

Indian Outlook of Design

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Abstract

The objective of the study presented here is to analyze the scenario of design in India and to identify the causes for lack of progress in the field of design such as lack of institutes of design education, lack of standardization of design curriculum and lack of quality designers. Also, the study identifies aspects of the external scenario in India such as a dynamic economy, a country's high aspirations to mark its presence on the global level and a universal reliance on innovation to seek solutions to various challenges point to the importance of design to the growth of the country. The study is concluded by drawing inferences from the analysis presented.

Keywords: Design, Urban, Scenario, Case, Quality, Analysis, India, Economy

Introduction

What is Design?

From the safety pin to the urban road network, our world today is what it was designed to be. The problem of life seems to resolve itself into two questions: What to do and how to do it. How to do it? That is a question of design.

We live in interesting times defined by exponential change. While we are yet to learn to accept change, we have learnt to adapt to it. This partial learning has led to massive economic and social upheavals during current times. Design binds people together and elevates human life through synchronization of needs and subsequent solutions.

What is The Role of Design?

Design is something that makes both business and social sense. In the present times, design can play an important role by being the tool that companies and societies can employ to address challenges such as climate change. Innovative solutions to such changes can help fulfill goals of sustainable living.

Design transforms the way we do things, resulting in new economic benefits and a better quality of life. It helps to improve product quality and differentiation, to offer world class services and to improve business efficiencies. It is instrumental in improving productivity and margins, increasing revenues, achieving higher market share as well as accelerated economic growth.

Value of design to the individual

Design in all its genres - from urban planning to the art of painting, photography, furniture design, automobile design etc. - has a major impact on the overall wellness of an individual. Comprehensively, design improves individual health, productivity, emotional balance, clarity of thought, development of children, social relationships among individuals and communities.

A framework for positive design includes three main components of subjective well-being: pleasure, personal significance and virtue. There is pleasure in inhabiting a beautifully done up space and personal significance in looking at an old photograph. Also, design has the potential to evoke in an individual the virtue of transcendence.

Each of these three components represents an ingredient of happiness and a design scheme that expressly includes all three ingredients is one that assists people in living life to their fullest potential.

Value of design to communities

Research conducted world over indicates that people strongly believe that design improves the quality of life and is a source of community pride. It does so by promoting an understanding of other individuals and different ways of life. Consequently, it helps to preserve and share cultural heritage, providing societies the opportunity to come together and to grow collectively.

The social impact of design applies to a broad spectrum of contexts. A mobile toilet for instance addresses the basic concerns like sanitation. A smart classroom enables improved learning outcomes. Other design innovations such as the electric car have revolutionized human mobility.

To designers, it is about the impact of products or services on individuals and groups of people. Being cognizant of the role design can potentially play, designers think about balancing the needs of the individual with those of the overall community.

Design in the Indian context

History of design in India

The crafts of India are diverse, rich in history and religion. The aesthetics of each state in India reflect the influence of different empires. Throughout centuries, crafts have been embedded as a culture and tradition within rural communities. They are a constant source of inspiration for contemporary designers and the subject for global exhibitions representing India.

Historically, India has been at the fore-front of crafts and innovation, and is one of the few cultures on the planet that has managed to sustain for thousands of years. From the time of the Vedas, there has been a conscious attempt to channelize the forces, to establish a better living for the masses.

In ancient India people used to make utility items for their daily need. This is where indigenous design was born . The sandstone sculptures and clay beads of the Indus Valley Civilization are examples of this.

During the earlier stages, Indian-handicrafts had been used as utility items to fulfill the needs of people, such as clay pottery which was used for cooking and distillation, but now these products have become creations of art and are used for decoration such as the blue glazed pottery of Jaipur.

Eventually, these crafts got diversified and refined into different local styles. The miniature painting style, for example, got localized into various forms such as Mughal, Pahari, Rajasthani, Basholi etc. However, one thing that continued in all forms of the craft was the exhibition of skill of the Indian craftsman and carrying forward of the local Indian flavor .

While it flourished for centuries, the Indian design field received a major set-back due to colonization of the land by foreigners. For their own benefits, the British constructively decimated the local Indian crafts system to ensure the success of their machine based industrial society. Since the transition from craft to modern industries was never really complete, India reached a point where her arts had a vast historical background, but also a good foot forward to harmoniously step into the rapidly progressing world.

Progressively, while India has entered the field of a globalized business today, it is also arguable that this has come at a steep price. A fast and quick way to get a quality assured product or service has been to import the basic idea, and sell it to the population. The agents in foreign lands who export their designs to the Indian market do so with severe restrictions, stifling the scope for design development in India. Coupled with the low interest of the government and general public, this situation is akin to tightening noose around the neck of the Indian design sector, whose identity appears to be eroding year by year. While the saga today is to innovate, the rich design history we have is often discounted for western design traditions that are perceived to be superior to indigenous design.

