connections
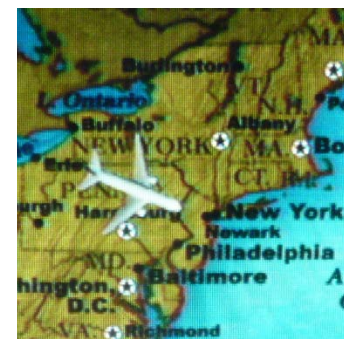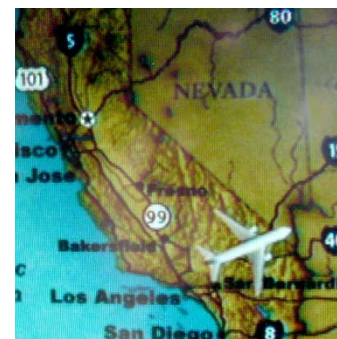
Miya Zane Osaki
Designmatters Fellowship Spring 2007
UNICEF Headquarters New York

designmatters
● Art Center College of Design

…a texture of events, environments, other people and that from the meeting, in turn, other stories will be derived which will break off from their common story.

Italo Calvino 1979

This book documents my internship at UNICEF in New York City as a part of the Designmatters Fellowship Spring 2007. While it does not capture all of the memorable details of my time in New York, my hope is that it reflects the value of my experience. This knowledge expanded my understanding of what it means to be a designer and influenced my interests and work.

I would like to express my appreciation to Mariana Amatullo and Elisa Ruffino for making this all possible, Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, the Media Design Program, and my family and friends.

MZO 2007
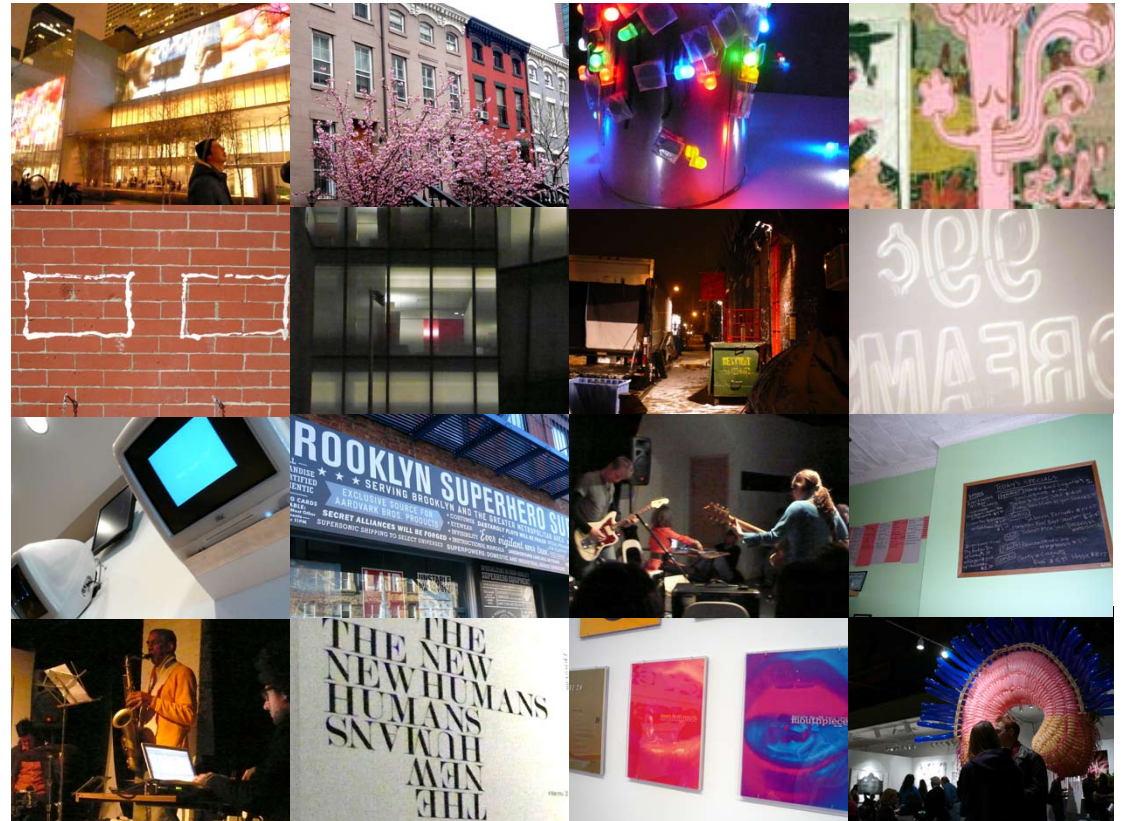
The Internet, Broadcast and Imaging Section in the Division of Communication at UNICEF is committed to spreading the UNICEF message via all possible media channels, exploring new ways for that message to be delivered to a global audience. As a design intern at UNICEF, I contributed to a diverse array of projects, among which I had the exciting opportunity to work on the One Laptop Per Child XO (Negroponte's $100 Laptop, an educational project providing computers to children around the world). With people from OLPC, MIT, and Google, UNICEF is developing new tools for students and teachers to collectively create innovative educational materials to tell their own stories, inform history, and share knowledge.

