

Book Review

Thinking Design
Singanapali Balaram
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Contents

1 **Introduction**

Nicola Morelli

- 3 Designing Product/Service Systems:
A Methodological Exploration

Oğuzhan Özcan

- 18 Cultures, the Traditional Shadow Play and Interactive Media
Design

William M. Taylor

- 27 Characterizing the Inhabitant in Robert Kerr's
The Gentleman's House 1864

Reflections

Uday Athavankar

- 43 Design in Search of Roots: An Indian Experience

Lance Hosey

- 58 HALO Communication Booth

Audrey Bennett

- 62 Interactive Aesthetics

David Stairs

- 70 *Okuwangaala:*
The Persistent Vitality of the Vernacular

Books

Jeffrey L. Meikle

- 89 *Aluminum by Design*

by Sarah Nichols with Elisabeth Agro and Elizabeth Teller, editors

Adam Kallish

- 91 *Thinking Design*

by Singanapali Balaram

Teal Triggs

- 93 *Clean New World: Culture, Politics, and Graphic Design*

by Maud Lavin

- 96 **Books Received**

entries projects a refreshing sense of randomness but in fact offers plenty of examples by which to test and deepen the ideas proposed in the scholarly essays. One realizes, finally, how pervasive and varied are the forms, surfaces, textures, and uses of aluminum—and how mutable is the very concept of materiality in the hands of imaginative inventors and designers.

Adam Kallish

Thinking Design

Singanapali Balam

(Ahmedabad, India: National Institute of Design, 1998)

183 pages, illustrated. ISBN: 8186199330

From South Asia Books: \$50.00

If design is about values made visible, how do these values affect the meaning and practice of design? While designers in the industrialized world struggle with issues around technology, competition, and the uneasiness of non-designers encroaching on design activities, in the developing world designers struggle with cultural complexities. The development of a designer is a process that implicitly recognizes the complex and ever-changing relationship between people, objects (in this case objects can refer to traditional objects of design or refer to the realm of services and information) and the designer. What may bind these together is the increased recognition that globalization and interdependent world economies have generated legitimate questions about industrial world lifestyle sustainability given finite world resources.

Thinking Design is a rare book that addresses the monumental challenges that face the practice of the applied arts of industrial and graphic design and the traditional crafts in India. Singanapali Balam, a faculty member at the National Institute of Design in India (NID) and an industrial designer, has compiled his past writings on those subjects in this important book. Published in 1998, with certain chapters written early as 1985, its content is still relevant in 2002.

While there is a strong literary tradition in India, there are few books available about contemporary Indian design (Hugh Aldersey-Williams authored two books in the 1990s) and even fewer are those authored by Indian designers. I met Mr. Balam while visiting the Institute on a Fulbright Fellowship in 1990. His background in product design, mechanical engineering, and research at the Royal College of Art gave him a diverse understanding of the role of education in creating practicing designers in India. His book is a unique, honest, and direct view from a practicing Indian designer who has spent his life immersed in India.

Thinking Design attempts to frame a challenging mosaic about a country "...of simultaneous existence. Here the bullock-cart and the space ship exist simultane-

ously. The postmodern advances in science and technology simply took positions of coexistence beside traditional ways and traditional artifacts." Balam states that "The past exists with the present. The rich exist with the poor. Tradition exists with modernity. Cottage or home production exists with high-tech mass production." It is said that within one hundred feet of a person in India you will find people living in 2001, 1001 and several centuries in between.

Western designers are the beneficiaries of a highly integrated economic system in which twenty percent of the world's population demands eighty percent of its resources. Its value system endlessly consumes, commoditizes and effortlessly separates economic, social, and religious functions. Scarcity, "something that most designers in the industrialized world do not comprehend" is an everyday reality in India. "The pressure on inadequate resources is such that it often makes the Indian designer feel helpless." Countries like India with highly educated workforces and a growing middle class are placed in a challenging dilemma of how to address both development and lifestyle. Balam is an advocate for Indian designers to be inspired and influenced by the industrial world, but not to be seduced by its values of conspicuous consumption and planned obsolescence. He describes the imposition of values as "cultural victimization...which results when the aesthetic ideas of one culture are transplanted to another with a total disregard for its own." Sensitive to stereotypes, he looks for taxonomies that empower nascent designers in India. He avoids terms "third world" or "developing nations," and instead focuses on the term "majority world," a term that recognizes the bulk of nations that are neither European or American.

