

Opening up our Gated Community

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doi: 10.21606/pluriversal.2020.023

Teaching design in a non-Western culture makes one vaguely aware of its embedded cultural and technological determinants, such as the machine aesthetic or mass production techniques and materials. When this is juxtaposed against local design traditions and cultures of practice – many of which pre-date post-war Europe – these ‘normalisations’ become glaringly self-evident. Design education in the non-Western context, therefore, becomes more an acculturation project (along with its shadow, ‘deculturation’) than one involving technical training. This paper attempts to narrate this epiphanic experience of a designer-educator, which has met with instant and widespread resonance when sharing this with peers from non-Western origins or work experience, and leads up to a set of propositions to unlock the gates of the design community and allow a lot more diversity to flow in and enrich the discourse.

Keywords: tradition; knowledge; method; diversity

1. Problems Teaching Local/Indigenous ‘Design’

“Design is a very young profession, but a very old activity.”—Hoary design cliché

As the record would show, there was no ‘design’ prior to the establishment of its institutes in newly-independent India. Sure, there was plenty of art, architecture, handicraft and even applied art, but nothing that would qualify as ‘design’—by which is implied a particular class of artefacts produced by/as industry, whose conception & specification follows a laid-down process, that is undertaken by a ‘specialist’ professional (who is not the actual maker of the artefact).

So while there was a wealth of ‘design artefacts’ and a ‘design culture’ in abundance (now defining design as ‘artificiality’), it was all classified as ‘traditional’ because these emanated from an un-self-conscious spontaneity and tacit intellect, wisdom and method—to boot, produced in small batches from naturally-occurring material, often with hand-tools, so certainly not ‘industrial’.



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This could not be the basis of a formal ‘discipline’ or a ‘professional training’ in design. This was what the duo of Ray and Charles Eames reported in 1957-58 when they were asked to produce a note guiding the establishment of a design institute for India (to “resist the rapid deterioration of consumer goods” and “aid small industries”). They described India as a “tradition-oriented society” where “behaviour patterns are pre-programmed, pre-set”, decision-making is “unconscious” and “security is in the status quo” [1958]. Clearly, the new d-institution—and its resultant practice—would need “conscious decision-making”, faster (not “evolutionary”) pace of transformation, in order to create “quality” for the young republic. In other words, the western model of industrial innovation embedded within consumerist economics, as well as its benchmarks of ‘quality’ became the defining frame for the newborn discipline.

In this framing, ‘tradition’ had to be relegated to an honoured position in the distant past – even though it was ubiquitous in contemporary society. The ‘traditional’ had to be seen and studied with an anthropological-historical lens and rendered as ‘exotic’, like it would for any western tourist or scholar even. And this is the ‘curse’ that the Indian designer has been stuck with ever since—a profound uprooting & alienation from her own cultural context.

This broadly captures the dilemma of the designer and design educator in India. We can now elaborate this into what it epistemologically means for design as a discipline, and for Indian design in particular.

2. Is Traditional ‘Design’?

When Nigel Cross [2001] said that the area of expert knowledge that designers have is the “artificial world”, the “human-made world of artefacts”, he was trying to demarcate an all-inclusive and generalizable yet sufficiently differentiated and particular ‘territory’ for ‘design’ – and propose a “strong and appropriate intellectual culture” (under the subhead “Design as Discipline”) that “concentrates on [researching] the underlying forms of knowledge peculiar to the designer ... at least matching those of others”, as the way forward for the emergence of a general design theory and methodology, he was asserting that there exists something of the sort, and that it could be duly uncovered and distilled.

Summing up ‘design epistemology’ over the last fifty-odd years, Darius Mahdjoubi [2003] concluded that “apparently one can envision design epistemology as a method for expression and change/manipulation [synthesis] compared with science, which is based on analysis and investigation ... the exploration of truth”. This was in broad consonance with Cross [2001], who also located design in the space of original innovation and creativity, going so far as to say that “the results [of the practice of design] do not have to be repeatable, and in most cases must *not* be repeated, or copied” (italics his).

Now this renders almost all that is ‘traditional’ null and virtually antithetical in terms of ‘design’ – since that is characterized by “pre-programmed or pre-set” behaviours and practices, with the aim of preserving the status quo [Eames, 1958]. This also means that the ‘traditional’ has very little, if anything at all, to offer to ‘design’ by way of ‘expert knowledge’.

