

# The Piper at the Gateway between West & East: Challenges before Design as an Underserved Discipline

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## ABSTRACT

This theoretical paper addresses the gap between Design and Art and suggests that if design is to develop into a central discipline, its structure must be the same as that of Art. It further states that if design is to spur development, it must have a theoretical, ideological and aesthetic base that must evolve from Western matrices in dialogue with the East.

## Keywords

Art, Design, Sustainable Innovation, Sustainable Development, Community, West, East, Ideology

## INTRODUCTION

**“If you board the wrong train, there’s no use running along the corridor in the opposite direction.”** – Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The century ahead is slated to be tumultuous because of the unprecedentedly global scale on which human developments are taking place. Samuel P. Huntington has predicted a “clash of civilizations” in the melting pot of the world. One of the shifts taking place is in the proposed transfer of power from established disciplines like Art to novel permutations and combinations of disciplines where younger Western forays into discipline-making like the subject of design may be highlighted. These intellectual shifts take place against the ground of political and economic changes that throw into sharp relief issues like post-colonialism, neocolonialism and new imperialism in countries like India that are in search of sustainable development. The graph of progression in the future for development by design, while it should not be that of the colonized, has to move beyond the bipolarity of privileging

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West or East. This implies that evolutionary Western thought not be put under the sign of erasure just as the relevant dimensions of Eastern thought should not be sacrificed. Design theory, if it frees itself from the subject position of handmaid to design’s functionalist credo, may be a significant means to such an enunciation.

## A PREAMBLE ON DESIGN

Design is a word that encrypts in it a concept that has assumed staggering importance in all the interdisciplinary theoretical forays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The concept ‘Sign.’ It reminds us of other important words like signs, significance, signifier(s), signified(s), plurisignification and signature(s). A fit frame for design, we know, is semiotics. It is equally interesting to look at it in linguistic terms, through the lens of the nominalism of structural linguistics that conceives of language as a rational construct and in the antithetical sense of language acting as a virus, the idea that objects can be influenced through words.

*De* is ‘of’ in French. So design also means ‘of sign’. The word design, looked at like this, seems under a question mark. It is derivatory, and can be represented, syntactically speaking, as *de-sign*. What makes ‘popular’ design artifacts, although done in a permeable medium, often differ from aesthetically grouped words or those *ensembles*, as Simone Weil describes beautiful works of Art which are examples, is the absence of the definitive signature writers or artists manage to bring to their work in an impermeable medium, to put it differently.

Being a young discipline, design exists in this vacuum, augmented by the absence of as yet grand, overarching meta-narratives of theory around it, in spite of the concreteness of its medium and work. The questionable foundations of design are often made clear by the serious doubts aesthetes sometimes raise about its strong dependence on too much of functionalism, pragmatism, utilitarianism and its ‘compromised’ commercial or

'appropriated' aesthetic approach to the solution of problems. Design is of dubitable nature, for the aesthete. This is because while, a priori, design may be both beneficent and maleficent simultaneously, what it will become in the future without a more developed artistic and theoretical base cannot be surmised yet.

In literature, as the modernist Tamil writer Nakulan stated once, a work must not have a palpable design. Or as Anais Nin put it: "The palpable seem(s) like an obstruction, a delay to the more luminous life"<sup>1</sup> of Art. In design, however, brand(ing) is often the key to success. The brand (an inscribed sign) cannot, by any stretch of imagination, be equated with 'the signature' as yet. Historically, a "brand" is associated with attempts to impose uniformity, servility and slavery on life forms and material possessions; the brand is the making and marking of the objectified, subjugated Other. A signature, however, lays claim to authenticity.

If the launch pad of design is linguistics, one can learn to see the word design as a double-edged morpheme with positive connotations and negative denotations. For example, take these two sentences:

1. He has *designs* on her.

2. That *design* on her dress makes her look prettier.

If this were drawn as a diagram with a horizontal and vertical axis, the vertical axis would have as its 'x' and 'y' ulterior motives and covert practices or vice versa, while the horizontal axis would have as its 'a' and 'b' use(ful)/surplus and (mutual) profitability. The central point 'o' would be design itself, contaminated and purified by or contaminating and purifying these two axes continuously.

Introducing words like surplus and profitability may disturb anti-capitalists but design can be divorced from the context of political ideology or economics in a discussion where it predominates as the main topic of the conversational paradigm only with great effort. Such a divorce from the functional sphere of politics and economics is not desirable.

## DESIGNING THE SIGNATURE

To return to the linguistic premise from which this amble started, if, as in writing, design can come to the point of the signature without it becoming palpable it will become increasingly relevant in the present context. Meaningful theory will be spontaneously generated around it and design will add to the rich tapestry of 21<sup>st</sup> century inter, intra- and transdisciplinary efforts to "better" the world.

In Henry James's *Figure In The Carpet* the narrator, a writer, does an astute review of Hugh Vereker's latest novel. Vereker dismisses his efforts, explaining that the critics have "missed my little point,"

"the particular thing I've written my books most for," "the thing for the critic to find," "my secret," "like a complex figure in a Persian carpet." The narrator tells his friend Corvick of the puzzle. Corvick and his novelist fiancée, Gwendolyn, pursue "the trick" without success. Later Corvick wires Gwendolyn and the narrator from India "Eureka! Immense." He divulges the secret to Gwendolyn only after they are married, and then dies in a car crash. Gwendolyn refuses to share the secret. The narrator speculates: "the figure in the carpet [was] traceable or describable only for husbands and wives - for lovers supremely united." Gwendolyn then marries Drayton Deane and when she dies, the narrator asks Deane what her secret was; Deane is surprised and humiliated by the news of his wife's "secret". He and the narrator are consumed by curiosity, by the mystery.<sup>2</sup>

Donald Barthelme, the American, minimalist, post-modernist, metafictional short story writer, entranced by Henry James' narrative finesse, wrote an interesting essay about this story. Barthelme, interestingly enough, wanted to make the work of literature cross over into being an object. While that may be a worthy enterprise for literature that is increasingly being bogged down by metaphysical garbage, design may have to move in the opposite direction where it becomes not only a plastic art but also a fine art. Its products have to be more than functional objects.