I am interested in how design can inspire a deeper engagement with culture and the world. My work explores storytelling, knowledge building, communities, and cultural history. During my internship, I was able to merge these interests with the UNICEF mandate to support educational opportunities for all children.
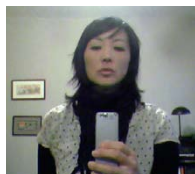
Some of the more complex challenges I faced as a designer at UNICEF revolved around issues of media and the digital divide. My internship experience lead me to examine these issues in my own work to bridge these gaps.

Working on projects at UNICEF brought up many questions about the relationship we have with technology today:

What kind of opportunities can new media offer to educate, advocate, and enrich culture? How can we use technology in more dynamic, interactive, and meaningful ways within communities, without alienating or overpowering them? How can we address human needs and activities while also introducing more open-ended systems? Can a computer be as easy to understand and access as a pencil?
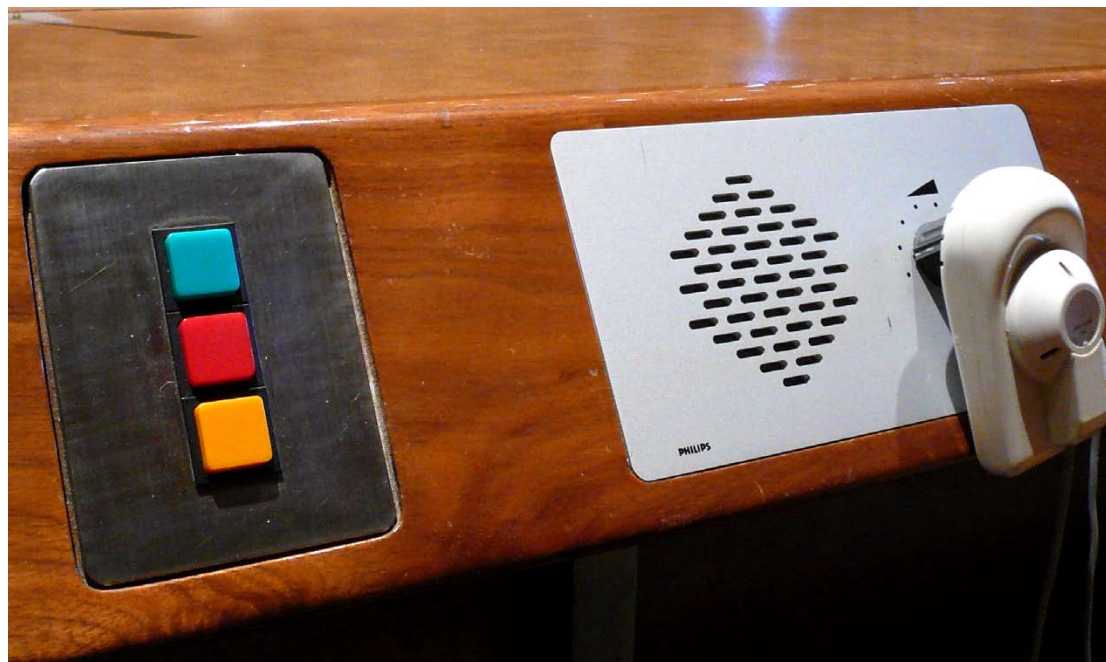
This trip was also significant for me as a native Californian, as it was only the second time I had lived away from the west coast. In addition, it was my first design job in a large international office.

