

Please tell us something about your design education.

After I finished my graduation from the Sindh University in Industrial Technology I ended up working as an Interior Designer in the Middle East, contrary to the field in which I had graduated. This is one of those God's mysterious ways of leading you to the role that you have been assigned, closing one door and opening another. The reason I say this is that because from Bahrain I decided to travel to England to get formal education in the design. I preferred to pursue a course in architecture but again all the seats were full and there was a single seat in the Interior Design department at the Polytechnic of North London. This poly was known for its education in design and has now grown to become Metropolitan University in London.

How and when did you feel yourself convinced for the design field?

Honestly speaking I had absolutely no idea as to what I was going to do in my life. Design ka Shauq bachpun sey nahin thah. It just happened to me; it appears like a sweet accident. In fact I could compare myself to any street kid who had a bleak future but somehow God kept on leading me to opportunities and I kept on availing them. Although part of my teenage life spent with my father, Mr. Ozzir Zuby, who was a renowned Sculptor, Artist, Designer and educationist did provide me with the 'creative environment' as such but I wasn't convinced till I finished my course in England that design was my destiny. True exposure and understanding 'design' happened in England. This was late seventies.

How would you describe your experience at ASA, the architectural firm?

Most nourishing and one of the best. I feel true education starts when you start working in the field that you are cut for. When I returned from England my second job was at ASA. I consider myself lucky to have been associated with Arshad and Shahid Abdulla, the renowned architects. In fact I wouldn't hesitate to call them my mentors. They always saw me as an associate and an asset to ASA but I secretly saw them as my Teachers. They weren't teaching as such but I was learning all the time. Learning is natural and a life long journey and I have a special thing about learning something everyday from any source available. My eight odd years experience at the ASA, the University of ASA as jokingly we used to refer to our office, was most rewarding. Many a famous names in the design profession have been through this university and that's where I picked up my lessons in architecture and building construction. It wouldn't be an exaggeration if I admitted that all the architectural side of my work would not have been possible had I not been at ASA.

Tell us something about your design projects? Would you like to give some detail? Which type of projects you enjoy more? Commercial or residential?

God has been extra kind to me as far as work is considered. I have been involved in almost all aspects of Interior Design. Recently I got to do some Health care projects which were quite a learning experience. The time when I did hospitality related projects like restaurants, hotels etc. I got very excited about the temperature and the landing time of a pizza from the oven to the customers plate and I saw this as a challenging planning exercise but then I found that doing polyclinics or a cardio ward was equally stimulating. In fact every design project becomes a unique experience and an exciting venture. With almost three decades in design I have been lucky to have covered all aspects of Interior design. The least attractive and the most difficult of all is the residential design which I think almost all the designers would like to avoid. You see the client knows what he wants but cannot explain and he wants his untold dreams to be accomplished by the designers. Commercial design has its own challenges. Doing a hardware store, a car showroom or a lighting showplace brings in its own flavor and excitement.

Which is your favorite project till date? And why?

The Pakistani Restaurant at the Karachi Sheraton, which was completed in 1990. Normally the design life of a five star hotel restaurant is five years but today after seventeen years it is still doing good business and the management has no intention of any change. This was a project for which I had to dig into our own design heritage for inspiration and motifs. We did not have to look towards the 'west' for ideas. In fact I think 'Pakistani' was a milestone project as it became a catalyst and an initiator for a chain of similar design projects in Karachi, whereby designers preferred to use local names, local materials and motifs. Our "Arts and Crafts" came in the lime light and became popular. After the completion of the project I came to realize that we had such a rich and beautiful design heritage that it would have been a sin not to discover and present it to the people and world at large. This restaurant also became a show place for our culture.

We started off with the idea to display, as much as possible, images of our traditional arts and crafts heritage. Basically to take the onlooker on a journey, give glimpses of our indigenous past which is extremely rich and colorful. To remind the people of the skills, trades and professions we mastered but are forgetting day by day. To remind people of the callous acceptance of the sub standard machine made products especially in a labour rich country like ours.

To show the passion and pride that our ancestors had in every thing that they produced ranging from architecture, furniture, pottery, rugs, textiles etc. etc. and what resulted in colorful indigenous and ethnic cultures.

It was planned that equal time would be given to all four provinces all the year round displaying their costumes, music, dance and of course their cuisine.

