Emilio Rossi

Inclusive Signs

A card-based toolkit to generate creative inclusive design concepts and research strategies

Handbook • English Version 1.0

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Details

Inclusive Signs: A card-based toolkit to generate creative inclusive design concepts and research strategies [Handbook • English Version 1.0]

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Part 1

Research setting

Introduction

> ***The understanding of signs is not a mere matter of recognition (of a stable equivalence); it is a matter of interpretation*** (Eco, 1984).

Signs, intended as visual stimuli, play an important role in people's everyday life, since human communication largely employs symbols to generate, or classify, narrations having a specific meaning. Trees, urban lights, tattoos, animal furs … the world is full of signs.

In Semiotics – the study of signs and symbols – a sign is defined as the combination of visual and conceptual meanings: *signifier* and *signified* respectively. The signifier is the material form of something that can be perceived – i.e.: seen – whilst the signified represents the mental concept of what is perceived (Chandler, 2017). For instance, the picture of an airliner (signifier) can mean (signified) airplane, but also to flight, aviation, the future and vacations.

The study and the use of signs can be very useful in Design because, more and more often, designers are asked to create new artefacts (products, buildings, interfaces, services, etc.) containing *representational functions* to spread specific messages (Vihma, 1995) such as functions and values. Therefore, a *glossary of signs* can be generated through the creative combination of signifiers and signifieds. This generation is extremely important in the concept design stage (Verganti, 2009), when designers set the main project's trajectory; the stage when the main artefact's meanings are made explicit – innovation driven by meaning.

Visual signs can also be used in **Design for Social Inclusion,** which aims to create **enabling solutions**[1] that contrast the exclusion of some people from the economic, social, and political life of the society in which they live. Although human disability is one of the topics mostly considered, a Design for Social Inclusion approach goes further and solutions developed tackle important societal issues like social wellbeing, human abilities, disabilities, and rights; as well as human values, inequalities, and the value of individual (dis)abilities (Reed and Monk, 2006). Thus, the multidisciplinary complexity of such concept needs original design approaches able to stimulate creative reasoning (Braga, 2017).

This aspect is considered as crucial for the correct design of any enabling solution because designers often struggle when they want to create an inclusive artefact, which should go beyond the mere idea of accessibility, or being designed for disabled people. Designing enabling and inclusive solutions is therefore a matter of conception process, rather than execution. It should employ creative and focused insights, otherwise designers will continue to largely use biased concepts in their creative practice – i.e.: designing what is known, rather than what it may holistically work.

Figure 1. *Inclusive Signs: Sample of cards.*

[1] Solutions that enable people to get a result, rather than disabling them through inaccurate interpretation of their needs/wishes.

Designing ***inclusive signs*** – inclusive concepts – can give the opportunity to generate original meta-design insights by creatively combining thematic signifieds belonging to Social Inclusion, and evocative visual signifiers able to stimulate creativity, reflections, and divergent thinking.

This handbook presents the **Inclusive Signs** (Figure 1), a card-based toolkit to generate creative inclusive design concepts and strategies. Inclusive Signs is a set of 180 cards (two different families of cards) and a worksheet that can be used to run creative brainstorming, workshops, discussions, as well as to find inspirational trajectories and meaningful values. The creation of inclusive signs is operated through free and instinctive combination of descriptive and visual concepts.

The first part of this handbook provides useful but concise information on the toolkit and its use. The second part contains the 180 cards and the worksheet. Early results are also presented.

Whilst this toolkit has been designed at the University of Lincoln to be a teaching and learning toolkit for design programmes, it aspires to be a useful solution usable by designers and a wider audience to generate controlled design ideas and meaningful visions for a future inclusive society. The goal is to stimulate deep reflections on using Social Inclusion as a learning ground through which to improve, holistically, all design processes.

An innovative approach to generate inclusive concepts

Knowledge makes everything simpler (Maeda, 2006).

The Inclusive Signs employs **semiotic patterns** to produce meaningful inclusive-oriented design meanings – *signs* – useful to guide the meta-design process in the development of enabling ideas, concepts and design strategies that are compliant with the idea of Social Inclusion. Therefore, the toolkit can be considered as a resource to work with the Design for Social Inclusion.

This innovative approach allows designers and stakeholders **to frame new meta-design concepts through instinctive combination of descriptive and visual meanings.**

The use of Semiotics is paramount if related to the conceptual design stage (Davis and Hunt, 2017), as the development of inclusive solutions requires the use of unbiased design thinking, fostering the innovative design of solutions that are consistent with the Social Inclusion concept. Therefore, the toolkit promotes the overcoming of limiting concepts only linked to, for instance, design for disability, design to accessibility, etc. Instead, it promotes wider reasonings and explorations of central concepts belonging to Social Inclusion, spanning social relations to futures opportunities, gender and race to societal assets. Accordingly, the toolkit is considered a valuable tool to produce radically new concepts to be used for the design of original artefacts. In this sense, this toolkit supports the idea of **meaning-driven inclusive innovation.**

The toolkit allows the linking of 60 keywords relating to Social Inclusion to 120 evocative images to stimulate the reasoning and the creative development of new meanings. In relation to Semiotics, keywords refer to signified (i.e.: what is the concept of Social Inclusion that the project must address), whilst images comprise the signifier of the new concept to be developed (i.e.: how this idea can be creatively implemented, achieved, etc.) (Figure 2).

The sole rule to follow for the correct generation of inclusive signs is: **one descriptive concept must be linked with at least one visual concept. Or vice versa.**

Figure 2. *Combination of concepts.*

The card-based toolkit

The use of card-based toolkits in Design is not new and provides designers and stakeholders a valid low-cost resource to be used in

many co-design processes. According to Roy and Warren (2019), card-based toolkits are semi-structured tools that facilitate the creative combinations of information and ideas. Notable examples have been made by IDEO (IDEO, 2003), Dan Lockton (Lockton et al., 2010; Lockton et al. 2019), Ræbild, and Hasling (2018), and IDEAN (2020).

As anticipated, Inclusive Signs is composed by two families of cards – **descriptive cards** and **visual cards** – and a **worksheet.**

The set of 60 descriptive cards contains a selection of the most recurrent keywords relating to Social Inclusion (Figure 3). Cards are clustered in three sub-categories: (1) single keywords (e.g. *participation*), for concepts providing immediate understanding and cultural associations; (2) binominal keywords (e.g. *mixture and diversification*), for concepts that may benefit of association with other reinforcing ideas, so one can have an effect of the other; (3) multiple keywords (e.g. *gender / race / sexuality*), for interdisciplinary concepts providing wider understanding of complex issues, such as society, context, the future, etc.

Figure 3. *Descriptive cards: Sub-categories.*

The set of 120 visual cards aims to stimulate creativity, deep reflection, emotional connections, and lateral/divergent thinking (Figure 4). This is done by producing a kind of visual reaction in the toolkit's user. Images are both positive and negative; human and animal scenes are also included; figurative and abstract representations equilibrate the information provided.

Figure 4. *Visual cards.*

Finally, the worksheet has been designed to help designers and stakeholders to systematize the information that can be generated in the creative process of inclusive signs generation (Figure 5). This resource allows both providing textual insights (i.e.: textual notes and definitions) and sketches to rapidly portray the new inclusive concepts.

The format chosen for the cards is A6 (105 × 148 millimetres, landscape orientation). Therefore, they can be printed in just 45 A4 sheets. Conversely the worksheet format is A4 (210 x 297 millimetres, landscape orientation).

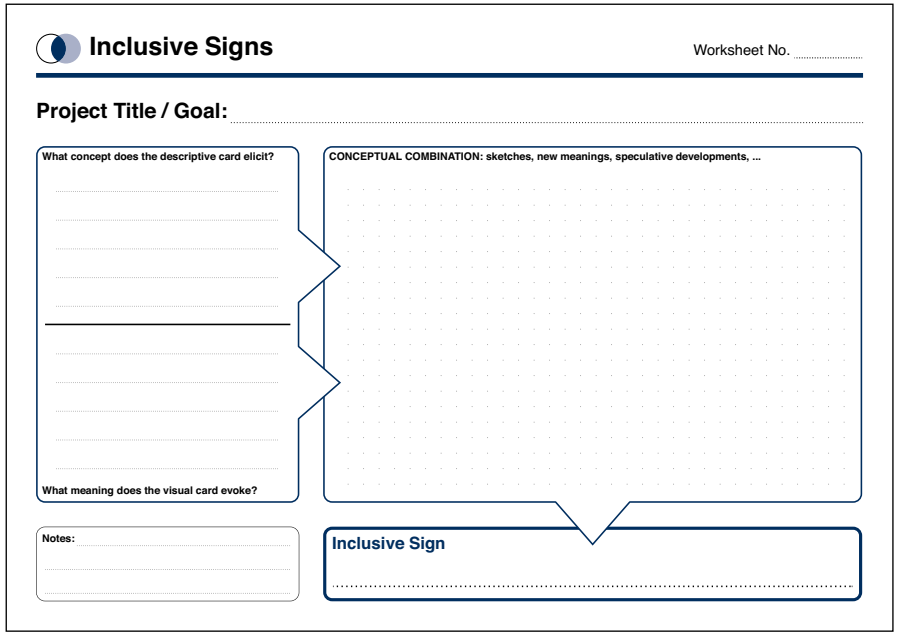


Figure 5. *Worksheet.*

Inclusive Signs: why, what, when, how, where, who

This section provides detailed information on the toolkit, as well as specific insights on the functioning, combination process, users' role, and possible outcomes. Detailed descriptions will be organised into six sections: why, what, when, how, where, who.