This requires us to unpack the notion of ‘traditional’ and its invisible binary, contemporary or modern.

3. Unpacking ‘Traditional’

No elaboration on tradition can be done without referencing Eric Hobsbawm [1983], who declared “traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented”. He distinguishes between tradition, which is characterized by “invariance”, and “custom”, which “does not preclude innovation and change” – which “cannot afford to be invariant, because even in traditional societies life is not so”. He also points out the distinction between “tradition” and “convention” or

“routine”—which applies even to “unprecedented practices – such as the work of an aircraft pilot – as to long-familiar ones”.

On “invented traditions”, Hobsbawm suggested that this tends to happen when a “rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the [old] social patterns [or order]”, and significantly asserted that it occurred not just in so-called “traditional” societies, but also in “modern” ones.

This is an important perspective because it challenges our neat binaries of traditional versus contemporary, past versus present/future, conservation versus innovation—and pushes us to acknowledge and examine the politics underlying this formulation.

From the design perspective, it is clear that this binary has effectively ‘invisibilised’ local & indigenous design practice, culture and discourse—the ‘traditional’—almost entirely. At best, it has allowed it to present itself as a space of nostalgia, maybe even utopia, but firmly precluded from challenging the cognitive model & framework of ‘modern’ design. It is condemned to present itself as a ‘subject for modernisation or contemporisation’, and its intrinsic ‘knowledge’ (whatever that might be) irrelevant except for those who reject modernity and wish to live in an idyllic bubble of the past.

For thousands if not millions of design students, educators and practitioners who have had the good fortune to closely interact with traditional artisans (or “craftists” as I like to call them), there is no dearth of rich and valuable knowledge and wisdom with them, that does not have a direct bearing on design education and practice. This is often in a form that simultaneously addresses the current physical or material context but also the metaphysical and eternal context. As an illustration, I can cite a personal experience – of drilling a hole into a vacuum-formed polystyrene box for my final product design project at school. It was only when my ‘uneducated’ and ‘untrained’ (but a master all the same) workshop supervisor-craftist remarked that I should ‘listen’ to what the plastic was ‘trying to tell me’ that I realized that my drill wasn’t aligned perfectly perpendicular to the plastic, and I was brutally trying to force it down regardless – deaf to the ‘shrieks of protest’ emitted as a result!

Such experiences have always raised questions like “Why shouldn’t this person be a designer, or a design professor, or a PhD? Why does (such) embodied knowledge and wisdom not count against reams of paper filled with words?” that have evoked vigorous affirmation but never a satisfying answer.

4. Unpacking ‘Knowledge’

This brings us to unpacking ideas about ‘knowledge’. The most apt framework applicable to our case is the distinction (another binary, unfortunately) between “tacit” and “explicit” knowledge. As per Michael Polanyi [1958], the latter can be distinguished in terms of i) codifiability and mechanism of transfer, ii) modes of generation – via logical deduction and/or via practical experience, and iii) appropriability, extractability and storage/distribution without participation of the ‘expert’ [source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacit_knowledge].

The objection this immediately raises is whether it is in the nature of the knowledge that such distinctions occur or in the attitude and capabilities of the analyst. If I am sceptical about (or in awe of) my workshop supervisor’s ‘expert knowledge’, I may ascribe it as unknowable without personal experience, or unextractable and untransferable without his personal presence and participation. This is evocative of ‘Meno’s Paradox’ which can be paraphrased as “If you know what you’re looking for, enquiry is unnecessary. If you don’t know what you’re looking for, enquiry is futile. Therefore, enquiry is either unnecessary or futile”! [Cohen, 2006]

Unfortunately, Cross even while asserting that much of designerly knowledge is tacit [1982], relegates it to its 'skill' aspect rather than the more profound philosophical or metaphysical dimension. Even recent work such as Wood et al [2009] remains focused around the acquisition and transfer of an 'expert skill/mastery' when discussing craft production.

It is Polanyi who provides us with a critique of the above, possibly forced distinction, with his famous quote: "We can know more than we can tell". In 'The Tacit Dimension' [1966], he asserted that tacit knowledge "is shown to account 1) for valid knowledge of a problem, 2) for the scientist's capacity to pursue it, guided by his sense of approaching his solutions, and 3) for a valid anticipation of the yet indeterminate implications of the discovery arrived at in the end". Addressing Meno's Paradox, he inferred that "the process of formalizing all knowledge to the exclusion of any tacit knowledge is self-defeating".

