

# Does smart designing make smart business sense?

## Reflections on IDC's designing in its silver year of 1994

*by Dr. Ajanta Sen Poovaiah, IIT Bombay*

### **Introduction:**

The Industrial Design Centre's silver year 1994 coincides with the country's entry into a period of a new economic orthodoxy. This ought to be the time when we get around to asking certain crucial questions; among others, what is the economic context of design in India? Why is design important in the context of economic activity? And in its logical extension - does design make any business sense?

### **What is design:**

Before moving on, three parameters need clarification: that, (i) for design to make any business sense would mean having to position design either in concomitance or in subservience to manufacturing, the market and the consumer; (ii) that, design as an element of output of the designer is being seen as "an evolutionary process rather than as a series of inspirations" in random outbursts of self-expressions. Which typically enhances the role and responsibility of formal or institutionalised design teaching. And also by implication, that design as a discipline allows its end-users viz., the corporate sector and the industry to bank on certain minimum available standards of design approaches, applications and methodologies; and, (iii) that design as a likely input in the production process is relevant only in the context of an "economically active" population. Which means that, to sustain itself design would necessarily require certain minimum threshold levels for the functions of its various operatives.

### **The business-design link:**

The first conceivable link between business and designing emerged from the efforts of a breed of American designers Raymond Loewy (designer: Greyhound bus); Walter Teague

(Boeing interiors) Henry Dreyfus (Bell Telephone) and Norman Bel Geddes (Furniture exhibit, World Fair, New York) around 1929. For them, designing seemed like a natural ally of profit-making, and naturally, therefore, insisted that "good style sells more products". With this philosophy in mind they also coined the phrase 'industrial design' and worked assiduously towards forefronting design as an effective marketing weapon. Over the next two decades, this linkage got articulated as 'good design is good business' - a charter of faith for the Council of Industrial Designers in the 1950's. In the subsequent years of progression in manufacturing and with the rise of mass culture, design entered a new professional phase that initially called upon the designer to satisfy his clients while still upholding his professional identity; and yet increasingly came to reverse itself to suit prevalent trends in industry which was now largely driven by "profitability as the only standard for judging excellence in design". This overall trajectory holds no parallels for us in India. We never ever started off with the creed 'good design is good business'. We started off, instead, with a manufacturing and marketing base that was hardly required to consider the question of whether the consumer likes an "elegant solution to a practical problem". Elegance seemed too easily co-opted into the operations structures of monopoly houses working under the protected environment of tariff barriers and import restrictions; and given these circumstances, under a hardly competitive form of trading. Things, however, have now begun to change with the advent of a new economic orthodoxy since the mid-nineties. Increasingly now, there is the tendency to want to understand what British designer Sir Misha Black said way back in August 1974; that "it is possible for industrially-produced objects to have the elegance of a mathematical equation, a quality exactly suiting their purpose, so that they are tuned to the emotional and practical needs of a society at a moment in its history." This situation as a practical reality is sandwiched somewhere between the mere ambition of selling a client's products on the one hand, to designing a product (or a corporate identity) that usually always ends up being vastly apart from what the public desires. The trick instead is to be able to envison, which in the words of the 18th century Swift remains the "art of seeing things invisible". And which by Black's

interpretation again would mean that the real value of design teams is "in their capacity to prognosticate the future, not a decade ahead but sufficiently in advance of present standards of acceptance to lead the market when the product is produced a year or more after its original conception". In any case, designers themselves (such as the Norwegian designer of Philips, Knut Yran) have maintained that "design is a technical profession with a marketing function". For this to work, one foresees two essential prerequisites; (i) that designing must tie up closely with business through certain specific areas of operations such as the production and sales of the product to be designed or already designed; and, (ii) that business could begin to give itself the anticipated dividends only when it allows the designer into the technical facilities of the company for which he is working, into its marketing potentialities, into the estimated profit margins and into the whole complexity of the production and sales of the product(s) to be designed.

#### **Leveraging design:**

So, how does one go about leveraging the power of design? And launch products that not only win awards but also sell profitably in the market. Before approaching inspiring examples of products that have combined the above conditions, we need to articulate the major axis along which business-designing moves. This movement basically follows two alternate pathways: (i) one, in which the attempt is to tap or translate potentially existing markets into real ones by condensing into meaningful efforts, the "expressive striving" of a great number of people at a given moment of historical time, and (ii) the other route, through which we create markets by working towards actually building up a certain amount of this expressive striving. In other words, while the first option creates the market and takes the buyer into it, the second one creates buyers for a given market. Three examples from the pre-nineties and particularly striking in their ability to combine design and marketing are the Herman Miller Inc., Bang and Olufsen and Nakamichi. Herman Miller Inc., the American furniture company that is known most for its trendsetting modernist furniture as also for its pieces created by

Charles Eames, has set itself apart from its competitors especially in the past through its ability to "catch the fastball of America's most innovative designers" in the words of Max DePree, son of its founder D. J. DePree. And obviously toss this fastball to the rest of the world. It is the Herman Miller designer Robert Blaich who went on to replace the Philips', designer Knut Yran in the eighties and who is known to have espoused the credo of 'global design' for Philips, which in its turn inspired Sony to take the same track. Basically, Blaich made it possible for industrial designers, engineers and the marketing personnel to talk to one another. There is also Bang and Olufsen, the Danish audio and television systems company which espoused design as being the effective bridge between technology and humanity. At Bang and Olufsen, superb design itself has constituted its market strategy. In the words of Jens Bang, product planner and son of one of the founders of the company - "We want our work to reflect the marriage of machine and humanity, and design is the language we choose to articulate this union". The strength of this argument may be gauged from the endorsement that this line has received from one of Bang and Olufsen's chief competitors, the Japanese Nakamichi. Ted Nakamichi, the founder's son and the company's marketing seer has always supported the "uncompromising way that Bang and Olufsen produces and markets its work".