It was also proposed that the waiters would be dressed in regional dresses. Some areas were allocated for a single person "cultural activity" show for interest e.g. ceramic tiles painting, camel skin shades painting, small scale "Khaddi" cotton spinning loom, Charkha or hand spindle cotton spinning to produce thread, rug making or pottery etc. etc.

Traditional way of preparing bread "Naans" in an earthen Tandoor, visible through glazed counter, was GMs idea but became very popular. You see restaurant design is the most challenging test for a designer as it brings into action all the human senses, the sense of taste, the audio, the visual, the tactile and the sense of smell and I was quite happy with the 'Pakistani'.

You are known as an Interior Designer. How would you explain your architectural work since some of your projects can be termed as architectural work?

Design is best a team work. Claim to some ideas is fine but architectural design is not possible by single person sitting on his drawing board. It is always a team work. You have to have not one but several partners on board before you can successfully complete a project. And I have always had architects as my team members in the studio. Yes I have done a lot of architectural work but this I have achieved through team work. My own house which I designed was nominated for Aga Khan Award for excellence in architecture and I am proud of that.

Actually I have a small story to relate here, one of my clients who, perhaps was most impressed with my work asked me to design his house and I told him that I was not an architect but he insisted. He told me that if I could plan a good interior layout of the house he would erect walls around and complete the house. It was one of the best compliments I received back then. Now I get a lot of design enquiries in which architectural design is involved, in fact the clients insist that I look after this aspect as well.

What do you think is lacking in our country as far as professional practice is concerned and the designer-client relationship?

'Professional practice'. Yes, that is what is lacking. One still finds clients who want to keep your initial concepts and sketches and then never call you back. I on the other hand accept work on my terms, well, after almost thirty years in the trade I can dictate my terms but young designers still have a tough time getting honest design commissions. To have a balanced view on the subject I must admit that

even the quality of designers in the market looking for work is not of high standard. Some are lacking in the professional engagement methods and some lacking in the management side.

I am not surprised that in absence of professional project managers in the market we are still surviving. You see the Project management is a complete science and the fourth wheel of the built environment. We have traveled far without it and it is time that clients and designers alike would appreciate its importance. People think they can manage their own design projects and this is one of the sore points of the design trade. The awareness is slow but is coming.

At one time we used to call this world a global village but it has grown even smaller. The net has shrunk the world on your palm top. The tastes have changed, people are widely traveled and awareness level is quite high. Good design is appreciated and demanded. I am hopeful that the quality of design consultants will also improve and so will the work of professional and educational institutions.

You are an important figure in a famous institution. What short comings do you see in academics?

If you are referring to the Indus Valley school then let me say that the founders of the Indus Valley School have done great service to the province by creating such a needed art college and they were kind enough to invite me to put together a degree course in the field of Interior Design. I am trying to help establish department of Interior Design and temporarily heading it. The list of short comings is long and much is desired to be done but the biggest shortcoming is the availability of able faculty. Able people do not come forward to teach and share their experiences. I think this is a serious issue with other sectors as well. I feel we should campaign and create programs for faculty development on a national level. No matter what the short comings on a national level but for us the professionals, its time to pay back – no matter how painful the journey, this country has given us a lot. We all should devote a part of our time to education. That would be service to the nation.

What do you suggest for students opting for this field?

There is a majority of students who are looking for short cuts in design education and especially in Interior Design. There is a dangerous tendency of taking up short courses for becoming designers and there are many institutions who are cashing on this weakness. People think that by rearranging their furniture and changing colour scheme and soft furnishings they become designers. Then there is a confusion regarding ‘interior decoration’ and ‘interior design’ which is clearing slowly. At the moment Indus Valley is the only school in the country that conducts a bachelor’s level four year degree course in Interior Design. The management is struggling to maintain the required standard. Interior Design is a very serious subject, it is to do with the quality of life. You become the doctors of the built interior environment; short courses can only acquaint you with the subject. I pose a question to many who intend becoming a doctor; can you become a doctor with a short course in medicine?

How were you able to bridge the so- called gap between interior design and architectural design?