Surely, it is the failure of 'knowledge' if it fails to acknowledge, value and validate its 'tacit' or non-formal variety, and not the other way around.

Moving from the 'tacit/explicit' binary, let's briefly look at the 'oral/written' one. This is also of critical significance in the Indian context, where oral knowledge traditions have been the norm until very recently, and lack of literacy in no way implies a lack of ability or intellect. This sounds highly applicable to 'designerly knowledge' as well.

Deborah Tannen, in her work assessing "Oral and Written Strategies in Spoken and Written Discourse" [1983] in the context of children's education, describes as "most radical" her assertion "that oral strategies may underlie successful discourse production and comprehension in the written as well as oral mode". In other words, the oral mode (and culture) is more effective at generating "discourse" and enabling "comprehension" in the minds and imaginations of young children, as compared with the written mode. This is not hard to understand for anyone coming from India who's personally encountered its rich and diverse living traditions of oral storytelling, whether as cultural ritual or religious education. Going back to my student experience, a lot of my interaction with the workshop supervisor was oral – chatting about this and that, Q&As, anecdote sharing, life-lessons instruction, etc. – and this certainly wasn't only about the 'skill' aspect, nor was it very 'tacit' (as in 'taciturn') by any yardstick. Even today, despite the higher prevalence of literacy and the easy access to media, India's new-age 'gurus' prefer to reach out and preach to their followers in embodied form – combining the oral (enhanced with background music perhaps) with the visual (more often than not, downright spectacular) – testifying to the unmatched power of orality in certain kinds of knowledge transfer. In an absolutely opposite way, other spiritual masters shun any kind of words altogether, relying on other modalities -including silence- to elicit, manifest and convey profound 'knowledge'.

Could it be that the knowledge underlying 'design' (both 'traditional' and contemporary variety) can, at least in part if not substantially, be best accessed and worked with in tacit or oral form?

5. Unpacking 'Translation'

It follows from the above that there may exist one class of 'knowledge' that defies articulation, and that in the case of design, it is possibly substantive. Even assuming we could articulate everything (since 'description' is fundamental to the scientific project), how would we communicate it to one another? Prior to that is the question: which language could really capture every aspect of 'design knowledge'?

Originally, much of the vocabulary of design came from the fine arts. Today, much of it comes from psychology, technology and management. While these subjects have been translated into the world's national languages, its efficacy remains in doubt.

रहता है। इस पर तार्किक युक्ति का कोई प्रभाव नहीं पड़ता तथा वास्तविकता में जिसका कोई आधार नहीं होता। मनोविदलता में **उत्पीड़न भ्रमासक्ति** (delusions of persecution) सर्वाधिक पाई जाती है। इस तरह के भ्रमासक्ति से ग्रसित लोग यह विश्वास करते हैं कि लोग उनके विरुद्ध षड्यंत्र कर रहे हैं, उनकी जासूसी कर रहे हैं, उनकी मिथ्या निंदा की जा रही है, उन्हें धमकी दी जा रही है, उन पर आक्रमण हो रहे हैं या उन्हें जानबूझकर उत्पीड़ित किया जा रहा है। मनोविदलता से ग्रसित लोगों में **संदर्भ भ्रमासक्ति** (delusions of reference) भी हो सकती है जिसमें वे दूसरों के कार्यों या वस्तुओं और घटनाओं के प्रति विशेष और व्यक्तिगत अर्थ जोड़ देते हैं। **अत्यहंमन्यता भ्रमासक्ति** (delusions of grandeur) में व्यक्ति अपने आपको बहुत सारी विशेष शक्तियों से संपन्न मानता है तथा **नियंत्रण भ्रमासक्ति** (delusions of control) में वे मानते हैं कि उनके विचार, भावनाएँ और क्रियाएँ दूसरों के द्वारा नियंत्रित की जा रही हैं।

