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THE LONGING FOR A DESIGN PUBLIC AND SOCIAL DESIGN IN INDIA

DESIGN X DESIGN
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The review explores the challenges of forming a design public in India. It highlights the importance of inclusive, participatory design practices to ensure design represents diverse voices and marginalized communities.

There's been an uptick, over the past decade, in conversations around publics and their responsiveness to acts of participatory design and co-design. Publics, as is commonly understood, are assemblies of people who come together because they are concerned about the actions of individuals or institutions. Publics care about the direct or indirect consequences of such actions and wish to have a say in facilitating them.

There are, though, a few pragmatic considerations related to where and how publics come into being. Usually, the actions of individuals or institutions by themselves do not prompt people to assemble and become a public. Rather, somebody or some agency has to make these actions into a matter of conversation. Only conversations prompt people to reflect and take positions. Conversations enable people to reckon with the implications of becoming a public.

Crucial questions remain, however, about the exact identity of the intermediaries facilitating conversations. What, for instance, does it mean to say that designers, particularly participatory-designers and co-designers are increasingly tasking themselves with stewarding reflexive, deliberative dialogue? How does abductive thinking: a form of reasoning centered around cooperatively proposing 'what is' and 'what could be' questions help bring publics into being?[1] In what ways does co-design as a process of conjoint inquiry and reflection — enable people to envisage a future or what the philosopher John Dewey once alluded to as "the projection of the desirable in the present"?[2] How indeed to invent or dream about instruments that are conducive to the realization of a collectively imagined future?

[1] To learn more about co-design and abductive reasoning, read Emma Blomkamp, "The Promise of Co-Design for Public Policy," *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, Volume77, Issue 4 (December 2018) pp. 729-743 and Marc Steen, "Co-Design as a Process of Joint Inquiry and Imagination," *Design Issues*: Volume 29, Number 2 (Spring 2013) pp. 16-28

[2] John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" in *The Pragmatism Reader From Peirce through the Present*, eds. Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) p. 140

At least some of these questions appear to animate *Design X Design,* a recent volume published by the architect and designer Iftikhar-mulk Chishti on behalf of Design X Design (henceforward DXD), an interdisciplinary initiative for discourse on design in India. As it turns out, the design community in India is just as much in need of participatory design and co-design-based organizing as any other collective. In this regard, DxD began as a participatory space for facilitating reflexive, deliberative conversations among designers in New Delhi in 2010. The forum, Chishti clarifies, was an organizational response to "a long-standing and deeply felt need for a credible public platform to share good quality design work, exchange ideas on burning issues concerning design and provide an avenue for showcasing the work of young emerging talent from across various design disciplines".[3] Through a variety of conjoint activities such as exhibitions, roundtables, domain exposes, and charrettes over the past ten years, the convenors of the forum have attempted to take a holistic view of different forms of design in India and "invent a method of communication and dialogue between and across" them.[4]

The *Design X Design* book volume is a record of the conjoint activities of the DXD forum. Going further, however, the book volume also demonstrates how the making of a design public in India is predicated on the capacity of its constituents to perceive the consequences of conjoint activity. Amassing numbers and moving towards being "counted, recognized, and heard" as a design public can help carve out a space for design in the policy arena at the national and sub-national levels.[5] As the conversations in the DXD forum attest, a design public comes into existence in India only in so far as its constituents collectively agree on design as a substantive force in civic, economic, or municipal affairs.

At the same time, conversations in DxD have also stayed in sight of the distinctive contributions and share of each constituent in producing a credible design public in India. Publics are not sentient beings that somehow exist over and above the individuals constituting them. A public has no perceptible form of its own in advance except for that of those who embody it. Take, for instance, the sheer diversity of fields represented in *Design X Design.* There are references to architecture, interior design, urban design, architectural conservation, landscape design, textile design, fashion design, lifestyle and accessory design, digital design, experience design, communication, product design, and industrial design. Each of these "subdomains" and the detailed manner in which they are advocated for in the various essays in *Design X Design* would suggest that a design public in India is at all times expected to be a compilation of the aspirations of its individual constituents.

