Design Deficit in our country

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Whenever I have used this term among friends at various occasions I have received a bemused look and a smile in return. What is Design? Even a literate person would find it difficult to distinguish between two-dimensional design and three-dimensional design. The fact is that majority of the people have absolutely no idea what design means, both at a micro and the macro level. Sadly most of us are so entrapped in our daily lives that we prefer to take everything we use, for granted. Generally speaking design is taken as a two dimensional motif or a colorful pattern on a piece of paper, curtain, carpet or a wallpaper. I am baffled to find that even professional designers of various disciplines and trades have inadequate knowledge and lack awareness of the subject in its totality.

Why design?
Why discuss design when there are many more pressing issues at stake today? Some feel that the country is facing economic ruin so we must talk about new economic order. Others may claim that it is the political bankruptcy thus a proper debate on political order is due. Yet many others will point to the social turmoil and would like a discussion on the social order. Being associated with design field I felt obliged to introduce another viewpoint, a different perspective of things based on design, because Design is in fact the foundation of all orders. All models and systems follow a simple human desire to live- especially in communities, which in turn generates all 'design', economies and eventually all politics. Theoretically speaking one can say that it is an undeniable truth of our contemporary times that one of the most important aspect that governs the well-being, health and development of any society is the 'Environments, Products and Systems' (EPS) it creates and uses for survival. But the real test is how it maintains, learn from their mistakes and develop these EPS for the advancement and betterment.

What is Design?
What is Design on a macrocosmic level? A brief introduction can be attempted in a short space like this. For the sake of simple interpretation of the concept of design one has to take a hypothetical scenario of a human settlement. The early human settlements required a lot of housing and inter-trading, which required a lot of skills and materials. Materials to construct dwellings and manufacture products to support and survive as a homogeneous society. The need to survive together also required creating environments and organizing systems for peaceful survival like justice, police, health, education, governance, systems for trade and commerce, etc. Hence all the environments, products and systems (EPS) had to be thoroughly planned and thoughtfully laid out. This whole process of thoughtful planning of all the human needs and the subsequent activity to accomplish the required need can be termed as design.

Who is a designer?
Every thing ranging from a teaspoon, a teacup, a teapot, a trolley, a table, a town house, a tramcar, a tractor, to an entire town, - it has been designed by someone. All Vital decisions that define and deliver a product, system or an environment in our use is supposedly the work of a designer. Although the EPS may fail us every now and then but they are supposedly produced for our benefit. A simple product like a needle or a sophisticated product like a crane requires a lot of science, technology and craftsmanship to build or to manufacture but the person who conceives and makes all the important decisions regarding the performance, materials, shape, colors etc. is a designer. It is unfortunate that we use everything without giving any thought of how it was created and if it really is any good to us or not.

Teamwork
The design professional could be an architect who designs buildings that surround us in our towns or an interior architect who is responsible for the internal environment of any building. Can anyone imagine today's cities without the sophisticated 5star hotels, airports, hospitals, shopping malls etc? An engineer who designs a bridge or even a potter who gives us our utensils is part of the design fraternity. The entire built environments like the buildings we use with their intricate interiors that satisfy different functions in different buildings, have a lot of engineering behind it. An army of skilled and non skilled workers are needed to construct your environment or manufacture your product, but in today's world of specialization there can also be a large team of designers who would jointly decide the quality of the end product.

What it takes to design
Design is the most basic, the pristine thought process, which sets the standards of living that regulate all societies, and eventually their systems, may it be in the heart of Africa or America. It is the driving force behind all survival. It is evolution. The process calls upon enterprise and enthusiasm, inventiveness and ingenuity, scientific discovery and technical knowledge, powers of visualization and spatial awareness together with insight of human capabilities and aesthetic sensibilities. Clearly it is a subject of great importance. Unfortunately our knowledge of the subject or even the desire to know about the subject has been very limited.

