



From Delhi to DC and Other Meanderings

by Sujit Tolat

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As I read about all the excitement at the Beijing World Expo 2010, I realized that a decade had gone by since I was at the opening of the Millennium Expo 2000 in Hannover, Germany, serving as Head of Design responsible for the Basic Needs Thematic Pavilion. Coming from India, it was an incredible experience to be involved with such a high profile international event and to stand alongside known international designers pitching ideas. It was only the beginning of an incredible ten years that have led me to many different countries and design experiences that I could not have foreseen when I started my design journey in New Delhi, India. This article will describe the two aspects of that journey: one a literal move from New Delhi to Washington, DC and the other, a cultural journey that focuses on the evolution of a design perspective that incorporates elements of both East and West.

The Early Years, India

In 1991 I graduated from the only design school in India at the time, and plunged into the streets of a commercial aesthetic that could not conceive the “value” of intangibles such as design philosophy. The National Institute of Design (NID) was set up in the early 1960s, conceived by a group of visionary Indian industrialists such as the Sarabhai family in collaboration with the California design team of Charles and Ray Eames. The founders realized that the process of development demanded a closer look at future policies to determine the pattern and pace of growth envisioned for India. NID was and still is a unique institution. It was way ahead of its time in an India that was just emerging from the stagnating and conservative ethos of the “planned economy.” This political environment

had strangled much of the spirit of innovation that is today so representative of the galloping economy of the New India.

In hindsight, I see that NID ideas about ‘design for change’ and a holistic approach were at least ten years ahead of their time. Designers were still regarded as “Artists,” people who could make things look pretty, and their function was purely cosmetic. Even though there were significant opportunities to make money (mainly through trade expos and retail interiors), I felt too strongly about design and making a mark and was not prepared to be just a cog in the wheel doing the mundane. Before long, my frustration with the lack of purpose in the work I was producing triggered a desire to move away from India and towards the developed world where there appeared to be a more mature design sensibility from which I felt I had much to learn.

Today, thanks to several of my Indian peers who stuck to their design ideals but also rationalized their way of thinking about the role of design, our profession has evolved to the degree that India now has a design policy: designers are regarded as strategic thinkers and are being brought on to projects at an early conception stage and as an integral part of the process.

Master of Design, Australia

The second leg of the journey takes place in Melbourne, Australia, where I relocated to undertake a Master of Design program at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT). During the three years spent there I came to realize much more clearly that as a designer I needed to understand much more than just design theory and practice. Besides providing creative input, designers also need to



"Hi-Life-The Supermarket of Want," forms the queuing area at the entry. Basic Needs Pavilion, Expo 2000. Courtesy of the author.

be experts in branding and communications, and have an understanding of commerce. The RMIT design program covered the fundamentals of design and business, giving an edge in a very competitive field. Unlike our education in India, the program emphasized the importance of possessing a broader knowledge of business practice and an ability to justify design strategy.

The Chance of a Lifetime, EXPO 2000, Germany

Eventually returning to India after three years in Melbourne, I had a chance encounter with Rajeev Sethi, the artistic visionary behind the 1985/86 Festival of India in the U.S. and the 2002 Silk Road Festival at the Smithsonian Folk life Festival. This led to my first deeply satisfying design experience in the real world. I learned some invaluable lessons working for Rajeev, who was invited by the German Expo to design the Basic Needs Pavilion. This was one of the eight thematic pavilions at the Expo 2000 that talked about the key emerging issues for the new millennium. The project, over two years in its execution, really helped me become more aware of the process of design in a cultural context. Coming from India and working on a project in Germany forced me to understand the cultural nuances that are so important in the way a project is executed.