While there have been several commendable achievements in the design field in India, a cause of concern is the falling interest of the youth of the nation in this sector. Another concern is the disconnected growth of the education sector from the industry. Disparity exists between the Indian design education curriculum and the requirements of the design industry. This results in most of the ideas being imported by the industry and only replication processes happening at a local level.

Need for rejuvenating the design sector in India and its objectives

India has made rapid strides in many fields. As a result, India is one of the economies, projected internationally to be a leader in the coming years. One of the reasons for our surging economy has been focus on the development of small and medium businesses. This sector however, has completely ignored the involvement of any design professional. It is not because of any particular bias against them, but because of the ignorance of their importance which has led to this fate.

It is important to acknowledge the importance of design in businesses as a structured creative process that acts as a competitive tool for firms in all sectors. Design is also fundamental in realizing innovation, which gives companies vital differentiation in the market place. Design is also a fundamental determinant of the quality of human life, as it affects everyone in their everyday routine. On a larger scale, design can potentially contribute to finding solutions of various societal and economic problems.

A nation establishes its identity through its culture. Design is the force that represents this culture. For a nation where the design experts have little voice in policy making, the whole nation stands to lose. This non-inclusion can dilute the identity of nation in several small unseen steps, whose impacts are difficult to regulate. These impacts, once established are also difficult to undo, and the effects are almost permanent. Later changes and iterations only create an atmosphere of confusion.

The design culture today is no less confused. Continuous transfer of 'Western' design has brought into the country Western habits and value systems, creating a crisis in our cultural identity. Design tailored for others, when borrowed into different contexts with different requirements are not well suited for local needs and often have negative fall outs.

The need is to focus on the importance of design processes in MSME (Micro, small and medium enterprises) sector to improve overall efficiencies, to recognize the importance of design to address various socio-economic problems, to include design considerations in policy making and to rejuvenate the design culture.

A case for more designers

Inputs for an output in design

Analyzing the importance of design industry's outputs in other countries, it is easy to decide on the increased need for the sector in a developing economy. But in order to achieve the desired output, we need to focus on what inputs have to be made. Like a garden, the industry must be nurtured and cared for, otherwise there is a risk of it withering away.

Like most other industries, the design industry stands on 3 main legs - proper government support, availability of trained professionals and a healthy market to keep the design companies' business running.

Firstly, the governments to include measures to promote the growth of the design industry. Establishment of institutes and organizations to promote design activities, establishment of government supported educational institutions, developing schemes for proper planned growth of the sector, creating appropriate business incentives for the private sector to take the growth forward etc. are some of the measures the government take to reinvigorate the design industry.

Secondly, the design industry requires trained professionals to carry out its activities. While various tools and equipment may aid the design process, they cannot completely eliminate the need of human intervention. In fact, very little of the design process can be done without human involvement. Also, the level of understanding and skill required for the process is high. Hence, it is necessary for the professionals to have proper training.

Only big industrial houses and conglomerates can afford the capacity to constantly train and re-train its personnel. The major chunk of the design industry, constituted of the smaller participants, largely depends on the talent-pool of designers who have received education in their respective fields of design. Educational institutes of good quality can be suppliers for such manpower. These institutes can help the design industry by assisting the government in fulfilling its innovation policies, participating in research and development as well as ensuring that there is a constant supply of trained professionals to the industry. A study of these educational institutes can be the litmus test for checking the state of the design sector in a nation.

Thirdly, like any other sector, design can form a part of any economy only if it is supported by other segments in the economy. In the modern day world, design must be justified in the balance sheets of the companies if it has to survive. Entrepreneurs and designers are only likely to invest in design studios and institutions if they feel they can earn returns on their investments. The environment for good design projects in a rising economy is better as the competitors stand to gain more if they achieve any advantage over their rivals. Such ambitious companies are more likely to invest in research and development for product or service enhancements.

As it stands today, the market today is large enough to ensure that there are sufficient projects for all designers. To help design professionals take advantage of that, the administration has to ensure that all companies are subject to fair competition. Government bodies such as Competition Commission of India and government programmes such as Start up India are examples of such support mechanisms.

Today, India shows a bright potential for the growth of design. She has a highly competitive private sector with good design backing. The government has been active in promoting innovation. In the matter of design education, however, India it is not motoring much.

Scope for designers in India- a study by evaluating examples

Although lagging far behind in the design sector internationally, India has managed to prove time and again that the country holds good potential for a thriving design academia. The National Institutions of Design established with great expectations have done a commendable job in the field. However, they continue to under-perform at various levels. The model of historically high performing institutions such as IITs and IIMs can be replicated in design education by creating centers of excellence. These centers can act as beacons of light, illuminating the entire human resource development scenario of design in India.

Let us take the case of architectural education in India. There are a wide variety of colleges offering basic courses in architecture. The government institutes have good basic facilities but are poorly maintained. Consequently, the quality of education has also deteriorated. In such a scenario, the private institutes have tried to fill the void of quality education and have found ready acceptance. However, due to low regulation and quality checks, the quality of private education has suffered. There have been some private institutes of repute, which have made significant contribution, yet the design Indian industry places more faith in foreign talent, which it considers more valuable.

