ANJULI SETHI
MDP/FIELD MFA CANDIDATE

DESIGN MATTERS FELLOWSHIP

PROXIMITY DESIGNS, MYANMAR
SUMMER 2016

ANJULI SETHI
MDP/FIELD MFA CANDIDATE
I arrived in Myanmar at the very beginning of the monsoon season. On the first day, it rained so much that the giant rain boots I had lugged halfway across the world weren't even effective. Coming from a dry and sunny Los Angeles, I was shocked when I was told that the sun would not show itself for the duration of my visit. Needless to say, I spent the greater part of my summer with drenched pant cuffs and wet feet. This is just one of many adjustments I had to make during my fellowship at Proximity Designs.
Myanmar is a country in Southeast Asia bordered by Thailand, Laos, Bangladesh, India and China. For over half a century, Myanmar was under a military regime and therefore isolated from the rest of the world. In 2015 they had their first democratic election, and sanctions that previously hindered growth and development were lifted.
While the country is growing rapidly economically, socially, and politically, there are many efforts to preserve ancient traditions and ways of life.

Myanmar is home to many ancient Buddhist sites. Sacred pagodas, temples, and Buddhist icons are scattered frequently all over the country.
I lived in Yangon, which is the cultural capital of Myanmar. As the country’s largest city, the development is quite palpable. This is where Proximity Headquarters are located.
Proximity is a social enterprise that designs and delivers products and services that meet the needs of Burmese farmers.

The company has four distinct business ventures including low-cost irrigation products, farm advisory services, microfinance, and policy.
When I first arrived at Proximity, I was a bit overwhelmed. I was still adjusting to living in a new country where I didn't speak the language, and I also had to familiarize myself with a new company and workplace. My team, the Creative Services team, welcomed me with open arms. I felt right at home and eager to start working.
My main task was to redesign Proximity’s dated website. As a MDP/Field student, I know how incredibly difficult it is to authentically and responsibly depict impactful design, especially to an audience who might not even know where Myanmar is.

There are so many preconceived notions about what design for development looks like. Typically, NGO’s present themselves in a way that involves images of western ideas being used to solve issues in a developing context. It is difficult to break that mold, even if the company is doing something different.
I began conducting user research with people representing the target audience of the website, including Doers & Makers, Investors, and Do Gooders.

I held quick interviews to better understand what the audience found problematic on the old website, then synthesized the responses to start teasing out what changes needed to be made.
DOERS & MAKERS

Very Dark

Waste Of Mobile Data

Intimidating

Overwhelming

Doesn’t Stand Out

All Over The Place

No Clear Flow

Doesn’t Represent Experience

Inconsistent Imagery

Confusing Verbiage

Cluttered

Redundant
INVESTORS

No Clear Path or Flow

Confusing

Info Spread Out Across Site

Harsh Contrast

Generic

Hard to read

Too Much Copy

Not Communicative of Ventures

Redundant

Donate Button Is Not Useful

Numbers Are Outdated

Doesn’t Show Process
DO GOODERS

Unclear

Navigation is cluttered

Hard to find information

Busy

No focal point

Job listings are confusing

Too many links

Dated

No CTA

Uninteresting images

Repetition

Many un-needed elements
From the user research, I discovered that the main issue of the website was that people couldn’t find what page they were looking for through all the clutter. There were no clear call-to-actions. As a result, I cleaned up the information architecture and went into a deeper analysis of what elements needed to be changed and why.
New Information Architecture
Current images convey “results”, products and techniques, but no process.

Images show Proximity products used by farmers without any evidence that it is what they want, what they need, or that they were involved heavily in the process.

Images only tell one part of the Proximity story. Don’t at all convey experience at Yangon office.

It is difficult for an outside audience to differentiate between the Staff and the Customers.
Images should portray and reflect authentic interactions.

Updated product images with new logo.

Large images to create immersive experience.

Process emphasized.
As part of the design process, I thought it would be important to gain a perspective from the farmers to see how they experience Proximity products and agriculture in Myanmar. To do this, I proposed a field trip to rural Hindatha, Myanmar.
Throughout the trip, we visited several farmers' houses and conducted interviews over copious amounts of green tea.
I used Google Cardboard and 3D panoramas as a design research tool to learn more about what farmers thought would be interesting for an international audience to see.
Usually, it was us coming in with the big cameras and fancy equipment, and I wanted to flip that dynamic. I wanted to give agency to the farmer and encourage them to capture images of things they thought an international audience would be interested in. These are some images captured by Ko Than Naing as he gave us a tour of his property.
Proximity Designs is an award-winning, social enterprise based in Yangon, Myanmar. We design and deliver affordable, income-boosting products and services that complement the entrepreneurial spirit of rural families.
From working in the office with Burmese natives, repats, and expats, to hopping on the back of motorcycles to visit remote farms, the fellowship at Proximity was truly an incredible experience. Getting the opportunity to engage with methods that prioritize immersion, field work, and design research was worthwhile and something I will definitely take forward with me in my practice as a designer. In my work, I always look forward to the exchange of knowledge, and I hope I left the team with as many valuable insights about design for development as they left me.

**DESIGN MATTERS**

Dr. Mariana Amatullo  
Jennifer May  
Susannah Ramshaw  
Stephanie Sigg

**PROXIMITY**

Jim Taylor  
Debbie Aung Din  
Geoffrey Brewerton  
NgeOo Mon  
Lin Thet Naung  
Khine Min Tun