Although they are two distinct subjects but I do not see any gap between the two. They are the Siamese twins, you cannot separate the two. I tell my students that buildings are not made for visual pleasure, they have a purpose. They are created for some internal function that they have to serve. Interior design is the soul of architecture. How can anybody conceive one and not consider the other? I have always claimed that architecture evolves from the inside so I see no gap. I see it as one. The technicalities that separate them need more space (for explanation) and also a deep understanding. In the western world where this subject evolved as an important discipline, both the consultants work in a team on the conception level. This saves you of costly changes and mistakes after the building or a portion of its space is handed over to the Interior design consultant for a particular function. Recently I was invited to quote for a large job and I was pleasantly surprised that the patrons had decided to hire the Interior design consultant before the building was conceived.

Please share your thoughts about Pakistan Institute of Interior Designers. How and when the idea came in your mind?

Many years ago when I was in England finishing my formal Interior Design education I was encouraged to apply for membership to a British Institute of Interior Designers which later merged with Chartered Society of Designers. CSD is one of the largest, oldest and most respected design societies in the world. The primary objective of such a professional body is to promote standards of competence, professional conduct and integrity within the design profession and also to establish and monitor professional educational standards. I was impressed by the BIID. Back then the goal was set. I vowed that when I return to my home country I would work to help establish such an important Institute and with help from fellow professionals we managed to establish Pakistan Institute of Interior Designers. PIID is a registered body in Sindh.

How effectively PIID is working? What do you feel is lacking?

Unfortunately our performance is not up to the mark as yet. As this is a professional designer's body we have our shortcomings. You see these institutions survive on personal time from its members and time being in short supply with designers these days, such institutions normally suffer in their formative years. This is exactly what has happened to us but I am quite optimistic that we will overcome these hurdles as well. It took me twenty years to see my dream turning into reality I can wait a little more to see it flourish. We are making all the efforts.

Being the first qualified professional interior designer of Pakistan you have a large number of clients. How difficult it is for you to convince the client for the appropriateness of a design solution?

I do not impose myself on clients but a design strategy is developed during the briefings, meeting with the client to assess their needs. It is always a good idea to respect the client's desires; after all he is paying you to accomplish a certain goal. Out of a few hundred projects there must be only a couple of projects that I have abandoned because the client did not bother to honor the design ideas or details. But then the clients come in all shades and colours, some just demand absurd things or want us to copy this or copy that. This is rather a difficult situation for any designer. But I manage and convince the clients not to copy their neighbors or a particular design. There are times when the designer has to assert himself. But God is very kind to me as far as work is concerned. I have older clients who keep coming back to me and that I take as a sign of client satisfaction and success.

Painter, calligrapher, cartoonist, illustrator, graphic designer and of course architectural interior designer. Which one has a greater weightage in your personality?

I'd like to say all of them. Some of my projects are purely artistic in spirit e.g. Sunny Touchstone. Every thing done in that project was free hand, free of set squares and tee squares. You see the personality is a product of all your interests and beliefs put together and somehow it reflects in everything that you do. Art and music is my passion and I cannot possibly separate myself from that. There is so much music in design and so much design in music. But I take my professional design work more seriously like any professional would therefore it kind of outweighs all other interests, and I hardly get any time for art and music nowadays. In reality, I feel that there is beautiful balance between all that you do, and one compliments the other. I enjoy this chemistry between art and design.

Your firm is dedicated to provide creative solutions in the design and planning of human environment. Please tell us about the contribution it has done in recent past years?

Not much except creating good clean interiors. 'Creative solutions for design of human environment' is a slogan that I had put on my website but I feel I should remove it now as frankly I am quite embarrassed. Embarrassed in a sense that I have only provided creative solutions to the upper strata of the society and there is no design investment in the poorer segments of the society. Recently, after the great Earthquake I very enthusiastically designed an earthquake resistant house with all its interior details and I was quite happy that it might find an audience but it didn't, although I showed it to some important people. I just wanted my service to reach the poorer segments and un-privileged people of our society. Design is meant to change lives, not just the people who can afford us.

All I can say now is that I dedicate a few hours in week for teaching design, and that is the only tiny contribution or social service, if I may call it, in my account.

Please tell us about your design philosophy.

Now that is difficult one. Designers normally prepare for this question and come up with brilliant lines. I on the hand would only prophesize age old dictum of simplicity and honesty. The simpler our lives fewer our problems, and honesty is still the best policy be it decision making, selection of materials and technology or management. Design should be 'need' based but with a conscience and concern for nature. Yes I am guilty of specifying opulence when asked by clients which is usually short lived. But deep down in my heart I believe in timelessness in design. To provide design solutions that will survive time. A design solution that does not age. Looks fresh each day. A solution that was good yesterday, would be good today and would be appropriate tomorrow. A design should be playful, strong, and stable and should be able to make you achieve your need without waste. And if it can put a smile on your face- its good.

