

## Team Challenges



### Understanding 'Participation'

The prospect of participatory planning drew many of the students to this studio. Each team member had their own understanding of the meaning of participation, and how to conduct a participatory process. One of our first challenges was to overcome these differences and to come to consensus on our team process. This was critical aspect of our internal team building, and an important element in presenting a unified and consistent face to the community.

### Adapting to Reality

While many team members were experienced with participatory processes and facilitation methods, we needed to adapt our various skills and expectations to the social, political, and economic realities of China and Quanzhou.

### Overcoming Differences

As a diverse team, we faced considerable cultural and language barriers within the group. These barriers were mirrored in the community, where as a team we had very limited knowledge and experience. Given our team emphasis on communication and consensus, we repeatedly wrestled with issues of understanding and appreciation of each other and the stakeholders we worked with.

### Community Distrust

As outsiders, sponsored by a government office that many citizens consider part of the problem in the functioning of the community, we faced considerable reluctance to speaking openly and in depth. This was compounded by the local politics of the area, which we often unknowingly stumbled into. In addition, the concept of a participatory process in which all stakeholders have equal voice was met with some skepticism by community members.



### Interpreting Responses

Many of our challenges combined as we attempted to make sense of community responses to our work. Our interactions with the community showed our own cultural biases and insensitivities, and we depended on our native-speaker teammates to make sense of what we were hearing. Given the lack of time to fine-tune our questions and strategies, and to develop trust in the community, our interview results were likely skewed by stock or 'safe' responses.

We also needed to work together to overcome our individual limited perspectives in understanding community responses. By comparing notes and sharing sometimes tangential observations, we arrived at richer and more complete interpretations.

### Limitations of Time

Perhaps our greatest challenge was the limited timeframe of our work. Most of our other barriers could have been overcome with more time. A participatory process cannot be completed in four weeks, so our goal became to establish a process that could be continued by local government and community. However, buy-in from stakeholders is usually dependant on seeing a successful process at work, and this remains undone.

## Accomplishments

### Planting a Seed

Despite the many challenges to our work, we encountered a great amount of general interest in what we were doing and why. In our many conversations with people throughout the neighborhood, many were impressed that their (to their eyes) typical or humble street would be worthy of study and discussion. While we did not leave Quanzhou knowing that someone would be taking up where we left off, we can be confident that we raised a few eyebrows and inspired a few questions.

### Making the Most of Our Diversity

The greatest internal barrier we faced became our greatest strength—we were successful in many ways in overcoming our professional, cultural and language differences to create rich interactions, lasting relationships, and a unified product. The various skill sets of the team members strengthened and enriched our work, and we each went home knowing more about ourselves and our fields of work and study. If our team dynamic can be seen as a microcosm of working with communities, or as an example of group processes, we can be optimistic about the potential of participation and teamwork in any setting.