This is an important point because from the late 1600s until the rebellions of the 1850s, India was a possession of the British East India Company and was essentially a corporate asset. India's vast resources were exploited, sent back to England for processing and then sold at advantageous margins to the world. This colonial method had a devastating effect on India and made them dependent on others for the processing of their own resources. While India was never fully conquered by any invading culture, many attempted conquests created layers of outside influences to the many native populations of India.

With this in mind, the two important chapters in *Thinking Design* that effectively address the complexities of practicing design in India are Chapter Two: Modern Indian Design: The Roots and Chapter Three: The Power of Representation: Semiotics for Mass Movement. These chapters describe the influences of both Gandhi and Nehru, which Balam sets within a wider context of historical Indian mythologies. In today's world, Gandhi is a historical figure whose complex life eventually became packaged to Indians and the world as a simple lifestyle and empowering messages. He accomplished

this after first being raised in a privileged family that supported England, was educated in England and then left India to practice law in South Africa, another English colony. Only when he was out of India, operating as an Indian in another colonial society did he confront the complex realities of oppression. This set Gandhi on a life journey where he succeeded in showing Indians all that was good in India. The Swadeshi movement was of momentous importance because it paved the way for radical political, economic, cultural, and social changes in India. It not only spearheaded the struggle for political independence but set in motion the search for freedom of expression at all levels. With his revolutionary concept of self-reliance and self-sufficiency, Gandhi awakened the multitudes to several home truths and indirectly initiated a process of "redesign" that extended from pandals (the open tent-like structures that seated a million listeners), to chappals (a simple pair of sandals that adorned a million feet). His focus on common Indian objects like the spinning wheel, sea salt, farming, and simple everyday values eventually raised the consciousness of all Indians that they had the ability for both self-reliance and self-determination. Balaram rightly states that these "...simple products are governed by complex semantics whose grammar every Indian readily understands."

Nehru, who both benefited and struggled with Gandhian values and outcomes, took India in 1947 as a series of independent states with very different languages and forged a nation. He closed India's borders to imports and embraced a complex mixture of self-reliance and rapid industrialization based on the socialist models of planned economies. What was even more challenging was tackling these parallel paths at the same time within a wider context of the cold war. With the passing of both Gandhi and Nehru, India is still grappling with both of their ideas and legacies. It is here that Balaram recognizes how Indian designers can be catalysts for change. He highlights how "Designed objects can provide physical support and enable people to do what they cannot do otherwise; but it is their symbolic qualities, their largely mythological meanings, that can liberate people from psychological depression, from social oppression, and add a spiritual dimension that is individually invigorating and culturally creative."

With this as a backdrop, the looming question of how Indian designers are trained to operate not only within India, but also in an interconnected world is where *Thinking Design* focuses the bulk of its efforts. Balaram states that aspiring designers need to be exposed to "...an open atmosphere conducive to person, and inquiry-based learning." He concludes that influences of western educational systems were "difficult to change because trainees from such a system produce trainees of the same order for tomorrow, forming a vicious circle." While open to other educational models and influences, Balaram also voices a concern that

"...after spending the most precious money of the people on increasingly expensive design education, we are left with graduates who have only the understanding of alien situations, alien problems and alien solutions."

A clear example of this is a referral to "...a designer trained abroad to work on the most sophisticated computer-aided animation recorder, needs to use at home the very same equipment. If his country cannot afford to buy it (along with all its attachments, spares and service), he feels his experience most useless. Soon, frustrated, he migrates, usually to the country where he received his advanced training where he will perform brilliantly." Balaram states there should not only an emphasis on tools, but also the underlying techniques and values that give skills meaning and "...be an appropriate design method which fits the people, their cultural minds, their economic conditions, their own skills and their available resources." Even if a designer stays in India, due to the scarcity of trained designers, they can become selective to which assignments garner the best fees and outcomes that are usually for industry aimed at middle class lifestyles. In the industrial world, design students are exposed to the concept that their skills support the needs of market goals and objectives. While designers practice in a diverse set of industries and organizations, they accept the models of commercialization and middle class aspirations. In India, Balaram recognizes that this is a strong motivator to train designers, yet he also comments that in this model "...the real benefit goes to the manufacturer or a few wealthy customers, thereby further widening the gap between the rich and poor." Due to design education's alliance with the Indian government for subsidies, Balaram recognizes the direct and indirect impact that governmental policies have on the teaching and practice of design. He concludes that design needs to be responsive to human behavior, culture, and supported by government policy—a tall order.