Working with the Germans, who supposedly epitomized "German engineering and precision," who were extremely precise, and who wanted to know every next step, was challenging for our Indian team. We had a style that was more hands on, textural, and improvisational. Stylistically and culturally, we couldn't have been more different. Having studied and worked in design both in India and Australia, I realized I could speak both design languages. I was well conversant with the formal, often linear design process of the West and the more organic (often chaotic) approach in India. My role evolved from a creative lead to that of being a facilitator and a mediator. There was a lot of give and take, heartburn and tears, but ultimately the results were stunning. We were able to negotiate and integrate within the German structure a work methodology allowing last minute improvisations that proved to be innovative and extremely creative.

An interesting example of this "culture clash" was the design of the "Papier Mache Cathedral." The grand finale to the exhibition was conceived as a theatrical setting where the visitor also became a part of the performance. The key aspect of the approach that made the German organizers very nervous was the design or the lack of, something visual and tangible that they could comment on. Constructed out of recycled materials found on the expo site,

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the design could only evolve to the extent of blocking out areas for the staging performances, changing rooms, and the entry area, without real drawings. It was not possible to provide detailed elevations or specifications on materials or construction as the design of the space was dependent on finding appropriate salvaged materials from the site. This meant we could improvise till the very end to suit our objective. Ideas and sketches were being generated on site with the construction crew to put ideas into action. To convince the organizers we assured them that the design needed to be treated

successfully: the pavilion won the award for best pavilion at the world's fair.

New Design Beginnings, Vancouver, Canada

While in Australia, I had decided to immigrate to Canada. Lots of cold calling and several emails resulted in an interview with one of the best exhibition design firms in Canada. Working on the Basic Needs Pavilion in Germany had provided me with a great exposure and luckily, the Principle of the firm had seen and liked the exhibition. Soon I was on my way to Vancouver.



"Papier Mache Cathedral," Basic Needs Pavilion, Expo 2000. Courtesy of the author.

more like an artist's installation; it would not compromise on the clearances required by the fire life safety; and it would provide handicapped access per the local requirements. As it happened, this area turned out very

Working in Vancouver introduced me to a whole new side of design including a much greater emphasis on process and structured management of projects. Time sheets! The idea of keeping track of billable time to see if



"Papier Mache Cathedral" Performance Area, Basic Needs Pavilion, Expo 2000. Courtesy of the author.

projects were being profitable was totally new. The notion of being able to bank time or being compensated for overtime was unheard of but a pleasant surprise. In all, my time in Canada introduced me to two key differences in design process and management from what I had experienced working in India.

My first insight involved learning about the way teams are structured for design projects. I found that requiring clearly demarcated roles and processes within interdisciplinary teams was hugely helpful for effective management of both large and small projects. In India, design organizations do not have this sort of role demarcation. Designers often end up doing bits of everything, from overseeing and developing content to managing budgets and clients, including the creative oversight of design. The Expo 2000 project in Germany is a great example: I became responsible for a lot of these functions. No doubt a great learning experience, but in hindsight, if there had been a clearer project management structure, it would have fostered an environment where designers could have devoted more time to the creative fine tuning of the exhibition.

This brings me to my second point, the concept of personal time. The nature of business in

the design industry is such that you work however long it takes to complete the project. The practice is probably true the world over whether in India, Australia, Canada, or the United States. The difference is that, in Canada, Australia, and the U.S., the concept of personal time is still considered critical while in India, the design team would often be called in after dinner to get a download from an extremely busy Principal, and then the work session would continue till about 2:00 to 3:00 in the morning. Whether or not the long hard working hours are compensated, the employers I have had in the West still value and are sensitive to the employee's personal time.

Maturing as a Professional, Washington, DC

Finally, a job interview with the Smithsonian National Zoo brought me to Washington, DC. At the recommendation of a friend I was also able to show my work to Gallagher & Associates, a young and dynamic museum and exhibition design firm led by Patrick Gallagher. Gallagher and Associates creates visitor experiences for public and private museums, visitor centers, and learning facilities along with science centers and travelling exhibitions. Some of their projects include The International Spy Museum, The Sant Ocean Hall at the National Museum of Natural History, the Jamestown



In "Beyond History's Records," the visitor is introduced to the rich oral traditions of the Native peoples, New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe, NM. Courtesy of Sujit Tolat/ Gallagher & Associates.

