

The interlocking Paradigms of design and development experiences from Italy.

by Dr. Ajanta Sen Poovaiah

On the question of comprehending what constitutes our country's design paradigm, it is our understanding that designing as an activity must be guided by at least one fundamental precept, viz., the determination of our 'real' vs our 'perceived' needs. It is that critical point of intersection where these two 'needs' converge that will go to constitute the absolute fertile grounds for developing our(own) design paradigms. Even achieving a close fit to this ideal type would be preferable to a situation where designing merely 'feels' good but hardly 'does' any good. And until this point is identified, our designing will continue to remain in its pre-paradigmatic stage which could easily make our design susceptible to be held up to ridicule by conflicting interest groups- What seems encouraging in the positioning of such a hypothesis is Peter Dormer's (Design since 1945, 1993) interpretation about the designer, based in its turn, on journalist Pamela Johnson's observation in her shock of the Newborn, (Issue May, 1991). For both of them, designers respond to need-based designing as a matter of rule, not exception because "their needs coincide" with those of people's; and while only "a few of us are iconoclasts" (given to radical chic or avant-garde thinking), "even fewer iconoclasts are successful designer". Which by our own interpretation would mean that the very ordinary, everyday realities and experiences are what could provide the necessary signposts for appropriate designing, rather than fashionable alternative, counter-current sensibilities or experiences. A

couple of definitional clarifications before one proceeds further:

1. 'doing good' is not being treated as a mere moral compulsion. Instead, it is to be read as a rhetoric for understanding how far our designs penetrate into our everyday social and economic awareness levels and experiences; and 2. the term 'conflicting interest groups' in our country's context has increasingly become a mere euphemism for the two polar monochromatic extremities of the entire existing spectrum of opinion-making. These two broad collective whose views find more frequent expression than those of others, are erroneously read to be 'progressives' and 'conservative' : the former supposedly willing to open up to changes in order to integrated itself into this expanding as well as shrinking world; the latter group supposedly willing only to regress into its traditional shell. We must first recognise this mindset as a central weakness surrounding our occasional debates undertaken in our pursuits for a design paradigm. The weakness has the definite potentials for subverting or for closing options of any likely convergences of these two world views. Besides, there is always more to it than what these broad sweeps of judgement would have us believe.

Since we do not happen to be the only country saddled with conflicting interest groups or a brand of designing that upholds elitist needs, it is our intention here to highlight through the experiences of other, the ways towards likely convergences (of 'needs' and of ' world views'). One of the countries whose design and development experiences may be foregrounded as a veritable prototype for our own potential and real conditions is Italy. This is within the frame work of the following considerations: (a)Italy represents a part of the developed world with all its associations

(technostructures and so on). It also dominates along with America, the language of contemporary design (Collins and Papadakis, 1989); and Italy envelops within itself two entities -the North and the South (Mezzogiorno), each with its own distinct stamps of development and underdevelopment, respectively. We intend here to capitalize on Italy's famed development dichotomies in order to understand the extent to which Italian design may be considered effective as well as worth -while within this frame of reference.

In our quest for material that supports or rejects the above positions, we begin with a few thoughts from one of the seers of design - the Italian, Tomas Maldonado. It is absolutely relevant and heartening for us to gather that at least a two and half decades ago, Maldonado drew a clear line of distinction between old and new utopias as a necessary baseline for understanding one's 'needs' for designing as well as design's consequent operative axis the 'progettazione' which in approximate terms would mean 'design planning'. For Maldonado, old Utopians "designed models that were prospective abstract structure" which consisted of precepts that necessarily embraced within their perimeters the planning of future concrete life, future concrete people and most importantly, people's lifestyle needs in their entirety. The new utopians, on the other hand, have used the same prospective abstract structures but with a difference. They have concerned themselves "with non-people and with people-substitutes". Obviously, their design planning have comprised of devices such as "computer hardware, system procedures, functional analyses and heuristics" which bank on converting people into things because things are easier to administer, mutate

and manipulate than people. A principal objection toward subscribing for the new utopia would be its violation of a given reality as well as its a -ideological and its so-called value fee focus of design. Given this, where does the very fashionable rhetoric of the global village fit in? and the real pertinent question for us here would be: of the two sets of utopians, who must be allowed to set our design agenda with its underlying ideals and design paradigm?

A more recent endorsement of Maldonado's views exists in the Charter of the Graphic Design Project (Nov. 1989, Milan) signed by a group of Italian graphic designers some of whom hold formidable positions at the ICOGRADA, BEDA, ISIA & the AIAP, the last three representing Italy's foremost design collectives. These designers including Vignelli, Castellano, Sambonet, Cerri, Lupi, Anceschi and others have expressed severe reservations about their "hyper-industrial mass consumer culture" and have offered to undertake "a reassessment of the goods and services" that are currently being produced by the design community in Italy. This resurgence of thoughts in favour of giving "substance to the structures of society" through one's actions specifically through design is not what one gets to be informed about as as essential designing ethos for a part of the West (that would also include the Scandinavia and Germany where such an anti-design ethos is concerned). In stead for us, the West and its development idioms with all their concomitant. structures and functions (including designing) constitute for us a veritable premier almost action to a character of faith, that must contain for us most of the requisite potential points of reference, and which in reality today find deep systemic assimilation in our design ethos and thinking. Quite

significantly for us and specifically in the context of our current marketisation reform region, it should be interesting to pose yet another question: how do we plan to deal with the West's resurgence of thoughts reflected in its increasing recognition of the 'pollution' effects being created by the uncontrolled surge of a tendency to communicate, often to the detriment of the "culture of the image" itself? This question also submitted by these Italian designers represents without doubt, their effective understanding of the fact that this uncontrolled surge arises from the industrialisation of the communications process where " the media and information interest are prisoners of the ideology of market targeting and spew out uncontrolled quantities of information" What gets buried under this heap is the consumer as well as product-quality.

Italy's design efforts must be read within the framework of a very important development distortion that Italy and most of Europe have learnt to live with. This is Italy's 'Mezzogiorno', its southern section comprising naples, Sicily and so on and whose regressive development curve has found such an effective artistic expression in Puzo and Coppola's creation of 'The Godfather' I, II and III. What his as grim reality beneath the exoticisation.