
Pranab K. Das



MIND OVER MATTER

ON CLIENTS' REQUIREMENTS

It is necessary to review and redefine the requirements given by the client. Though the clients know well what their needs are, they are not necessarily clear in outlining the structure and organisation of different activities in their office. A new conception of the relationship of different activities in the office influences the design. Initially, therefore, the designer has to evolve a new situation in order to create an interior, unique in its kind.

ON THE PROCEDURE TO BE ADOPTED

Every job demands a different approach. I won't be able to announce a formula. However, it is necessary in every assignment to understand the nature of its business and activity, the objective of the client, the identity the premises ought to present, the nature of management and the relation amongst the people working together, the attitude of the management vis-a-vis the employees, colleagues, friends, visitors, etc. Simultaneously, it is necessary to understand the requirements in relation with the space available.

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Evolving a concept and planning principle is the first part of the design exercise though there are many considerations and influences that demand alternatives. We then

As a student, P.K. Das garnered a rich and varied experience under the tutelage of such illustrious Planners and Architects, like Rusi Khambatta, Raja Poredi, Charles Correa and G.S.Pathak. For his thesis in the final year of Architecture, a degree in which discipline he secured from the J.J.School in 1977, his design and execution of a Self-help Housing Project for Kathkaris (Tribals) in Saral Village, Alibaug, provided a relevant theme.

Subsequently, he has involved himself with the problems of the displaced and the dishoused, not only as the Jt. Secretary of Nivara Hak Suraksha Samiti, an organisation to fight for rights of slums and squatter settlements, but also by expressing his concern through planning and resettlement programmes for evicted slum dwellers.

He has been appointed as an Architect by the People's Responsible Organisation for United Dharavi (PROUD), for housing at Dharavi, Bombay under the Prime Minister's Grant Scheme. He has been a visiting professor of Design at the Academy of Architecture, Bombay since 1983. He is the joint editor of the IIA Journal and editor, IIA Newsletter and Hon. Treasurer, Vishwa-Karigar, a national association of artists and craftsmen.

translate this concept into physical forms of space and furniture design, ceiling, walls, ventilation, services, colours, etc., which all form part of this stage.

Although, we constantly try to spell a very definite sequence of design approach, one invariably bypasses and changes the sequence during work.

ON THE FLEXIBILITY TO ACCOMMODATE FUTURE EXPANSION NEEDS

Today most offices feel the need to expand. Besides, they also make many changes in their staff structure and business approaches. A lot of re-shuffling is also done in most large and diversified corporate establishments. The interior of the office, therefore, has to allow these changes and be flexible for re-arrangement. Standardised modular furniture help towards this end, though at the same time it becomes necessary to create a variety.

ON CONTRIBUTION OF CLIENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL JOB

Invariably we complain of interferences by our clients. They interfere almost at every stage starting from the designing to the execution. This has its own advantages and disadvantages, though often the disadvantages are more. The clients see things in different places and sometimes demand having the same in their own office. At the same time an intelligent and educated client contributes greatly to the job. He even helps the designer in evolving basic design concepts. Their participation also helps in the detailings and in an efficient execution.

Ultimately, though the architect has to take the final decision, it is a game of mutual participation. A meaningful relationship of the client and the architect invariably results in a good interior. While each one profoundly expresses his ideas, they accommodate and understand the

other's point of view. When this relationship is not possible it would be wise to move out of the job.

ON THE ORDER OF PRIORITY OF DIFFERENT ELEMENTS IN AN INTERIOR DESIGNING ASSIGNMENT

As I have said before, although one tries to spell a sequence and an order of priority in the design process there are influences, experiences, obsessions that often come on the way or run parallel to everything one does. We think of many things at the same time. But for a beginner I would say planning and circulation comes first. Then the needs of the clients and finally the details. Use of appropriate materials, its maintenance, durability, followed by good workmanship are important. Costing is important and this is what influences a design greatly. Also the psychology of a client forms an important criteria, but as I said it is difficult to sequence and compartmentalise these procedures. We have to think in terms of the whole situation and there is always an overlap.

ON THE SELECTION OF MATERIAL

In a way we experiment at client's cost. Whenever we try new products, we first study the technical literature, the various possibilities in use and also the effect it would produce in the total interior. We gain reasonable confidence through the study as well as from our experience and we persuade our clients in accepting them. Otherwise, everything would be too drab and monotonous.

In most interiors there is an unstated understanding between us and the contractors, who accommodate certain changes that we make during the execution. At times we also try out, in sample forms, new products and materials. This is possible due to team spirit where intentions are understood rightly. Our need to experiment does not at all

mean that we fool around with the assigned task.

A trust has to be built and mutual confidence established in the team of the client, designer and contractor.

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ON THE AVAILABILITY OF MATERIAL

Today we have a very wide and a very good range of materials and products. There is also an increasing consciousness among the designers, manufacturers and users towards new and creative use of materials and products. We may not have the variety and the range that is available in Europe, America and Japan but this is by no means a limitation to good work. The important responsibility of the professional is to design and create within the available materials and skill. Creativity is best judged in the context one works in.

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Today, increasing commercialisation and an expanding product range has influenced the designer greatly. The market influence has been so strong that most designers are merely solving a jig-saw by using different products and materials. Interior designing has in fact been reduced to this demeaning level.

Homes appear to be like shops and offices like a showroom of materials and products.

What we are trying to achieve is a better working environment.