Difficulties arise, however, on account of the preponderance, in terms of numbers, of particular constituents. In this matter, the data visualizations in *Design X Design* have a story to tell. Sub-domains such as animation design and the fashion and textile industry are shown as having the highest number of students enrolled in design programs in India. Architecture comes a distant second, followed by interior and landscape design. Similarly, graphic design, animation design, toy and set and exhibition design, industrial and automotive, and retail design have the highest number of adherents employed. Furthermore, while fields such as animation design, human-computer interaction, and toy and set and exhibition design have the highest turnovers in the design industry, at an individual level product designers earn the highest incomes.

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[3] **Iftikhar-Mulk Chishti, "About Design X Design,"** in *Design X Design: Wither Design India* (Delhi: Soft Launch January 2020), p. 3

[4] **Ibid. p. 15.**

[5] **Ibid. There is a rich and storied history globally, of "the essentiality of design policy" as articulated by J.E. Auber, "The Approach of Design and Concepts of Innovation Policy" in R. Langdon and R. Rothwell (eds.) *Design and Innovation: Policy and Management.* London: Frances Pinter, 1985. The recent cabinet nod in Thiruvananthapuram for a Kerala State Design Policy serves to affirm what Chishti and his collaborators write about in *Design X Design.* While the Kerala Design Policy framework is "less of a regulatory framework and more of an enabling and capacity building framework," it does explicitly task itself with bringing attention to "design matters" in the state. https://document.kerala.gov.in/documents/governmentorders/govtorder1603202419:18:36.pdf (accessed July 21, 2024).**

What are the implications of this stacking up of numbers? Will a design public in India be overly influenced by subdomains that dominate in terms of enrollments, employment, turnover, and income? In other words, will the agential power of majorities begin to dominate the discourses of the design public? Or, on the contrary, is there room within such a public for persistent minorities, or specializations whose numbers are frequently negatively correlated with those of the dominant sub-domains? How, in short, is one to ensure that "the public" equally represents the aspirations of all and not just a few of its constituent subdomains?

There are no direct answers to these questions in *Design X Design*. Instead, the greater portion of the text in the book attests to how the sub-domains constituting a design public in India are themselves in a state of flux. The book's strength is that it traces the evolution of design practices in India over a decade and sheds light on how new phraseologies, forms, and practices have emerged. As it turns out, the way we understand specializations in design in India is at all times contingent upon transformations in wider discursive and material frameworks.

Take the case of landscape design. In the past, the garden and associated fields such as horticulture and forestry had served as dominant paradigms within the profession in India. The stabilization of the garden as an aesthetic object went hand in hand with the institutionalization of a desire to "tame" or "harness" the vegetal world.

More recently, however, there's been a conversation over capriciousness and chance in the profession. We are witnessing a transformation, writes the landscape architect Akshay Kaul in *Design X Design*, "from a controlled, static, choreographed notion of landscape as a garden to a more ecological, dynamic and 'predictably unpredictable' landscape".[6] In a time of catastrophic climate change, landscape design interventionism veers closer to immersing itself in what the environmental historian Donald Worster once heralded as "a new ecology of chaos".[7] Instability, in other words, is now poised to become a legitimate artifact in landscape design.[8]

At a distinct remove from landscape design, fields such as architectural conservation and urban design do not so much freshly identify or redefine their "objects" as increasingly strive to foreground the question "For whom does this object matter?" The monument, for instance, was initially the principal preoccupation in architectural conservation. Recently, however, the emphasis has shifted from monuments towards non-monumental heritage, or more specifically, towards a conception of heritage that draws substantially from the writ of collectives and local communities. The insistence, as the conservation architect Aishwarya Tipnis draws out in *Design X Design*, must not so much be on the conservation of individual grand buildings as it ought to center around the processes of "achieving community consensus" over what buildings legitimately merit conservation and for whom.[9] Conservation, in other words, has to be people-driven.