WHY

Why use the toolkit? In Design, Social Inclusion is often a hard concept to grasp. This leads designers to develop new artefacts using stereotyped information – i.e.: cliché – resulting from their own knowledge, such as designing only for wheelchair users to improve accessibility, etc. Instead, Design for Social Inclusion should foster the creation of enabling artefacts. Inclusive Signs increases the quality of the meta-design process by suggesting clear keywords that prevent biased creative connections.

Why inclusive signs? Designing disabling solutions can jeopardize the impacts of new artefacts, if originally envisaged to be inclusive. Inclusive Signs provides methodological guidance to designers and stakeholders that want to create innovative inclusive meta-design insights, concepts, and early ideas, which later can be used to develop enabling solutions. Alternatively, Inclusive Signs can be used to anticipate innovative scenarios and future design trajectories for social change in the way of Social Inclusion.

WHAT

What information can be generated? Inclusive Signs allows the creation of inclusive meta-design insights that can be used in the concept design stage of any project that wants to follow the contemporary notion of Social Inclusion (Figure 6). Information in the concept design stage is crucial to set the design trajectory and to develop meaningful innovations. Products, services, interfaces, built environments, visual projects, branding campaigns, research strategies and much more; the toolkit is a valuable resource for any inclusive project.

What data can be used? Inclusive Signs provides essential information needed to generate meaningful meta-design insights, ideas, and concepts. Conceptual insights belonging to Social Inclusion are contained in the 60 descriptive cards. Visual references can be extracted from the 120 visual cards. Further interpolations and analyses can be developed in the worksheet, which helps to summarise the reasoning and collect relevant concepts.

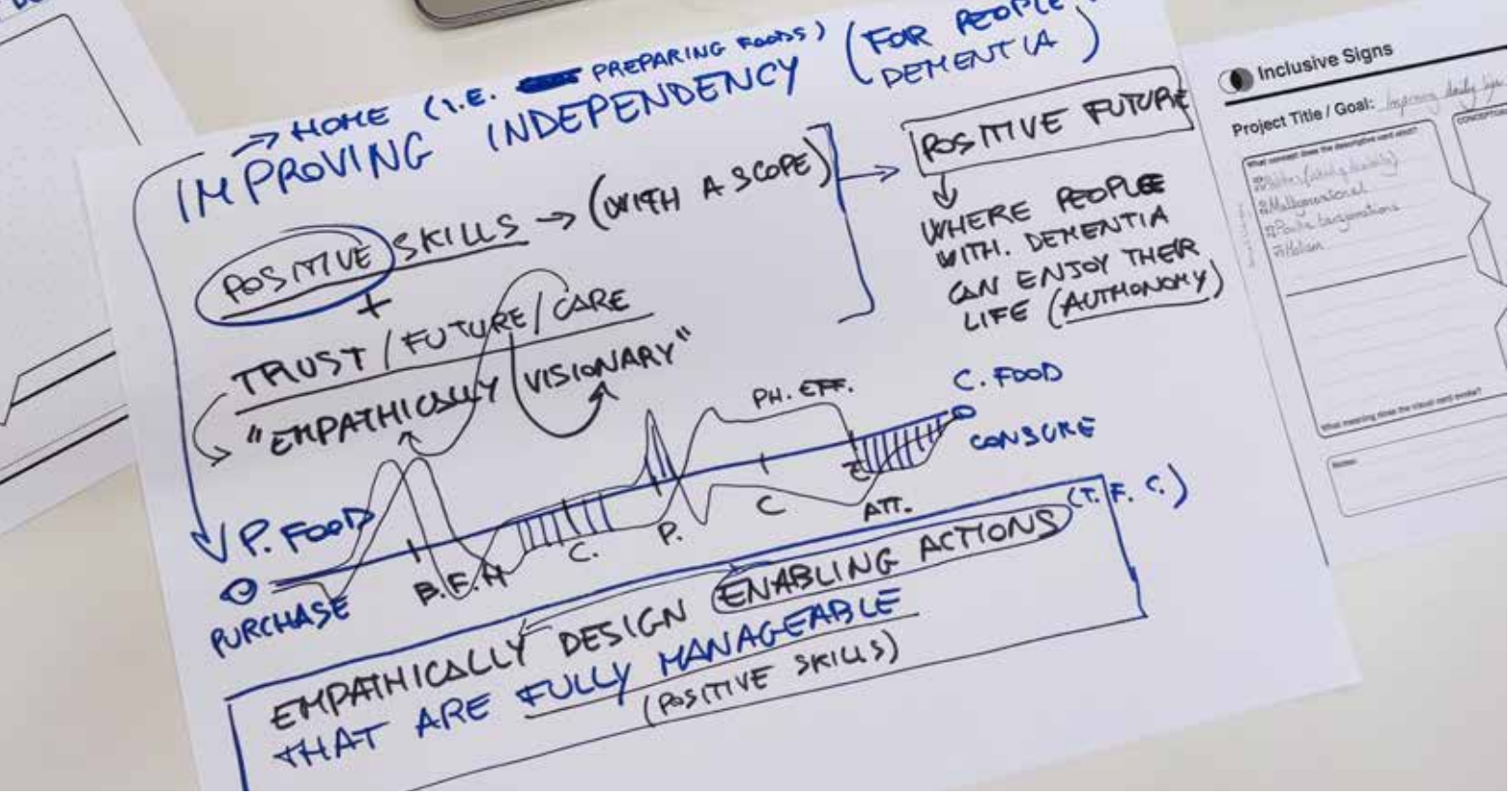


Figure 6. *Meta-design insights generated through the Inclusive Signs toolkit.*

WHEN

When to use the toolkit? Inclusive Signs can be used in the meta-design process of any new inclusive project. This means that the toolkit can provide useful guidance in all situations when an original strategy for the creation of new enabling solutions is needed. Furthermore, Inclusive Signs can be used to frame complex issues as well as providing ground-breaking advances and conceptual developments for future inclusive scenarios and projects.

HOW

How to generate inclusive signs? The generation of inclusive signs is made through free and instinctive combination of descriptive and visual concepts. For pre-identified domains, the toolkit can be also intended as a flexible resource to create contextual insights. Therefore, the toolkit allows expansion of the *glossary* of design-oriented concepts to overcome biases and reductive clichés linked to Social Inclusion.

How is the process of inclusive signs generation guided? Inclusive Signs uses 180 cards and a worksheet to support designers and stakeholders in the generation of inclusive meta-design concepts. Alongside the creative combination of cards, the worksheet supports the process of synthesis and data extraction.

WHERE

Where to use the toolkit? Alone or in team, designers and stakeholders can use the toolkit in studios, offices, at home or during collective brainstorming sessions with a wider audience. Inclusive Signs is a flexible resource that can therefore produce limitless ideas, when needed, always, everywhere. The toolkit can be downloaded or used online through the project's website https://inclusivesigns.lincoln.ac.uk/.

WHO

Who can/should use the toolkit? Inclusive Signs is an *inclusive resource* and therefore allows everybody to creatively generate inclusive meta-design insights to be used for creating any enabling solution. Accordingly, Inclusive Signs is a toolkit primarily conceived for designers. However, stakeholders can intuitively use the toolkit to produce meta-design insights that later can be used by designers in participative design processes.

How to use the cards

This section of the handbook provides useful guidance and instructions on how to use Inclusive Signs and how to generate inclusive meta-design concepts.

Two modalities are discussed in this section to provide complete understanding on the use of the toolkit. In the first case (Figure 7), inclusive signs are produced from descriptive cards. In the second case (Figure 8), inclusive signs are created from visual cards.