Taking the case of automotive design, the most backward design field in India, we see that there are only a handful of quality options for education in this field are available to the people. This can be partially attributed to the government policies in the industry. In order to grow local industry, the government encourages foreign investment in the automobile sector in partnership with the local entrepreneurs. As a result of continued foreign influence on automotive design in India, this sector has realized the need for local influence in the design process. As a result, large Indian conglomerates have started investing in research and development to explore various possibilities in design. The big difficulty here has been the lack of regulation or government promotion. The sector, still in its nascent stages presents a bright opportunity for educational institutes to guide the direction for future growth in this niche industry.

Another case observed is that of Industrial design or product design. This sector is opening up in India. Indian brands such as Chumbak, Happily unmarried, Play clan etc. are exemplify this progress. While these islands of success are like a silver lining in dark clouds, the local market has largely suffered due to the strong presence of Chinese products in the domestic market. The process of design imitation has also plagued this sector, but the growth of an educated and aware consumer market has also meant that more designers from India are getting opportunities within India. A parallel sector of traditional products has also flourished, but is severely limited in its capacities. India is being seen as a strong emerging market by global industry and many of them have set up their design labs here. Consequently, there is an increased demand for product designers who have strong user research and innovation skills. (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry 2012)

Shortage of designers in India

"Design, as a profession, is young in our country, and there is a shortage of designers nationally," says Sudhakar Nadkarni, a pioneer of design education in India who set up the Industrial Design Centre at IIT-Bombay in 1969 and the Department of Design at IIT-Guwahati in 1997.

The typical buyers of design services include appliance manufacturers, machine tool manufacturers, automotive industry, furniture manufacturers, retail industry, hospitality industry, Telecom and IT industry, FMCG companies, banking and insurance companies, publishing companies, apparel and footwear companies, pharmaceutical industry etc. Domains such as education, NGOs, institutions, real estate, government, etc. sporadically use design services.

Design is evolving to become more strategic in nature. It means that businesses use design throughout the development process of existing businesses and they also use design to find new areas of business. Companies use design in different ways. Some use it as a strategic tool and some relegate it to be used at the end of the development process for styling purposes. A handful of Indian companies use design strategically.

With the changing character of the Indian industry, where it is producing more and more original products, the role of designers is also becoming more intensive. Yet design industry lags behind other professional service domains in numerical terms when looked at in terms of turnover and number of employees. Architecture, Interior, Animation / New Media, Fashion Design are leading domains within the design industry. Other segments are far behind at present. However, with the change in the economic scenario, design domains such as graphic design, industrial design and human computer interaction are growing at a fast pace.

The number of new design companies is growing as also there is growth in existing companies. There is also a trend of designers opting to start their own setup. Hence, most companies existing today are new. The existing companies are consolidating further by adding more services to their portfolio within diverse design disciplines. In-house design departments are prevalent in companies dealing with products such as automobiles. This can be attributed to the huge involvement of design in every part of development and production processes. Multi-nationals like LG Electronics, Whirlpool, Philips, General Motors, Renault, AMD, Google, GE, Microsoft, Nokia, Motorola, Yahoo and Oracle have all set up their own in house design units in India. The in-house design departments of these companies cater to the creation of India specific offerings with an aim to create a niche position in the Indian markets. At the same time , even though they are based in India, these companies also cater to the needs of other markets taking advantage of the relatively cheaper input costs in India.

In this situation of an expanding domestic market, increase in design outsourcing jobs being allocated to India and establishment of in-house design cells by big companies in India, there has been a surge in the demand for designers. Despite the overall growth of the design education sector in India, this growth has not been uniform across all sectors, and even across the geography of India. While Indian design has been appreciated at the international level ,it suffers from unavailability of quality and qualified designers. The industry has also repeatedly complained about the low quality of students with a design education background. Due to this shortage of professionals, the industry has adjusted to the situation by hiring professionals with backgrounds from other fields.

An impediment in the growth of design education programs has been the absence of recognizing universities. Universities are not open to recognize design as a separate faculty and bring various domains of design under this faculty. Hence, very few institutions can initiate design education by applying for affiliations to these universities as the fear the risk of failure due to lack of recognition by an established university remains.

While various government initiatives have raised the quality of the design industry development, a lot more can be done to improve the quality of the average Indian design professional. Support from the government in design education especially to the private institutions has been a little short of forthcoming and there is an absence of institutionalized systems of recognition and quality assurance of design professionals across various genres. This has resulted not only in a lack of designers but also the quality of the existing pool of designers is not suitable to cater to India's growing needs in a dynamic world.

Conclusion

The study above leads us to conclude that the growing Indian economy has various needs so that India can mark her presence in the world. These needs can be met by the use of innovation. Design is the discipline that is the harbinger of innovation and creative thought. Given the weak status of Indian design education, the need of the hour is to develop not only more institutes of design education in terms of number but also create centers of excellence so that good quality design experts guide India to harness her aspirations in the future.

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