ON SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS FOR DESIGNING BIG CORPORATE OFFICES

In general offices, things are general. But when it comes to specialised offices, we need to have an extensive dialogue with the office personnel. We have to understand their business, how it operates, the people who are involved, how they work, the kind of environment they work in, under what stress they are working, etc. Because ultimately, what we are trying to achieve is a better working environment.

ON THE PROBLEMS DURING IMPLEMENTATION

My experience has been varied and there have been both good and bad times. Problems in fact arise due to critical involvement in one's own work. We keep changing, demolishing work already executed, colouring and dis-colouring.

There are other factors that also bother us. The problems of the clients themselves, unreliable and inconsistent supply of specified materials and products, bad workmanship, etc. Invariably, in all interiors, the state of mind of the user plays an extremely important role, particularly in the finishing stage. We had once faced serious opposition from the entire staff of a very large office, who vehemently opposed the idea of the false ceiling we had designed (aluminium slate ceiling) that co ceals the ceiling fans while maintaining good ventilation. But as it was peak summer, when the office was to be occupied, questions

were raised against the whole idea of the false ceiling.

The real reason, however, was that there were serious differences between them and the management regarding the renovation and many other issues. Hence the interior became an issue through which their anger and dissatisfaction was expressed.

ON APPOINTING CONTRACTORS

We have carried out jobs, where we have appointed a single contractor; others, with several. There is no set rule. Both have worked out fine. It depends on the size of the job and the competence of the contractor (or contractors) you are selecting for the job.

All these factors influence your decision. It is the way you build up the system. When we appoint a single contractor, we must have a definite reason why it is advantageous and beneficial. If we can justify that, even at slightly higher cost (say 5%), it should be acceptable. But again, there is no hard and fast rule. It depends on the nature of the job. I am talking in terms of efficiency which is not quantifiable.

Sometimes, we take a decision of spending a little more, for which the advantages cannot be quantified. For instance, take the time factor in a shop doing a business of Rs. one lakh a day. If the job is delayed by 30 days, they would lose 30 lakhs, including the cost of spending on the interior. Here the whole scenario is different. We would employ an agency who would do the work faster, who should be able to co-ordinate better.

If the contractor does not work according to your designs or schedule or standards, there is no way but to change him. Clients also come around and keep messing around, but we have been very assertive from the start. It is the way a professional handles the contractor, or the client, that matters.

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ON DIFFERENT STYLES

If someone demands period furniture I would not do it. I would rather recommend a co-professional who could do it better, because I mentally don't think I am suited to do such a job. I don't conceive that way, I don't live in that way. I don't consider it challenging enough. Because a professional has to assess his own capabilities, his limitations, his own attitudes. It is in fact un-professional to carry on doing something that one is not familiar with and not capable of handling.

It is the Designer's responsibility to discuss with the client, what his requirements are. May be he is under some misconception. After all, his wanting a French or Italian style may not suit his actual lifestyle.

ON CREATING AESTHETIC INTERIORS AT LOW COST

A job I have done for 5 lakhs can also be done for 4 lakhs, without compromising the standards. Actually, this depends on the job. There are no rules and norms. After all, any job has a certain amount of money and the client's requirements involved - all of which define the situation. Design has got nothing to do with more money spent to make the design better. The materials used, no doubt, make a difference. If I am doing an interior where my budget does not allow to use good marble, I would go in for a very different surface altogether. What finally matters is the total effect and not a display of individual materials.

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ON MAINTAINING CONTROL ON SITE

Periodic visits to the site are essential. We should have the ability to verify work and check quality on site. If we work out tight schedules in terms of execution of work, the contractors also are kept on their toes. You must be very aware of the situation. We expect the contractors to take equal responsibility, because we are aware that they are equally dignified, intelligent and equal contributors to the creative output. A contractor has to be judged from that point of view and his appointment should be a recognition of these responsibilities. Only then is the job done well. It is a team effort with equal responsibility for all. The Designer is just like the captain on the ship. But each one must do his work well.

ON COMFORTS AND CONVENIENCE

We should be careful about energy saving designs, comfort levels, finishes and their maintenance in every office interior. This is very much evident in the developed countries, but I think we should try and do that here as well.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DETAILED DRAWING

As professionals, detailed drawings have to be our back bone.

Because they reflect the depth to which the professional goes, the seriousness with which he handles the job.

ON PRESENT DAY STANDARDS OF INTERIOR DESIGNING

Interiors are a reflection of the cultural trend. There is a whole lot of borrowing and imitation without any consideration of the context. Clients, professionals, and the society at large are equally responsible. Glossy journals, 'Western' imitations, films, advertisement, impose an illusion and a falsehood that leads to such an unreal situation. Paintings are put up on the walls to merely decorate homes without any understanding and feeling for it. Walls are paneled as on film sets. The credibility and success of a big designer is judged on how best he can create the most irrelevant and unreal situation.

What is important is to be a sensitive human-being with a high standard of designing ability.

ON ADVICE TO STUDENTS

Students are most vulnerable to various influences. The media, the movies, the 'Successful Professional' having a large business and ostentatious living style, corrupts his desires. He loses himself completely in evolving a value system where the quality of life and understanding of our society is limited. The students have to carefully observe the disparities that exist, look beyond the thin veneer that masks vulgarity, and crudeness. Ultimately, what is important is to be a sensitive human-being with a high standard of designing ability.