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Permanent Settlement Museum, and the New Mexico History Museum, to name a few.

Today, eight years later, the partnership with Patrick and Gallagher & Associates has been transformative, consolidating my previous experiences into a clear specialization and area of practice as a design professional. I feel fortunate to be a part of a multidisciplinary team that is always trying to push the envelope with regard to being creative and providing design solutions that resonate with the visitors as well as clients. From managing projects to working with clients and consultants for lighting, interactives, film, and media on the creative side to understanding the business of design and the importance of fostering client relations, the growth has been very rewarding.

The Cultural Context

More than the physical journey itself, it is the cultural experiences that have contributed most to my growth as a designer. Cultural differences are more than just differences in language, food, appearances, and personal habits. You experience first-hand a different country's perceptions, beliefs, and values. Each physical transition point has contributed in some way

to how I think and apply my understanding to the process of design in the hope of delivering solutions that are 'out of the box' and that resonate with the visitors.

The Creative Process

While there is tremendous creativity and the ability to come up with innovative design solutions both in the East and West, a couple of key observations come to mind:

- **Ideas can come from anywhere and anybody.** I have learned the value of being open and receptive to ideas; learning to recognize that ideas can come from anywhere and anybody, and not necessarily from a designer. Working with craftsmen and non designers from Africa and South America on the Basic Needs Pavilion, I came to realize that often the best we can do as designers is to be a catalyst to give direction and see the ideas through rather than impose structure. As a designer it is extremely hard to let go of the ownership of an idea, but I have consciously been practicing this approach in my work here, and I have been pleased with the results.

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- ***Design can get lost in translation.***

Working in the United States, I sometimes feel that the design gets lost in translation, from the early concept stage to production and the final execution. This may be considered as the natural progression of how the design evolves; once we start adding the layers of fabrication complexity there is a tendency for design to get compromised. Agreed there are the similar constraints on projects everywhere, but here in the United States, it is very difficult to get a design fabricated that does not conform to the 'standardized' practicalities of production methodology. The result is that designers start to self edit, even before the design has had a chance to live and grow, thus affecting the creative outputs.

- ***Standardization vs. Creativity?***

Strangely, in this regard, it is possible to come to more satisfying, out of the box, creative, and innovative design solutions in the Indian context. Sometimes the absence of standardized methodologies helps breed creative innovation. In India designers from the very start have to do more with less and are therefore forced to innovate. While this results in intensely original solutions, this lack of standardization can also be a double edged sword. In India, for example, the quality of fabrication is definitely not at the level we have come to expect in the museums and exhibitions here in the United States. Due to lack of standardization in manufacturing in general, there is little consistency in fabrication standards from one area to another. As a result tolerances and

attention to details are not considered critical. To compensate, designers have to come up with ideas that have a more 'handcrafted' conceptual approach that can be a hit or a miss. While looking good, this approach can often be very esoteric in a way that may fail to connect with either the content or the visitors.

Project Management

In India, the process of project management is still quite organic and nebulous. In the past the concept of formal sign-off by the client at the end of a phase was a foreign concept; getting paid was like having a tooth extraction. Unstructured meetings, lack of clear cut accountability and well defined processes for redress made the process quite unpredictable. This I believe is largely because clients did not fully understand or appreciate the value of design and the design process. For example, Indian clients are often impatient with the process and want the end product delivered instantaneously, compressing timelines beyond a reasonable timeframe. Today, in India, with a more vibrant economy, new money, the ability to travel internationally, and much greater professionalization across the board, there has been a considerable shift in emphasis to a more formalized process.