The question is whether or not design can not only produce artifacts like the figure in Henry James' storied carpet but also evoke the same sense of lasting awe and mystery in the genuine seekers of its ultimate meaning if it is to move into a centrality among the pluralized discourses rampant in today's world. To put it simplistically, design may be technical but it must also feed off and into the realm of high modernist art to create its own classics without sacrificing its interface with the mundane in its "design for development" mode. Better still, these classics could come about for and because of this indispensable interface with these two poles. In other words, can the two-fold enterprise of the emerging discipline of design innately be the body of the earth strung out between two poles, reconciling both into a whole that can be nurtured and granted equitable, incremental development? Isn't this the grand meta-narrative of "developing" from the margins to the center or, conversely, exploding from the center to the very margins, that design seeks as a discipline?

## DISCIPLINING DESIGN

This purpose of "designers" may not, however, be easily achievable in the post-modernist scenario where the premise of any single discipline approaching the sort of specificity mentioned above is itself questioned. Design is not considered a discipline in the conventional or established sense like physics, astronomy, economics or

even psychology. Design and designers work behind the scenes in a rather Masonic manner. Design exists somewhere in the underbelly of extant disciplines.

Jean Baudrillard puts it: "Everything is now aestheticized: politics is aestheticized in the spectacle, sex in advertising and porn, and all kinds of activity in what is conventionally referred to as culture – a sort of all-pervasive media- and advertising-led semiologization ... Each category is generalized to the greatest possible extent, so that it eventually loses all specificity and is reabsorbed by all the other categories ... When everything is aesthetic, nothing is beautiful or ugly anymore, and art itself disappears."<sup>3</sup>

He continues: "Art has been dissolved within a general aestheticisation of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality ... (there was) that moment when art, by renouncing its own aesthetic rules of the game, debouched into the transaesthetic era of the banality of the image."<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to see how some discourses, often those most widely circulated, try to use language to grant to design the privileges that traditionally belong to Art. Max Bruinsma, who emerges out of the context of graphic design, that realm most concerned with the generation of superficial, temporal images and signs, says: "Design is a critical operation by itself: every design, in essence, is a criticism of the context for which it has been produced. A good design 'activates' those contexts by offering an understanding of, a comment on, or an alternative to them."<sup>5</sup> But this is the role of Art "with its power of illusion, its capacity for negating reality, for setting up an 'other' scene in opposition to reality, where things obey a higher set of rules, a transcendent figure in which beings, like line and color on a canvas, are apt to lose their meaning, to extend *In* themselves beyond their own *raison d'être*, and, in an urgent process of seduction, to rediscover their ideal form (even though this form may be that of their own destruction) ..."<sup>6</sup>

Bruinsma continues: "In my view design has superseded Art as the main source of visual metaphor in our culture. Graphic and product design, television, advertising – yes, advertising too –, these are the media through which our culture reflects itself. And even in the 'autonomous' arts, I increasingly see what I call a 'designer's mentality': more than personal expression, or an idiosyncratic commentary on the world, or the condition humaine, art purposely addresses specific conditions and contexts, in much the same way as a design addresses a brief. The media and contents of art and design are merging, in a sense to the detriment of the former. And although I don't think this is an altogether positive development, I do think it is essential, and exciting."<sup>7</sup>

Bruinsma speaks of "supercession" and "merging". But in the post-modern condition "all disciplines as they lose their specificity ... partake of a process of confusion and contagion – a viral loss of determinacy which is the prime event among all the events that assail us ... aesthetics becomes transaesthetics ... all converge in a transversal and universal process wherein no discourse may have a metaphorical relationship to another, because for there to be metaphor, differential fields and distinct objects must exist. But they cannot exist where contamination is possible between any discipline and any other."<sup>8</sup>

Is design trying to leverage confusion and contamination in an attempt to be more centrally located as a discipline by using buzzwords like development and progress? Has it superseded Art as "a symbolic pact, something clearly distinct from that pure and simple production of aesthetic values, that proliferation of signs ad infinitum, that recycling of past and present forms which we sometimes call 'culture'"?<sup>9</sup> Or does it remain just de-sign?

Design classics could have the same long-range acceptance and wide accessibility of the works of past masters in Art. Then design could ally itself with developmental processes more powerfully than before, meshed with them as an indispensable factor. Design does not have classics of that sort yet, goes one of the most powerful arguments against it. A few, yes, perhaps. But when designers get together and talk of the masters in their genres, there is lack of knowledge about what is referred to in terms of its own history oftentimes even across their own board. The layman, especially, remains in abysmal ignorance about classic 'designs' of designers.

In the light of what thinkers like Baudrillard have noted, the canonization of design will not be easy in the post-modern scenario. While the likes of Bruinsma and Steven Heller are moving towards an awareness that some fixity is necessary in the midst of the flux, they do not yet posit a means to this end necessary for design to become more than just mere hyper-reality, in the ephemeral sense of an image-centered culture where all images are popcorn for consumption and nothing lasts even for a second, at times.

Of course, design cannot be reduced to just words, signs and images since it has practical application and is at its most powerful in the three-dimensional world of felt objects where it can, if it must, hold sway in fields like environmental design, agricultural design, industrial and engineering design, genetic design, architectural design, etc. It is here, doubtless, that it can come to grips with its unrealized potential in a more cognizable way, in the same manner in which Art works, so it can have the

same kind of lasting impact the discourse of Art has had on human endeavor.

