPERTS: THE DEER PARK STUDIO EXPERIENCE

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## ABSTRACT

In July, 2014, The Deer Park Studio was offered as a 12 week course to Australian Industrial Design undergraduate students. The studio was developed as a companion studio to the The Himalayan Ecology Project, a Masters level Industrial Design course, run in India in early 2013. During the transnational studio, teaching staff from Australia and India worked with Australian students in Australia to develop designs for the residents of Bir, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, India. The Deer Park Studio was developed using 'design for development' and Social Design approaches and used the report on the delivery and outcomes of the The Himalayan Ecology Project as the primary document. The design of the studio also included an 'intensive phase' during which the academics who taught the The Himalayan Ecology Project took part in The Deer Park Studio. For 10 days they attended classes and in collaboration with local staff consulted with the Australian students, providing contextually rich feedback during the ideation and concept development phase of the studio. This collaborative teaching phase enabled students to design from within a local context but to develop designs that would be relevant and useful in Bir. The students were able to mitigate the limitations of designing for a physically remote and culturally different context and to produce outcomes that drew on their own design experience as well as the cultural knowledge of the visiting academics. This paper discusses the design, delivery and outcomes, both student and academic, of The Deer Park Studio.

*Keywords: Social design, design for development, industrial design, design education, transnational design.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Australian Industrial Design degree programs a 'studio' is a course in which students focus on the development of design skills in response to a brief set on a topic chosen by the program or course tutor. The term 'transnational' refers to operating across national boundaries.

In 2014 Deer Park Studio, a 'design for development' and Social Design transnational studio, was offered to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Australian Industrial Design undergraduate students in the Design for Industry stream, a stream that offers courses in which students work with an Industry Partner. For this course the Industry Partner was The Deer Park Institute, an organisation working to improve the well-being of the residents of Bir in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The studio was delivered as a companion studio to the The Himalayan Ecology Project studio run in India in 2013. In that course, Masters level Industrial Design students offered their design responses to research they had personally conducted in Bir in collaboration with The Deer Park Institute.

The starting point and benchmark text chosen for the explanation of Social Design as a method was "Design Revolution: 100 Products That Empower People" [1] in which Allan Chochinov discusses "design for social good" [2, p.6] in relation to Industrial Design and Emily Pilloton discusses the her view of design as "problem solving with grace and foresight" [3, p.10] before presenting 100 products that encapsulate the approach of Social Design. However the broader aims of the Social Design, of design that can contribute to 'human welfare' by asking questions such as "What role can a designer play in a collaborative process of social intervention? How can agencies that fund social welfare projects and research gain a stronger perception of design as a socially responsible activity? What kinds of products meet the needs of vulnerable populations?"[4, p.28] were also embedded into the studio teaching approach.

The Deer Park Studio design brief tasked the studio participants with developing products and services that would increase the 'well-being' of people in Bir and its surrounding regions. The aims of the studio were aligned philosophically with the aims of The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for developing countries "which considered issues of culture, social equality, health, nutrition, and education among others" [5, p.111] common concerns of designers who work within the 'design for development' field.

Discussion between the respective partners meant the studio format was modified to include a text from the Indian course that enabled the Australian students to develop their understanding of the issues and opportunities of designing for the people in Bir without ever leaving Australia. This text, a rich and detailed account of the research and the design outcomes of the The Himalayan Ecology Project course, was included as must-read contextual background document for The Deer Park Studio. The change in format also included the addition of an Intensive phase during which the Indian academics visited Australia to act as expert advisors and consultants for the students in Australia guiding the Australian students in developing contextually relevant and useful design for the residents of Bir.

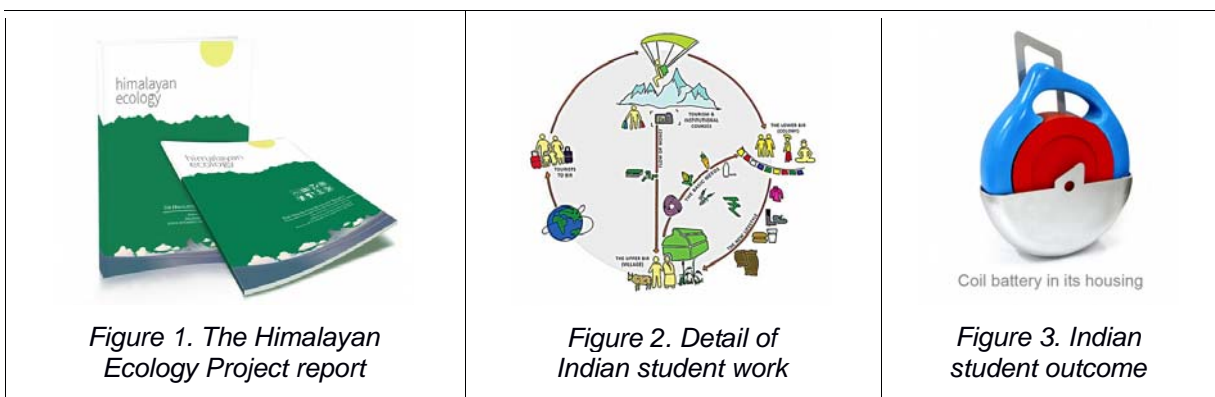
During the Intensive phase the Australian students were asked how they could bring their experience of designing, and their knowledge of designing, for an Australian context into their designs for the residents of Bir. To do this they were guided by the local tutor and the academics from India who had developed and delivered The Himalayan Ecology Project. This approach enabled the Australian students to embed their design knowledge and experience of designing for an Australian context into their design projects for the remote location. This approach also enabled new methods of engagement with 'design[ing] for development' to be explored and the design outcome results retained elements of design from Australian as well as first hand Indian knowledge of location, society and culture.

