Mapping the design mindset at IDC, IITB - in line with a country finding its foothold in a gradually industrializing market: 1969-present

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Abstract:
In the backdrop of an emerging market scenario in India and the increasing need in the last three-five years to have to design devices and applications that are technology-driven, it is our submission that an understanding of the user's context has become critical as never before.

The reasons are obvious. The focus of the networking technologies has started shifting away from the traditional users (with large income bases) in big cities, to underserved communities, whether rural or urban. It is imperative that we understand the mindsets of these user groups – their needs for specific products thrown up by their own environments that are hugely culturally mediated, and what makes them click with certain products that already exist in the market.

We will approach our presentation with a backdrop of the design philosophy adopted by the Industrial Design Centre (IDC) at IIT Bombay, India.

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Defining the ethos of design (for our own purpose):

We, at IDC, remain in this wonderful and enviable situation that allows us to draw inputs from the best of several worlds.

So, (i) first we get to construct our definition of design from an industrial paradigm, viz., the Bauhaus and the Ulm School-inspired notions of industrial design which had espoused that, (i) design, as opposed to art, must be produce-able through backward and forward integration of production factors and technology, (ii) through a methodology that had a structured logic, (iii) because materials and process that are key to product building, adhere to such logic, and (iv) and a logic that became the very driver of the Modern movement of design itself.

(ii) And then, we came to imbibe precepts of the post-Modern design movement that followed the Modern movement by rejecting the tyranny of straight lines and monochromes of the Modern movement, to inform design with cultural inputs and organic forms and colors from countries such as Mexico, India and those in Africa.

In this, we were quite fortunate to have a key faculty member from the Ulm School of Design, **Guy Bonsieppe**, *to influence some of our critical thoughts in design with respect to cultural influences through his visits to IDC in the early-eighties to mid-eighties.*
This was also roughly the time when the Modern movement in design had started to give way to a post-Modern one. So, there was also **Ettore Sottsass**, *father of post-Modern visiting IDC in the early eighties.*

(iii) However, as a design school located in India and drawing its people-resources and a large part of its mindshare resources from the Indian subcontinent, it was inescapable that we find our own references to expand and construct our own definition of industrial design – mindful of the fact that industrial design itself, as a discipline, was born in the West.

The deeper motivation for this expansion of design definition at IDC happened with the necessary acknowledgement of the inevitable, viz., the role of our own culture as a mediator, and in it, the role of the visual arts in India since its very early civilizational times.
But, it was important that our enthusiasm for this did not become doctrinaire, whereby culture becomes an exotic element.

(a) What we needed to do was to draw inspiration from works of scholars that had established that our visual arts were the very torchbearers of the culture's organic development and patterns of continuity, allowing its images to give form to the felt quality of experiences from everyday life. (Ananda Coomarswamy, Kapila Vatsyayana, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, John Keay, etc.,)

Arguably then, the visual arts could become a vehicle for deconstructing seemingly well-ordered images, sounds, words and dominant sentiments, to unfold subtle tensions and cruel truths (and any hidden underbelly of an outer milieu).

So, design, as the occasional cousin of the visual arts, could be counted upon as an instrument *"to unravel the way people expressed or experienced the feelings they had at a deeper level – their joy, their sadness, their hidden desires, their untruthfulness, or their longing for amusement or beautiful experiences"*.

(b) And alongside this the inescapable recognition that, within the visual arts and design context of India, the arts (both performing and visual ones as well as the crafts) had come to represent the

very *'repositories' of cultural meanings* (Wolff, 1989/'Arts under Pressure', p.81), and notably the fact that *"many of these sentiments and meanings had a longer shelf life than we ourselves had."*

(iv) And all this expansion of design definition finally and quite remarkably coming a full circle today, with the present-day affinities across the world for cross-cultural idioms lending complete affirmation to the fact that *the arts are indeed veritable 'workshops' in which cultural meanings are crafted.*

All this is simply to emphasize that design's definition at IDC had always sought to embrace the machine sophistry of the West (located as we are at IIT), as well as the sensibilities of the sensory-driven environments of the East.
The latter, in no small measure, reinforced by the visit of the sage of design in Japan **Kohei Sugiura** to IDC across the eighties and the nineties, and inspiring us with his cross-cultural works (such as the Indian 'Mandala' and its applications within the Oriental mindsets in Japan and China).