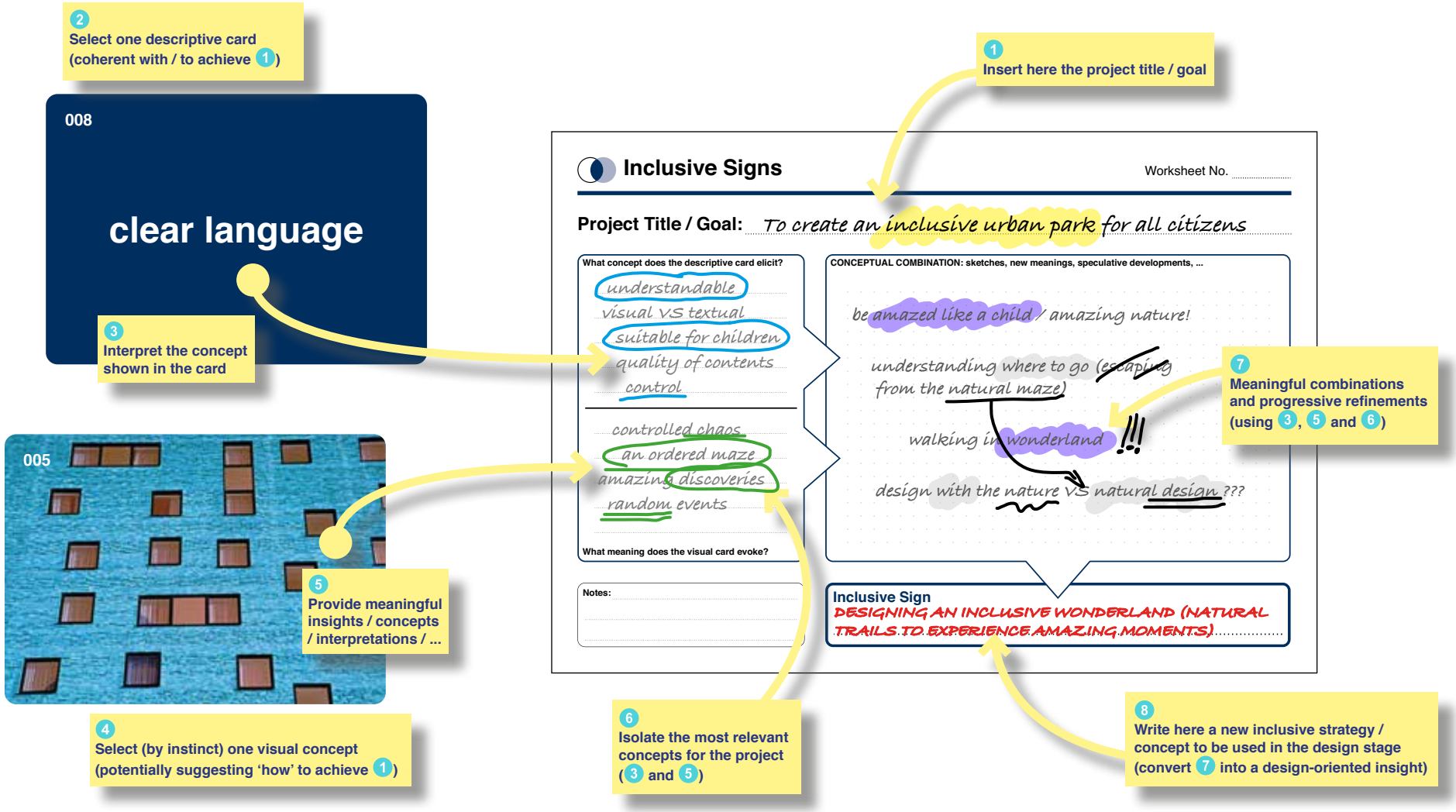


Figure 7. *Inclusive Signs: Generation of an inclusive strategy from one of the concepts of Social Inclusion (descriptive cards) – From 1 to 7.*

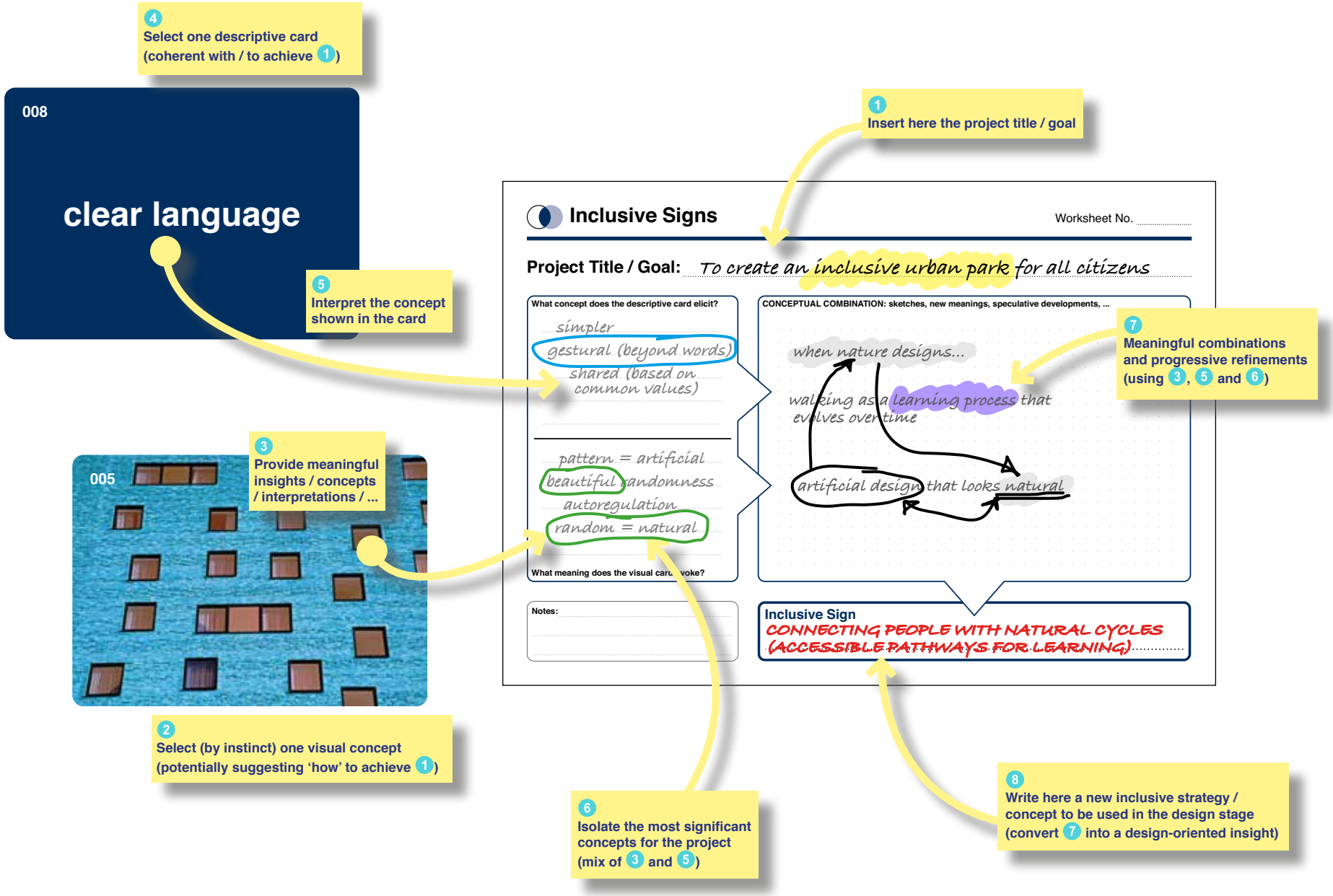
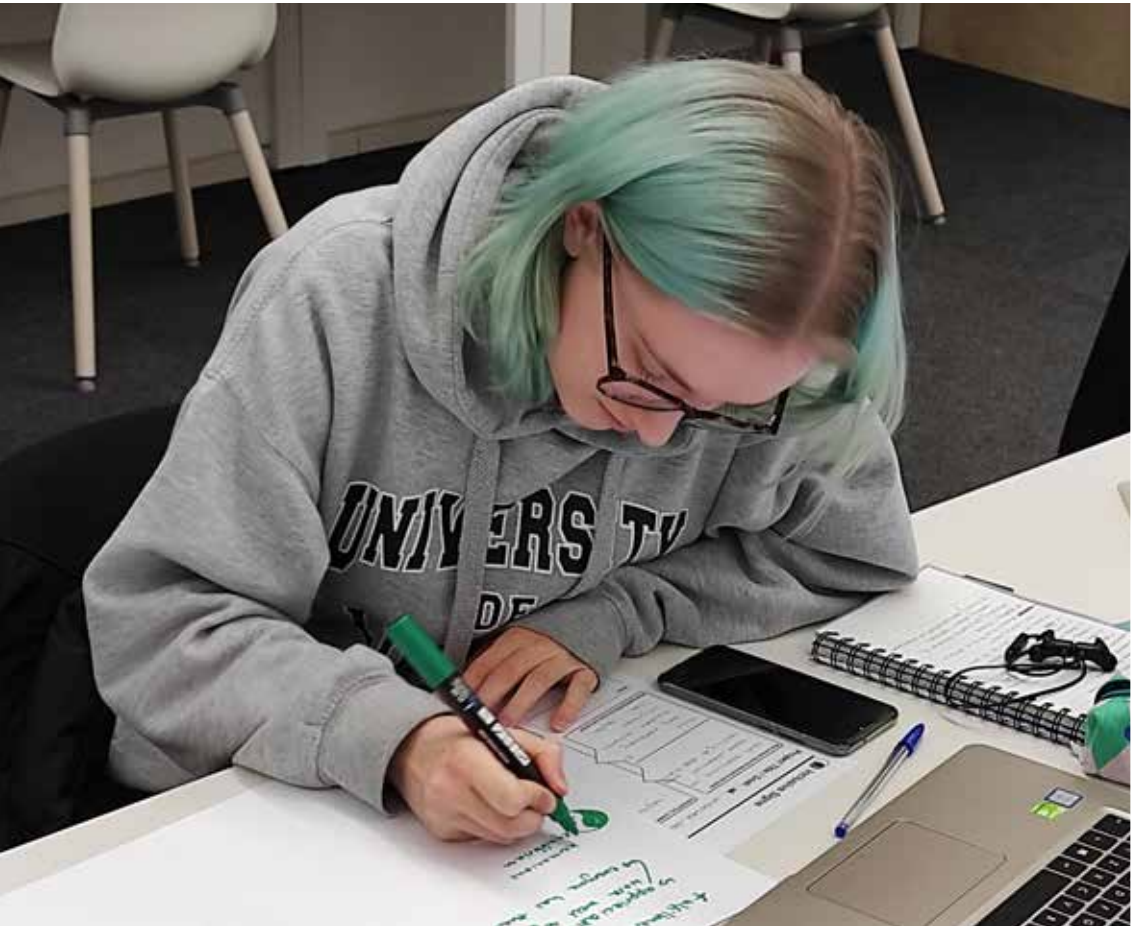