I experienced my first snowy winter, made lasting connections, and fell in love with New York over those three months.

world gets bigger

In the beginning of February, I arrived at the nine floor building in midtown Manhattan where I would begin my work as an interactive designer for IBIS Internet, Broadcast, Imaging Section) in the Division of Communication. IBIS delivers news and information about UNICEF to 158 nations, dealing with content, accessibility issues, and translation everyday. Their website is updated daily and improvements are being discussed and implemented regularly. I was impressed by the vast scope of their efforts, which includes media work in fourteen languages with over 65 websites, numerous related programmes, and broadcasts over television, radio and the internet.

The department was interested in exploring new media, and I was encouraged to discover areas where I could expand my interests and develop my design skills.

During my internship I helped with several projects, such as working with Voices of Youth–a program that promotes youth activism. I designed a website for the School Fees Abolition Initiative and helped restructure UNICEF's AIDS campaign website, Draw the Line.
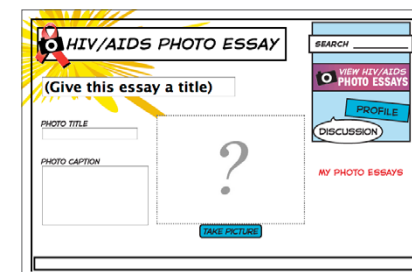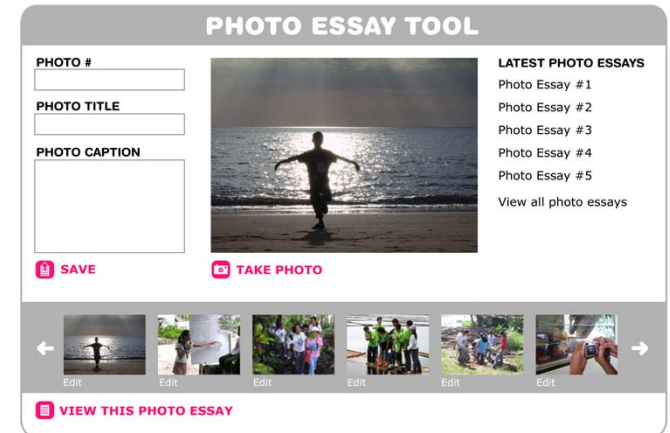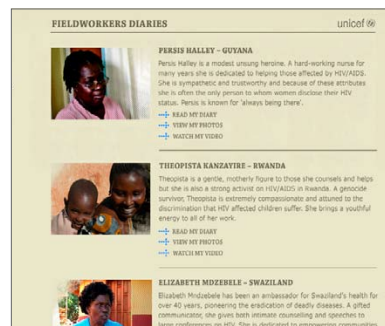
constraints build opportunities

As I've said many times, the future is already here. It's just not very evenly distributed.

William Gibson

Being able to contribute as a designer in this environment was a great learning experience. I learned that the digital divide is still a significant issue for most of the world (limited bandwidth, 800 x 600 screen size, low accessibility), and I realized that these constraints can also open up new possibilities. Working in a large non-profit agency posed another set of challenges– limited resources, tight deadlines and other bureaucratic issues that I learned to navigate.
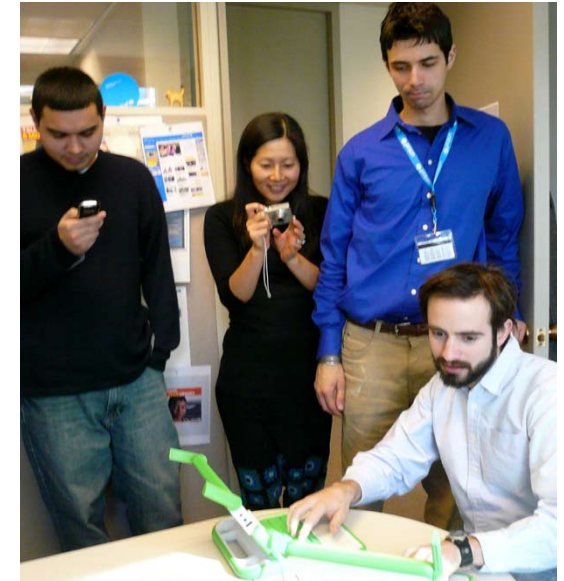
I became convinced that I needed to think about these issues in my own work–how new media impacts not only the developing world, but culture at large.