The concept of project management has a much longer history in the United States. It is a critical aspect of managing design, and is immensely professional and structured. In my view one of the big differences here in the United States is that clients more often appreciate the rationale of the iterative process and understand the value and the need to go through the various steps to achieve a quality output. This structure helps keep the project on track in terms of managing deliverables, organizing and tracking content

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"The Linking Nations" gallery documents the opening of the Santa Fe Trail, New Mexico History Museum, Santa Fe, NM. Courtesy of Sujit Tolat/ Gallagher & Associates.

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information, and billing the designer's time. This organization and documentation are even more important in case there are any disputes that require arbitration.

Content and Client

In my experience, in the United States, museum design and the approach to museums and exhibitions is a highly intellectual, educational process. There is well researched scholarship, and the design of exhibitions is to a large extent guided by the client's vision. The designers work closely with the content experts to create an experience that celebrates the message that is being delivered. In India on the other hand we have two extremes. On the one hand there is a rich abundance of content in our cultural history which has deep and expansive representation in the form of buildings, artworks, and archeological treasures. This can result in a lack of attention to the need to display it in the best light and to make it more

meaningful for the visitor through thoughtfully designed museums or visitor centers. On the other hand, recent attempts to create large, international style museum experiences have demonstrated the lack of sophistication or content scholarship on the clients' end, resulting in a complete handover to the design team. Although this sounds like a designer's utopia, it has led in some cases to an indulgence of design over purpose that does not achieve the intended outcome.

I am reluctantly coming to the conclusion that the U.S. practice of the client being the ultimate driver (over the designer) may have its merits in the museum field, where the content should triumph. However, we continue to need more robust and equitable back and forth with a better appreciation of the expertise the designer brings to the table. As with anything in life, the balance of power is never quite right to create perfect harmony.

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Wiser and More Critical, My Take on Design

In looking back over the past decade, I realize that I have changed tremendously as a designer. I have been fortunate to work and learn in diverse environments, and believe I have gained some skill in speaking the international language of design and management that is used in many Western countries. All these experiences have codified in some way a design viewpoint that can be captured in a few essential points:

Form Follows Content

I am a firm believer that form follows content. For museums, especially interpretive museums, the challenge is how to convey scholarship to a diverse audience. Content or storyline and its interpretation and articulation are all critical. In a successful exhibition the design, the look and feel, the spatial layout, graphics, must take their cues from the content to engage the visitor at all levels. For example, if our design of the New Mexico History Museum had featured glass, metal, and a super clean contemporary aesthetic, the space might have looked good but it might not have resonated with the audience and the local sensibilities. Instead, the exhibition incorporates local materials, finishes, and techniques (adobe with straw as binder) wherever possible to connect with the local vernacular. In my opinion, design experiences that are devoid of references to content and context ultimately become dated and lack soul.

Being a Risk Taker

The approach to design must be as fluid as design itself; we need to continue to push ourselves as designers to be greater risk takers

despite the increasingly codified and client driven world in which we operate. The ability to infuse fresh ideas and techniques is one of the biggest challenges of operating in a highly organized and structured environment.

Context Is Critical

While there is no dearth of creativity or ideas in any of the countries in which I have worked, the end result is often defined by the social and cultural context. Design, as universal as it may be, needs to understand the context and relevance of the local systems and traditions. The imposition of an external (Western or Eastern) model of best practices is not always appropriate and can in fact be detrimental to achieving the intended outcome.

Conclusion

Today, India, China, and many other countries are seeking to showcase and safeguard their history and cultural heritage through new museums and exhibitions. These are created not only for an international audience but also to stimulate awareness at the national level. This presents a great opportunity for international museum and exhibition design firms to collaborate with these nations, sharing ideas and expertise, advancing these countries' cultural visions, and learning a new cultural language in the process. There is a fascinating opportunity in the global village for the development of cross cultural processes that straddle East and West, Folk and Contemporary. Design is one of these processes and can be used to enhance diversity and encourage an equal exchange between cultures. ✨