## 2 BACKGROUND TO THE DEER PARK STUDIO

The events that led up to the The Deer Park Studio began ten years ago when, in 2005, the Program Manager for Industrial Design at the Australian university initiated an exchange program with the National Institute of Design (NID) in India. The Australian tutor teaching in The Deer Park Studio was the first student from the program to spend a semester at NID. His courses in India involved working with the National Innovation Foundation with grass roots inventors in Ahmedabad. By the time he finished his exchange he had a strong understanding about grass roots innovation as well as design projects that served the needs of the poor and the way designers spoke about such projects.

In 2013 the same academic set up a sustainable transport design project, a week long event that exposed the attendees to the innovation context in Australia and one of the Indian academics was invited to participate. This was followed up with an invitation to collaborate in a 'design for development' studio in Australia along with the co-academic from The Himalayan Ecology Project.

The Deer Park Studio was arranged so that the local tutor would teach the course through the semester and the visiting academics would participate as experts during the course's Intensive phase.



### 2.1 Himalayan Ecology project

In February 2013, in collaboration with The Deer Park Institute, the Indian academics and students travelled to Bir with the intention of designing for the residents. The studio outputs were 16 design projects developed from opportunities discovered in Bir and The Himalayan Ecology Project report, which detailed the studio process and outcomes. This report was used as the basis of research for The

Deer Park Studio and as such provided invaluable research and inspiration for the Australian students. See Figure 1 for an image of the report and Figure 2 and Figure 3 for examples of student work from the report.

### 3 THE APPROACH TO DESIGNING THE DEER PARK STUDIO

#### **3.1 The design narratives used in The Deer Park Studio: Social design, 'design for development' and increasing the 'well-being' of the people in Bir**

As discussed earlier the Deer Park studio was developed as a 'design for development' studio and used the approach of Social Design to enable the Australian students to frame their work. In the studio brief this was presented as designing to increase the 'well-being' of the residents of Bir. This necessarily imprecise direction was used so that the students could have a wide range of design responses to the research that they undertook.

#### **3.2 An approach to designing a transnational studio**

The transnational studio approach provided a way for international collaboration between the universities to occur and as a way of introducing students to experts in the particular context of the studio; the inclusion of these experts, the visiting academics from India, provided the means to increase the contextual and 'real world' rigour of the Australian student's projects. The nature of the transnational studio meant that the Indian academics could not be present for the entire semester so the studio was designed around an intensive phase. This phase was designed to allow significant time for students and visiting academics to consult and collaborate. In all, the studio had three distinct phases, the Research phase, the Intensive phase and the Design Development and Delivery phase. These are briefly described below

##### **3.2.1 The Research phase**

The Research phase was developed using the Himalayan Ecology Project report as the initial research document. This document provided a rich base for the Australian students to work from and allowed the studio to be clearly framed and bounded for students who would not visit the location they were designing for. The research that students undertook in this phase was designed to extend the research in the report, including topics that complemented the original research but that were not covered, or if covered, were explored using different methods such as the analysis of statistics in contrast to the location-based observational research that the Himalayan Ecology students had undertaken.

After conducting their research, the Australian students investigated their findings using techniques such as the Actor Network Theory and presented their results as two posters. The first an infographic that summed up their research, the second, outlined the 'Patterns, Problems, Gaps and Opportunities' that they had identified through their research and could then use to develop design concepts.

At the end of Week 4 of the semester, the Research phase ended with the students, in their research groups, presenting their posters to the visiting academics. This event marked the introduction of all parties and the start of the Intensive phase.

