INTERIOR DESIGN: INNOVATION

(For FOLIO magazine)

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I feel that it is imperative that I mention the "status" of Interior Design profession, in our country, in the beginning of this article, as this would reflect the degree of creative application and innovation in the subject. We are only beginning to appreciate that ID is an amalgamation of various "Arts" and "Sciences", and that it is a fully comprehensive, multi-discipline trade that requires high degree of professionalism. It is a specialist's consultancy service that has a direct bearing on the quality of our life and that its application can influence our life positively or negatively.

It is high time that we took Interior Design seriously.

Day in and day out we make important decisions relating to interiors and interior items, may it be our homes or our workplaces, these decisions influence our lives for a long time to come. For example a beautiful and comfortable looking chair may turn out to be a back breaker in the long run. A low lit interior may look cozy, dramatic or romantic but it can have adverse effect on our eyesight. Some colours may look and feel sensational but in reality, if not used imaginatively, can have subtle but bizarre effects on out temperament, for example a particular shade of pink can be extremely passive. A beautiful but noisy office can become inefficient within no time. ID is one trade that requires participation of all five senses. An extremely sensitive approach is therefore a must.

Good internal environment or poorly designed environment has its peculiar effects on humans which become apparent during or after the actual use of the internal elements, therefore all internal elements demand careful and professional handling.

In the west the umbilical cord that brought nourishment from Architecture has been cut off since long. There is no disagreement that architecture is the "mother of all arts" but now in this modern and extremely complex world all the offshoots have outgrown architecture in one way or another. The evolution of specialist engineering professions such as civil, structural, mechanical and electrical are a clear indication of how complex our built environment is, may it be in a building, a yacht or even a spaceship of the future, deserves a special treatment.

A thorough ID professional may need to study as many as twenty disciplines to have command over the subject. Today, even in the trade of ID there are many specialists who need to be consulted, for example the acoustic engineer, the illumination engineer besides the mechanical, electrical, civil and structural engineer. The materials specialist or the textile specialist, the mural artist or even a sculptor become part of the Interior Design team.

Although there haven't been any PhD's in the subject so far but throughout the world degree courses are conducted by universities and has due recognition. Unfortunately, this is not true for our country. There is still not a single full time school for ID. A few months diploma holder cannot appreciate the depth of the subject, even the 'Ladies with a flair for decoration, and a bit high on the social scale' rely heavily on foreign magazines and "mistri saheb" with traditional carpenters details. The experienced furniture suppliers are not competent to handle other important aspects of ID, but then there are graphic designers and company managers who are filling in the tremendous gap. There is a great deal of awareness that design pays. The demand for properly designed environment is increasing day by day but unfortunately it is being filled by non professionals, however this awareness is mighty good news for the country.

Good for us that the profession of architecture is gaining full recognition and is pretty much established here and the bulk of ID work load is undertaking by practicing architects. There is a feeling that the practicing architects give an impression of being afraid of colour, the typical “off white on walls and white on ceiling” has become a typical formula. They show lack of interest in textiles, tapestries and other soft furnishings. Also when it comes to nitty gritty details, an architect who is so engrossed in the building envelope does not have tome for furniture and interior accessories.

There is debate going on in Europe that the interior designers should be addressed as the “Interior Architects” but over here we are still trying to distinguish between the decorator and the Designer. The issue of ID problems looked after by ID professionals is critical and we desperately need a school of ID.

Now coming back to our topic of Innovation. There are several areas of discussion where the ‘new changes’ or creative application of ideas to introduce novelty in the subject is possible there can also be areas like established “standards’ for example anthropometric data, a result of very hard work of our predecessors, these have very little or no room for innovation.

First of all we should know that due to lack of ID schools and professionalism, lack of standardization and quality control on whatever is available as resources, the generation and exchange of ideas is extremely limited. This also means that important elements for the development of any subject, i.e. journals, magazines, general press coverage is also limited. Obviously the establishment of a professionals association or a body becomes a far cry in such a scenario.

The degree of innovation will also depend on the mileage of the subject. The more seriously we take anything the more difficult and demanding it becomes. The more detailed study it asks for and the more room for innovation. It is difficult to say, in our case, if innovation is with a purpose or has become a necessity.

When post formed tops and surfaces are not available lamination and solid edging becomes a necessity and not an innovation, they don’t look as neat but serve the purpose. So one area of discussion is the imaginative detailing of the designer to achieve a particular function. A “necessity” innovation. This is quite common with experienced designers.

The natural method of seasoning timber i.e. natural air draft allowed through a staggered stack of solid timber does the trick in the absence of seasoning machines, but it still is a primitive method. This may fall under the same category but then the situation is pretty bleak considering that we are not using even half of the powered tools used in the developed world. There are many imaginative alternatives and original methods employed by our craftsmen but again at the cost of ‘time factor’. The element of creativity that is employed by our good craftsmen to over come the handicap of modern tools is really remarkable but cannot be termed as innovation.