मनोविदलता में व्यक्ति तर्कपूर्ण ढंग से सोच नहीं सकते तथा विचित्र प्रकार से बोलते हैं। यह **औपचारिक चिंतन विकार** (formal thought disorder) उनके संप्रेषण को और कठिन बना देता है। उदाहरणार्थ, एक विषय से दूसरे विषय पर तेजी से बदलना जो चिंतन की सामान्य

जैसे - पेट में साँप का रेंगना इत्यादि), **दृष्टि विभ्रान्ति** (visual hallucination) (जैसे - लोगों या वस्तुओं की सुस्पष्ट दृष्टि या रंग का अस्पष्ट प्रत्यक्षण), **रससंवेदी विभ्रान्ति** (gustatory hallucination) (अर्थात् खाने और पीने की वस्तुओं का विचित्र स्वाद) तथा **घ्राण विभ्रान्ति** (olfactory hallucination) (धुँएँ और जहर की गंध) प्रमुख हैं।

मनोविदलता के रोगी **अनुपयुक्त भाव** (inappropriate affect) भी प्रदर्शित करते हैं अर्थात् ऐसे संवेग जो स्थिति के अनुरूप न हों।

नकारात्मक लक्षण (negative symptom) 'विकट न्यूनता' होते हैं जिनमें वाक्-अयोग्यता, विसंगत एवं कुंठित भाव, इच्छाशक्ति का हास और सामाजिक विनिवर्तन सम्मिलित होते हैं। मनोविदलता के रोगियों में **अलोगिया** (alogia) या वाक्-अयोग्यता पाई जाती है जिसमें भाषण, विषय तथा बोलने में कमी पाई जाती है। मनोविदलता के कई रोगी दूसरे अधिकांश लोगों की तुलना में कम क्रोध, उदासी, खुशी तथा अन्य भावनाएँ प्रदर्शित करते हैं। इसलिए उनके **विसंगत भाव**

क्या आप कुछ ऐसे चरित्रों को जानते हैं जिन्हें आपने फ़िल्म में देखा या पुस्तक में पढ़ा हो, जो ऐसे विकारों से ग्रसित हों जो अभी तक आप पढ़ चुके हैं जैसे - अवसाद या मनोविदलता और जो

क्रियाकलाप
4.5

Snapshot from NCERT textbook on Psychology (page 86), for Hindi-medium students of Grade 12.

Without taking anything away from the translation effort, it is apparent from the above illustration that this is not about transfer of knowledge but only a catalogue of technical concepts along with their definitions and inter-relations meant for memorization and regurgitation in a written examination – and no comprehension or application purposes, whatsoever. Is it that certain kinds of knowledge can only be articulate or taught in certain languages exclusively? There is no basis to assume so, but it does raise serious doubts about the limitations (absurdity, even) of literal translation.

This poses a huge challenge when it comes to making design education accessible to the large majority of young people in India, who are not educated in English, or despite being so, have low fluency and comfort with it.

Even in mainstream and elite design education, on a closer look it is obvious that chunks of 'design knowledge' remain on the fringes of or even outside of formal articulation, and are hard to convey. Of course, this doesn't apply to technical aspects, but certainly does to qualitative ones, involving taste, judgement or refinement, where it's easier to articulate—even in a same-language, high-fluency group—what's *not* appropriate or effective rather than what might be. What is being conveyed is not merely information or a concept, but a value system or culture.

Design, being a highly judgement-based activity, involves a deep immersion into and engagement with a culture of values. Hence, the challenge of translation is not merely linguistic or semantic, it is actually cultural. As González-Cascallana [2006] puts it in the context of translating children's literature across cultures: "Translation, then, is a matter of semiotic transformations and operations that presuppose choices, alternatives, decisions, strategies, aims and goals. The translator is indeed faced with a wide

choice of strategies ranging from domestication (absence of peculiarities by adaptation of cultural signs) to foreignization (registers foreign identity by close adherence to the source text).” Clearly, in addition to posing a technical challenge, cross-cultural translation also becomes a political act.

The dilemma of the Indian designer, caught between her Eurocentric training and acculturation and her very Indian environment and aesthetic, is best expressed thus by Sarita Sundar [2016]: “One cannot help but wonder whether the Indian design landscape would have been different today if there was a more forceful contribution from vernacular creative practitioners in those early years of formal design education.”