Obsolete systems
Design can be equated with the basic definition of ecology, which is the science of the relationships between living organisms and their environments. How and why we choose a particular E, P and S is only a reflection of what we are. The prevalent chaos and confusion in every sphere of life is a testimony to the fact that we have been most deficient in this respect. Perhaps our ruling elite and the decision makers in Islamabad have been totally ignorant of this school of thought. Their sole desire has been to 'rule' without the needed vision coupled with improvisation and creativity. We have mostly survived on systems designed by others especially our colonial masters and relied mostly on transfer of technology. The transport, the Irrigation systems, education systems and standards, the law and judiciary, the constitution and governmental systems all were designed, developed in different times and used by different genre of people and perhaps are alien to our genius or incompetent altogether. We as a nation have paid heavily for obsolete systems due to lack of vision and sincerity and at time total ineptness of our leaders.

Till today, I doubt if someone has seriously questioned the colossal damage done by poor planning of the national salary structures by some Wage Board in Islamabad. Over the decades the specified salary structure bears absolutely no relationship with the cost of living and has been one of the biggest causes for corruption in the country. I take the liberty of calling it a serious design fault. To put it more candidly it is a planning flaw that becomes a cause for many ills in the society. Today every department of every institution in the country is ripe with corruption by design. And the nation suffers.

Generally speaking, the life and quality of any manmade product or entity, may it be an auto-rickshaw or a written constitution of a country, has four stages. ONE; the basic concept and the design, TWO; the production or the materialization of the entity with all the necessary processes, THREE; the performance and the management of the entity, and FOUR; the maintenance of the entity. The confusion and fiasco, one after another in the country shows that we certainly are incapable to qualify for the first stage but we also lack the capability for the remaining three. We have shown a preference to tread blindly. Again, theoretically speaking, the absence of a built in mechanism of checks and balances in any system or the absence of a mechanism for the redress of grievances can be termed as a design flaw but our apathy and indifference is so remarkable in every walk of life that one cannot possibly imagine change or question the status quo. If the parliamentary system does not work for us we are unable to see beyond it. If someone talks of more districts it is given a political color and shunned but no one appreciates that the small units can be better managed than the large ones. The meaning of national interest seems lost. 'Devolution' is a good plan. It only needs fine tuning but the list where change is desired is endless.

Design culture
In the developed world, the design process has evolved into a design culture. Their products and systems have gone through the evolutionary journey of inventiveness, creation and further development to keep up with the contemporary times, may it be a car, system bylaws, a vacuum machine or even a clutch pencil. The earlier models of cars which were quite dangerous to use have developed over the years to give way to new economical cars with a lot of convenience like central a/c and heating, central locking, power steering as well as safety factors like seat belts, child locks, accident sensors, inflatable pillows etc. The quest for pollution free fuel like hydrogen instead of leaded petrol is only an indication of this design culture. This spirit of design culture echoes in every aspect, every product, and every environment that we encounter in the developed world. Why does every thing in the developed world seem proper and right to us? Yet it is a result of a continuous design culture. There is a proper decision-maker at every level of the evolution of a product.

Unfortunately, not so in Pakistan. Everything seems to be out of order in our country or is inefficient or does not function properly. Reasons for these collapses are many; almost zero investment in education, systematic slaughter of merit, political postings etc. etc. There are innumerable factors, operating at different levels, for this breakdown in every sphere of life but I simply emphasize another factor, namely the absence of a 'design culture'. Even a small product as little as a toy is purchased from the foreign market and a bad copy in made locally. The production is based on down to earth economic factors and takes place in the flourishing informal manufacturing sector outside the tax net. Only some of us realize the quality difference when we come across the original. Our markets are flooded with sub standard copied models of almost everything that can be purchased. Our Human resource with incredible enterprising abilities and creativity is utilized in copying foreign models, obviously, in the absence of basic design education infrastructure or even the basic awareness of the subject. Fake washing powders and Barbie Dolls are mass produced in the shanty towns of Karachi. Unfortunately for us, copying has become a culture due to the lack of basic design appreciation and education. Our mechanics and 'mistris' can reproduce (read here the word copy) the most sophisticated components manufactured in the west but are unable to design and create a component. We keep on making parts because the 'whole' was never created locally. The creativity and the conceptualization or idea generation are missing. This grave deficiency produces extremely poor copy-models in all spheres of life and the quality of life suffers.