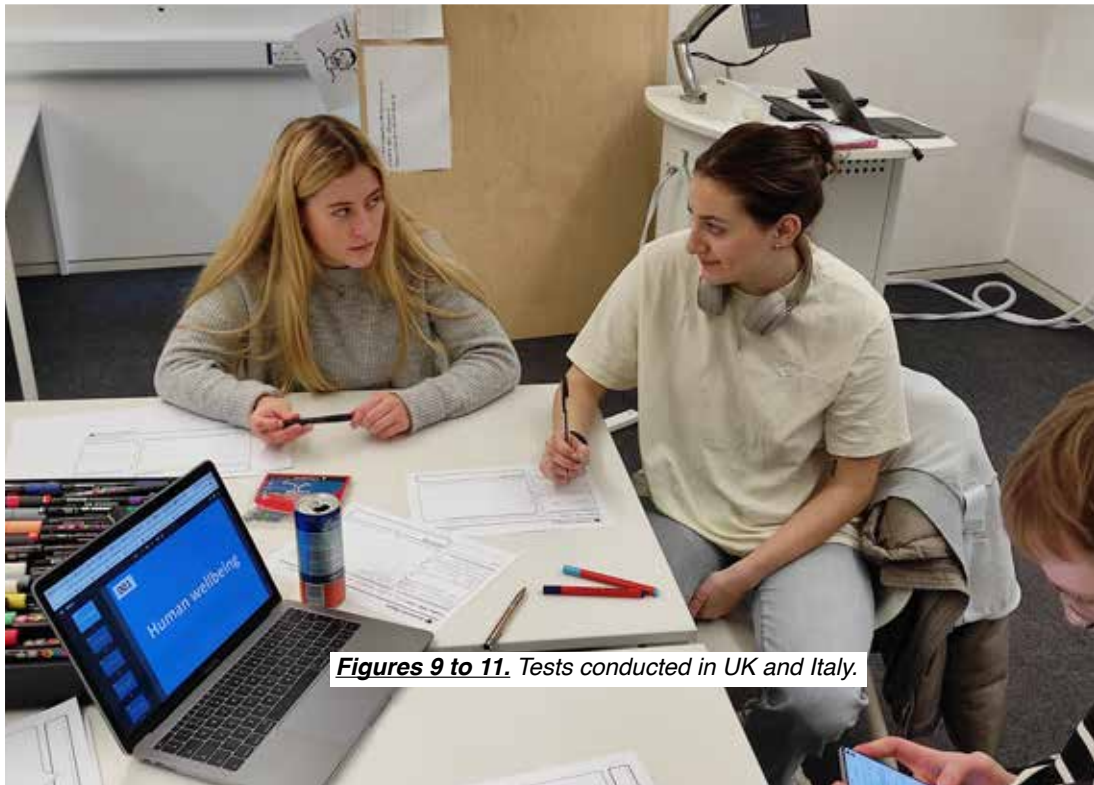
Figure 8. *Inclusive Signs: Generation of an inclusive strategy from a visual interpretation (visual cards) – From 1 to 7.*

Workshops and tests performed

Inclusive Signs has been validated through several trials performed in United Kingdom (University of Lincoln) and Italy (University of Florence and University of Chieti-Pescara) with students.

This process provided scientific generalization of results and confirmation of the approach used to generate inclusive signs. Figures from 9 to 17 show the synthesis of main findings developed by students in UK and Italy during guided tests and workshops.





Figures 9 to 11. *Tests conducted in UK and Italy.*

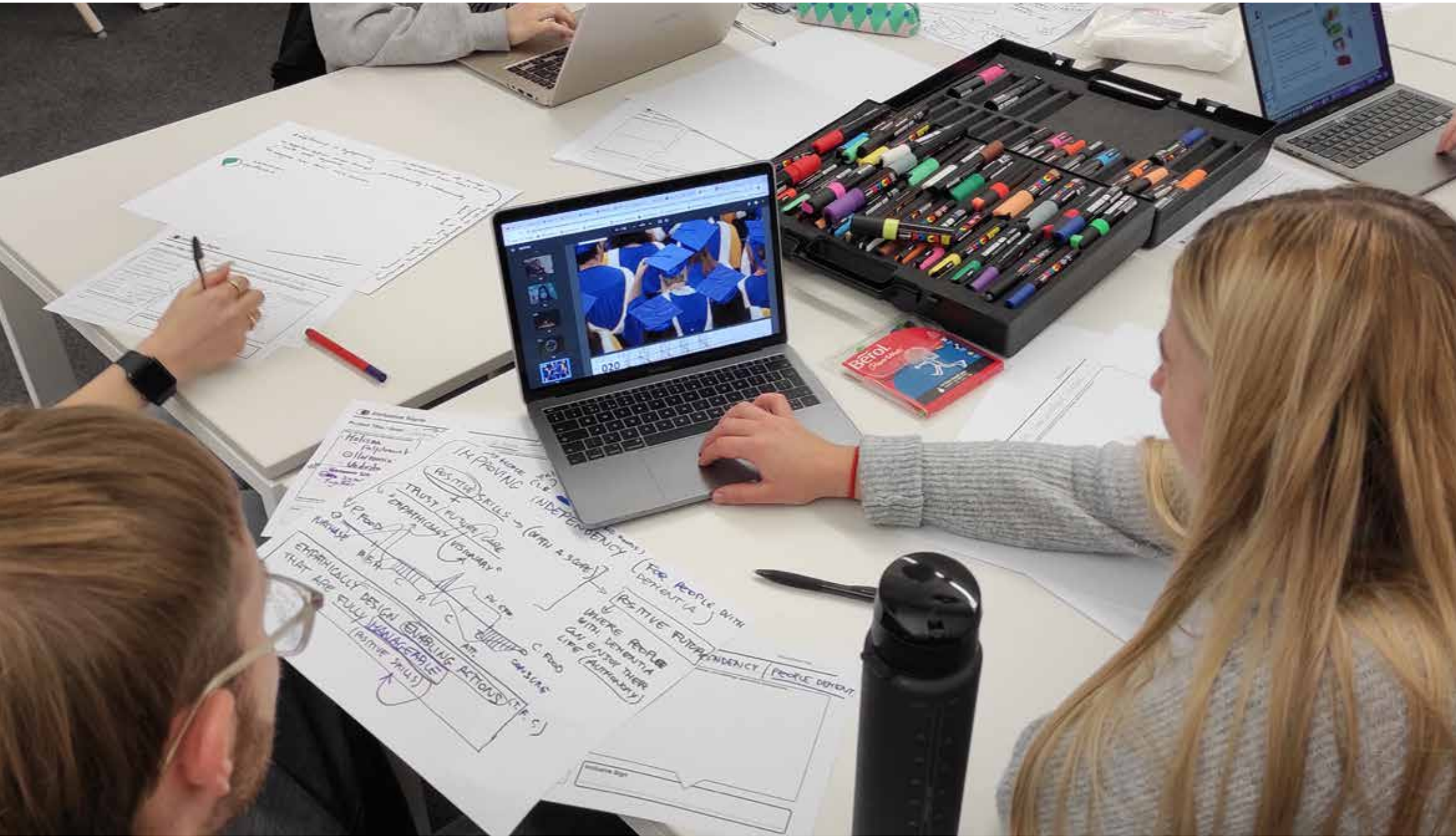


Figure 12. *Studio session at the University of Lincoln (UK).*

Inclusive Signs

Worksheet No. .....

Project Title / Goal: INCLUSIVE EQUIPMENT (SAD & Osteoarthritis)

What concept does the descriptive card elicit?