In a similar vein, the urban designer Aneerudha Paul argues in *Design X Design* for a greater say for people or citizens in urban governance. Notwithstanding the 74th Amendment Act of 1992 that was geared towards enabling decentralization, centralized control over cities persists in India. According to Paul, "agencies established as development authorities in many Indian cities, with no mandate towards citizens, are more powerful and resourceful than local municipalities".[10] Resultantly, "critical urban projects" have been initiated by the central government for municipalities, with virtually no role for local institutions.[11] In short, there is no sustained effort to place people or consensus-building efforts in the center of urban design and planning processes.

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[6] Akshay Kaul, "Is Landscape a Garden or More," in *Design X Design*, p. 27

[7] Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," *Environmental History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 1/2, (1989) pp. 3-5.

[8] Transformation also continues apace in fields such as industrial design, visual communication design, experience design, digital design, and accessory design. As chronicled in *Design X Design*, the symbolic universe of each of these subdomains is in a state of flux on account of, among other things, the advent of *mass customization*. Designers are now increasingly called upon to re-evaluate the form of customer involvement in the design process and the nature of the location of design activity in the value chain, all the while staying within the cost constraints of mass production. It is now virtually expected of designers in several subdomains to continually work in two distinct but correlated transformative registers. On the one hand, they are to develop interaction systems to facilitate co-design and customization. On the other hand, they also are mandated to create flexible manufacturing or production systems to stay in sight of co-design.

[9] Aishwarya Tipnis, "Remaining Relevant: Architecture Conservation past to future" in *Design X Design*, p. 25.

[10] Ibid., 22.

[11] Ibid.

The relative absence of actual instances of consensus-building in the context of urban design projects in India, however, must by no means be read as an indication of its insignificance as a process. Indeed, if anything at all, the emergence of disciplines such as social design, as alluded to in *Design X Design*, attests to the importance that is increasingly being attached to an education centered around comprehending both: dialogue within communities and the nature of community-based exclusions. For instance, agreement and disagreement within communities, as envisaged in the MDes program in Social Design at Ambedkar University, hinges on the prior ability of people to identify and communicate their issues with each other. Social designers, per the students in the MDes program, have a part to play as mediators and facilitators who enable people to speak.

Equally, however, social designers are also expected to pay heed to how consensus or dissensus-building efforts by definition exclude those who do not possess speech or communicative means or those who do not see themselves as being empowered to agree or disagree. There will always be limitations to dialogue when markers such as caste, class, gender, religion, and sexuality, conspire to define who legitimately qualifies as a part of the speaking community and who does not. On this view, the event of consensus or dissensus in communities will always be a form of domination of those who are capable of speaking or being expressive over subordinated social groups.

It, therefore, seems only appropriate, given the advent of social design, to ask about the prospects within the country for "subaltern counterpublics," or what Nancy Fraser once identified as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs".[12] Counter-discourses could be pivotal while articulating the nature and intentions of a design public in India. For one thing, such discourses prompt people to think about how design and material cultural practices are often articulated in opposition to the modes of address that are associated with speech or with text-oriented communities. In other words, people bond together as a designerly praxis-oriented public or material cultural public to resist the dominance of social norms centered around speech and texts.

At the same time, there is also the risk of designers themselves becoming an overbearingly dominant and exclusionary community. This prospect becomes immediately imaginable when one foregrounds what it takes to become a designer in India. To thrive, and not just practice as a designer, one must possess a formal degree, the financial and cultural capital to become mobile, and the networks that facilitate mobility. This is an indirect way of saying that even within the subordinate realm of practice-based skills and techniques in India, designers, as opposed to artisans and craftspersons, are more likely to "speak and be heard" as a public when it comes to concerns related to practice.

Can a more substantial role for social design-centered design processes be therefore foregrounded in the calendar of activities of DXD? Disciplinary social design and also peripheralized material cultural practices must be foregrounded more publicly in India if any headway has to be made in making the design more inclusive. In a society riven by inequalities and marginalizations, design-based practices and collectivizations must become representative of a wider swathe of practitioners. While DXD has robustly chronicled how the profession of design has evolved in the country over the past decade, the crucial work of rendering design into an egalitarian endeavor still lies ahead, in the future.

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[12] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, 1990, No. 25/26 (1990), p. 67.