6. Unpacking ‘Method’

In their Report to the Indian government, the Eameses eulogized the humble ‘water pot’ or *lotā* – found all over India, in a myriad shapes, sizes, materials and application contexts. After listing its various design attributes and achievements, they refer to its ‘evolutionary’ design: “Of course, no one man could have possibly designed the lota.” The aim for the design institute would then be “to hasten the production of the lotas of our time “(i.e. not leave things to evolve organically, subject to chance). And this should be done not in the traditional “unconscious” way, but as “conscious decisions evaluating changing factors”, by “conscious selection and correction in relation to evolving needs” [1958].

Clearly, the reference here is to the deployment of a systematic and rigorous method that involves a detailed appraisal and analysis of the various influencing or constraining factors, and a scientific decision-making on what to prioritize and what to optimize, *en route* to the predicted and predictable final solution. This correlates with what Cross [1993] called the desire to “scientise” design, tracing it back to Le Corbusier in the 1920s, Bucky Fuller in 1957 and Herbert Simon in 1968, peaking around 1962 with the Conference on Design Methods under J. Christopher Jones and D. J. Thornley—also featuring Christopher Alexander’s systematic analysis of “Components for an Indian village” (sic!). There could be nothing in common with the ‘traditional’ method of ‘unconscious’ decision-making followed by the uneducated rural artisan here... or could there?

Cross continues in his chronology, “in the 1970s there emerged a backlash against design methodology and its underlying values—notably by some of the early pioneers of the movement”. He quotes J. Christopher Jones as saying, “I dislike...the continual attempt to fix the whole of life into a logical framework”.

Although the story continues to roller-coaster up and down even after this, we can leave it here to forge a link with the ‘traditional’ – which on the face of it seems mindlessly repetitive, but on closer look and through an appreciative lens one may discover analysis, reflection, hypothesis, experimentation and iterative innovation in practice. ‘Traditional’ artefacts aren’t frozen in time, they also evolve in subtle ways from generation to generation – but the evolution is so cleverly done that the consumer never feels deprived of the elements that cue ‘tradition’. Obviously, much of it is market-driven rather than self-driven (‘craft’ in the Indian context is not a hobby, it is an inherited/legacy family business, identity and knowhow), hence radical innovation is rare (as it is with large industry as well, although in the case of traditional artefacts, the primary selling-points are ‘purity’ and ‘continuity’). But that should not imply that the artisan is incapable of radical innovation, given sufficient confidence and opportunity.

On developing this appreciative insight into and understanding of the traditional craftist’s ‘design paradigm’, it is hard to agree with the state’s appraisal of her/him being ‘ignorant’ in design and in need of ‘design training’ – by someone ‘trained’ at design school, naturally. When faced with this situation,

my only response is to ‘inform’ them about their changed clientele – the urban or overseas buyer/collector personas – and the prevailing notions of value & taste and competition in that segment.

Does the latest edition of ‘design methods’ now called ‘Design Thinking’ as ‘pioneered’ by the design team at IDEO along with academics of Stanford University’s d.school, serve as a universal general method/framework for all design everywhere, regardless of context and culture? Unfortunately, it doesn’t – simply because context and culture render it irrelevant in terms of acknowledging and addressing the peculiar factors that exist in the Indian context. One of the handful of second-generation design educators in India, S. Balaram, summarised these as follows [1998]:

The factors inhibiting the development of an “appropriate design method” [for India] are the mental realities of its people. These for example are:

- *The capacity to play with an inner version of the environment rather than with the outer version which is rational and functional ... For instance, a computer coming into the house calls for worship of the machine.*
- *The subjectivity of the Indian mind, transforming [a signifier] into “the object” rather than viewing itself as “separate” from the object. For instance, a competent actor who plays villain on screen is hated in real life too.*
- *“Process-concern” rather than the “product” (result) concern. Whether it is the theory of Karma or the theory of “unfinished images” in Indian temples, where the sculptor did not bother about the end product, it is the clear demonstration of concern only with a process.*

These are realities difficult to explore but not impossible, to grasp. Men like Gandhi had grasped them and used them successfully.

In the ancient Indian treatises on architecture (closest there is to ‘design’), the *Vastu Shastras* estimated to date back to 6000-3000 BCE, there are no direct instructions or prescriptions of ‘methods’ [Chakrabarti, 1998], there are just a large variety of grids or mandalas – which serve as a kind of ‘pattern language’ (to allude to Chris Alexander’s landmark compilation) that the designer could meditate upon and interpret, adapt or improvise, with reference to the specific design context and features of the site.

