

CRAFT AS A POST MODERN VENTURE: EXPERIENCE IN BAMBOO CRAFT

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Abstract : Industrial design was built on the foundation of Arts and Crafts, which was well integrated at Bauhaus, giving craft a new status. The roots of craft were weakened with the advent of Industrialization. Modern design with its emphasis on industrial production prevailed. A new Aesthetics based on industrial processes emerged forming the base of modern industrial design. But today in the age of Post modern era, Crafts are acquiring a new meaning for Design. Craft as a post modern design is trying to evolve as a practicable venture. Repositioning of craft with appropriate blend of latest technologies provides a means for practice of post modern design.

Taking bamboo craft in which 10.5 million craft persons are engaged in India alone, the role of design with examples of work done at bamboo studio of Industrial design Centre at IIT Bombay in past 10years are discussed. Possibilities of developing a new theoretical frame work for practice of postmodern design are further indicated.

Industrial Design emerged from Arts and Crafts after industrial revolution in the West. Loss of quality in Industrially produced products became a major concern. Machine made textiles could not compete in quality with textiles made in the East. Designer and a Socialist of that period William Morris was critical of the process of creation of design at that time . In an article on ‘Art and Beauty of the Earth’ he says:

‘ In almost all cases there is no sympathy between the designer and the man who carries out the design; not unseldom the designer also is driven to work in a mechanical, down-

hearted kind of way, and I don't wonder at it. I know by experience that the making of design after design - mere diagrams, mind you - without oneself executing them, is a great strain upon the mind. It is necessary, unless all workmen of all grades are to be permanently degraded into machines, that the hand should rest the mind as well as the mind the hand. And I say that this is the kind of work which the world has lost, supplying its place with the work which is the result of the division of labour'[1]

Bauhaus, the famous school of Design headed by Walter Gropius gave 'Craft' a status equal to that of 'Art'. Quest for new forms based on Machine production lead to the discovery of Machine aesthetics nurtured by movements in Modern art . Functionality and simplicity, became the main traits excluding 'Crafts' from its aesthetic domain. Crafts preserved their decorative character. The intellectual values of that time namely Dominance of Reason, Rationality, Objectivity and Scientific Temper nurtured Modern design. Concept of Progress based on increased consumption by masses became a guideline for practice of Industrial Design which got entrenched into Modern Industry. A global acceptance of its practice was symbolized by a definition of Industrial design articulated by Thomas Maldonado for ICSID(International Council of Societies of Industrial Design) in 1969 which states

'Industrial design is a creative activity whose aim is to determine the formal qualities of objects produced by industry. These formal qualities are not only the external features but are principally those structural and functional relationships which convert a system into a coherent unity both from point of view of producer and user. Industrial design extends to embrace all aspects of human environment which are conditioned by industrial production'.[2]

Post Modern Design can be seen as an offshoot of Post Modernism which challenged the earlier modes of thinking. A definition in the conventional scientific sense of post modernism does not seem to exist. It can only be understood by its many traits. However we can examine two faces of Post Modern Design, one which influences from behind and the other which manifests in its Practice.

Face 1 : Influences behind

Here we can see the various developments taking place in the post industrial era.

Decentralisation of Industrial Production

Centralised production is becoming increasingly uneconomical . Controlling ‘work force’ has become difficult with workers’ Unions acquiring a legitimate power. Workers aspirations have changed. Working at one’s own pace with one’s own choice of time predicted by futurists like Allwyn Toffler has become a practical reality with many Industrial set ups. Software Industry is able to adopt such ‘decentralised’ models effectively

Net based communication and product distribution

Net marketing has become a reality. It is possible to use the ‘Net Distribution’, even by individuals, making small scale productions possible

Acceptance of Fragmentation

Fragmentation of work and time necessary for industrialization has crept into the very psyche of human beings. Today’s younger generations all over the world are comfortable with fragmented modes of expressions and communication in general. Today’s graphics seen in channels like MTV is a good example. ‘SMS’ language of mobile culture is making an entry into formal academic communications.

Concern for Ecology, Eco friendliness and Global warming

Awareness of Public on issues like ecological damage, extinction of several species, global warming caused by high carbon emissions, unlimited use of disposal plastics have

brought focus to eco-friendly design and green design. Use of eco-friendly natural materials like 'bamboo' is becoming a 'Post Modern' feature.

Need for cultural diversity.

With the adoption of Industrial culture through out the globe, products tend to loose their cultural roots. Uniform, sterile forms and environments created in Developed world are getting adopted through out the world often ignoring local cultural concerns. Modernism as a trait of Industrialization is getting accepted by all Nations obscuring the local identities. Global mass media further consolidates such monolithic culture.