### TANGENTIAL EVIDENCE FOR DESIGN AS ROLE MODEL

Artists are helped economically by design projects, especially in the realm of visual culture, but they are often paradoxical creatures in that they seldom bother about the industry of design, industrial design, designers, etc. Design was created or stands at the interface between science, engineering, commerce and purpose. Art is created at the interface between life's complexities and the human search for meaning. Tools, techniques and technologies have not yet become repositories of life's mysteries or meaning. However disparate the two discourses seem when their foundations are posited in this bare manner, the present situation is exciting because, as Bruinsma notes, it brings about precisely that collision of interests between differing media that can lead to healthy explosions, which consequently brings about progress.

When we consider contributions by individuals to Art, we are reminded of the persistent repetition of a pattern whereby precisely those artists whose works were at first condemned as "unproductive" (a phrase evolving from the capitalist, industrial milieu) and fiercely questioned as to their theoretical validity and functionality in the practical, political, economic and social realms of invested interests, were the ones who later were canonized for the developmental nature of their work on one of humanity's many grand projects, namely Art. The design movement with its roots in the Bauhaus actually suggested the idea of the "unproductive" artist as anathema. In the Bauhaus manifesto, Walter Gropius put it: "... the unproductive "artist" will no longer be condemned to inadequate artistry, for his skills will be preserved for the crafts in which he can achieve great things",<sup>10</sup> the classic example of the designer demoting the artist to a craftsman.

Now take, for instance, Giacometti and his sculptures. Even his highly avant-garde artist friends like Andre Breton misunderstood him. While there is nothing unusual in that, their grounds for disagreement are of interest.

"I could not understand it. All my statues ended up one centimeter high. One touch more and hop! The statue vanishes."<sup>11</sup> - Giacometti. This absolutely paradoxical situation that clearly smacks of the quixotic would have confounded lesser artists.

Simone de Beauvoir says of this phase in Giacometti's existential struggle: "At that time he was making "objects" of the sort which appealed to (Andre) Breton and his cronies, and which had only a tenuous suggestion of reality about them. But for two or three

years now he had been convinced this method was getting him absolutely nowhere; he wanted to return to what he regarded as contemporary sculpture's real problem - the re-creation of the human face. This had shocked Breton. "Everyone knows what a head is!" he exclaimed, a remark which Giacometti, in turn, repeated as something shocking. In his opinion no one had yet succeeded in modeling or portraying a valid representation of the human countenance: the whole thing had to be started again from scratch. A face, he told us, is an indivisible whole, a meaningful and expressive unity; but the inert material of the artist, whether marble, bronze, or clay, is, on the contrary, capable of infinite subdivision-- each little separate bit contradicts and destroys the over-all pattern by the fact of its isolation. Giacometti was trying to reduce matter to its furthest viable limits; this was how he had come to model these minuscule, almost nonexistent heads, which, he thought, conveyed the unity of the human face as it presents itself to the intelligent eye. Perhaps one day he would find some other way of counteracting the dizzying centrifugal effect of space; but for the time being this was all he could think up."<sup>12</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir's insight brings much light to bear not only on Giacometti and his battle with intractability but also on this whole discussion on design and development. The artist, like the designer and the social worker who brings sustainable development to the man in the street, works provisionally and is marginalized, but if his effort is as serious as Giacometti's the results become innovative, progressive and developmental. The consequences are often far-reaching, even if they may not be earth shaking. Giacometti's nigh to non-existent sculptures that were either too small or too long and thin are a parable of possibility. This was recognized by many, including Jean Genet, Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, etc.

Beckett collaborated with Giacometti once and the result was a stage-set for *Waiting For Godot* that had a tree long and thin like Giacometti's figures. "I see men ... like trees, walking ...,"<sup>13</sup> the blind man said to Jesus Christ who was in the process of giving him sight. The intermediate stage is vital. The excitement of discovery of the explorer is only a beginning but it is inclusive of all the goings and comings in the future for better or worse. Constant work, as exemplified in Giacometti's ceaseless quest for the real, fraught with all the existential danger of going mad in the process, led him to scale heights of perception.

The photographs of Man Ray, the paintings and sculptures of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, the painstaking translations of St. John of the Cross's poems done by Roy Campbell, etc. have all been able to provide different windows into the issue of how to go forward in solving innate compositional questions. Their work has been recognized and made available to the sensitive and the majority only because of the assiduousness of a few other

reflective, activist-aesthetic spirits like some of the Surrealists, Ezra Pound, Jorge Guillen, Marjorie Perloff, etc.

While speaking of Man Ray, his famous photograph “Le Violon d’Ingres”, a woman’s bare back with two f’s or violin flues painted on it, comes to mind. This is one of his best pieces. Even people who know nothing about photography have come across this image and reacted to it instinctively because it is so easily accessible in its simplicity and indeterminacy. It is endlessly reproduced by popular culture as a kind of icon mysteriously charged with innumerable possibilities, so that it can fit into any kind of context. Its ability to transcend time, like Giacometti’s to solve concrete problems in creation, is a good example for designers to internalize.

Gaudier-Brzeska, who died tragically at the age of 24 in the First World War, is another case in point. He was, like Giacometti, a painter and sculptor and died relatively unknown. Ezra Pound wrote a book on him. He was prolific but stayed away from the madding crowd. His was “a character that no unscrupulous gallery owner could get the better of, nor one that any social climber could take advantage of. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was a man very much in control of his own life and, quite possibly, his own death.”<sup>14</sup> Gradually his works have swum more and more into ken because of their intrinsically unmistakable stamp. The same undiluted mix of simplicity and indeterminacy we find in Man Ray’s famous work is noticeable here too. The photographs of some of his sculptures are available in Marjorie Perloff’s insightful book *Dance of the Intellect*. Ephemerality was not Brzeska’s forte in the making of objects. In life he was irreverent towards the worship of Art, like the new breed of designers, but in his work he could set standards that are difficult for designers to emulate and surpass, because his works breathe of an insatiable hunger for immortality.