What was generic though, was the advice to the ‘seeker’—to withdraw from the distractions of the world, go into a remote forest or atop a mountain, and meditate on the divine for inspiration. At one instant, the entire ‘design’ would be revealed in a flash, in complete detail. Now, this is truly a super-meta ‘method’ if one chooses to see it that way, applicable to almost any human endeavour. It may well be that with the right packaging and jargon, this becomes the future design process to make sense of and devise ingenious ways out of complex systemic and ecological challenges.

Even at the humbler level of the small artisan, a ‘pattern language/library’ metaphor works well to model her/his ‘expert knowledge’—albeit not explicit, not fully conscious or reflexive, not well-articulated or verbalized. It remains to be seen whether underlying these, at the meta level, can be found a generic ‘design methodology’ – and whether it corresponds to the popularly-accepted global one.

One significant area of difference between the modern, global design process and the traditional, local one is in their approach to originality. In the traditional context, fidelity to the normative form is not seen as illegitimate because the traditional artefact form is quite tightly-specified with not much scope for variation (and common sense says “why fix it if it ain’t broke?”), and so the differentiation would manifest in terms of material, quality, finish, price, embellishment, etc. Craftists’ first response to being

asked to ‘differentiate for the sake of being different’ tend to be rather crass and ridiculous to our eyes – simply because they’ve never considered originality as a marker of value before.

However, where one can indeed have an equal and mutually-enriching conversation with a ‘traditional’ artisan is in the outcome—physical form, material properties, innovative features, aesthetics in context, market value, and so on. There is no evidence of illiteracy or lack of intelligence discernible in such discussions. This clearly means that s/he is fully cognizant of and concerned about the efficacy, value-addition and finer aspects of the artefact—i.e. the technical and culture-agnostic performance aspects. In fact, her/his simultaneously being a creator and entrepreneur invariably teaches a lesson or two in pragmatics to the ‘trained design professional’ who lacks business as well as hands-on making perspective.

It is Balaram again [1998] who sums up the ‘expertise’ of the ‘illiterate artisans’ thus (and then goes on to elaborate extensively):

Most artisans are poor as well as illiterate. Nevertheless, they are highly skilled and well “educated” in terms of their long and rich experience. There are often many unrecognised strengths amongst such people, particularly the artisans. They are sometimes storehouses of knowledge, which would constitute a wealth of learning that could be made available for others in society. It is aptly said that in oral cultures when an artisan dies, a hundred libraries are burnt down. This wealth of learning would comprise firstly what the artisans do and secondly, the way they do it.

7. Discussion

Returning to the state of art in design methods and research, there are still considerable gaps that prevent the emergence of a comprehensive explanation that satisfactorily applies to and incorporates all the occurrences of ‘design’ wherever and whenever.

Jones et al [2016] flag that 15 years after Cross, “there remains no independent, epistemic basis to establish design as a recognizably independent discipline, or even identification of [relevant] epistemological tendencies”. They conclude that until there is more clarity on scope, methods and validation, the situation is likely to remain unchanged.

Rather than feeling despondent, this may actually be seen as opening up an opportunity for many more design discourses to join the project and enrich the core to become truly global in a robust and inclusive way.

Using ‘traditional’ design practice and epistemologies as a filter for the ‘global’ one, shows up several flaws—for example, its identification with mass production and the market economy (viz. scale and mobility). These are clearly not intrinsic features or factors of a ‘discipline’ but only contextual ones, to which disciplinary knowledge must adapt and formulate its application—no different fundamentally from what occurs at the ‘traditional’ level.

Perhaps by setting aside some of these legacy attributes as being not binding or mandatory, we might succeed in creating a more open but robust definition and identity for ‘design’ that turns out a lot more inclusive of and pertinent to a wide range of cultures and contexts.