One may argue that when we have an extremely poor record of investment in the most basic education in the country how we can possibly expect investment in design or technical education. How could we possibly think of thousands of polytechnics across the country, (which has been the desperate need of the country all along), when we lack the most fundamental education? Therefore one of the most important sectors that need rejuvenation is Education. There is one little consolation. Yes, our literacy rate can be compared to even the most backward nation in Africa but the Pakistani people can become the finest professionals; architects, doctors, engineers, craftsmen, that is if they are trained in foreign institutions and systems, which we lack. This proves that we do have the basics ingredients of development, like human resource, talents, enterprise but we need the infrastructure. We need to improvise, improve and rejuvenate our systems. We need to work on our institutions.

Blind urbanization
Although we take everything for granted and prefer to stay on the receiving end of consumerism it is obvious that we inherited the city prematurely. We had to adapt to the concept of a modern city without having the awareness or the teething troubles with the modern paraphernalia of survival. We are capable of importing all the beautiful luxurious cars but we could care less about the traffic engineering needed with the cars. We have come down to a stage that we prefer to light up and energize our offices and factories but could care less how the energy is generated or reaches the premises. The telephone should ring no matter what jungle of wires it creates on the streets. The building should be erected even if the debris is flying all over the place. All this is generally termed as lack of civic sense and pushed aside but it is a combination of both civic sense and the almost absent 'design sense'. Had we been provided with a better (design) solution, we would know the difference and demand it by default.

Karachiites are all witness to the kind of dread and agony this soulless megalopolis has become. It is a classic example of poor design and mismanagement. It is sadly lacking in urban design and planning and limps on obsolete systems. Building and zoning violations have destroyed what was left of good old Karachi. Yes, mismanagement and corruption has eaten through the very roots of the whatever systems we have but it is also the poor design standards in every sphere of life that one has to face or follow. The badly designed procedures and systems have become a routine matter and taken for granted by the majority. People teach themselves to duck and bypass the systems and become corrupt by default. We have all become victims of the systems, a design fault.

It is ironic and alarming the way the disparity of scales stares in our face everyday. It has become fashionable to use 'One window' operation as against the procedure heavy/obsolete systems which we live everyday. We have sophisticated ATMs' (machines) handing over cash in the city while at the same time we have the typical local banks, which can make you cry cashing a cheque. The success of foreign banks with professionally designed interiors and state of the art systems and management as against local banks only vindicates the design protagonists' point of view, but it does not move the people who can change things for us.

We couldn't even design and provide to the public a decent comfortable auto-rickshaw in the last fifty years. There is no agency that will check the design standards of public utilities and services. The buses that are locally built lack design and minimal safety and comfort standards. One should be careful enough not to mention the government schools and hospitals but even the private schools, majority of them which are located in bungalows creating serious traffic engineering problems have a pathetic interior environment, while any talk of public hospitals, systems and standards would make your heart sink. Go to any post office or saving center or any public sector office, the interior design and systems are unbearable. Except for the senior most officers the work environment of all government employees is deplorable while living condition is equally miserable. There is absolutely no concept of public safety and convenience. Fire regulations and fire drills are unheard off. Public convenience is a luxury because even the minimum standards of security and safety are hardly met. The height of decadence is that even the design of simple forms makes no sense.

Is there a way to a design culture?
There is an urgent need for a 'designer's master plan' for national reconstruction, with a list of priorities to be prepared by a team of professional designers' of the country. A designer's think tank on a national level should also be a part of the governments' reconstruction policy, too. While the 'long term plans' should be the main feature but an action plan has to be prepared for immediate 'remedial' measures. Various initiatives will have to be made on various levels and various fronts.