Does this philosophy need any change in its application when you use it for architectural design?

In design all the fundamental principles are the same and are universal. They apply to all design disciplines, even architecture. In fact timelessness is a most desired element in architecture.

What have been the inspirations in your life?

Inspiration comes from many different sources and at very different times. It comes from people, places, objects and events. As far as people are concerned I was once totally mesmerized by the Godfather of all artists and designers, Leonardo da Vinci, when I saw his handwritten manuscripts in England. He was surely one of the greatest minds who ever walked on this earth. There were others like Bertrand Russell and Edward De Bono, but can anything be more inspiring than a loving and caring family.

Inspiration is a strange phenomenon. It gives direction to your thoughts and actions. It is generated by concepts of beauty like balance, symmetry and proportion etc. as you can see, in a lot my work and that's the easiest. But it can also be triggered by ugliness and chaos. I had written some anti-war songs and about in-equalities, pollution and the Ozone layer etc. I never had the time to record them though. Looking at the troubles of Karachi I joined a pressure group to form Shehri, Citizens for better Environment.

My son, who was born in Karachi, has seen Karachi ever since it was in a mess. He equates it to total chaos and un-happiness. He is completing his architectural studies and to my utter surprise he translated the chaos and ugliness that one sees in a society as a design form of a building, which I thought was brilliant. In fact it is one most difficult thing for an Architect to attempt. He was inspired by Architect Daniel Libeskind, the modern day Guru. Libeskind most brilliantly translated the Nazi brutality into architectural design for a Museum.

Any unrevealed aspect of your endeavors?

Looking at environmental degradation in general and the disastrous condition of Karachi, which is my home town I once, became very interested in urban planning and design. I thought I would generate ideas and solutions to help Karachi. I even made a sketchy idea of 'elevated grid cities' and became very excited that perhaps I could take it further as a design research project, but unfortunately my career and family responsibilities came in the way and my dream project never saw the light of the day. Two decades and years down the road Karachi is still a chaos and ungovernable and I am still surviving amidst this chaos ...one day perhaps I may take up all the unfinished projects of my life. Something that is dear to me is a scrapbook about Karachi and its inherent problems, which I am making since the last couple of decades. I would surely like to finish that in the form of a book. It might generate some solutions for our perpetual problems.

How do you perceive the future of interior design as a profession in this country?

I think there is a tremendous demand for well designed shops, malls, offices etc. Can we imagine present day life without our Hospitals, Schools, Airports and five star Hotels, restaurants? These are

all examples of high end urban Interior Design and our changing lifestyles. The awareness and scope is there but there is a big vacuum in ID education. This vacuum is filled by novices. We need to have more of professional graduate level schools across the country.

What do you feel should be the design expression in this context? What is the right direction for design as a discipline?

Once the schools are established a proper direction in design will emerge. The professional bodies and other related institutions will also be ready with a design strategy for the country. The biggest problem that faces the world and Pakistan in particular is energy. In this context the modern buildings with its interior spaces that need artificial lighting and air-conditioning are the biggest culprits. Their consumption is unreasonably high by design. The concept of green buildings is still not fully understood nor on the agenda of architects and designers. We need a clear cut policy in this direction.

When I was in England I saw mock fire drills in buildings and strict fire codes adhered to. Here one sees the same building gets burnt down twice from top to bottom in one year and things are back to normal in a few days. The less said about our building control authorities the better. There is not a single body to observe and monitor fire and safety regulations, HVAC standards, lighting standards etc. for our built environment.

I propose a National Design Council, a regulating body comprising of eminent Architects, Engineers, Designers, with chapters in every city to look at design issues in the country. Not only it would monitor international building standards mentioned before but also look at graphic design standards. We are bombarded with obnoxious hoardings and advertisements day in day out and there is no body to question or to check them? The other objectives of the council would be to promote design as a national strategy and promote to design as a tool for producing better Environments, Products and Systems which would strengthen our economy and our well being as a nation. I am willing to join hands and help in this direction if some concerned designers would spare some time.