Post modern thinking

Disillusion with the concepts of 'Progress and better life' promised by Modern Industry lead to new thinking. Postmodern thinkers challenged the very basis of earlier notions built on scientific reason and rationality. Thoughts of Foucault on Power and Knowledge, Lyotard on Discourse, Boudrillard on Media and Derrida on Deconstruction exemplify such thinking. [3]

Spiritual needs in Products and Environments.

Fragmentation and complexity in technology based environments has also lead to the need for beliefs and assurance beyond the frame work of science. Products as symbols with deeper spiritual meaning is gaining momentum in peoples' mind. Popularity of products and environments based on beliefs systems like Fengsui, Vastu are getting popular. A new need for post modern design to discover and assert meaningful, new higher universal order seems to be on the anvil.

Face 2 : Design Manifestations

Post modern Design manifested into Practice sequel to the above mentioned influences.

Limited product expressions controlled by economy of production and distribution as well as concerns of marketing for mass consumption frustrated designers. Designs became more and more uniform optimized functional concerns like 'ergonomics'. Plastic

moulded chair is one such example. Most of products tended to acquire box form, with notions of efficient use of space.

‘Memphis’, a movement sphere-headed by designers like Ettore Sottsass, challenged the prevailing notions of visual orders. In Furniture notions of Symmetry and Order rooted in the Industrial culture were demolished. ‘Deconstruction’ expounded by Derrida became a guiding force for Post Modern Design of products as well as Architecture.

Symbolism was well incorporated by architects like Charles Jenks in Architecture and Product design.[4] Post modern Architecture has taken off in Practice leading to bold expressions in several buildings.

Crisis in Industrial design : New Future

Modern industry has been built on the basis of earlier values like Centralised Production and distribution. Designers working in the industry are frustrated as the set ups offers little scope for Individual Creativity. Memphis like outbursts have not been possible in other products. Designers dependant on the comfort built in Industrial employment are finding difficult to reposition themselves. However a new scope can be seen for Designer owned enterprises as it is already happening in Software Industry.

Craft based industry offers such possibility as

- Variety of Designs can be produced with low investments.
- Select markets can be reached through internet based marketing.
- A new participatory relationship between workers and owners can be

developed

In which designers and craftpersons will have stakes these possibilities can be examined taking

Bamboo craft as an example..

Case study: Bamboo craft practice at Bambu Studio of IDC

Bamboo Craft : Indian scene

Bamboo craft is practiced in most parts of India as an occupation for living. An estimated number of craftpersons who depend on bamboo craft in the country is 10.5 millions. Traditionally the work was relegated to certain castes like 'Buruds' and 'Mahadev kolis' in South and Western parts of India and 'Mohalis' in the central and eastern states. They mostly make baskets for storage and a tray called 'Soop' for cleaning the grains. Craft persons are generally below poverty line and belong to socially disadvantaged castes.

In the North Eastern states dominated by Tribals, bamboo craft has acquired a high degree of refinement. With 70 varieties of bamboo available in the region bamboo craft products are used for many purposes in every day life. The craft has been well documented in recent times.[5],[6]

Bamboo craft products are traditionally marketed through weekly markets as well as occasional festivals called 'Melas'. Melas coincide with agricultural cycles and are associated with religious festivals. People in rural areas save money and buy products for yearly consumption in these Melas. One such 'Mela' takes place every year in a village called 'Masa', 100km from Mumbai on 13,14,15 of January coinciding with festival of 'Sankranti'. It attracts 100 000 visitors every day. New decorations on the baskets can be seen in this Mela reflecting unconscious expression of post modern thinking.

In 1963 a national conference 'Jagruti' on bamboo craft design was organized at IDC with participation of 30 designers, experts, 15 craft persons and 30 students attending the seminar and workshop. A holistic view was examined in the Seminar dealing with all issues like raw material, ecological damage, design, craft earnings and marketing in the urban markets. [7]

A major effort was made by Govt. of India in 1999 to upgrade bamboo craft with the funding provided by U.N.D.P (United Nations Development Programme). IDC (Industrial Design Centre) was assigned a 'Tool and technology development project' in bamboo craft. Consequently a comprehensive modern 'tool kit'(fig 1,2) was developed suitable for village crafts person. The tool kit with 30 tools had one third of the tools newly innovated. 4 hand operated machines and natural dye colouring in addition to

treatments for protection from insects and fungus, were also developed. The tool kits and small machines are being manufactured by two small scale Industries.