Man Ray’s work can be considered an incisive interface between photography, sculpture and painting, bringing to a head the conflict between technological art and the older form of art that was emotional, spiritual, of the soul, and manual. Similarly, translation can also be thought of as an interface that exists at a significant interstice of Art. Jorge Guillen who was one of the few poets at the cutting edge of Spanish poetry at the peak of Modernism, while speaking of the greatness of Spanish poetry, notes that St. John of the Cross’s mystical poems remain among its greatest achievements. Quoting Roy Campbell’s English translations to make this clear, Guillen, himself a fine poet, succinctly explains how greatness can be translated into other languages by someone sensitive, in such a way that it is retained. He comments on the multi-layeredness of St. John of the Cross’s poems that can be read as about the mysticism of Martin Buber’s I-Thou relationship (spiritual) as opposed to the I-It relationship (material). Campbell’s translations

are faithful to the gently complex nature of the originals and we get in them the same haunting sense of the unfathomable depths of the experiences of St. John of the Cross. The saint could express it specifically, universalized in language to the point where it has become at least partly accessible to all men, albeit through the difficult art of double translation.

The challenge relates to how this ability that has become natural to dwellers in the realm of literature, of translation at all levels, be transferred in translating design into classic design, explicating it, transferring its power into other facets of design and finally universalizing it to the extent where it feeds the body/bodies of men all over the world as much as poetry and sculpture feed the spirit?

## **COLLABORATION AND COMMERCE**

This brings us as artists, viewers and readers to another level, the need for Collaboration, Theory, Criticism with a C and Networking that need not necessarily be spatial or temporal. These examples have been chosen to exemplify several things. Be it Giacometti, Man Ray, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska or Roy Campbell, when ‘linked’ with Simone de Beauvoir, Marcel Duchamp, Ken Russell, Perloff, Pound, St. John of the Cross, Guillen etc.; the resultant spatial and temporal curve turns out to be progress and development for Art and Humanity. This is an important aspect worthy of emulation for design. What is effective in design and development can be kept alive only by groups of dedicated men and women forming a collectivity or community of nothing but kindred interests and eventually shared endeavor that will benefit recipients at the concrete level of sustainable development. Such communities would be the result of linkages that came about spontaneously and they would be the deserving of a new world who would reach out to the underserved, in sensitiveness and with finesse, and not in the spirit of institutionalized fossilization or bureaucratic rules and regulations.

There is another important point to be made in this context. All these artists were perhaps conscious to an uncanny degree, not in the sense of post-modern critical theoreticians, but in their gut of the state of the art in their time. This prescience resulted in their reaching out not for the “right” or “politically correct” tools but for those configurations which would set both contemporaries and future acolytes off on roads less traveled in search of treasures that would not rust or decay or be stolen. Their work would be imitated and mass-produced perhaps, a reaffirmation of their signature of authenticity, of intellectual property rights that did not need to be protected by law. Artists like Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky who were involved with a design movement like the Bauhaus chose to ignore the appellation of

“designer” even while contributing the first bricks to the theory of design. They preferred to contaminate design with Art.

The difference between design and Art is ‘marked’ here. Concerned with the brief, client(s) idiosyncrasies, deadlines, the budget, profit margins and the ideological presuppositions that work as underpinning to every project, design/ developmental assignments ‘produce’ with a narrower space to maneuver within. The best designers spend time trying to make their ‘mark’ in the marketplace before they begin to do subjective briefs, if ever they do so. The concentration and assiduousness required is often unwillingly compromised either for the sake of survival in monetary terms or for the customer’s sake, although he may be only out there as a future prospect. Many artists who broke through had to pay a price before their wares became highly priced; a posthumous honor. In design, returns must be immediate.

The same attitude is common to high-ranking officials who deal with developmental concerns. They are unable to move in the awareness that what really matters is that progress must be definite, even if slow, and the long-term consequences should matter more than or as much as statistical proof of the same and of money well spent as shown in portfolios, etc. An example of classic developmental design of the sort to be reached out for would be the wheel. Even the Surrealists had to praise it; Guillaume Apollinaire pointed out that when man wanted to invent something that resembled walking, he invented the wheel and that “design” was functionally ‘surreal.’ A negative example of design done in good faith but neither aesthetic nor developmental would be the popularization of endless brands of blue jeans by designers of high caliber who may have had to abandon pet projects of high density that might really have helped the future to ensure that their clients’ jeans sell “better.”

The inventiveness/ innovativeness of such artists and critics as those mentioned here who are also prolific is definitely surplus, but seemingly profitless in terms of present day design and development. Their relevance to contemporary thought, especially to the topics being discussed here, is clear. It lies in how they tackled the problems facing them in Art, problems that are perhaps essentially the same in structure and in the parabolic curve of their eventual goals as the ones designers face when dealing with issues of development.

Designers like Ivy Ross, or Art Chantry who refuses to make use of computers because it reduces job opportunities on the market, are chipping away at design asking relevant questions to give ‘fitting’ answers to some of the doubts raised here. But the issues at stake are too tangled in transdisciplinarity for any kind of essentialisation as of now to provide the requisite

structure for more classical work in design to come up, except in fragments.

