

Vision First

Introduction

The Indian Design community is excited -- the Indian government has committed to the setting up of four new Institutions for Design Education (NIDs) in the country. We believe this is a significant step towards leveraging design to enhance the country's ability to innovate, and in using design as a force for enhancing the quality of life in the country.

At the same time the design community also feels concerned and responsible.

We were frontrunners among Asian nations in 1958 when the first NID was set up thanks to the far sightedness of Prime minister Nehru. We believe this new effort must once again yield institutions that are well-informed and borne out of the most contemporary, bold and forward looking thinking in design. It will be a lost opportunity if we follow a predetermined route and only end up replicating expired, limited and ineffective models of design.

This concern has recently sparked a spirited debate on the internet and on social networks among groups of designers. The 'Vision First' initiative has emerged from that buzz that continues to spread online.

The need for a Design Vision

In the last fifty years the world has seen dramatic changes and design has also transformed significantly along the way. Design and Design thinking are increasingly about building in capabilities that empower and enable people to use these resources, with quality of life and environment as the guiding principles, not just economic factors which are also important.

The implications for design education are captured in this set of questions.

Around the world design is now being appreciated and put to use as an essential approach in dealing with those problems that have no linear, step by step solutions but require a leap of faith towards integrated, radical new answers. This set includes all the issues of our times – poverty, health, food production, unemployment, sustainability, terrorism...the list is long. The old analytical approaches are found wanting in the face of these ill defined, complex problems. This is possible through design because it works with a different set of processes: repeatedly reframing the problem, engaging with stakeholders, prototyping and testing solutions, exploring alternatives, visioning scenarios and so on.

The big question this throws up is what kind of institutions do we need to impart these capabilities to young people?

In India we are privileged to have a large rural base of people with agricultural and artisanal skills and a huge diversity of knowledge, tools materials and experiences. In the march towards a mostly western, industrialised model of development much of this indigenous knowledge resource is being lost. Design skills could be put to use to trigger new imagination, propose daring new scenarios which build on what people know and empower them to become partners in shaping their destinies.

How would a new curriculum accommodate these activities?

Indian industry and services are maturing rapidly. Indian corporations are becoming multinational. To remain competitive in the global marketplace, industry must respond to new sets of challenges from users who are seeking more than usefulness and usability. They are looking for emotional connectedness, commitment to green values, transparency, fair use of labour and so on.

How will future designers understand and interpret for industry, the expectations of users?

At a time when social networks are becoming the carriers of ideas and open source model a new inspiration for design, designers are participating in different sectors of creative industry as facilitators of co-creation. Design thinking is becoming a new medium for identifying gaps in old ways of problem solving and filling those gaps with innovative solutions. This shift from designers as creators, who design for people, to designers as co-creators, who design with people is defining designer's role in the future.

What will be the mechanism for human resource development (specially teachers) to handle these new design paradigms?

What we propose

At the time, Pandit Nehru invited Charles and Ray Eames to articulate a vision for NID. The Eames' had insisted on an intense reality check and extensive interaction across the country prior to penning down their vision for Design in India. (The India Report which emerged from that effort is still considered a seminal document the world over) Today we can tap into the wisdom and experience of a vibrant network of design practitioners, teachers, thinkers, who were trained in India and are now scattered across India and around the globe.

We propose a rigorous co-creation process, as detailed below whose entire thrust will be to stimulate fresh inquiry and bring clarity to the models of design education that India should seek.

- **A focussed, perhaps three week long, series of events / workshops / roundtables to be held across the country at various design schools and also with groups of practitioners and other stakeholders. (Among stake holders represented in this search would be policy makers, design school managements, design students, design teachers, entrepreneurs, representatives from industry, academics, other professionals, NGOs, craftspersons, and so on.)**
- **A grand open, global conversation about design education in India that could unfold on the internet and in print media and could remain ongoing over a long period.**
- **An international conference to share the insights and emerging directions in design education from around the world.**
- **Formation of two or three working groups to translate the varied conceptual directions emerging from the consultations into a broad vision.**
- **A focussed discussion at the highest level of Government to explore the interface between design thinking and each and every Ministry of the Government of India so that all sectors of development needs in India are addressed in a comprehensive manner. (The Government is probably the largest potential user of design.)**
- **Draft reports of emerging approaches for operationalisation.**

What the Vision Document will be

- **From a political perspective it is a manifesto for implementing public policies for improving quality of life through invention, innovation and design.**
- **From an academic perspective it is a broad framework for compiling research, learning and action resources.**
- **From the perspective of prospective students and their parents a vision document will inspire them with a sense of purpose for finding meaningful and gainful employment that connects**

their individual career pursuits with national / global and humanitarian goals.

- From the perspective of the administration a vision document will become a template for monitoring the institutes evolving progress against national goals and priorities and assign available resources for building specific competencies that meet the needs of the time.
- Finally, the vision document is meant to be about people of India to articulate the nature of design expertise & education that addresses the emerging needs and aspirations of the citizen by facilitating a connect between localised innovation and insights in form of informed choices, solutions and enterprise.

In conclusion...Seeking a new start

A Request for Proposal has already been floated, to invite consulting organizations to bid for finalisation of the model for setting up campuses for four new NIDs. While It does ask some relevant questions about possible financial, technical, academic and administrative models for the new institutions, the emphasis on stringent financial and architectural experience requirements on the potential consultants confuses the issue and becomes a barrier. The process may exclude new and innovative ways to imagine new institutions and government may commit to building infrastructure for a pre-supposed form of a school, both in building and content that is actually in desperate need for re-imagination.

It is our contention that if we proceed along that path, we will be training designers in an old paradigm of design, for an image of India that is rapidly fading, in campuses that are not listening to the beat of the nation.

Design was understood as an essential building block in the development of a newly independent nation, therefore the first NID had the commitment at the highest level from the Prime Minister of India. We feel it is once again time to harness the power of design in the service of a rapidly growing nation, towards which we need an updated commitment from the highest level of the government. We need to readjust our dream for India and for India's role in service of humanity. That is our new trust with destiny.

Core Group – Vision First Initiative. (<http://visionpehle.wordpress.com>)

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