The next area of discussion as mentioned before is the established standards which may consist of technical or scientific data, methods or methodology e.g. the zoning of interior areas when designing a fire fighting systems. Obviously it calls for a specialist and the technical reasoning will dominate the creative faculties of a designer. The curing of concrete demands certain mandatory requirements and that’s that, I doubt if there is a creative way to handle that. The author was at one time, a part of project design team where accelerators for concrete were used but it was failure. Perhaps the specifications were not followed religious but these scientific innovations can become an embarrassment in our part of the world.

The third area of discussion is the creative side of the profession. There are several sub areas of the subject where creativity and innovation plays a vital role e.g. space planning, the use of fine/ subtle details, the use

of materials and last but not the least the use of colours, materials and finishes. The author once saw a patchwork of “left over” tapestries used as an upholstery material. This can be termed as a “rag work but the ensemble of these rags was so creative that it looked totally brilliant.

The history of Trompe d’luile is pretty ancient but the painting of a timber surface made to look like a ‘marble’ is still not considered innovative by some designers. However, the imaginative use of marble and other stone and its detailing can become the most attractive feature of an interior. The use of granite and stone and other hard wearing surfaces is on the rise here because of its low cost but what we are lacking is a meaningful detail for the same.

Obviously in the absence of professionalism we cannot expect imaginative handling of materials. Although the architect is still in charge here but detailing and sound project implementation is still very hard to finish.

The phase that we are going through can be termed as “vernacular pragmatism”. Local experiments and local pressures play an important role in the direction for the subject. As far as client input is concerned it is generally not encouraging. “Would like it the way, its done next door” still gets many jobs done. Perhaps, intelligent use of a designers capabilities and a scientific approach should not be far behind.

A broken wall in a modern office can look rather stunning, but as shown in the photograph this use to be a masonry divider between two spaces that were joined together by the author. This was confusing to some but exciting to most of the visitors. Some were surprised and some were awe struck but the client thought that it was innovative.

Internal illumination is one of the most important elements of any interior. Obviously illumination depends on the quality and the type of lamps/ luminaries available in the market. The supply of Lamps has been a monopolistic situation. Also the governmental apathetic policies and controls have resulted in a vacuum in the field of lighting. This in turn resulted in the lack of variety in lamps and the lack of professional design for luminaries (light fittings). The markets were flooded with standard incandescent, tungsten filament lamps and colour 54 fluorescent lamp.

We have been particularly unlucky in the “Colour Rendering” aspects and quality lighting as far as interior illumination is concerned. Some practicing architects and designers have utilised available “patti” fittings and lamps quite creatively, infact there has been a lot of development in “Uplighting”, for example our typical colour 54 fluorescent tube has been used with a yellow coloured reflecting surface to counter the pale bluish nature/ colour of the light. Various pelmets and troughs have been designed using “Patti’s” resulting in cheap, effective and glare free illumination.

We have also seen ingenious methods for downlighting, when very few downlighters were available, for example using inverted “Degchi” a metallic pot as a substitute for a downlighter. We can use standard extruded aluminium sections to convert them into lighting tracks.

In our case different subjects of ID are going through a localized evolutionary process, some with a degree of success and some with disaster. One such aspect is Fire safety and fire protection. This is one of the most important but also the most neglected areas of our built environment.

We do have some mandatory civil defence regulations for all internal environments but there is no agency or institution that would approve and check internal “alterations”, just like a building control authority in the case of architecture. Hence these regulations are used as an avenue for corruption, just like any other control institution or it is so inefficient that loss of life and property has no meaning at all. In fact, at this stage there is no concept of public safety at all in any product or environmental design.

We have quite a dangerous situation at hand. I would not be exaggerating if I said that about 80% of fires in the city are caused by failures of the electrical systems. Yet almost 80% of the electrical work is in the hands of informal sector. The work is invariable given out to an “experienced” electrician who is responsible for design and implementation of the entire project. In the developed world all electrical design is handled by professional electrical consultants working in collaboration with the Interior design consultants.

The recent catastrophic fire of Tariq Centre on Tariq Road was a typical short circuit fire. Sometimes a small electrical fire is controlled locally in an interior and the cables replaced locally but only a professional can tell how far the damage has been done inside the conduits, what is the condition of insulation? etc. therefore only a professional advice can save from a future disaster.

In the end I would like to reiterate my original recommendations that only the establishment of professional institutions and bodies can bring about healthy change in our “products, environments and systems”. I am sure that a lot of us must be tired of poor copies of foreign products with so much potential and talent going waste at home and only waiting to be harnessed. I think that an effort has to be made both on governmental and non governmental level for the establishment of high standard design institutions. For how long are we going to live with sub standard products, environments and systems? The author believes that the level of DESIGN education and practice in any country can give a good insight to the quality of live of its inhabitants.

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March 1993