Soon it was realized that technology interventions of this kind would have no relevance without new designs suitable for urban markets. New designs (fig. 3) were developed at the newly formed Bambu Studio at IDC. Designs inevitably followed the aesthetic traits of modern design. User concerns like less projections and ease of operation were incorporated. Simple geometric forms were used. Production and distribution concerns like uniform size and shape were achieved with simple innovations in moulds and product specific tools. Coil technique which was new to Indian craftpersons was introduced. Training in use of new tools to make new designs became necessary. Number of training workshops in the remote villages of India were held. Training material suitable for craftpersons were developed. A new company with Social Concern, 'AG Bambu Style' was initiated under SINE (Society for Innovation and Entrepreneurship), IIT Bombay. The company has introduced a mini Tool kit (fig.4) which can be possessed by each craft-person. The company intends to market craft designs produced by 'self help groups' formed by craft persons.

These efforts have brought some insights demanding a fresh outlook to base 'craft design' in post modern idiom. A paradigm shift seems to be an opportunity to make craft sustainable. Designers taking an entrepreneurial role with partnership of craft groups can become sustainable.

Such enterprises .

.can be based on low investments.

. can use limited edition designs providing a fuel to the creativity of designers.

. can have internet based global marketing to reach select buyers with knowledge

. can harness Bamboo as eco-friendly material with advantage.

and

.can introduce designs with local cultural values for Tourist markets.

To experiment such possibility some attempts at Bambu studio were done:

A lamp in coil technique (fig.5) uses a spiral form unsuitable for mass manufacture.

A tray (fig.6) combines cut circular form made of coil technique with a rectangular wooden frame.

A set of tea coasters in combination with brass turtle crafted in local tribal technique (fig.7)

offers a juxtaposition of frames of Culture.

A traditional pineapple weave in bamboo gets combined with acrylic strips(fig.8) without inhibitions in an attempt by a student designer to mix natural and artificial materials.

A bar stool(fig.9) combines bamboo and rattan with coloured steel in a rich visual mix.

These examples can act as indicators to new future potential for craft as a post modern expression

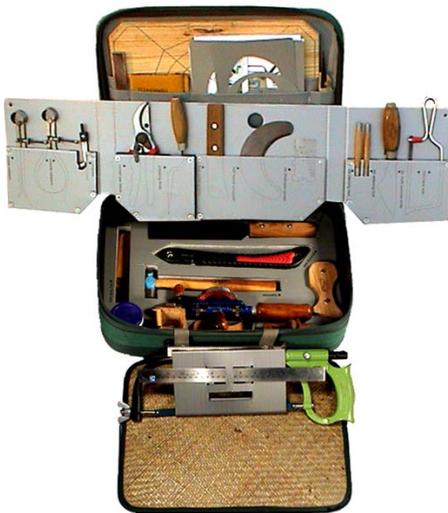


Fig. 1 (Toolkit Open)



Fig. 2 (Tools in the Toolkit)

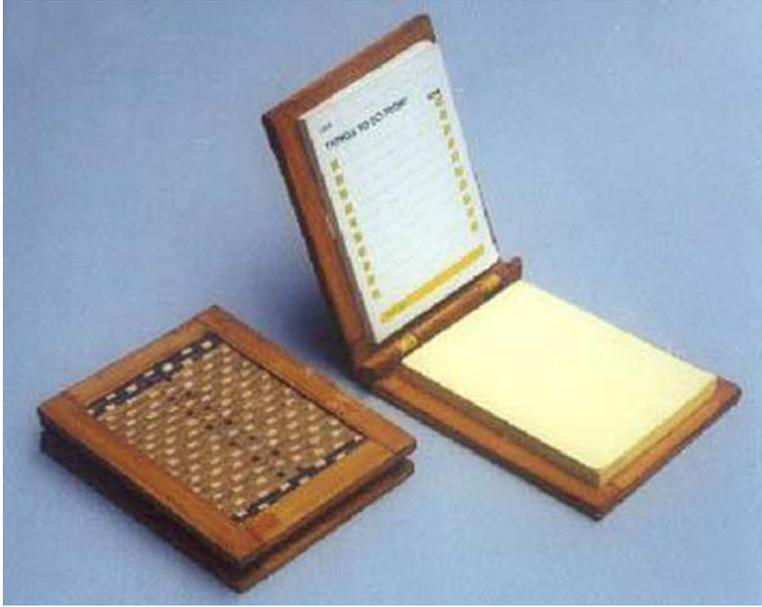


Fig. 3 (Notepad in bamboo)



Fig. 4 (Mini Toolkit)



Fig. 5 (Lamp in coil technique, Design by Kiran Kumar)



Fig.6 (Tray in coil technique with wooden frame)



Fig.7 (Tea coaster with a brass turtle)



Fig.8 (Pineapple Weave with acrylic strips: Design by Rupesh)



Fig.9 (Bar stool in cane and bamboo: design by Poorva)

References

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