## **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, INNOVATION AND VALUE**

To rearrange the discussion a little, seeking to tie up design and development, one is reminded that Dr. Mustafa K. Tolba spoke of “sustainable development” decades ago. He did not perhaps realize that the idea would be ingenuously applied to everything from the manufacture of toys to biotechnology for terrorism. What he meant by “sustainable development” was “Growth which works in tandem with the environment ...the requirement that current practices should not undercut future living standards”.<sup>15</sup> He predicted that it would be the foundation of economic and social planning in the present century.

To use it like an umbrella term or a fashion, as is often done today, is a degrading rather than a degradable process. The concept of sustainable development at the national and international level has led specifically to interesting ideas like accounting and auditing of resource capital to see that it is not misused, with the aim of bringing in right investment, better allocation and a more even distribution of produce, etc. Here the new catchphrase has become “sustainable innovation” because creativity and originality are required if initial enthusiasm for development is to be sustained and improvements and reforms do not flag.

The word ‘development’ may puzzle and intrigue deconstructionists because it suggests progress, a presupposition denied to those who believe that social and cultural signs are arbitrary constructs made up of graphemes and phonemes held together merely by temporary common consent. Marxists, however, who are in the vanguard of all social reform movements, would have no such difficulty as the deconstructionists. Yet the yoking together of design with development may meet with some disapproval in the leftist camp because design is sometimes seen as part of an elitist discourse.

Then again, to use Baudrillard’s account of value for something called “development by design”, the question arises as to what is possible in a post-modern scenario. He posits that value has a natural stage (use-value), a commodity stage (exchange-value) and a structural stage (sign-value). All these stages have referents. Use-value developed on the basis of the natural use of the world, exchange-value comes from reference to the logic of a commodity and sign-value is governed by code or a reference to a set of models. In the post-modern condition, a fourth stage has come about - the fractal (or viral, radiant) stage where there is no point of reference at all, no longer any equivalence natural or general, so much so “we should

really no longer speak ‘value’ at all.”<sup>16</sup> How does one assign value for development or the design factor?

This intellectual argument doesn’t hold, however, for the underserved. The poor are becoming poorer. In 1960, as a United Nations estimate put it, 20% of the world’s population had 5% of the world’s income, whereas the richest had 63%. In the 1990s the share of the poorest had fallen to an abysmal 1.3%. By design?

Simone Weil in her book *L’Enracinement*, published in 1949, pointed out the need for a declaration of duties towards mankind. Is the designer sited in such territory when talk mounts about design driving development? Weil asserted that there is only one obligation imposed upon human beings towards one another: respect.

“Respect is effectively expressed in a real, not a fictitious, way ...through the medium of Man’s earthly needs.”<sup>17</sup> The needs the designer primarily addresses are physical and material – housing, clothing, heating, health, etc. What about needs that are not physical and more difficult to recognize and enumerate? Weil speaks of respect for human collectivities because “each is unique and, if destroyed, cannot be replaced.” Collectivities have unique “food” for the souls that form it, collectivities are continuum, and collectivities are repositories of the past. To treat any collectivity as the Other implies a lack of respect.

#### **DESIGN BY THE DESERVING FOR THE UNDERSERVED**

In the midst of the welter of confusions reminiscent of the Tower of Babel, the metaphor for divided, confused and confrontational collectivities, and for the constantly changing configurations of post-modern unity and disintegration in the wake of the 9/11 scenario, the difficulty lies in pinpointing authoritatively who should be in charge of identifying the collectivities with whom gaps in human needs have to be bridged. Between the under-developed and the developing a genuinely efficient mode of exchange has to be infused for progress’ sake, not from a vantage point of any self-perceived superiority on the part of any over-developed arbiter but from the positive standpoint of healthy interactive design that can at least build fraternity, if not yet equality and liberty. It seems clear that America has forfeited its chance at being a satisfactory mediator because of its high-handed foreign policy that doesn’t take into consideration the lives of the oppressed in the nations upon which bombs are unleashed in the name of protecting human rights.

In history, when time and space create an intersection in an individual, or more rarely in a collectivity, something happens that creates community from which there is an overflow (surplus) that produces

value that has all-round benefit. But the value-brokers are usually trapped in power games and shortsighted and as such are seldom able to correctly read the movement’s validity in terms of real help/profit. Communities that came into being around the absent person (the writings) of Charles de Foucauld, or around the music of bands like the Grateful Dead, godman-led communes like that of Aurobindo or Osho, entertainment-spun fan groups like the Trekkies and direct-selling outfits like Amway all make us rethink design. The effort of the United Nations and similar global agencies to streamline sustainable development processes and the dissimilar attempts of transnational corporations (TNCs) to generate capitalistic communities do not take into account such interesting experimental hybrids, whether we label them good or bad according to our prejudicial measuring rods.

Design and development for, within and across communities can be driven by the writings of influential thinkers, alive or dead, the rediscovery of crafts traditions, a healthy ingestion of technology and a participative collective process. Common vision and participatory action achieve a contiguous community, something not easily attained by those who try to arrive at the same through top-down design. TNCs use signs/symbols, talk about vision, mission, anthems, logos, etc to create a kind of contiguity that results in loyalty, but it is accepted grudgingly and does not reach the intensity achieved by authentic community. The unquestionable sway exercised over followers by charismatic figures that run God-authorized sects is something as yet beyond the reach of governments or TNCs.

In this context, what the West seeks in the East in order to unravel meta-design and discover a different sort of formula for development is perhaps another exotic idea(s) of God in the impersonal holistic and monistic sense. This could be both an embarrassed harking back to and an attempt to escape the traditional Western paradigm of God as the Grand Designer. The materialistic manner in which this concept has been applied in the West immediately prior to and especially after the Enlightenment is perhaps the reason for the post-industrial, post-Christian, post-modern, technological and media-driven chaos that has resulted. Looking closer though, one still finds some interesting examples of collectivity and community in the Western milieu in the work of the Shakers, the Amish, the Iona Community, etc., who draw their strength from a pattern of understanding the cosmos as God’s master design. Such contiguous communities have sought to cut away at the wrongs done to the Other by self-perceivedly ‘politically correct’ authorities.