Balaram tries to define the outer boundaries of design. He states "If design as a 'problem solving' activity and its concern is 'to improve the quality of life' let the Indian designers take a look at the direction they are going in and the society they are living in. What is the designers' response to the major problems facing the country [such] as population explosion, unemployment, child labour and poverty?" Designers can take on roles that extend beyond their immediate professional skills by what he refers to as "service design." "The designers (should) turn to service design. They should design strategies...offer creative solutions to problems on a variety of issues rather than create more and more varieties of objects. Design would then become a mission instead of what it is today—a commission." Roles could include roles as documentor, trainer, community builder, catalyst of reform, missionary, activist, and integrator. On large problems, "design should not claim to encompass every human activity" and in certain cases should leave well

enough alone. This seemingly contradictory statement leaves the reader struggling with ways to reconcile how to enlarge the context of design and at the same time decide when to recognize its limits. That is what much of this book is about—the struggle to map out a territory for design and create well trained form givers that have strong liberal arts education to operate in a highly complex society.

Thinking Design is a struggle about detailing the factors that define Indian identity and the role design has to further the significant strides India has made since independence in 1947. Balaram states “India is a multi-cultural society...where many centuries are telescoped into one and...it is not surprising that there is confusion and misunderstanding about identity, culture, and modernity.” This is important because design as a defined professional activity is new within a country where everyone creates or modifies their own design solutions. While India is endeavoring to open its borders and integrate in the world economy, its populations “Pressed by necessity...often invent their own solutions which may be crude but nevertheless genuine, indigenous and functional.”

“In the rapid technological change and in the dual coexistence of social and economic values in India, the designer’s role is not at all clear. He is according to the industry, an expensive, glamorous, and superfluous beautician. Like the foreign product, often he is a prestige symbol to the client. As a non-technical appearance designer or so-called stylist, he faces contempt from the rigid, functionalist engineers.” He goes on to state that “More often than not, the beneficiaries themselves are hostile to the designer. People do not know in what way such design intervention can help them as they often lack knowledge about design and resource to hire a designer...[and] the designer has to seek and find a role for himself and then approach and persuade the people involved.”

Some of the most interesting reading is in the back of the book, where Balaram shares several case studies of products developed by designers in India. One quickly understands what 140 pages of reading may have been difficult to reconcile—that design in India is challenging. This also may be a shortcoming of the book, because these examples are not integrated in the chapters where they would have made the content readily understandable.

The challenge in understanding the “majority world” is that many complexities and tradeoffs cannot be applied intellectually by reading a book. Victor Papanek wrote many books about design in the developing world and addressed issues around scarcity, technology, indigenous materials and larger social issues. Reading books or being taught by world famous designers can only enhance understanding and craft, not be a substitute for active engagement in society. Balaram states “...it is nearly impossible, without living in it, to

feel the inner truth of this culture, the social values and the ethos, in their many subtle aspects, in order to find suitable solutions.” The contemporary history of India has been a half-century struggle to create a unified country where poor, large, and rural populations compete for scarce resources with rapidly growing urban middle class populations who have the resources for design solutions. By 2030, sixty percent of the world’s population will live in urban centers, which will have dramatic impact for countries like India. Wherever recipients of design solutions live, Balaram states that physical proximity and involvement are two essential ingredients to effectively design for people. Throughout *Thinking Design* Balaram continually confronts design as a tool for social change and a tool for commercial ends. This is a natural extension of Gandhian and Nehruian forces that to many are incompatible, yet are very real factors that affect the integration of designers in Indian society.

Teal Triggs

Clean New World: Culture, Politics and, Graphic Design

by Maud Lavin (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001) 201 pages, illustrated, index, \$27.95 (hardcover) ISBN 0262122375

In this age of Naomi Klein and *No Logo*, the *First Things First Manifesto*, and international G7 protests, graphic designers are increasingly being asked to re-evaluate their role as mediators within the arena of global corporate profit making. The pressure is on to use the resources available as visual communicators in order to influence content to “make a difference” within a broader social, political, and cultural context. Traditionally, corporate-based designers have been viewed as packagers, or stylists of information. Such a position has clearly fostered a role that is ultimately more about creating a marketable aesthetic rather than with any in-depth personal message. And, herein lies the perennial issue. How might designers reconcile personal and political beliefs within such a “client- and product-orientated” profession? This may be a daunting question, but as Maud Lavin attempts to explain in *Clean New World: Culture, Politics and Graphic Design*, one that is not insurmountable. Many graphic designers are finding alternative ways of speaking out, and in the process, she says, of “influencing cultural norms.”

Lavin’s “clean new world” is about communication and the power which designers have to affect the world around them. It is also about the irreconcilable dichotomy found within the profession. Few designers have yet to fully achieve a position of simultaneously being in a corporate service and still be able to control social, political, or cultural change. While Lavin acknowledges the problem she also provides us with examples of those

Contributors

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