Interior Design in Pakistan

In light of History of the Arts and Crafts in the region.

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The world is familiar with our rich and glorious past and we have all the reason to be proud of our exquisite cultural heritage, but most unfortunately we were unable to sustain the excellence of our culture. The legacy left behind by our ancestors in the sphere of arts and crafts and the built environment suffered a tremendous blow due to the socio-economic and political changes the region had to go through in the 18th and 19th century.

The sub-continent is abundantly rich in the relics of arts, crafts and architecture that constantly remind us and leave us in shame if we compare them with present day works. We posses a vast treasure of masterpieces of arts and craftsmanship, which is looked upon by the entire world with awe and inspiration.

The region was rich with the great Hindu culture. When the Muslims came they brought with them their own flavor, and at places one finds an astonishing combination and permutations of the two. The most enchanting and consistent is the great Mogul architecture. Their mosques, villas, forts, palaces, and gardens are looked upon with amazement. Their costumes, jewelry and Interiors were equally stunning. The world of geometry and floral art and the creation of the same in ceramic tiles were at its peak. The miniature painting and the hand written/illuminated manuscripts, the preparation of colors, paper and book binding are all examples of our cultural splendors that we are losing day by day.

The third cultural mix or rather a cultural transformation, which in a way stagnated our own cultural development, was from the West. Those people had actually emerged from their 'dark ages' while we were enjoying the fruits of our golden age. We did not realize that the times were changing. The maritime nations were naming conquered and discovered lands, setting up posts and trading merchandise, but mostly they were colonizing whatever they could lay their hands on. Some were even busy in pillage and plunder like the ancient Spaniards who played a major role; it is said, in the destruction of the Latin American cultural wealth. Once our entire region was usurped by the British our people experienced a tremendous change in their lives. Their lives were disoriented and confused.

The Imperialistic age retarded our cultural growth, its enrichment and progress was brought to a grinding halt. The region's population was taken by surprise with the socio-economic and political changes. The direction of peoples thought process and its priorities had changed. For them it was time for political movements and struggle for independence.

At about the same time different developments were taking place in Europe that would have far reaching effects on the history of the entire world. The Industrial revolution and the subsequent revolution in the transport and building were the starters. The discovery of electricity and development of electronics, and the subsequent revolution in the communications. Later on the media explosion and information technologies completely changed the human lifestyles. All this was coinciding with revolutionary economical and political changes throughout the world. A global culture was in the making, but unfortunately our people were unable to keep pace with these dynamic changes. The search for local identity, which has become so fashionable today, was unthinkable then because of political problems.

In the twentieth century the world was divided on economic and political affiliations rather than cultural and social ethos. In such an international and complex scenario people at large were left for a day to day struggle

and mostly hand to mouth with the result there was a global decline in the socio-cultural enrichment. Next outcome of these global changes was the uncontrolled urbanization that rendered a final blow to the traditional cultures and values.

When finally the British left with the division of India and Pakistan, the situation was extremely bleak for Pakistan as it started off on a geographically and politically unstable situation. The two wings of the country were a thousand miles apart with much wider gaps in the socio-cultural ethos. This was an extremely precarious situation, eventually the country was further divided because of political blundering.

The rest is known to all of us. A fiasco in every sphere due to poor leadership and poor planning with feudal and tribal hold on every institution in the country. Economical disasters' one after another retarded the development of everything conceivable. The life and blood of any society i.e. the arts and crafts, building trades and culture was the worst sufferer. The most detrimental influence on arts was the mis-handling of national educational policies and the resultant low literacy rate, (which we shamefully maintain till this day). In such an enormous void the main players to control the mind of the people, became the religious hierarchy and fundamentalists who already had a grip on the hearts and souls of millions. The Western exposure of liberalism and rationality versus the religious bigotry, helped further confuse the thinking mind. This was another factor that stunted the development and culture of education in general but the Arts and crafts, building and related trades in particular assumed a sorry state.

Sculpture and fine arts are mostly forbidden and abandoned for the danger of idolatry and imagery, which is a sin. Performing arts, music and dance never got any worthwhile support from any direction to flourish; in fact it receives serious condemnation from the religious hierarchy. Product design, industrial design, furniture design is mostly unknown. Graphic design, because of our consumer/urban pressures has faired relatively well. The art of calligraphy, geometrical arts, pottery and ceramics could not flourish as much as they should have had. This total apathy and neglect had its ill effects on the quality of built environment, products and systems.

In absence of formal education specially design education the "products and systems" are still copied from imported models. Architecture somehow faired relatively well. With decades of struggle, the architects have managed considerable recognition and have established themselves. The awareness level as far as built environment is concerned in the urban centers is very promising. Although architecture is in a state of disillusionment, there are some professionals who are digging roots. There are some who have performed well with positive directions mainly received from the West.

One should appreciate that Interior design as known in the world is more of architecture than engineering or anything else. Even in the 1950s with the initiation of political ventures in our country namely, 'industrialization' and 'engineerization', the arts and aesthetics never flowered. They remained on the lowest priority. With the result we have now a ratio of (more or less) 1 architect verses 40 engineers in the country and with obvious results.

In the West, since the olden times the super masons or the super artisan who mastered many arts of the built environment became known as the Architect. As the lives and our environment became more and more complex various disciplines of built environment became independent, like the civil, structural, electrical and the mechanical engineering. Finally with global urbanization and changing lifestyles and the economical pressures the subject of interior environment planning and design became an independent entity.

After the First World War this profession, originally referred to as "interior decoration" and monopolized by ladies, was slowly changing into an extremely essential and important part of peoples lives. After the second war the subject was established as "Interior Design," when strategists, economists and planners realized the

importance of well planned factories, offices, schools, hospitals etc. In fact every enclosed environment was seen in a new perspective of efficiency, sales and comfort.