The Shakers set an intriguing pattern of amity, designing artifacts of excellence like furniture. They were also unique because the whole movement stemmed

from, derived its strength from and was run by women. The result remains tangible in terms of design; even today a Shaker piece fetches astronomical sums in America because of the painstaking eye for detail and perfection in their craft products.

The Amish, appositely, in their refusal to follow technological innovations and insistence on living close to nature strove for environmental preservation and the survival of biodiversity. Mennonites fought a hostile terrain for survival and carved out a home away from home in Canada, proving the resilience of the human spirit that can as community overcome developmental hurdles, provided the effort is spurred by a sturdy ethical, economic, social and spiritual, perhaps even Spartan vision, as the key to development.

The Iona community founded by George McLeod in 1938 has its rootedness in the Celtic-Christian vision of St. Columba and a commitment to peace and social justice, opposition to nuclear weapons, racism and the exploitation of the poor and unemployed and engagement with the environment. The Santivanam ashram was set up by the monk Bede Griffiths in Tamil Nadu to explore the complementarity of opposites, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the "coincidence of opposites". Jean Vanier's L'Arche Community serves the mentally handicapped (few designers want to look at the marginalized and their needs) and uses the arts and crafts both for therapy and creative expression. All the above founders and communities have been cited because they are a pointer to what the West might have missed while looking eastward for a refresher course in philosophy, spiritual tradition, collectivity and community in its search for a new paradigm for development. Incidentally, most of the communities cited above have an integral vision.

Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky had felt, much earlier, of the need for socialism and communism based on freedom from feudalism, monarchy and corrupted Russian Orthodox Christianity. They dreamt of ideal communities and wrote of them. Tolstoy even tried to bring some of his ideas into practice and Mahatma Gandhi went in the same direction when he set up Tolstoy Farm in South Africa. In the last century, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Mikhail Bakhtin continued the Tolstoyan and Dostoevskyan fight to voice the need for the polyphonic. John Ruskin with twin-edged ideas of Fabian and Christian socialism, believed that a heady and potent mix of aestheticism and craft was one of the viable directions for the future for a more just and equitable society where all laborers would be paid equally. Design appropriates Ruskin's vision but ignores his idealistic economic ideas.

T.S. Eliot in his books like *After Strange Gods*, *The Definition of Culture* and *The Idea of a Christian Society* raised key issues about the direction in which the West was headed regarding all things, including culture. While Eliot recognized the rich repository of wisdom in the East, unlike many of his contemporaries, he also recovered for the West much of its hidden deposits of intellectual, aesthetic and spiritual roots. He networked loosely with artists and thinkers like Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More etc. All these thinkers put down ideas for communities, suggesting different "doors of perception" for future communities to move through. But these ideas have remained untried, they are not considered viable by decision-makers in the echelons of power more due to ideological concerns than the practicality of the insights offered. The intellectual credentials of such seers have never been at stake, and the faults in their theories could be jettisoned (for example, Eliot's anti-Semitism, Royalism, Anglo-Catholicism and misogyny). But for the West, it has often been a case of throwing out the baby with the bath water, both in its inability to re-affirm its rootedness and its approach to cultural dialogue with the East.

Such communities and thinkers offer themselves for our examination as "counter-environments" or "alternative environments" and counter-culture intellectuals in the post-modern scenario by following an ideal of living in /engaging the world but not being of the world. The innovations of such reactionaries, saints, outsiders and decadents, as individuals or collectivities cannot anymore be seen as non-productive after post-modernism that levels the differences in a linguistic sense with its insistence that the sign is surrounded by flux that makes certainties of validity-criteria outmoded, the differentiation being made by the shapes and contours of the signs being used and not at the level of value. Such difference is inseparable from the historical contexts in which they were generated and the most powerful signs remain the ones with the maximum endurance quotient and not the popular ones adopted by the majority at any given time in man's developmental curve.

## THE END OF THE HISTORY OF RELIGION

Against this background, in the present historical juncture at which India has arrived, it seems irrelevant to discuss design or development without realizing the context. A type of propagandistic literature of the times has inscribed in it covert designs and ulterior practices to eliminate the Other. It fostered the reactions of people like Dr. Ambedkar once and, more recently, has elicited ripostes from thinkers like Kanha Ilaiah.



In Ilaiah's controversial book *Why I am not a Hindu* which is about the necessity to restructure Indian society as a whole, he writes: "In spite of the immense hold of modern Brahminism on various structures of power, the intellectual forces that emerged from the womb of the Dalitbahujan social structure as a result of both education and reservations have attempted to fracture modern Brahminism ... The elite of modern Brahminism recognized this force and resurrected Brahminism in the more aggressive form of anti-Mandal ideologies, the Ayodhya-based Rama slogan, as well as in the Sangh Parivar's theory of 'Akhandbharat' and 'minority appeasement.' Such a basically anti-Dalitbahujan thesis is advanced to modernize classical Hindu varnadharma to suit post-colonial capitalist structures, so that Hinduism can modernize itself in a way that will sustain the hegemony of the brahminical forces. This is the reason why the thesis is put forward that Hinduization should be within the broad framework of urbanization, modernization and so on... Even if Hinduism expresses a desire to humanize itself ... there is no scope for this to happen, since the history of religion itself is coming to an end. We must therefore dalitize our entire society..."<sup>18</sup>