##### **3.2.2 The Intensive phase**

The Intensive phase of the studio was a period of 10 days in which the Indian academics visited Australia to provide the students with expert guidance on the social, cultural and contextual appropriateness and usefulness of their ideas and concepts. The Intensive phase is discussed in more detail in Section 5.

##### **3.2.3 The Design Development and Delivery phase**

After the Intensive phase, the students worked on the delivery of their projects by refining their chosen design, by the development of models and then the creation of documentation for their final presentation and the end-of-year exhibition. The final outcomes were a model, an exhibition poster, a video that detailed the use of, or development of, their design as well as their project folio. The students delivered these outcomes to an assessment panel and exhibited their posters and models at the exhibition. The local tutor guided their outcomes for the final 9 weeks of the semester.

### **3.2.4 The Deer Park Project book as a way of capturing and complementing The Himalayan Ecology Project report**

The Himalayan Ecology Project report proved invaluable in the structuring and setting up of The Deer Park Studio and also provided an approach that could be used in the development of academic outputs from the studio. The academic outputs culminated in the development of a book, The Deer Park Project, that reflected on and discussed The Deer Park Studio as a transnational and collaborative teaching event. The book was a collaborative effect between the academics involved in The Deer Park Studio and the students that undertook the studio. The Deer Park Project, as a book, draws together the outcomes and outputs of the The Deer Park studio and frames them within an academic context. This includes the relationship between the two studios and presents The Deer Park Studio as a particular way of teaching 'design for development' courses using a transnational approach.

## **4 THE INTRODUCTION OF TWO AGENDAS**

As the The Deer Park Studio progressed, two agendas emerged that were used to further develop the brief and give the students the possibility of developing designs that would be different in type and form from previous projects in the 'design for development' field. They are discussed below.

### **4.1 How can a group of Australian Students add value to what is already being done in India?**

This question was posed to the students in a presentation that considered how design was conducted in Australia, and therefore, how students in Australia, were taught to be designers for an Australian context. The students were then asked to design in an 'Australian' way for the Indian context. Example design cues for this were diverse design projects such as playgrounds, preserving cultural memory through storytelling, tool libraries, farmers markets, public urban lighting, open source design and urban farming. This allowed students the opportunity to design as they would design for their previous studios, drawing on their own skills and experiences as a design student in Australia. The expert consultation from the visiting academics allowed for a free design approach to develop products and services that would still be relevant in the Indian context.

### **4.2 Design for NREGA**

The other agenda was the consideration of the National Regional Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) as a way of proposing projects that could be developed and delivered with the support of the Indian Government. The NREGA guarantees Indian rural workers one hundred paid days of work per year. The projects that have been traditionally undertaken are orientated towards infrastructure development such as roads. However during the Intensive phase the NREGA was considered as a way for a potential design or project to provide alternatives to the traditional infrastructure projects undertaken through the NREGA; especially if they met the studio directive of increasing the 'well-being' of the residents of Bir. In the end, several student projects were developed that could be considered candidates for the NREGA. These projects included consideration of the production of the designs as a local industry or locally driven activity that could be organised and undertaken by local businesses or community organisations. A few of these projects are discussed in Section 8.

## **5 THE INTENSIVE PHASE**

As the Intensive phase was pivotal in the success of the studio it is useful to discuss it further. The Intensive phase lasted for 10 days during which the local and visiting academics and students worked in a specially chosen location. During this time, the students completed half of their semester contact hours for this course. The location in which the studio was held was separate physically from the usual classrooms and was designated for the exclusive use of the participants of the studio. During this time students were encouraged to make the space their own and the academics endeavoured to create a 'hot-house' atmosphere in which the aims of the studio would be the focus.

This approach was very successful, allowing the visiting academics to be the experts on India and the local academic to work as studio facilitator. The students were able to work uninterrupted, to receive valuable feedback immediately and to incorporate this feedback into their work as it was received. The face-to-face contact with experts who could guide their projects with the knowledge of Bir and India produced an environment where the students developed strongly contextual and useful designs that still retained Australian aspects, concerns and design elements.

## 6 THE TRAVELLING ACADEMICS EXPERIENCE

As opposed to the Himalayan Ecology Project, where the group of Indian students were not completely unfamiliar with the region, the cohort of Australian students came with a completely different world view and diverse cultural understandings. This unfamiliarity and complete novelty was by far the most valuable resource they brought to the project. Their only connection to Bir was the Himalayan Ecology Project report, and it left them free to imagine, draw from their life experiences and develop entirely fresh perspectives. This new ingredient became the catalyst to redefine the boundaries of the design project and open imaginative new possibilities. Possibilities that were open ended and would trigger further prospects.