HAPPINESS. (17)

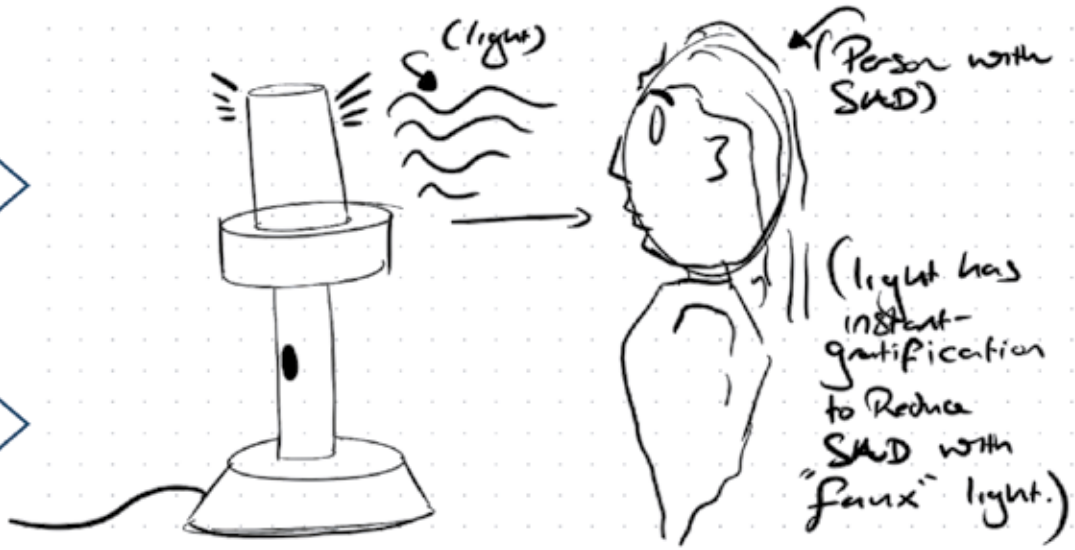
(65)

STRAWBERRY CAKE,

Satisfaction, Tastefulness, Rough Perfection & Badness

What meaning does the visual card evoke?

CONCEPTUAL COMBINATION: sketches, new meanings, speculative developments, ...



Notes: EATING CAKE GIVES INSTANT-gratification & gives happiness

Inclusive Sign

Instant gratification interaction with USER.

Figures 13 and 14 (next page). *Inclusive Signs: Design strategy to create inclusive equipment (Author: Louis Wise).*

Inclusive Signs

Worksheet No.

Project Title / Goal: Inclusive Equipment (SAD & Disabilities)

What concept does the descriptive card elicit?

(60)

Listening, watching, talking

↳ A clear process to success.

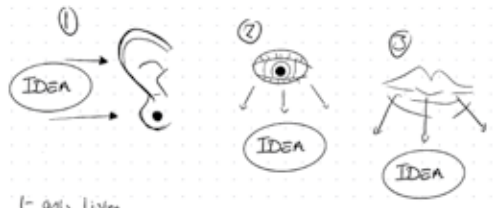
(84)

Stress

↳ Smart, collected & a path to project completion.

What meaning does the visual card evoke?

CONCEPTUAL COMBINATION: sketches, new meanings, speculative developments, ...



Notes: Smooth easy way to succeed in a project. Be clever & meticulous.

Inclusive Sign

Understanding, thinking & participating

Inclusive Signs

Worksheet No.

Project Title / Goal: Inclusive Equipment (SAD & Disabilities)

What concept does the descriptive card elicit?

(19)

Community interaction

↳ working around / in guides of the affected community

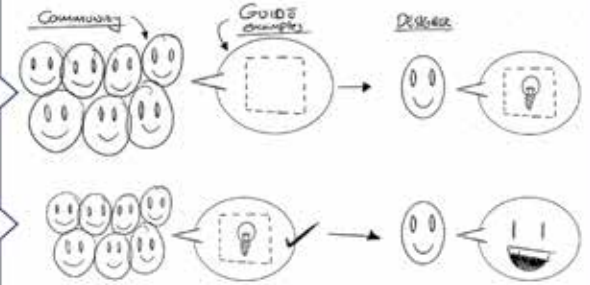
(92)

Bull Riding

↳ People showed hands but then to explore in the area. working with advice from others.

What meaning does the visual card evoke?

CONCEPTUAL COMBINATION: sketches, new meanings, speculative developments, ...



Notes: Starting a project feels like controlling = start of a cage!

Inclusive Sign

Guide Line Designing

Inclusive Signs

Worksheet No.

Project Title / Goal: Inclusive Equipment (SAD & Disabilities)

What concept does the descriptive card elicit?

(48)

Involvement & engagement

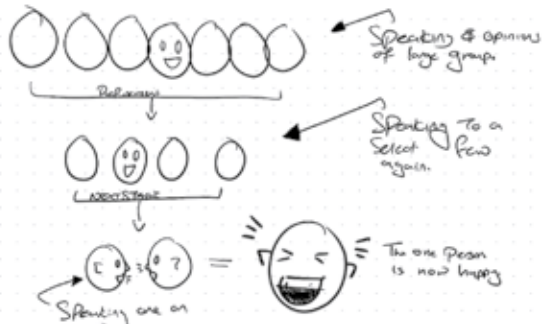
↳ Thinking & asking the right people the right questions.

Space Person (68)

↳ might not see the team behind it but they help to get the 'an' person to the 'mean' (common goal)

What meaning does the visual card evoke?

CONCEPTUAL COMBINATION: sketches, new meanings, speculative developments, ...



Notes: Team collaboration means being a background character

Inclusive Sign

Engagement & Inclusivity Design

Inclusive Signs

Worksheet No.

Project Title / Goal: Inclusive Equipment (SAD & Disabilities)

What concept does the descriptive card elicit?

(22)

- Co-Creation

↳ working with people actively in Design Process.

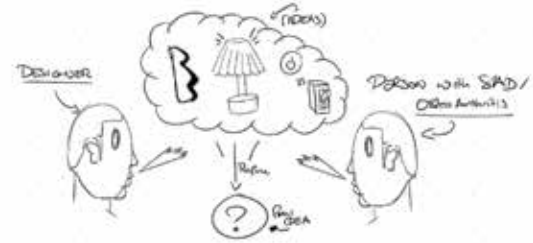
(79)

Sky Divers

↳ Connection, trust with others, success through collaboration.

What meaning does the visual card evoke?

CONCEPTUAL COMBINATION: sketches, new meanings, speculative developments, ...



Notes: working 'with' not 'for' is always Difference.

Inclusive Sign

Collaboration with those effected

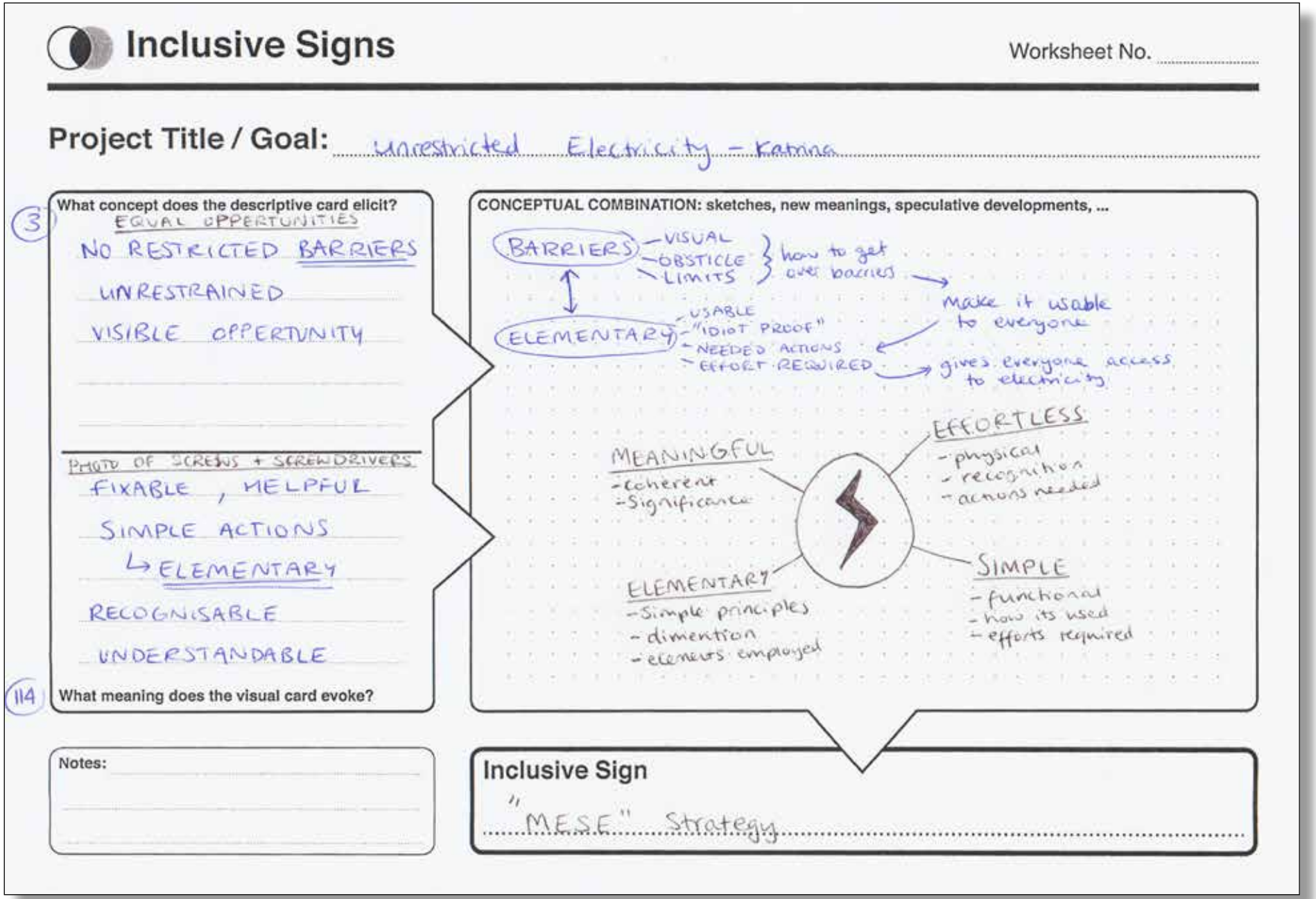


Figure 15. *Inclusive Signs: Design strategy to create accessible energy for All (Author: Katrina Wood).*