29 Trying out the OLPC XO
   prototypes at IBIS
30 Co-workers using the
   XOs for the first time
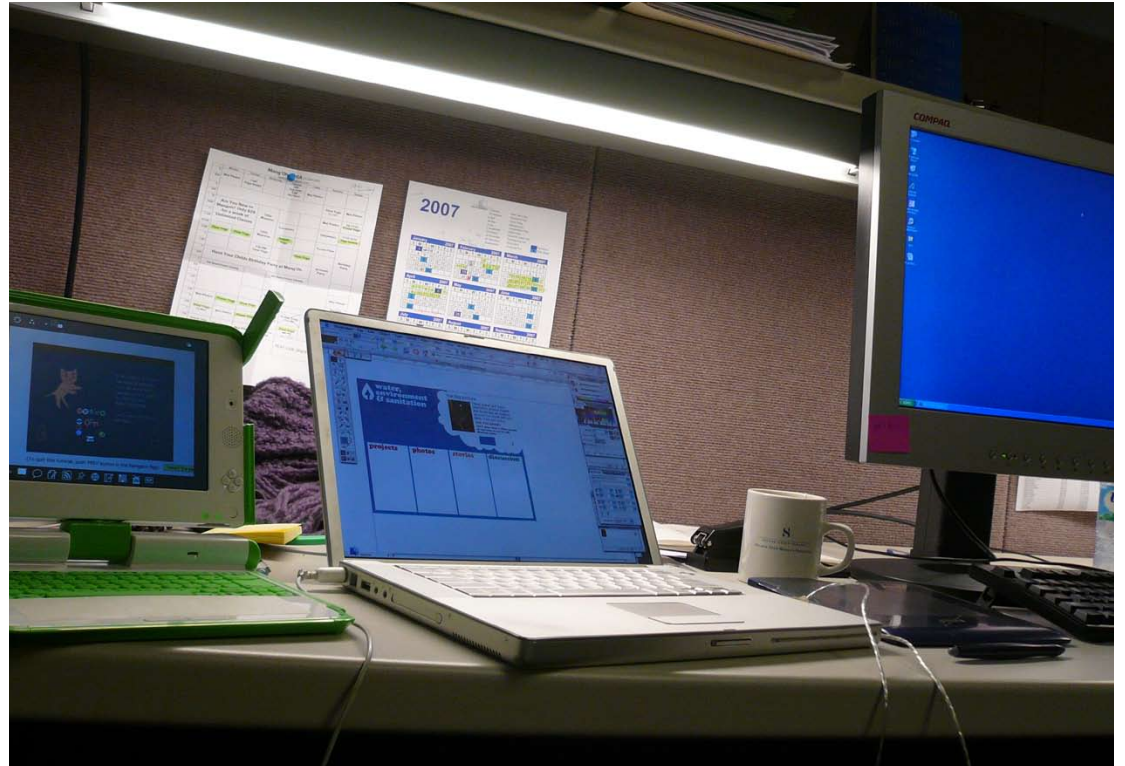
school in a box for the twenty-first century

About five weeks into my internship, I began hearing talk around the office of the $100 Laptop, a project with which I was already familiar from Media Design Program. I was excited to find out that IBIS was sent three of the latest One Laptop Per Child XO prototypes and was asked to develop ways to distribute UNICEF content for the OLPC's upcoming test program.

The possibliities of designing systems for the OLPC XO laptop was a tremendous opportunity. UNICEF had already been investigating how to use web-based tools and mobile devices to connect communities and field offices in emergency and educational situations. I quickly asked to be part of the project and found myself on a team designing a system that would be included on 250 XO laptops tested in five countries in April 2007.