This remote situation, another world that Bir existed in, encouraged cutting another cord. Their studio responses felt no need to be bound to 'problem solving' in design, there was much bigger opportunity in creating design with their Australian experience as a tool. Design, as opposed to the case of The Himalayan Ecology Project, did not feel the burden of being born out of necessity. Approaches to design spontaneously steered toward creating products and systems that reinvigorated, enriched quality of life, created new avenues for the community and strengthened bonds.

The Studio also built on the expertise of the Australian students to be able to develop products, services and systems that integrate the use of hi-technology, open-source knowledge systems, technologies that 'leap frog' to minimise environmental impact and contribute to sustainable growth in the region.

## 7 AUSTRALIAN ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Collaborating with the travelling academics was a great experience and as a group it was possible to explore new ways to deliver a 'design for development' studio that overcame problems that arise from distance; both geographically and culturally. The intersection between the knowledge and experience of the travelling academics, the 'hot-house' environment of the Intensive phase, the willingness of the students to engage with the novel experience of such a studio and the ability to facilitate all of these elements within a defined time and space meant that the studio was very successful in terms of richness of the student outcomes. All the students engaged with the specific social, cultural and geographic contexts that were embedded within the studio and were able, with assistance, to develop designs that had both Australian and Indian characteristics.

## 8 STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND STUDENT WORKS

All the student's outcomes engaged with broader social, cultural and geographic concerns and their design outcomes were much richer for that. Many designs considered the production of the design within the constraints of the capabilities and resources available in Bir and all engaged with the inclusion of the Bir community in terms of community building, employment opportunities or product development and distribution. The outcomes also reflect elements and concerns that are Australian in nature and that are currently being discussed and explored within the Australia context. These elements and concerns were able to be transported into the context of Bir and Himachal Pradesh where they were used as interventions or provocations to open up new ways to consider Social Design and 'design for development' approaches.

The following are a selection of student outcomes: 'Biopot', Figure 4, a project that addressed social and environmental issues in Bir through the creation of a community-supported business to reforest suitable local areas with native trees. This project could be considered for NREGA funding; 'The Plastic Bottle Exchange', Figure 5, proposes that discarded plastic water bottles, a serious problem in the area, could be exchanged for filtered water in a project that also includes the possibility of corporate involvement in the form of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); 'Card Projector', Figure 6, is a project concerned with the strengthening of bonds and relationships between local communities and families and the reviving of local traditions and history through the distribution of an open-source kit that includes storytelling cards and a DIY slide projector as tools used to facilitate community-led events and celebrations; 'Conductive Rocket Stove', Figure 7, is a design for improving the means of cooking in Bir. It is an open-source design that would be made locally from local materials. Through consultations in the Intensive period it was found that this design could have strong aspirational aspects for younger members of the Bir community and could lead to further changes in kitchen layout in addition to the original intent of reducing cooking smoke.



Figure 4. The Biopot project



Figure 5. The Plastic Bottle Exchange project



Figure 6. The Card Projector project

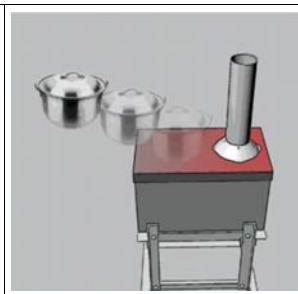


Figure 7. The Conductive Rocket Stove project

## 9 OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

The inclusion of visiting academics as experts into the concept generation and testing phase brought a discernible rigour and richness, in terms of contextual relevance and usefulness, to the student's outcomes. It also improved their understanding of the geographical context and how to design for it. This experience provided an insight into how 'design for development' studios or courses may be able to offer innovative ideas or solutions even if it is not possible to physically visit the sites that are being designed for. The collaboration and connection that is possible between the academics from different Universities through this type of studio means that ideas and teaching methods and styles can be shared and, if suitable, transferred between and incorporated into the other design courses and programs. Finally the input and guidance of the experts enabled the Australian students to design 'to their strengths', that is, in the way they had been taught to design for an Australian context, while ensuring that their design outcomes would be suitable for the remote context of Bir.

## 10 FURTHER WORK

The approach used in the Deer Park Studio proved to be useful in teaching 'design for development' studios for location remote from the studio location. However further research, through teaching, could be undertaken to see if this could be a useful approach generally as well as specifically. That is, if experts are embedded into a design studio for a short time, regardless of the brief or context of the studio, could similar results be expected? This would be more easily tested on a local scale, using local experts, and could provide insight into how expert knowledge and experience could be incorporated into design studios to improve the outcomes they produce.

## 11 CONCLUSION

The Deer Park Studio was a successful transnational, 'design for development' and Social Design studio that led to contextual relevant and useful outcomes even though the students designed in a location remote from where they were designing.

The approach of embedding 'experts' into a studio through an Intensive phase was very successful for the Deer Park Studio and further work into this approach would be worthwhile.

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