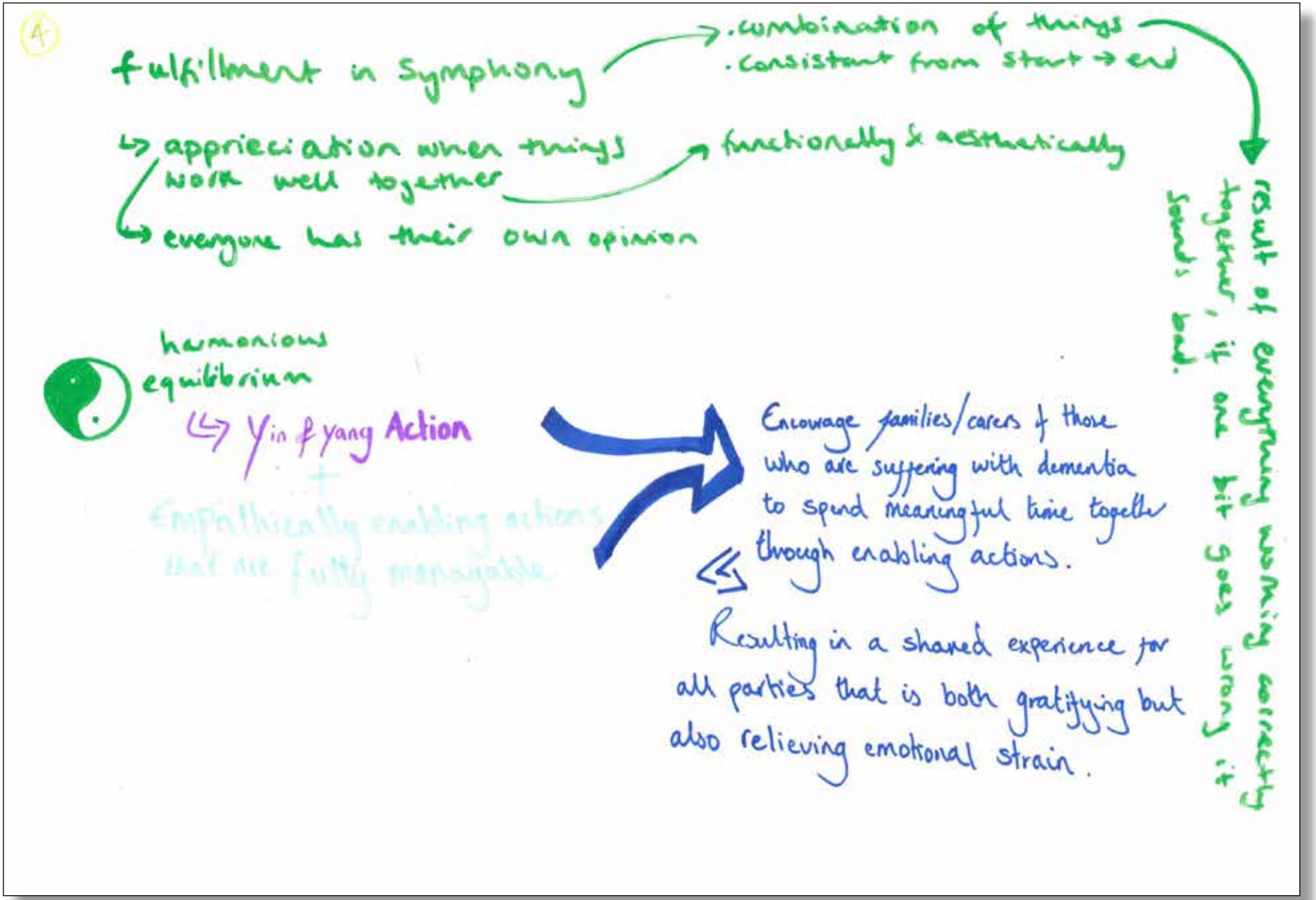


Figure 16. *Inclusive Signs: Design strategy to create enabling actions at home (Author: Declan Greene).*

039 **contrasting homologations and stereotypes**	+	Development and reflection *Give all people the chance to destroy stereotypes and homologations through simple and collective actions.* *Generating positive chain reactions.*	**Inclusive Sign (as design strategy)** ***Designing inclusive artefacts that allow people to express their individuality (contrasting stereotypes and homologations).***
055 **(opportunity to) collaborate / make a contribution**	+	Development and reflection *Make your contribution like a superhero (firefighter).* *Identify people who can make a contribution through and altruistic actions.*	**Inclusive Sign (as design strategy)** ***Designing enabling conditions to transform normal people into 'superheroes' able to make a real change.***
014 **diversity as a resource**	+	Development and reflection *The difficulty in conquering the right to be different, to be ourselves, in a society too much linked to appearance.* *'Designing beyond our comfort zone'.*	**Inclusive Sign (as design strategy)** ***Giving higher value to all design actions by proposing inclusive artefacts designed for real people and contexts.***
006 **justice / rights / transparency / democracy**	+	Development and reflection *Transparency is watching beyond structures, words, and rhetoric.* *A transparent (re: inclusive) concept is always visible.*	**Inclusive Sign (as design strategy)** ***(Like eyes that are the mirror of the soul, enabling design strategies must immediately) communicate the value of the design project.***
030 **equilibrium**	+	Development and reflection *'Normality' is a social construct and can't be defined. It is a personal concept.* *We reach a sort of equilibrium as soon as we are fine with being the person we are.*	**Inclusive Sign (as design strategy)** ***Balance the project's components, rather than pursuing the idea of normality.***

Figure 17. *Inclusive Signs generated during tests performed in UK and Italy by Product Design and Industrial Design students.*

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- Students in UK and Italy for the valuable inputs provided through the online tests and the studio sessions.

Part 2

The open access toolkit

gender / race
/ sexuality

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people
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abilities
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024

001

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004

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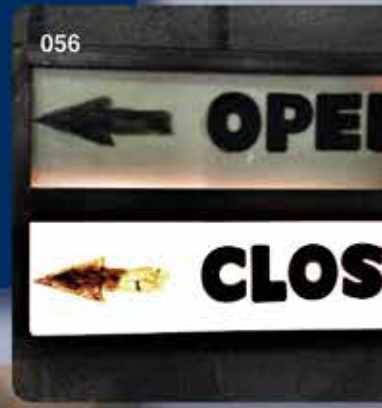
diversity
as a resource



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Inclusive Signs

Worksheet No. .....

Project Title / Goal: .....

What concept does the descriptive card elicit?

What meaning does the visual card evoke?

CONCEPTUAL COMBINATION: sketches, new meanings, speculative developments, ...

Notes:

Inclusive Sign

001

human wellbeing

002

participation

003

access to resources

004

bottom-up actions

005

social advantage

006

justice / rights / transparency / democracy

007

prosperity and improvement

008

clear language

009

common values

010

identity

011

shared visions and ideas

012

collective learning (process of)

013

social change

014

diversity
as a resource

015

open collaboration

016

public interaction

017

happiness and joy

018

people
/ community

019

community
integration

020

multiculturalism

021

gender / race / sexuality

022

co-creation

023

support

024

context / contextual

025

positive transformations

026

fairness

027

human rights

028

mixture and diversification

029

heritage

030

equilibrium

031

real living context

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nourish

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development

034

respect / dignity / promotion

035

cohesion and coherence

036

health and wealth

037

active commitment

038

overcoming limits or biases

039

contrasting homologations and stereotypes

040

central / relevant

041

psychophysical congruence

042

fair future

043

cognitive coherence

044

aesthetics and meaning

045

personal belief

046

community strength

047

relational connections

048

involvement

049

rise of awareness

050

protect / advocate / give value

051

holism / holistic

052

quality / better

053

pleasantness and enjoyment

054

multigenerational

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(opportunity to) collaborate / make a contribution

056

presence / be there

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yes / with /
together / visible
/ for all