The clue to the success of certain products could lie in an algorithm that uses two or more of the following factors in various combinations: technology intensity, design intensity, market intensity. By the same token, another way to understand how and when a product succeeds is to chart the genesis of the nature of its entrepreneurship - viz., in terms of a company having a manufacturing-based entrepreneurship vs a design-based entrepreneurship vs a technology-based entrepreneurship. But more than these rather illusory categories, the crucial factors for leveraging design in order to be able to sell, would be the following: (1) that beyond any technology considerations, it is the customer's use that must remain central to all product development; (2) that products are defined strongly in terms of their market segmentation before one takes up any tooling and manufacturing commitment; (3) that the company employs

'concurrent designing' in order to be able to 'visualize' the product as fast as possible; and that (4) outside of aesthetics, ergonomics and functional attributes, products ought to tie up with QCD (quality, cost and delivery) parameters. A few examples of "smart products" that have leveraged design to 'market' advantage are Apple's PowerBook (a redesigned wonder integrating a point-of-view of the user factor), Motorola's Micro-Tac cellular phone (with in-built durability and extra talking-time) and Gillette's Sensor Razor (with in-built high-tech precision and durability).

#### **State of design practice in India in the context of IDC:**

Which brings us to the state of the practice of design in India as one specifically understands it through the experiences of the IDC (IIT, Bombay), which with the NID (Ahmedabad), constitutes one of the two major design schools in the country. IDC trains a batch of twenty-five product and communications designers every year, which by some counts is hardly any number to unleash itself into a market that is opening up globally. In the twenty-five years of its existence (1969-'94), IDC has turned out a certain intellectual pedigree of design that has mild carryovers from the famous postwar design school, the German Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm (1955-68) in its emphasis on rationalist methods and a certain intention to connect up with industry, as the Ulm school had done with Braun. One does not know what to attach to the fact that IDC began by training students as product designers and only along the way (in the mid-eighties) launched its communications design section. But what seems interesting and a happy coincidence is the way both IDC and the country's economy have shifted from distinct socialist leanings to attitudes towards marketisation. This reflecting itself in the incipient stages of IDC's existence as shades of social designing that was intended for wider public outreach (and a criticism that has stuck to the NID for its own emphasis on rural development and crafts projects). This ideological battle has since eased out for IDC, with the first winds of change in market attitudes in the mid-eighties years, combined with the current rhetorics of privatisation and market reforms. And symbolic of the new winds of change are the relatively more aggressive market-oriented designs reflected in the recent projects at IDC. Where earlier on in IDC's development,

advertising (for communications designers) and the industry (for product designers) seemed like capitalistic travesties of employers, today these very setups offer its students creative and practical challenges to sally forth and face market demands. There are courses included in the Centre's design curriculum that are intended to make their students more market savvy. These courses are entitled Professional Practice and Design Management, combined with a summer shopfloor industrial training programme that connects the student with an outside industry. Students are increasingly being taught to understand the product-to-profit trajectory, as well as the quicksilver changing nature of product life-cycles which have compressed exponentially with time. Potential designers have also now to cope with decreased product-development cycles, lesser trial runs and shrunken development budgets; they have to be able to grab "off-the-shelf" technologies for reconfiguration and use; and increasingly as a result, begin to depend on "concurrent designing" and heightened interfacing abilities with the various units of a business setup. Examples of some of our own "smart products" and which have the involvement of design students from the IDC in their product development stages are: L and T's 'Zee line' petrol pump, Hawkins' 'Futura' pressure cooker, Bajaj's 'Sunny', Telco's range of cars, HMT's 'Pace' watches, Eagle's range of thermoware, Crompton fans, Philips' audi and television systems, and Mahindras's tractors among others.

#### **Where are we now?**

Obviously all this entails a complete reassessment of one's existing image, which is why the three-day international symposium 'DesignOdessey 2010': A Vision of a New Direction for Design Practice and Education at IDC (between 16th to 18th Dec.'94) will address a few hard questions directed at three broad areas of concern : (1) the role of design in future society, that will include discussions on post-Modern design thinking and its implications right into mapping the globalised mind and the macdonaldization of the world and its design response; (2) new tools and technologies in areas of information design, digital print, networked design and computers, among others that will be required to deal with new design and market challenges; and (3)

design thinking and design theories, that once again brings into focus the importance of a systematic understanding of design and a design institution's role in foregrounding such an exercise.

**Conclusion: Where do we go from here ?**

And now the inevitable question - where do we go from here? Without meaning to rest the entire onus of design-sell on the designer's shoulders alone, there is the need for him to underpin within a framework of economic rationale, three basic thumbrules: (i) that good design is intrinsic to making cost-effective, well-manufactured, durable products (such as the Boeing 747 and Chrysler's Neon which involve typically leaner designs, fewer parts, easier manufacturability); that (ii) innovative design creates new markets (just as the Sony Walkman and the Sun workstations have ); and (iii) that design is no longer a choice, it is an imperative towards making products competitive in international markets (with the example of what poor packaging of Indian products does to its credibility of sales in the international consumer markets). And integrate these universal thumbrules with certain contemporary user-signals, sensibilities and culture specificities (such as green concerns, ethnicities, etc.) in order to expand the power of design in the market. But at the end, while the designer might be ready to assimilate these thumbrules into his work-psyche, one still wonders if business and industry are prepared to assimilate this new breed of designers into their fold?