The word 'dalit' means 'broken.' Implicit in Ilaiah's suggestion is the idea that only the broken (the marginalized, fragmented authentic majority) can feel/think/work effectively for the broken (the whole), not a culturally-sanctioned elite who serve to preserve and protect certain principalities and powers. The discussion on design and its role in development in India needs to face up to the issue of 'brahminisation' and 'dalitisation.' Similar oppositions exist in other cultures too in different forms, raising the questions of what is the design behind development and who drives the design. The Rainbow Coalition in the USA of the 1980s sought "to honour and do justice to the specificity of subject positions such as black, Chicano, feminist, immigrant, ethnic, gay and lesbian and, at the same time, to enable structurally homologous and isomorphic readings of one situation in terms of the other."<sup>19</sup>

This is a critical issue in a country where a dangerous ideology that equates religion with culture is seeking the ascendant and generating a vicious debate between *videshi* (the "alien/other" Western model of development, the Islamic model, etc) and *swadeshi* (illegitimately appropriating Gandhi contra Nehru). Simultaneously opportunities become more available for the designer as agent of development and change, as an elite "participant" with the authorization to occupy the high space of knowledge and impose designs à la Albert Speer or Leni Riefenstahl. Historically speaking, one is well aware of how the enterprise of design was itself affected by cultural politics leading to the Bauhaus being

shut down and the migration of designers who valued freedom over fascism from Germany.

The designer who is interested in and committed to development cannot disagree with Ilaiah's strongly worded call for a new society. One can no longer ignore the fact that before talk of design and development, at the level of what to do with non-human resources in intelligently planning their preservation and growth and deployment for a better future, must take into consideration certain human lapses. These talks may even have to strike the hateful posture of aggrandizing in the present pre-fascist environment prevailing in many parts of the world.

Wilhelm Reich in his *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* speaks of how fascism has always been a mass phenomenon arising from the group psychology of middle-class masses who believe themselves to be the majority turning their reactions against their own inner contradictions born from the repressions latent in the structural psyche of their religious upbringing against societies living in their midst perceived as the Other. The end result is not sustainable development or freedom for design but the rise of movements not unlike Stalinism and Nazism. Many such movements have been marked by tendencies of privileging a certain form of culture, laced with religious discourse, that is termed nationalistic at the expense of what is viewed as "different" and therefore immoral in the cultures of the "lower" classes, the intellectual elite and the "aliens." This takes a form whereby in India a film like Deepa Mehta's "Water" could not be shot because it questioned the privileged and the self-acclaimed "guardians" of culture.

In an essay, "*What I believe*", E. M. Forster says: "I cannot believe that Christianity will ever cope with the present worldwide mess and I think that such influence as it retains in modern society is due to the money behind it, rather than to its spiritual appeal. It was a spiritual force once, but the indwelling spirit will have to be restated if it is to calm the waters again, and probably restated in a non-Christian form."<sup>20</sup> In other words, it has to do so in an entirely new language. Language remains primary as it is Thought that forms the wellsprings of all action. What Forster said holds true in today's world for all other religions and schools of thought as well. This statement sounds sweeping but it is becoming increasingly apparent that the present major discourses of power – Marxism, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Capitalism, Fascism, etc - promise Utopia but deliver sugar-coated dystopia.

In a politically volatile and unsafe system where the Other is not adequately represented or respected, 'religion' cannot be the panacea for developmental ills

any more than 'culture'. Consider the November 2001 "development" at the prestigious India International Trade Fair in Pragati Maidan, New Delhi. A pointer to the shape of development by design to come, the BJP-led government slapped the labels of "majority handicrafts" and "minority handicrafts" on crafts products and "15 Muslim craftsmen and a lone Sikh have been herded together in a separate section away from the glare of the visitors ... Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment Satyanarayan Jatiya, who belongs to the BJP, has justified the decision by stating that "we have separate groups for the disabled and those needing special attention".<sup>21</sup> Not a single designer protested this incident, as serious as the on-going destruction of, appropriation and redesign for "designer" or mass markets of crafts and aesthetic cultural artifacts belonging to unique collectivities by educated, culture-savvy designers who don the role of sophisticated middlemen in expanding global markets.

In spite of the *videshi-swadeshi* debate brought to the fore by right-wing Indian politicians, the approach of E. F. Schumacher, author of *Small is Beautiful*, who quotes Gandhi's famous dictum of not "mass production but production by the masses" remains a good pointer for design projects aiming at sustained development. "The system of production by the masses mobilizes resources which are possessed by all human beings, their clever brains and skilful hands, and supports them with first-class tools ... The technology of production by the masses, making use of the best of modern knowledge and experience, is conducive to decentralization, compatible with the laws of ecology, gentle in its use of scarce resources and designed to serve the human person instead of making him the servant of machines. I have named it intermediate technology to signify that it is vastly superior to the primitive technology of bygone ages but at the same time much simpler, cheaper and freer than the super-technology of the rich. One can also call it self-help technology, or democratic or people's technology ..."<sup>22</sup> This must not be jettisoned or falsely appropriated for irrelevant behavioral questions often brought in by the culture brigade. In India, at one level design for development has to work sideways to the East as indicated by Schumacher and Gandhi. At another level it has to be Occidental for the ability to use technology, bio- and genetic research, information etc., and for the sake of increased knowledge/awareness databases.

## **EASTERN EXOTICA AND WESTERN ILLUMINATII**

In its struggle to restate its ideological underpinnings, spurred by discoveries that are paradoxical in their nature in science, art, technology, philosophy, etc, the so-called logocentric West has sought the mythocentric East. Such tendencies can be traced back to the influence of German philosophers like Schopenhauer,

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the Beats, New Age physicists like Fritjof Capra, psychologists like Ken Wilber, etc. This movement towards the East was not what Forster or Eliot implied. It is surprising that the major discoveries of western intellectuals in the past 100 years suggest that certain ideological concepts and symbols are available to the imagination exclusively in the East and, therefore, assume that the West must make a paradigm shift in an easterly direction. A close look at these assumptions, inferred on the basis of concepts taken note of as superior or unavailable in the West, reveal that these very same concepts existed in pre-Socratic philosophies and western tribal myths and worldviews as well as in variant readings of mainstream western discourses in the West itself.

