Changing times

Niti Bhan on the role design is playing in India’s economic growth

India’s been in the news of late as the next big booming economy after China in the global market. In particular, software engineering, high tech BPOs and computer services and the ubiquitous call centres are frequently covered. Design, if noted at all, is perceived as an engineering-related function. In the context of automobile components or semiconductor chips, really that of consumer products and brands.

The Indian design industry is one of the smallest in the world, now so in proportion to its population. There are fewer than 3000 practising professional designers today, and until 1994, just one undergraduate programme, that at the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad. At the same time, the history of industrial design in India is unique amongst the once colonial developing nations. Soon after independence from Great Britain, India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru invited Charles and Ray Eames to visit the new nation and submit a paper on the role that design could play in India’s economic growth. The Eames Report, not only led to the genesis of NID, under the Ministry of Industry, rather than Education, but has also influenced the newly announced National Design Policy, and could be said to have shaped the design philosophies of a large majority of designers today.

For more than 50 years, while India struggled with a socialist state-run industrial policy, product design languished as a field. The mechanisms of a protected economy curbed competition in the market, a precondition for product differentiation. Since imported goods were rare, many manufacturers found it more profitable to import existing designs and reengineer the products for the local market. While textile, apparel and graphics designers made a living, the product designers, with the exception of a few who found a corporate opportunity, began their own studios. Projects would be as varied as POP design, retail and showroom interiors, exhibitions and museums, some tabletop styling and the occasional product design project.

With the liberalisation of the economy in the nineties, came an influx of global brands and products. By 1995, cable television, MTV Asia, multi-million dollar advertising budgets and global brands like Coca-Cola, Levi’s, Nike, McDonald’s and the Asian giants like Samsung and LG had changed the entire landscape. No more waiting ten years for the state monopoly to install a telephone connection. Buy a cellphone. No more waitlists for a car when all you had was the choice of an Ambassador or a Fiat, both models over 40 years old. You could now buy an Audi, a Toyota or a Mercedes right out of the retail showroom.

Monish Kohli, founder of Pune-based Orice Design, shares his view of the changes that took place. “Indian consumers have become more sophisticated in their tastes - travel, the software boom and the internet revolutionized them on changing tastes and their consumer rights. Did Indian manufacturers change accordingly? Well, the answer is yes, and no. We know of many small companies who are making up to the global giants or Chinese companies head on. There is no fear in them, they have learnt to master the ways they previously mastered. The suffering still continues in the larger companies, driven by traditional thinking and product imitation. All they did was hire a better sounding ad agency, which changed their ads. They also hired the management gurus to advise them on corporate restructuring, but things didn’t quite happen the way they expected. Returns of the investment remained abysmally low and consumers furious. Now that all other media andressees have been tried and no other option is left to survive in the liberalized market, companies have no choice but to turn to design. Here is the beginning of real design for India.”

Kohli has made strides in understanding the Indian consumer and conducts trend workshops in partnership with Paris-based Style Vision. Orice Design will be conducting such a workshop at the London Design Festival in September 2006. He believes that this is the biggest piece of the puzzle: understanding India – one that has been a hurdle for many global brands to overcome. Simply dumping outdated models and changing the language on the packaging won’t do. The diverse culture of India, with more than 30 languages in 14 scripts, many regional cuisines, cultures and lifestyles, with every religion represented under the sun, means that companies must design their products specifically for the Indian customer and not just want to sustain success in the market.

After a recent visit to a design conference in Jordan, Sudhir Sharma, founder and director of Elephant Design, another Pune-based consultancy, said in an email interview, "One of the biggest differences in India’s design industry that I saw as I travel is that our design firms are for the most part multidisciplinary and integrated in their design services. Of course, this has much to do with our history and the changes in the market, but today it places us in a position of strength and leadership. For us, most projects start with the client, who has no clue, just a problem to be solved. Working together, we then convert this to architecture, interiors, branding, experience, graphics and packaging etc. In fact, the client relationship becomes a partnership to find the most effective solution to their business problems.”

Elephant Design, like the majority of the studios in India, offers branding and communication design services, along with retail and exhibit design in addition to product design services. Of note is the rebranding of Bandhan Auto, arguably one of India’s largest two-wheeler manufacturers, which received a distinction in the Reliance Best 100 2003 awards.

But both Kohli and Sharma point to the need to scale quickly to respond to the opportunities in the India market today. While the number of schools offering design degrees has increased, there are still only 500 designers graduating each year. Both see the need to attract resources and manpower in order to grow and many firms hire
European designers, as interns or fresh graduates, to make up the shortfall. One firm that has made a name for itself for its size and scale has been idiom, based in Bangalore.

Unique amongst local design firms, idiom is the result of a merger between two established design studios, Innersanct and Sage. Supported by a corporate investment of Rs 30 million (US$450,000) by Adilore Bajaj, owner of the national retail chain, Petekloons, it has over 200 employees and is widely seen as the 1000 of India.

Further investments are likely to grow the technical and manpower infrastructure even more and the firm is positioning itself to respond quickly to market needs in the design arena. Bajaj, according to local newspaper reports, believes firmly in the future of design's role in the growing Indian economy.

But India being what it is, corporate investments, consumer products and international glamour are not enough. There is also a strong undercurrent of the need to support the underserved.

Pranam Bir Kasturi, a founding member at the prestigious Shri Vaishali School of Art, Technology and Design in Bangalore has taken just such a project. She is Academic Advisor at Shri Vaishali and coordinates the Design for Community (SVA) diploma, a multidisciplinary course. She is deeply committed to the crafts sector, both its cultural heritage and its people, and concentrates on accelerating interactions between designers and practitioners through participatory training programs and projects that empower each other.

The Daily Dump is a branded, open source design project for a home composting unit. Developed in tandem with local pottery using traditional materials such as terracotta, the product was conceived as an integrated solution to a number of problems faced by local households: Hygiene and sanitation due to infrastructural shortfalls in Bangalore's garbage disposal system, lack of knowledge about composting and creating social awareness of eco-friendly solutions were part of the design criteria. She says, "It became apparent that solutions to many of India's most pressing problems can be found in the practice of design. We cannot expect to grow as a nation without addressing the fundamental needs of society. The Daily Dump project offers a way for micro enterprises to be self-sustainable, helping the pattern increase their incomes, all the design drawings are available freely on the Internet along with user instructions and how to do it, thus eliminating the need for a middle man. Our task is to build awareness and provide the means."

This attitude too is part of the design heritage inherited from Nehru's vision and The Farm report. ND has many such initiatives in place in the crafts sector, the Bamboo initiative in the remote north eastern state of Tripura being one of the better known. The challenge that lies for India now goes beyond crafts or industries, but basic needs for the majority of her people, such as food, shelter and communication. Can the new found interest and focus on design provide the answer?"