

Practice to Theory: a difficult path

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Designers are trained to become practitioners. When it comes to theorizing we have a difficulty as there are *less or no inputs* in our training for this task! Often designers theorize without referring to other's work or theoretical knowledge already available! With little tradition of 'formal research' we often run the risk of unsubstantiated claims! The word 'research' is used for 'content' derived without any rigor or systematic approach. Realizing this we introduced a subject called '*special project*' in M des at IDC from the very beginning. It had an open format. Teachers were asked to give the topics of their research interest, from which students can choose. Creative ways of looking, use of 'formal measures' for subjective perceptions and systematic documentation were encouraged. Creative explorations in a defined, specific zone gave interesting results! For example, a special project explored uses of 'palm tree leaf sheaths' which fall out of Cola palms at IIT Campus. The student designed and produced usable plates, book covers etc., by pressing the steamed sheath under a hydraulic press in 'Metal studio' of IDC. Viable micro Industry was proposed with systematic data collection on quantity of sheaths falling per month. This paved the way for thinking in designerly way of research!

'Practice to theory' demands a reflective practitioner! It can become a foundation stone for looking at design as an "Interface" where strategic thinking in design dictates the practice!

A new culture of design discourse initiated by designers and design groups perhaps is essential in addition to the research pursuits in the Phd-programmes. In this respect IDC alumni Initiated presentations which are uploaded on you tube have a significant value!

1.0 Further thoughts on rim- design with a postmodern approach-

Craft episode 2: Reflections on 'Interface' of Bamboo craft¹

In my article on the above topic, issue of dealing with rim for bamboo tray was discussed. Traditional bamboo tray has a rich 'form' with cane bindings.



New doable approaches are

- **Redesign in coil technique with modern industrial form**



We adopted this mode, keeping the user convenience of 'cleaning' in mind. It also fitted with the objective of introducing a new technique making it viable in areas where cane is not easily available. Within the bounds of project framework, we justified the 'form approach' as a parallel stream.

But the challenge of encoding the rich form in newer ways remained!

Pyrography is an Option!

- **Use of Pyrography on wood**

Pyrography has been explored on wood creatively in other countries. For example, Brenda Wilkie ² offers amazing explorations of Mandala designs on wooden surface!



We found a traditional practice of pyrography in Chattisgarh and incorporated it on the coil rim of plates made by craft trainees during our workshop!



It had its own context where the craft persons were using local technique with a *wrought iron tool* heated in a small furnace connected to a hand blower. Coal was the fuel. We soon found out that 'pyrography' is more effective if skin of bamboo is retained as *fine lines* can be ingrained because of the 'Silica content'.



Furnace used by group in Chattisgarh



burning images with heated tool

We came across similar pyrography done on a 'Pipe for smoking' in Meghalaya as well.



Sukummar Haobam tried the pipe making craftsman happy



The 'Pipe' with rich detail was sold for rs.5/-

No doubt electric pyro-graphic tool, when it is available, offers more possibilities even with local images as seen in bambu studio at idc!



- **Use of Laser etching**

We, myself and expert craftsman Rudrapal at Bambu studio(IDC) were invited by Prof. Misha Schaub, director of Institute, HyperWerk at Basel, Switzerland for a week long workshop in May, 2013 to 'explore bamboo in different contexts'. One of the students of the Institute, had developed an attachment for laser machine which enables etching bamboo all around.

New designs on bamboo were tried in the workshop.



Such high technology can also be used on bamboo tray rims. Printed messages with calligraphic fonts on the rim can place the tray in upend market for very special occasions with limited editions. With the use of 'beeja aksharas'(the first syllable of a Mantra) like 'Om' or auspicious messages in different religions could give the tray a new positioning! But it needs further innovation in technology for etching on a large circular objects with laser.

This brings us to the challenge of appropriate choice of 'Postmodern thought framework'.

Practice of design needs to address more issues than mere technical possibility.

2.0 Competing with modern tools of Persuasion

Design, when it operates in the current industrial frame work, adopts powerful means of persuasion using media. Vehicle manufacturers will not be able to sell their vehicles as intended without advertisements on TV, Internet and print media.

A question comes to fore whether such tools could be judiciously engaged for design in the areas like sustainability, education etc., Bonsiepe has strongly argued a case for research in, what he calls 'Audiovisualistics'.

This brings me to my 'Review of Satyajit Vetoskar: Future is Now' exhibition. ³ I had indicated few new possibilities which can be explored in the Postmodern thought frame work like encoding messages to reveal 'sustainability dimension'.

On further reflection, one may say that such subtle visual encodings can be brought to the notice of general audience only through modern communication tools like 'animation' with audio visuals content.

Here I speculate. An animation with the power of 'sound and image' revealing subtle encodings which can be embedded in Satyajit's creations would have been quite in 'Order'.

Narration is a trait of postmodernism!

We may need a new 'theoretical frame work' to explore 'Speculation with reflective Practice' of design.

Traditionally this has been the forte of philosophers and authors. Designers need to develop some of their skills to pursue this dimension.

When I took a course way back in 1980 at MIT called 'Metaphors in Learning and Design' with Donald Schön as the lead teacher, I did not know that he, with his 'philosophy background', was specially brought to MIT to study and articulate the process of pedagogy in Architecture and Planning. His deliberations led to the two books 'Reflective Practitioner' and 'Educating the Reflective Practitioner', which we cherish today as landmark contributions.

His rare 'You tube-talk'⁴ on the topic is 'educative' to educators and practicing designers. He brings out the *challenge of learning in design and architecture*. In a typical studio framework student is expected to learn without knowing 'what is to learn'. Teacher or Coach also does not have a solution as the problem is 'new'. But the teacher has the experience! How does it manifest as a tool in learning-process? A dialogue is the first step!

Then

Comes the '*Metaphor*'

as Schön brings out while answering a question.

Perhaps a good teacher creates a 'bridge' with his/her experience to the 'student's learning situation' through the suggestion of a '*Metaphor*'!

Do see and listen to the video- lecture.

1. <http://www.agrao.in/images/Articles/CraftAsAPostModernVenture.pdf>
2. <https://www.pyrographymadeeasy.com/2017/12/01/mandala-iii-artwork-pyrography-tutorial-wood-burning/>
3. <http://www.agrao.in/images/Articles/ReviewSatyajitVetoskarFutureisNow.pdf>
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ld9QJcMiNMo>