In March, UNICEF hosted a conference for people from OLPC, MIT, and Harvard to brainstorm ideas. The primary goal was to build collaborative learning tools, such as wikis, that enable students and teachers to explore UNICEF's content, and in turn, create and share their own curriculum. In addition, we discussed systems for mentoring, collecting narrative histories, monitoring and evaluation, and emergency and educational programs, such as sending textbooks over satellite radio. It was rewarding to work with such a diverse, interesting group of people. Our conversations sparked great ideas and exposed me to many new possibilities.
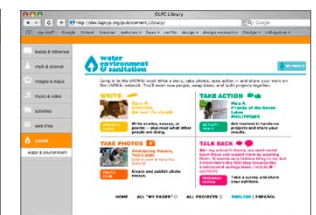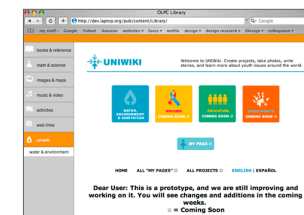
team blackmagic**

After the conference, we had ten days to build and
deliver our system prototype, both in English and
Spanish, for the OLPC launch to classrooms in South
America and Africa.

I felt tremendously lucky to be able to work on this
project. My last six weeks at UNICEF I spent with a
great team further developing this system we called
Uniwiki. Not only did I learn a lot from the group,
but I was also able to contribute skills I learned from
the Media Design Program , such as working collab-
oratively and using a process of rapid prototyping
to quickly test ideas and leapfrog our successes.In
addition, we conducted our own research and took
our Uniwiki to Uganda to gain firsthand insights
from a local youth group.

While our efforts and outcomes were not always
successful, we continued pushed ourselves to find
new solutions and ideas..

** Always trying to find a name our team, we never came to a consensus, but Blackmagic was a favorite

Another memorable experience made possible by my internship was meeting Art Center Alumni, Willy Loor, at Frog Design in New York. Though we had never met before, Willy graciously organized a group of senior designers who met with me at their office for an amazing brainstorm session about Uniwiki.

Our team at UNICEF was encouraged by the meeting and continued to work on other projects, such as montoring for field offices and mentoring programs. My final project was helping to develop a system for the Junior 8 (J8) Conference where teens from around the world participated in this year's G8 Summit in Germany. OLPC loaned us ninety XO laptops, and we created an online workspace for the participants to use during the conference. An unexpected outcome of this project was discovering that while the system was initially intended to help the participants work more efficiently, it became both a useful and enjoyable part of their social interactions.

43 Interview instructions
from an OLPC testing
classroom in Nigeria
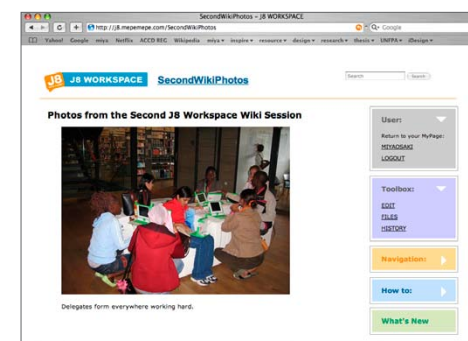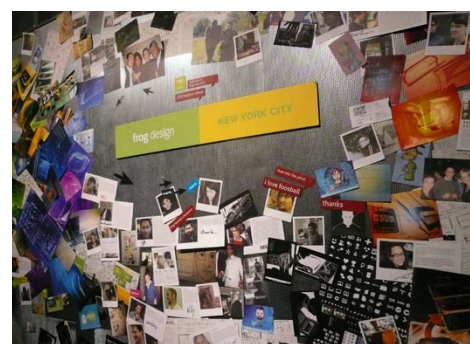
fantasy, invention, creativity, imagination

Creativity is also an end use of fantasy–indeed of
fantasy and of invention–in a global way. Creativity
is used in the field of design, considering design
as a means of planning, a means that, being free
like fantasy and exact like invention, includes all
aspect of a problem, not only image as fantasy,
not only function as invention, but also the psycho-
logical, social, economic, and human aspects.

Bruno Munari

My experience reaffirmed my interest in the role
design plays in culture, shaping our interactions to
be more accessible, engaging and meaningful.
I benefited greatly from what I learned at UNICEF,
and in return, I believe that I was able to share
with them the significant impact design can have.

I appreciate the opportunity that this Designmatters
Fellowship has given me. I hope that my efforts will
convince others of the value of such experiences.