In Pakistan Interior design or interior environment design is still confused with interior decoration and the true meaning of interior design, (still called interior architecture in most of the European countries) is mostly misunderstood. In reality the subject of Interior design covers knowledge of architecture, fine arts, science and engineering. It demands command over important issues like internal climate control, illumination engineering, fire safety, security, space planning, comfort and aesthetics etc. The subject of decoration that is a small part of the Interior design covers surface treatments, color coordination and soft furnishing.

In our region when Pakistan came into being a familiar tradition was in practice where the super mason-mistri was also the designer-builder of the entire built environment. This tradition is so deep rooted that the architectural occupation as practiced internationally had a tremendous difficulty in recognition. In such a perspective the importance and the benefits of interior design, product and systems design is barely understood.

In Pakistan interior design still has a long way to go before the umbilical cord with architecture will be cut off and when it will be taught and practiced as in the western world. (The western standard is again taken as a model because of our own lack of better precedence in the trade.) In this scenario when Interior designer as a licensed professional does not exist most of the interiors are being designed by architects and produced by the mistri (foreman) class. Professional Interior contracting is a long way ahead. In the west standard technologies, systems and materials are available off the shelf, whereas there is a total void in our region in this respect.

Architectural schools in our country only barely touch the subject of Interior design and do absolutely no justice to the subject. Interior design schools or interior design as such is probably unknown in the planning circles of the government; therefore in absence of professional interior design education it is sheer nativity to expect professional Interior Designers. The incredible demand of better interiors, in the urban context, is increasing day by day and the urban centers of Pakistan have become a paradise for the novices. Amazingly millions of rupees are set aside for the layout, furniture, decoration and then maintenance of public sector and government departments but a visit to any department leaves a very taste in the mouth and at times it is an extremely painful experience. How is the budget utilized and where is the money spent is anybody's guess.

In absence of professional interior designers the best qualified person is the Architect. He monopolizes the trade, but the demand is so enormous that the balance demand is being filled by graphic designers, decor material suppliers (i.e. wall papers, carpet and curtain showrooms), furniture suppliers (where the head carpenter is the star of the show), by builders, managers, shopkeepers, artists and sculptors. etc. Every month doors are opened to numerous interiors and the results are not so bad, but the interiors designed by architects are of high standard and outshine everyone else.

One can not say that the interior is a private domain of the professional Interior designers but the interiors created by consultants who have proper training and experience clearly stand out. They have a different effect on the health of the end-users. The only problem is that hundreds of interiors produced by non-professionals create an atmosphere of mutual distrust because of poor results and become a hindrance in the establishment of true professionals.

The other breed who is responsible for a lot of Interiors is "magnetic ladies high on the social scale" who have a lot of flair but naturally they lack in professional training and technical know how. They have indeed added charm to the profession by glamorizing it and perhaps nothing more. It is true that all designers refer

books and magazines, some for inspiration, some for ideas, but some I believe have had their entire education from them.

Absence of professional designers also creates a negative and a disorganized material supply market that add to the hardships and chaos. The demand and supply equation is very much alive but another problem that creates a void is absence of standards. This can not be possible without a professional body, (an institute or of standardization of material and interior products). This causes a lot of anomalies and making of a coherent interior a very painful exercise. Batch differences, color differences, dimensional variation of products, inadequate supply of materials and accessories, lack of updates in ironmongery and hardware, lighting, equipment and effects are some of the problems for practicing consultants. It is like re-inventing the wheel while creating a high standard interior in such a bleak and tricky situation.

As far as (specialized) Interior Design education is concerned there is not a single professional school in the country to cater for such an enormous market. Finding teaching staff for such an institution, if it was established, would be another problem. One must understand that proper Interior design training is a specialization and is taken after the basic architectural course as in the case of urban planning, landscape etc. Small courses can help but only to the extent of a foundation.

There are several architectural colleges in the country but the two leading institutions are NCA in Lahore and Indus valley in Karachi. Both the institutions still do not have interior design specialization courses. On a smaller scale there are several short course institutions, which do absolutely no justice to the profession. School of Decor in Karachi is the oldest one but again it only covers some basic definitions of design and mostly decor studies. Because of the enormous demand short courses are run at times at social and cultural centers e.g. PACC and Rangoonwala center etc. but they cannot be considered serious enough to fill the demand of a skilled consultant. We still have a long way to go even after the establishment of a professional school of Interior Design.

In the western world the Interior design professionals work at par with and at times in collaboration with the Architect to create a coherent and complete internal environment. They are struggling for a "license" to practice (similar to that of architects). This preposition is surprisingly opposed by the Architects and their bodies who have a monopoly on the interior markets. The author feels that a license will bring seriousness and legitimacy to the profession of Interior design. The author also feels that it is high time that some related subjects i.e. interior decoration, (which should not require a license to practice), are branched out as separate specialization studies.

An Interior environment either serves you well or can even become a virtual death if not designed properly. The death of hundreds of couples in a multistory American Hotel due to fire is an example. The fire does not spread because of architecture itself -- it the *design* and the materials used *inside* the shell that causes fire and havoc. It is the internal systems that spread fire. No matter what we do we end up spending most of our time in an enclosure without realizing that it is elements of internal environment that can have positive or negative effect on us. Today we all need better interiors not just for better performance but for safety and comfort.

The medical profession serves us all, and indeed is bound by its Hippocratic Oath to do so, but is it true for design professional? I doubt that. There is a great need for Interior design school, a professional body to monitor design standards, introduce professionalism and look after the interests of the professionals. To establish design education and aim for a design culture that is catalyst for a better life.

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