

How Good Design Helped Bring Light to a Remote Area of Indonesia

Source: magazine.good.is

Published: April 1, 2015



The Cut Out the Darkness donation ceremony in Sone, Indonesia. Photo courtesy Panasonic

1.3 billion people around the world live without electricity. Here's how a design challenge is starting to change that.

[Amie Tullius](#)

Last month, 110 solar lanterns dangled from simple wooden poles as part of a small evening ceremony in Sone, a remote Indonesian village in the mountains of West Timor. Before the lanterns arrived, Sone's inhabitants were among the [1.3 billion people around the world](#) who live without electricity, making such nighttime gatherings a rare occasion.

Each lantern was wrapped in a simple vinyl shade, light spilling out of intricate, animal-themed etching designs that had been selected by the more than 66,000 people from 162 different countries and areas who'd voted on submissions from 339 designers from around the world. 110 winning shade designs were ultimately produced and sent to Sone as part of Panasonic's Cut Out the Darkness project, which aims to bring light to places like Sone that are currently off the grid.



A closer look at the lanterns presented to the Sone villagers

Without access to electricity, homes in such areas rely on kerosene lamps, which emit dangerous levels of smoke and can easily be tipped over, catching fire. Even the brightest of these lamps don't give off much light, making it difficult to complete schoolwork or seek assistance in an emergency. Though nearly one in five people on the planet spend their nights this way, a lack of access to electricity is an issue that remains relatively under the radar.

Which is why, for Cut Out the Darkness, it was imperative to involve artists. “Things that are difficult to grasp or don't feel relevant to you can be turned into something that feels personally significant when expressed well,” says Hisao Tsugita, Cut Out the Darkness project leader and on behalf of the project. The designs, he says, gave people everywhere something visceral they could connect with. Voting on submissions through design network [Behance](#) and the [Cut Out the Darkness project website](#) got more than 110,000 people invested in the outcome—and the issue itself.



The shades featured animal-themed designs and were assembled as part of a larger project that Cut Out the Darkness refers to as a “lantern zoo.”

Though the well-designed shades generated awareness, it's the solar lantern nestled inside each shade that's the workhorse. Just one unit can light up an entire family home. Roughly the size and shape of a large, rounded sandwich, each is easily connected to a solar panel. The shade can be taken off, unrolled, and hung flat on the wall as a work of art.

But though the shades aren't quite as useful as the technology they house, they've played an important role. Each one-of-a-kind design—created by a stranger from the other side of the world—makes every shade a private, personal gift from the designer to the villager who ultimately takes it home. And according to Tsugita, that personal connection has been equally meaningful to the recipients and the designers.



Working by the light of an unshaded solar lantern

“Many designers from South America and other areas especially sensitive to issues like poverty are very excited about this project now,” he says. He explains that when passionate creative professionals buy into the idea, their visual statements about the issue spread the word much more quickly than more formal verbal or written channels. Good design, he says, tends to bypass the perfectly natural compassion fatigue that often surrounds such complex, overwhelming problems.

As for those villagers receiving a lantern, they are able to accept the charmingly designed shades (and the lanterns within) as souvenirs, rather than as handouts. Tsugita was pleasantly surprised to discover just how open Sone's villagers were to receiving them. “Not only children but all villagers welcomed and enjoyed the lanterns,” he says. “We were so touched to find out that the basic preparation for the ceremony was already done in advance when we arrived at the village.”



The Sone villagers prepare for the ceremony.

Tsugita recalls the first moment the lanterns blinked on as being a simple but powerful moment ([captured here](#)), resulting in a spontaneous round of applause. After a few hours, Sone's villagers walked home, their new lanterns lighting the way.

Cut Out the Darkness is part of Panasonic's larger program [100 Thousand Solar Lanterns Project](#), which aims to donate as many solar lanterns to people living without electricity in time for the company's centennial in 2018. The project "makes all the donations through NGOs and international organizations," Tsugita explains, "which deeply understand local challenges and needs."



A solar lantern improves safety conditions for these villagers.

All photos courtesy Panasonic