Certainly, this trend is noticeable in the space of design praxis, with more and more stress on empathy, diversity and inclusiveness (or participation) in even the industrial process. This reveals an increasing self-confidence in opening up and demystifying ‘design’, and reconnecting it back to our core human attributes and capabilities. What is heartening is that this is happening even as breath-taking

developments in technology are underway and could well have sucked design theorizing into a technocentric framing and mindset (and this is a concerted pressure from industry as well as states)—but instead we witness a greater embrace of humanness in all its brilliance and flaws. What is amazing is that there is a tacit consensus that it is only through a better understanding of—and engagement with—our humanity, that we would obtain ever-better insights into and reference coordinates for designing artificiality. The key to conceptualizing and evolving the artificial lies in appreciatively and empathetically embracing the human.

Can we do the same and ‘open up’ design pedagogy, epistemology, theorizing and research to embrace diversity, collaboration and participation as well? Taking a cue from Mahatma Gandhi, can we ‘find purpose’—with the confidence that ‘the means will follow’?

8. Conclusion: Propositions

We now reach the last stage of this discussion, where the ‘why not’ is converted to ‘what if’ (after all, it *is* a paper on Design). Having identified some of the challenges faced by designers and design educators vis-à-vis the vast body of ‘knowledge’ as well as ‘practice & practitioners’ in their societal and cultural context, who are denied legitimacy, recognition and expert status due to historical and contextual blinkers that got attached to the entire ‘discipline’ as it evolved, and remain till today. Sadly, they normalise certain Euro-centric conditions and contexts as universally applicable, and act as invisible gate-keepers against the entry of ‘others’ with different norms. Although these are framed as ‘technical’ or even ‘historical’, it’s not hard to see (especially for a non-Euro-American scholar) how culturally specific and exclusive they are in fact. In this paper, I have attempted to identify and name a few such possible assumptions.

Looking forward, I would like to submit some of these ‘barriers to entry’ that, if removed, could probably open up the discipline to a sharper and more universal understanding of its own specialist knowledge, as well as include a vast number and variety of experts and practitioners into its fold—and thereby enrich its knowledge-base that much more. Of course, these are not offered as a charter of demands or manifesto, but as considerations for discussion and debate, both amongst non-Western practitioners and between them and their Western colleagues. The hope is that these would be rigorously scrutinised and refined until they become universally and critically accepted as adding value to the discipline.

8.1. Unconstrain design from scale or mode of production

While Bauhaus and the post-war industrialisation context were key to the birthing of modern design as we know it, and there is no doubt whatsoever on its enduring influence and relevance till today and into the future, it has locked out creators and producers outside of this paradigm from the community of designers. Design would now be forced to find its distinction from ‘craft’ more rigorously – which should be good for both.

8.2. Unconstrain design from any particular temporality or speed of effect

While modernism was a compelling ideology and methodology in the formulation of design ideology, its ‘rejection of the past’ and insistence on ‘rapid decision-making’ now no longer seem relevant or helpful – especially when confronted with environmental scale and temporality. ‘Slow’ is no longer ‘bad’. Rather than throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, if we focus on generic issues or values from the past that we reject as a discipline, we might be opening our gates to a rich variety of practitioner-scholars. After all, don’t we all agree that ‘design is an ancient activity’?

8.3. Unconstrain design from vocabulary or method

This is a tricky one, as the fundamental markers of a ‘discipline’ are in fact, vocabulary and method. However, design being an action discipline, could open itself to even non-verbalised practice as long as the outcome is designerly. As practitioners and educators, we are only too aware of the fluidity and inconsistency of the ‘method’ that we profess and teach when it occurs in practice – so while using it to explain what we do and how it is done (to the non-designer world), we can afford to be more candid and tolerant of practitioners who don’t speak our jargon or follow our ‘methods’.

8.4. Unconstrain design from any particular aesthetic or culture

Yes, this is indeed a restatement of some of the above points – but more importantly, it is a plea to free design of its ‘acculturation’ element that seems embedded into its pedagogy. Why should it be necessary for a design student in the Philippines (say) to know about and attempt to embody machine aesthetic or minimalism in order to be certified as a design professional? The stress needs to shift to higher-order values rather than imitation.

8.5. Constrain design to intent, quality and outcome – but in context

In art theory, education and practice, there is a tacit understanding that ‘anything goes’ as long as the eventual outcome is a ‘work of art’ (even that tag is hotly debated). Perhaps design needs to take a leaf out of art’s book, and desist from trying to attain the status of engineering or science, even. This is not to propose that design subsumes into/as art, but opens up the space of methodology and theory whilst sharpening its rigour on the outcome.

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