For instance, a populariser like Fritjof Capra of Western dependency on Eastern sign/symbol systems to create analogies between Western scientific discoveries and Eastern concepts, is actually involved in the process of making a choice among many available symbols. He chose the "dance of Shiva" as an ideal metaphor to demonstrate certain principles in particle physics. Granting every thinker the right to choose any framework to work within, the question comes to mind as to why he and thinkers like him do not turn to the Greek tradition of the pre-Socratics like Democritus the Abderite to find their forerunners. The answer may be that the Western tradition has lost its moorings with its hoary past and intellectual rigor as a result of which people like Capra, in sharp contrast to the likes of Carl F. Sagan, offers an "exoticism" which is more quickly acceptable in today's world instead of a return to Western signs/symbols he would have had to strenuously dig into to find exact parallels or analogies for his ideas. This smacks of an unwitting drift towards mythological and intellectual suicide on the part of the West, something which artists like W.B. Yeats, James Joyce and J.R.R. Tolkien were aware of and consciously warded off. Yeats, for instance, situated the ideal city of Byzantium at the gateway between the East and West and his Christocentricity, like Joyce's, while critical of Eurocentric power structures, was not a foreign construct but a return to roots in Celticism and Gaelicism. Tolkien found his deep structures for his epic myth of Middle Earth in the Anglo-Saxon, Norse, Finnish and Icelandic myths.

John Cage's working principle as an artist was "Change returns success", culled from the Chinese I Ching. This thought is also central to the Bhagavad Gita, which states that change is the only permanent law of nature. But again, the question that occurs to someone poised at the gateway between West and East is why the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who believed in "flux" and whose philosophy could be summed up in the deep aphorism "You never step in the same river twice", remained ignored by such an artist, unless of course he was enamored by the I Ching as a tool. While such

scientists and artists are ready in their art or discipline to swim against the current, in other realms they prefer to follow the zeitgeist's fashion, much like popular, ephemeral design does.

Marshall McLuhan, studying the phenomena of technology and media, also came to the conclusion that a paradigm shift was being made from visual space to acoustic space in the West, a shift that the West could perhaps come to terms with if it moved into an Eastern mode of pre-literate, irrational (or suprarational?) non-phonetic language-based, oral, shamanistic perception. This shift from Platonic angelism to Eastern robotism is being brought about by the electric and electronic media, McLuhan and his acolytes contend, ushering in a brave new era of signs, symbols and images.

Here one finds the Western illumined soul taking recourse in Eastern symbolism even while negatively acknowledging the possibility of rootedness in the Western tradition; there were pre-literate Greek philosophers who resisted the invasion of phonetic, written text. Robotism, for instance, is likened to the Japanese concept of "living as one already dead"<sup>23</sup> to mean that one lives on a plane of expertness, yet there is no returning to or mention of the Pauline concept of the "crucified" Man: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me"<sup>24</sup> ... For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ ..."<sup>25</sup> It is at such points, where choices of syntax, symbols, motifs, emblems and signs are made, that the train of the West is derailed by Western Illuminatio and re-routed to Eastern exotica.

To put it more lucidly, if a case is being made out for the transformation of "the people of the Word" into "the people of the Sign", a transformation in which design, and not only technology or media, plays a key role, it might be relevant to heed Neil Postman: "... the Decalogue, the Second Commandment of which prohibits the Israelites from making concrete images of anything ... It is a strange injunction to include as part of an ethical system unless its author assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture ... The God of the Jews was to exist in the Word and through the Word, an unprecedented conception requiring the highest order of abstract thinking ... People (like ourselves) who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction."<sup>26</sup>

In the midst of this ongoing debate that is of mutual benefit to both Occidentals and Orientals, what is being discussed is also the choice of ideological base regarding the design-development equation, which cannot be sidestepped. Embedded in every tool, and every design, is an ideological bias, "a predisposition to

construct the world as one thing or the other, to value one thing over another".<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein spoke of language as a fundamental technology, not merely as vehicle of Thought but also its driver. Design must discover its ideology or ideological bias if it seeks to engage with or enable the process of development, become a discipline and make a meaningful contribution to mankind's endeavors to end unjust privileging.

Design is a powerful tool because by its very nature – semiotic/linguistic as mentioned in the preliminary divagation - it resists fascist varieties of power, being open to variant interpretations. Design cannot be limited to monolithic hermeneutics. Such a limitation would be self-defeating.

George Steiner in his book on translation, *After Babel*, points out that Western civilization has been primarily Graeco-Roman in matters of social structure, politics, economics and aesthetics and Judaeo-Christian in matters of ethics and spirituality. If design is to be used innovatively for sustainable development in such a way that neither the deserving or the underserved are marginalized, these matrices have to develop further in the present century, especially in applying their down-to-earth theories on human rights and social responsibility as exemplified in the dictae: "Thou shalt love ... thy neighbor as thyself"<sup>28</sup> and "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them."<sup>29</sup> These basics would ensure development by design and enable design to create concrete objects in space and time to tackle the vast task of innovative, sustained, sustainable development. The global perspective could be taken into consideration without omitting the inter-continental need for co-operation or forgetting the importance of aiding the underserved in such a way that all forms of unjust privileging 'wither away'.

Such design would weather the attempts of authoritarian states or transnational conglomerates to coerce these progressive measures into prefabricated patterns of their choosing. Design would come out as triumphant as Art, inheriting Art's beauty and adding to its 'delight' the qualitative dimension of applied 'instruction,' making it truly 'classic'.

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