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abilities
and disabilities

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resilience

060

listening / watching
/ talking / doing

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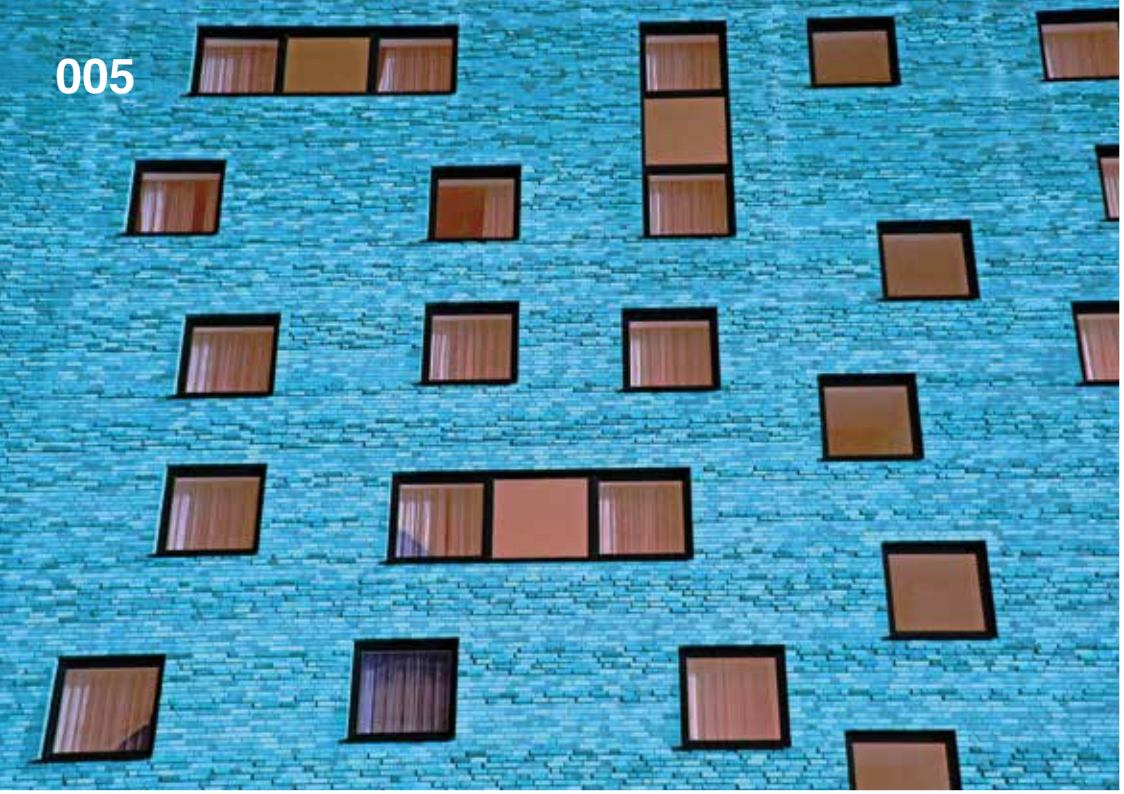
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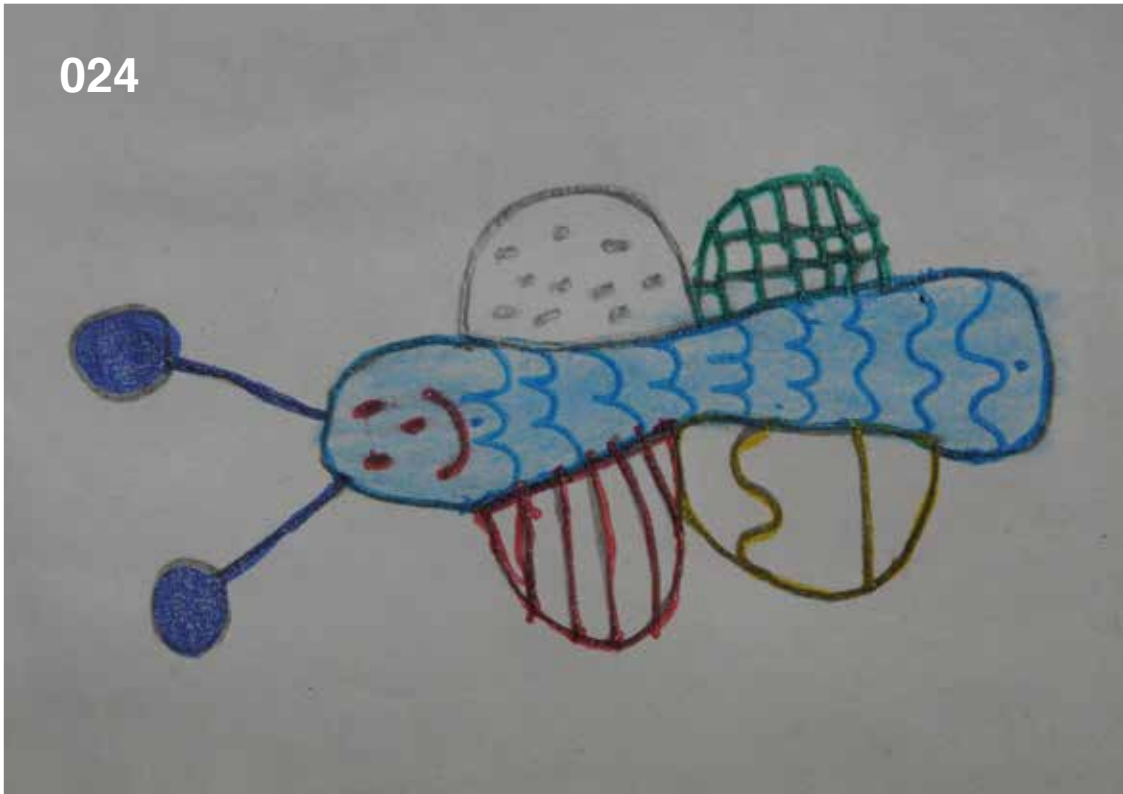
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Love
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CLOSED