On one front, for example, we may need a major investment in design and technical education, establishment of polytechnics, technical institutes and schools, handicraft and vocational centers, while on another front it would become imperative to redesign the curricula, and training of teachers. Redefining roles of various sectors and making the right decisions in selection of technologies and systems is a dire need. Not only do we need to sponsor and develop a movement for 'arts and crafts' but also a special movement for 'design' right from the grassroots level.

Today we need to eradicate unemployment on an urgent basis and today there is also a desperate need for technical skills. Can we create a national 'skills and training/apprenticeship' program? Can we create a national program to encourage cottage industry and create credit programs for the young. The energies of the young have to be diverted to technical/vocational programs, to computer technologies on an urgent basis.

We have to make the right choices now. Do we need more computer technicians, carpenters, welders, masons, electricians and plumbers or an army of unemployed Botanist, Biologists and Mathematicians? Do we need to concentrate on design studies; building trades, engineering skills and technical education, arts and crafts or we need an army of masters of the prose and poems of William Shakespeare and William Wordsworth. Yes the Liberal arts are of utmost importance but I am suggesting scale and priorities.

Improvement in quality of life only naturally makes its population more productive and honest. On another front, we need think tanks to change or redesign public systems. We have to eradicate a long list of "Non-issues" from the lives of the citizens like power failure, phone disconnection, police harassment, runaround of government departments etc. Without the provision of safety, security and convenience for the people one should not expect a turn around that we really need or any respect in the comity of nations.

Perhaps all this sounds so romantic and improbable in absence of an atmosphere ripe with corruption, and lack of accountability and justice. But then, on one front we may desire redesign of salary structures, while on another it would become imperative to arrest corruption and enforce accountability. The only way to survive is to enforce a rule of law and the only way to that is a fresh look at our infested judicial systems. Strengthening of some parts of the judicial systems; while redesign in certain areas should become one of the major components of the national reconstruction master plan.

Design and Technology

It is an excellent sign when our scholars are discussing the right issues. This is a reference to Dr. Farid A. Malik's excellent article in Dawn dated 1st September who builds a case for 'technology' rather than science for the country. He says, "The designers and researches produce what the consumers demand…." Obviously he was referring to the developed world as we are seriously short of both these species and we consume what the developed world sells us.

Also the technology comes in the shape of education, research and training, which should be incorporated into the new education system to encourage and nurture a 'technical' genius in us. We will have to retain the science part on various levels yet redefine education sector based on new realities of today and the near future.

Design education in the country

Overall the investment in education of design subjects is extremely poor. Engineering and other Technical subjects do not have the priority they deserve. Architecture is not getting the importance it deserves. The Polytechnic culture is almost totally absent. There are probably dozens of design disciplines, which are unheard of in the country, for example "Lighting design". It is always the electrician or (at times the electrical engineer) who designs the lighting for you whereas it is the most important aspect of our internal environment and the one that it has a direct bearing on our visual health.

Only Graphic design relatively faired better in our country because of the sizzling consumer culture that results from rapid urbanization. Consumer Products have to be sold. Product promotion is natural to urbanization but the same cannot be said about design disciplines that can influence the health of the end-user directly. There are no schools for Furniture design or Interior design in the country. Poorly designed furniture can be a health hazard. How long are we going to derive our designs from magazines and references? What about Product design/Industrial design?

Recent efforts for Design in this country

The most laudable events in the recent time for the cause the design were the establishment of Indus Valley School of Art and architecture followed by a department of design at Karachi University. IV was a brainchild of some professional designers who saw a big vacuum in the field of design. Unfortunately the subject of Interior Design is still missing from their curriculum despite the fact that Interior Design is perhaps the most important subject to influence the quality of life. In the near future when everything will be available on line and most of us will be PC bound enclosed in our internal environments, the world will be a different place altogether. Soon the cities as we know them will not be recognizable. The information revolution is going to change the basic design of the cities just as it happened in the last century with the Industrial revolution. It is about time for a change in the education policy and especially the technical education.

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