Whether we were able to put all of this rich tapestry of design ethos into practice in a closed economy stymied by a market protected from outside competition since its Independence in 1947 is, of course, a story reminisced over and over again up until the country's partial marketization in 1991.

2

What students construe of design as a philosophy:

But what it did for our students was to slightly confuse them into thinking that what came from the West was necessarily the more desirable idiom of design, because what came from the West was scarce in a closed economy, and hence, highly sought after.

So, through the seventies and the eighties, even while the culturally-driven designs were the ones that actually catered to the larger needs of the larger numbers, making them in fact acts of socially responsible designing, this genre of designing was considered lacking in the trendiness and a sense of 'modernity that is attached to designing for lifestyle products.
It was necessary to bring to students' notice that Bauhaus, if that was to be their only role model, was not just about aligning beautiful straight lines against the newly arrived materials of glass and concrete in the early 1990's or the newly arrived moulding of plastics in the 1950's. Bauhaus was primarily about 'form follows function' – a philosophy that had promoted the idea of making designing a relevant act for everyday living for ordinary users.
That, obfuscated beneath all the appearances of trendiness, remained the seminal point often lost to many, that Bauhaus was established in revolt against a society that had become indulgent

and moribund in its attitudes towards the common aspects of life, and there was the need to promote creativity in a way that would be functional and beautiful but also affordable.

It was for the students to ask: 'Was this not in line with what we were already trying to practice at IDC'?

3

The blind spots and radical chic - fudging the 'relevant' in design:

The country's partial marketisation in 1991 graduating on into a more robust/expansive form of marketisation around 1996-'97, was in itself not an inventive act of economics. Instead, it was inevitable, given the rapid globalization of technology, capital, labour and market since the 80's, from the West into countries along the East Pacific rim and into South-east Asia by the mid-90's.

However, apart from the constructive act of tearing down existing notions of competition under protection, thereby allowing the free availability of goods and services and the luxury of 'choice' unknown so far in India, what this widespread phenomenon called globalization did to India and to our students was a sense of confusion about a host of terminologies (cultural factors, emerging markets, user contexts etc.,) connected to globalization, and being brandished around like so many weapons. Suddenly, terminologies they had been running away from had taken on a new meaning.

But the indiscriminate and overuse of terminologies were beginning to have the effect of blunting the power of these words, and notably for us, blunting them in the young, formative minds of our students of design. Thus reducing many of these keywords like globalization to radical chic.
And most unhelpfully, the tendency for those working in the area of technology applications, notably in HCI/computing, to sometimes use these social sciences related terminologies in a reductionist manner to connote specific meanings for specific contexts, and disconnecting them from their larger generic environments/lineage, and thereby running the risk of shrinking their very meanings.

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Dealing with blind spots to facilitate the design process – via a deconstruction of terminologies such as globalization, etc

A good start for us then would have to be in deconstructing the prevailing semantics, and to place these terminologies in larger, historical, panoramic contexts,

A useful way of doing this would be to map the idea of globalization to the various information revolutions across civilizational time, especially against the backdrop of the role played by the last two information revolutions (enabled by printing and computing respectively, the earlier ones being the inventions of language and writing). Both printing and computing as technologies, carry special relevance for students of design.

And then defining globalization as a force that establishes supply chains across countries rather than within them, and which are in turn, dominated by powerbases that come to control them end to end.

The idea being to help students apprehend the larger picture in a substantive but dramatic way, since design students are not really known to cue in to theoretical abstractions.

So, e.g., a playful attempt at outlining relevant forces and boundary conditions, through the recent work of Alex McGillivray's 'Globalisation – a history', and urging them to view globalization as being sandwiched between two major forces, represented by two noteworthy events across a period of a mere 500 years:

-the Tordesillas Treaty of 1494 that carved out the control of the world's resources and supply chains across a newly expanding globe between superpower Spain and innovator country Portugal, with printing playing a seminal role in dissemination of information, and

-the Harvard Symposium of 1999 that marked the final charting of the contours of the globe not just physically but virtually on the back of the Internet, and opening up the globe across a wide spectrum of cultures straddling countries outside the Western and the Northern hemispheres.
The real value of the Symposium lay in legitimizing the need to explore the links between culture and political, economic and social development with respect to both underdeveloped economies and underachieving communities.