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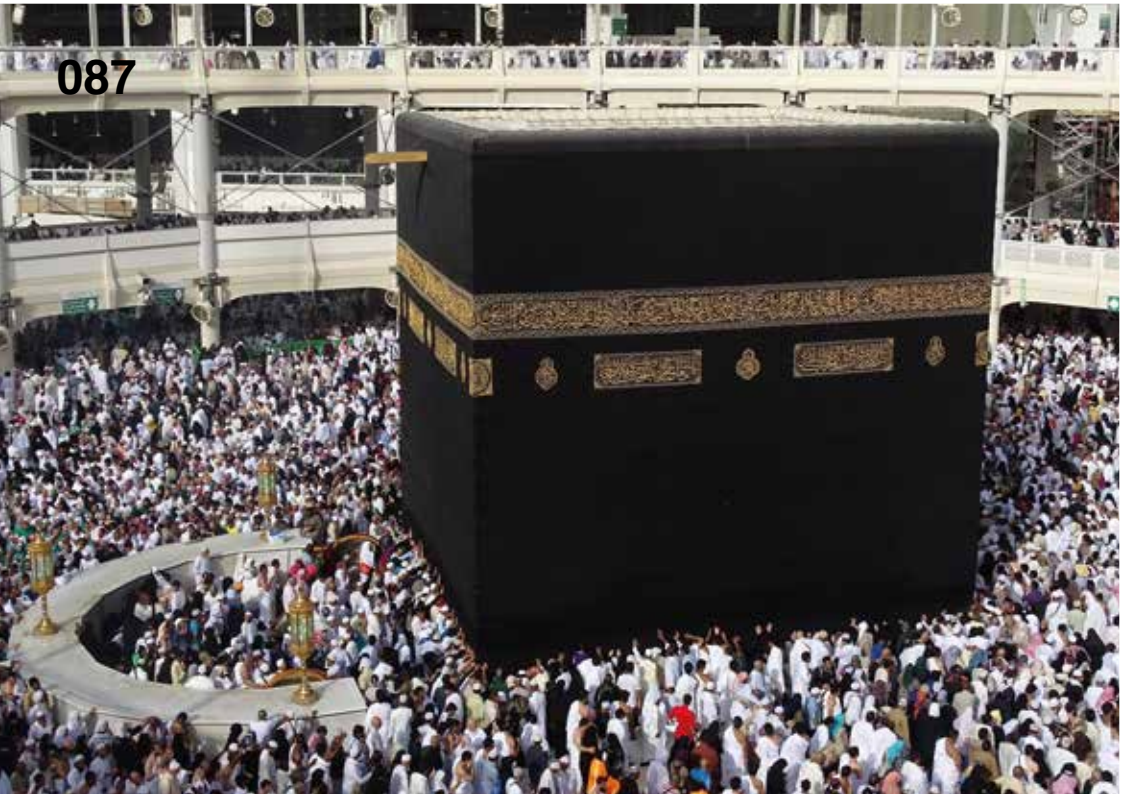
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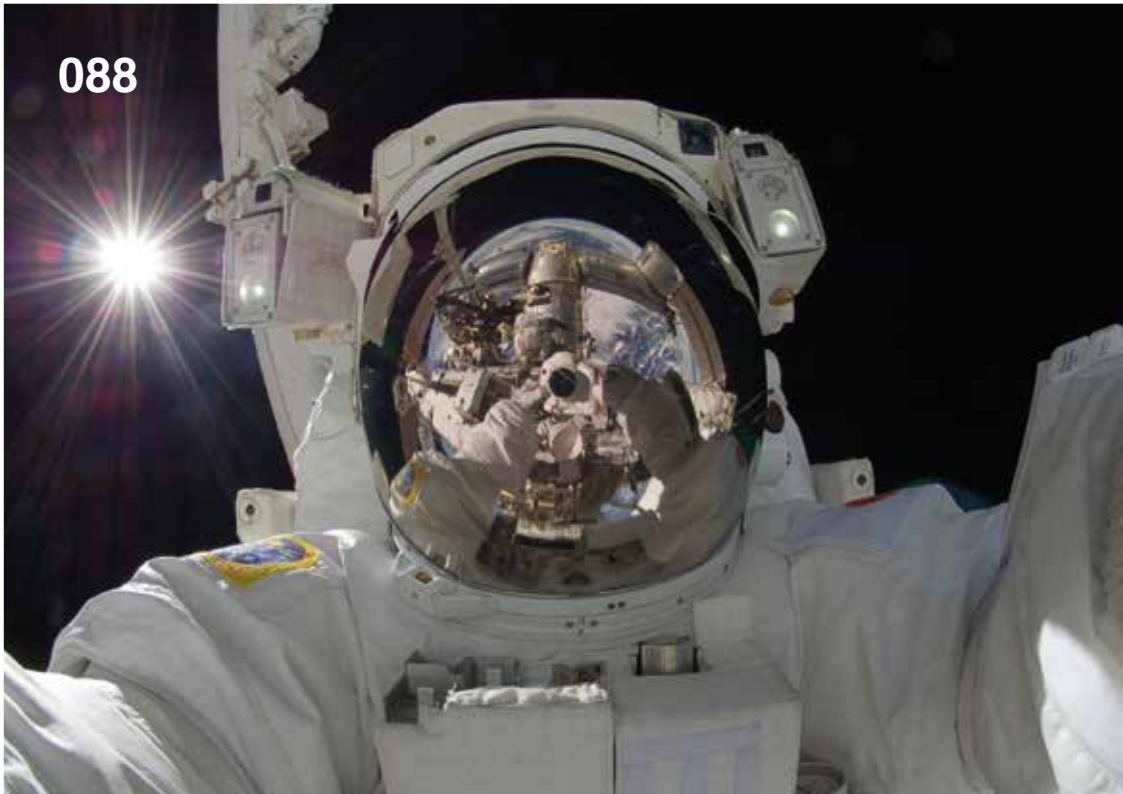
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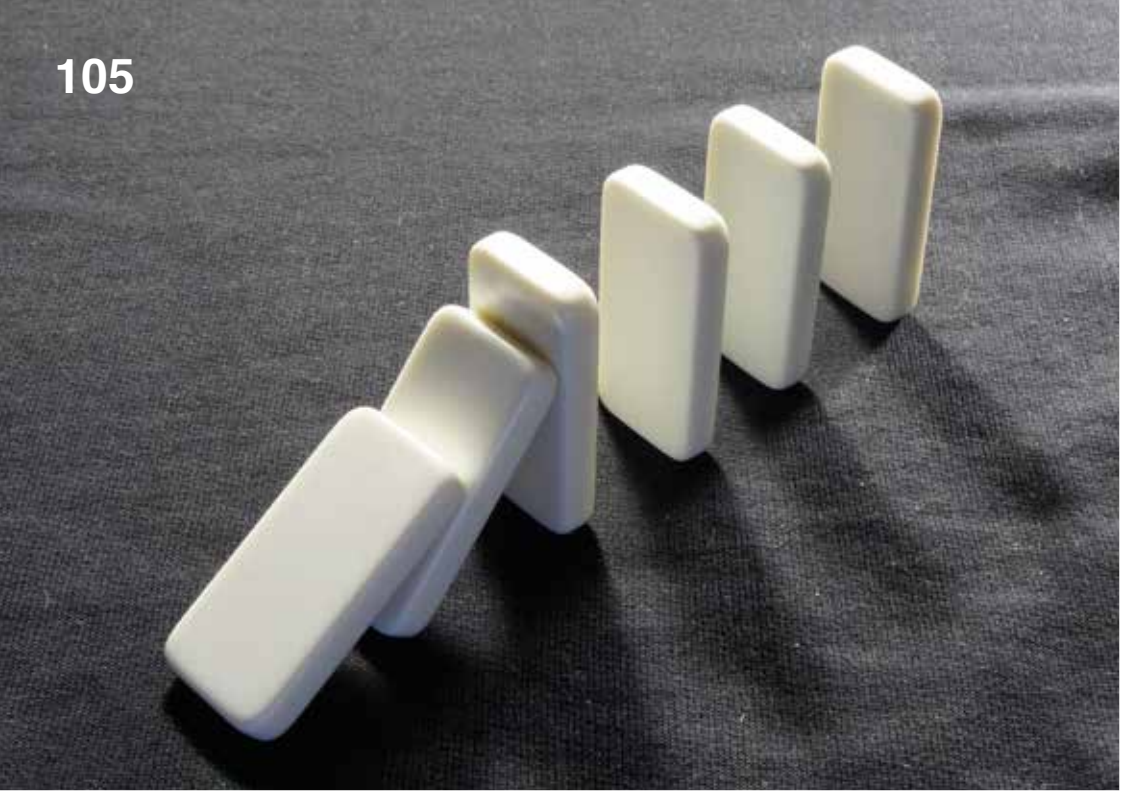
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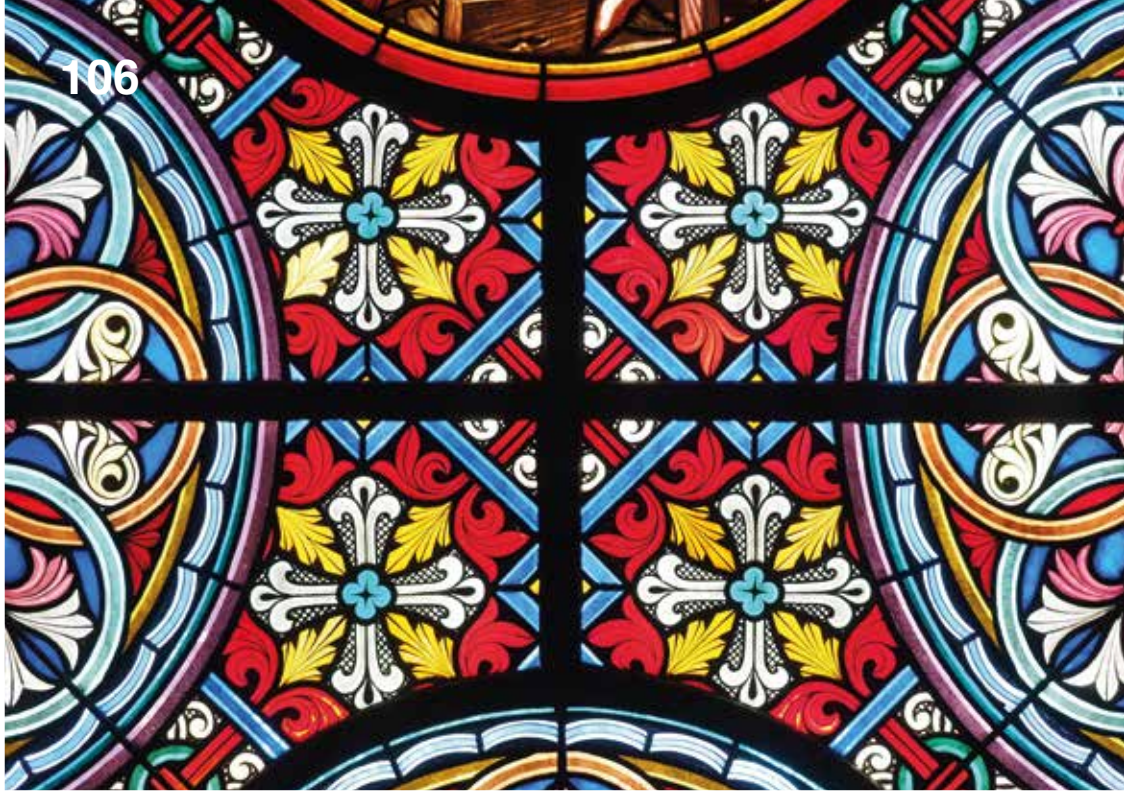
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18 50 KUCHING
18 55 malaysia KUALA LUMPUR MH6
19 00 SIA BALI
9 00 SIA HONG KONG
00 SIA K4LSRTZ
55 malaysia KUALA LUMPUR
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FIREFIGHTER

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Your Inclusive Signs

Use this space to collect your Inclusive Signs.

Inclusive Signs is an open access project and an original inclusive toolkit made at the Lincoln School of Design, University of Lincoln, United Kingdom

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Can designers and stakeholders generate meaningful design strategies and controlled visions for the future inclusive society that overcome the idea of 'design for disabled people'?

Is it possible to generate creative and innovative meta-design insights for future inclusive projects?

The design of inclusive and enabling artefacts (i.e.: products, services, systems of products, etc.) requires new creative processes able to interpret the complexity of Social Inclusion.

Inclusive Signs is a card-based toolkit designed to generate creative and inclusive design concepts, meta-design insights and strategies. A set of 180 cards and a worksheet can be used to run creative brainstorming, workshops, discussions, as well as to find inspirational trajectories and meaningful values. **Inclusive Signs** employs semiotic patterns to produce meaningful inclusive-oriented design meanings – ***inclusive signs*** precisely. The creation of ***inclusive signs*** is operated through instinctive combination of descriptive and visual concepts. Therefore, both designers, stakeholders, and design students can imagine future inclusive scenarios and new generation of enabling solutions in a new way.

This handbook provides useful instructions on how to generate inclusive meta-design concepts through the **Inclusive Signs** toolkit. Handbook and the toolkit (180 cards and worksheet) here presented are part of an open access project and are distributed under **CC BY-NC-SA 4.0** license.