

On Synthesis of Design ...

Design is said to be all encompassing, a catalyst for change, a solution provider. But is it really so? Hasn't design predominantly been driven by narrow economic models and egocentric visions centered around the designer who is the real hero?

The Design Profession still relies on the mantra which is a combination of art, science & technology. It has still not accepted societal needs and aspirations of the majority and has catered to the marginal few. In a nut shell, designers are still primarily stylists and have not really been involved as a profession in working towards solutions of a more sustainable nature. The very nature of the words 'industrial design' defines and presupposes mass manufacture and economic viability as the hallmark of success. It often does not have room for the human who in fact are the users that it serves and has an uncanny knack of building in obsolescence to serve its own future growth and existence. Where are the soft elements of design ?

Today, at the dawn of the 21st century we are in a transition zone – what is called the 'human economy'. A new digital world populated with 'amoebae' like groups with the unique ability to communicate at will without the monopoly imposed by governments and commerce. This same digital revolution has moved on through various paradigm shifts, like open source, to what some call the emergence of the 'intelligence economy' where the limits of the real world and the virtual world are blurred. When and how will design fit it?

Design has all along been reactive in nature, reacting to the current model of economics in vogue. Design has not been in an anticipatory mode and has always been a follower instead of a path breaker or evolutionary thinker. Design today needs to take a more proactive stand and not be seen as yet another flavour of the month.

Designers and their clients have always focused more on their immediate needs and the perceived needs of the user. But this has often disregarded two critical tenets, that of social responsibility and environmental responsibility. Various movements and debates have churned a lot of interest and a marginal output in terms of 'good' products but the failure is still attributed to the control of the business model. Human development has for the most part progressed on a cowboy mentality with designers being some of their experts.

The time has definitely come for development to start thinking like a spaceship and for designers to accept the value of community thinking and interaction and not a top - down process, which has been the old model so far.

A change in the basic thinking and process of design could lead to a shift from the purely economic model to one that is more sustainable and more representative of all stakeholders.

A holistic approach, not merely one from the manufacturers and the economics point of view is required for there to be 'good' design. Design as it is practiced today seems primarily to fulfill the need to the best looking, the fastest, the smallest, the cutest etc. The solutions may (in most cases) be totally ignorant of harmful waste of materials, of high-energy consumption and in all probability have built-in factors of obsolescence.

Papanek in his "design for the Real World" rightly blamed designers as the second worst profession, right after advertising. Current consumptive patterns lend great support to the hiring of a designer. But design, which would balance individual needs, societal and environmental well being would convey a different message.

New technological developments, new media, social and cultural studies besides knowledge of environmental science are some of the tools that a designer needs to rely on today. In this new world of globalization and decentralization, convergence, participation, open source and transparency

start playing a very critical role. This synthesis of the old and the new could bring out a more proactive designer enabling sustainability.

The role of design would now be to balance the socio-cultural needs of the individual with the well being of the environment. A new role for designers where design not only improves our lives but simultaneously improves the well being of our societies and cultures by restoring the health of our environment.

The designer cannot afford to be a mere specialist in one or two narrow fields. Design is all encompassing and is a synthesis of the material world, the world of communications, technology, of man's history and social development and his inner most needs of creativity, the arts and well being.