In retrospect, both these events had upheld two major notions: (a) the idea that the globe had finally come to be known thanks to technical innovations, commercial ambition and strategic intent; and (b) that, the respective information revolutions had caused serious information asymmetries across countries and communities.

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The connections between design and globalization – what were the key shifts? (tangibles to intangibles)

Most importantly for our students, between Tordesillas (Treaty) and Harvard (Symposium), the world had seen shifts in the way

technology was intersecting from one to another major 'tour de force' as a determinant of economics and the distribution of production factors and opportunities. It went as follows:

-from technology intersecting primarily with physical resources in the tangible domain

-to technology intersecting with the intangibilities of culture and information

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What really changed?

(economically-determined to culturally-determined markets)

This shift in technology behavior immediately snowballed into a shift in the nature and the location of world markets itself.
The big change/shake-up happened with a demand for goods and services shifting away from their traditional bases of demand, viz., the mature markets of the West and Japan, to the emerging markets of the BRIC countries (represented by Brasil, Russia, China and India but also including Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and so on), primarily because technology was now beginning to intersect with culture and information.

As it happens, economies mediated by culture and not the machine were located mostly outside of the Western hemisphere, and quite remarkably, many of these countries also happened to be characterized by high population bases with large internal demands and captive markets for goods and service. The demand for goods in Western markets with low population bases had reached saturation points.

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The shift from the mature to the emerging markets – what

were the key paradigmatic shifts guiding design?
(product-centric to user-centric, an engineering and visual designs platform to mindsets and worldviews)

The movement of technology-dynamics away from mature markets to emerging markets meant a shift from an economics-determined design paradigm to a culturally-determined design paradigm.
Designing for the mature market had required an understanding of industrial design alone, which means working out of a platform that combined technology, engineering, architecture and the visual arts. It was quite adequate under these circumstances to restrict oneself to the classical precepts of economics, viz., land, labor, capital and economics. The West, anyway home to industrial design and classical economics, had remained self-sufficient in its needs for design inputs.

The adjustments from an economically to a culturally-determined design paradigm changed all that.

Apart from having to negotiate around the idea of the physical migration of markets away from the Western and Northern hemispheres, the greater adjustment for designers was a mental one – that, implicit in this physical shift of markets from homegrown territories was the need to have to negotiate through mindsets of users. This now called for a new design thinking altogether.

Why?

Primarily because, the traditional predicators of industrial design, viz., a composite of technology, engineering, architecture and the visual arts, lay its prime emphasis on   product and process. But, under the new paradigm of culturally determined designing, designing would now have to negotiate through cultural attitudes and worldviews of user groups.

A product-driven environment had suddenly given way to a user-driven environment (and worse, while products don't have worldviews, users do).

Driven by this shift in locus from products to users, designers suddenly began to broaden their mandate from exclusively investigating a mindset that so far had remained a celebration of a highly ordered rational and economically determined worldview, to mindsets incipient of emerging markets, viz., the mythical and the magical (worldviews) coexisting with the rational and the informational.

And by virtue of being mythical and magical and informational, these worldviews had necessarily to be hugely culturally determined.

The industry's felt-need to commission university departments with research around cultural studies, that gaining slow currency since the early seventies (concomitant with the post-Modern movement), had suddenly surged to new heights by the mid-nineties.

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Why is it important for our students to understand all these shifts?

Because IDC itself had to now adjust itself from an environment that had earlier required it to plug into mature market design sensibilities to what was being demanded, viz., a rapid shift in design paradigm to match emerging market sensibilities.

However, this is an adjustment that was just a matter of procedure, not substance, given the fact that IDC's USP has always rested on a user-driven culturally-determined design paradigm, with integrity for process and method, as part of good design practice.

The shift from one to another hardly caused any flutter, except to raise comfort levels in students about cultural-related issues.

The reason why it was important for our students to understand these interrelationships is because, as key factors conditioning and assessing user contexts and product backgrounds, they needed to become more informed about the origins of these terms and the breath of their connotations in order to leverage them better.