

Unconditioned Learning

Kawalpreet Singh
15620005
Guided by Prof. Raja Mohanty

Communication Design 2015-17
IDC, IIT Bombay

Approval Sheet

The DRS project titled “**Unconditioned Aesthetics**” by Kawalpreet Singh Saroy of M.Des. Communication Design 2015-17 is approved as a partial fulfillment of requirements of a post graduate degree in Visual Communication at IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay.

Project guide :

Declaration

I hereby declare that this written submission submitted to IDC School of Design, IIT Bombay, is a record of an original work done by me. This written submission represents my idea in my words, I have adequately cited and referenced the original source. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misprinted or falsified any idea/ fact/ source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

Kawalpreet Singh Saroy
156250005



Namaskaram!

16345 Netravati Express, LTT 11:40 am

They say if it's the fork you remember after a dinner, then the food wasn't good enough! Well I will be lying if I say that the food for thought discussed at the "Thanima'17" seminar was all I remember...

The scenic view of Konkan Railway by the window seat, crossing the green ghats amidst the backdrop of orange sunset, the *sadhya* meal on banana leaf, strolling at the Kozikode beach nibbling banana chips, sipping filter coffee by the back waters...were reason enough for me to pack my bag and head to the very God's own country.

Bringing focus back on the seminar, the report is an attempt to accurately summarize the talks of the keynote speakers of the event.

Namely -

Mr Pawan Gupta, Public Intellectual

Mr Claude Alvares, Scholar

Mrs Anupma Kundoo, Architect

Mr Jinan K B, Designer

After engaging with the ideas put forward by the speakers, I have related to my own experience of conditioning.



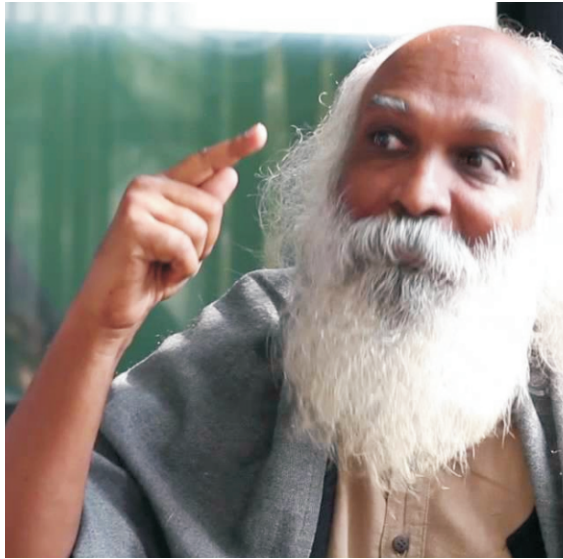
Thanima 2

a quest for authenticity

The aim of conference was to rethink the education of the aesthetic sense – involving both architecture and design.

The spirit of the conference being to engage in deep explorations and questions rather than ready answers and even when a solution is being offered, see the same with a spirit of openness. To explore various aspects of aesthetics - its formation, conditioning, politics, connection with culture and ways of teaching design pedagogy, the ambience for learning.

It was jointly organized by
Indian Institute of Architects, Calicut,
Dept. of Architecture, NIT Calicut
Existential Knowledge Foundation, Pune



Jinan K B

Have we lost ourselves in the process of living?

Mr Jinan was among the organizing members of the seminar. He was easily distinguishable on stage in his khadi kurta and jhola from his other formally dressed colleagues. He started the talk by emphasizing on the issue with the education system today. How all approaches to improve education lie in the same paradigm that is, to “Teach” children. While if one goes a little deeper, a better approach would be to understand how children “Learn”.

According to him, education today is either agreeing or disagreeing, and this stops one from exploration and hence stops in the journey of learning. Soon it becomes a linear dissemination of information. To engage with the world organically the child needs freedom, respect, autonomy and love.

Sensing Nature : Knowing nature

“A child educated only at a school is an uneducated child.” - Santayana

Jinan believes that courses like design, architecture, art are taught in a rather homogenized fashion through out. Rather development of aesthetic sense which is the basis of all art forms isn't dwelled upon, as when one gets the inner rhythm in sync with a particular medium/ art form..one 'learns' depending on his interest and opportunities.

Rather than teaching skillsets, the above approach would make qualitative and attitudinal change. Teaching is not called for but by providing an environment the would allow the natural in us to come forth.



Pawan Gupta

Teach them how to be, not how to appear or how to look...

The first thing one observes about Mr Pawan is his humility. He started his talk by saying, "I am not here to say anything profound, just my experience with the informal school I started during my stay in Mussoorie."

He mentioned that he always prefers his mother tongue over English, but as not many present their understood Hindi, he spoke in English. The reason being he believed that when one speaks in his mother tongue, a language he has grown up speaking...is when one truly communicates authentically.

After completing his engineering degree he went on to establish a chemical plant to extract oils from rice bran and other minor seeds. Later on his life he got introduced to *Vippassanna*, a buddhist meditation technique, and migrated to Himalaya to explore the meaning of life. It was here when the villagers requested him to start a school for their kids. He recalls that he found 'authenticity' in the villagers as compared to his encounters with the 'educated city dwellers'. Though he clarified that he is not romanticizing the village, agreeing that villages have their problems but a fifty year old woman in a village seemed to him more sorted than any person in a city.

What started out as a simple fascination towards villages in foothills of Himalayas through weekly visits, turned into a relationship with the village folks, and soon he was teaching the children of the villagers.

As the relationship gradually progressed, he got a feedback from the mothers complaining that education was actually ruining their kids instead of doing any good to them.

One of the mother said- "*bachon ko hona sikhao, banna nahi*"(Teach them how to be, not how to appear or how to look...).

A matter of quality

What followed the feedback, was a research that was compiled by his team, titled "A matter of quality". First step was to understand for a "educated being" that how can education destroy a mindset?

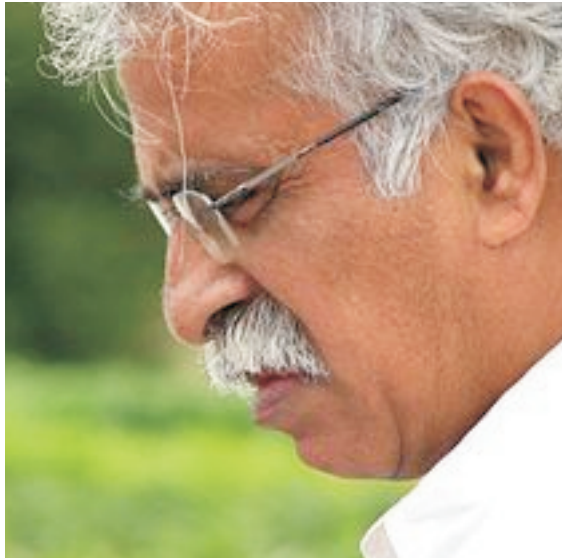
The research pointed out :

- Today's schools were psychologically destroying the children by infusing them with a sense of inferiority towards all that was their own - language, culture, and lifestyle.
- Today's schools were encouraging them to mindlessly imitate whatever was represented by the so called urban, 'developed' world.
- Traditional wisdom was looked down upon as superstitious without any critical examination.
- Creativity and originality were missing in the entire school system.

Believing one's culture as inferior is most common in colonized country like ours. Where English speaking individuals are considered 'educated' and any other person rooted in his culture as illiterate.

How simple disparity in home and school in terms language, dress code, way we sit/conduct ourselves affects our thinking.

Pointing out to the stage setup of the seminar itself, he commented that why should a speaker be seated on a podium and the audience far away from the stage. Instead of all the gathering seated on ground around the speaker..so actual discourse can happen, else one just fulfils a formality of speaking and listening!



Claude Alvares

Higher Education = Advanced Stultification

"If your teacher demands compulsory attendance in his class, run as far away you can!" Mr Claude is a good orator. His talk was scheduled post lunch, and as one would expect the audience in the last row to doze off a bit...instead Claude had everyone engaged with his frank nature of speaking.

He said one doesn't need to go to an institution with their imposing architecture claiming to impart the best education, where one is expected to regurgitate what the book says. One can expect such a behaviour from a child, as his parents will force him back to the school (though that's a messed up environment there too) but adults sitting in the same classroom settings, listening to same teacher, reading out the same data for the last thirty-fourty years in appalling

One has to decolonize thinking and curricula in our universities. He joked that even in Harvard, kids do paste the wikipedia and pass their assignments and so is the case here...so why would anyone pay hundred times the fee and study there.

One had to understand the meaning of higher education. For one we have created these buildings where the learning can happen, and created these barriers for people to enter. While in the Indian method of higher learning was that a pupil will go to the guru, and stay for ten to twelve years. Interestingly, the guru will not tell him anything, as if one regards other's wisdom has truth, it's not his truth..it's "their's truth".The pupil spends twelve years in forest and when he returns, by the way he is walking and his mannerism, the teacher will tell him that he understood or not, lest guru sends the pupil again for twelve years...unlike nowadays one gets a diploma in three months!

One should note that this learning was free, and it was for the person to find out himself what the purpose of his life is...meaning of life...his role in society...



Anupama Kundoo

Want to be an architect? Go to a mason

"India and China alone makes one third of the entire population but has only 2.3% of the land." She starts her talk with a slide of a skyline of Mumbai, lined with tall sky scrappers, mostly corporate offices and exclusive flats..then a zoomed in picture of the same shows slums lining endlessly at the periphery of the same buildings...How much in denial do we live with our social disparity.

Through her projects she talked about the issues of rapid urbanization. Using materials like wood, bamboo, stone..she shared some very unique urban spaces she had done during her practice. Apart from the materials, she also talked about how the void is as important, and how material affects the enclosed space.

Machines have standardized everything. Anything we do today is molded around machine, as basic as a A4 size paper! The tragedy of our time is that we have considered machine to be intelligent and made ourselves robotic...

She made a comparison of how during her college days students used to 'really make things' than just knowing a particular skill sets. Most of her projects she had done, the students who were a part of the project would have a hand on experience at the site, interacting and learning from masons.

We need time to do nothing

She shared the pictures of her first house, that she had built on her own. it was the most basic simple dwelling consisting of a thatch roof (woven coconut leaves) supported on untreated casuarina members that are tied together in place with coconut ropes.

The house had a low impact on the environment, harmoniously blending into the nature and totally dependant on the sun for its electrification and water heating demands.

Volontariat Homes – Pondicherry

This project was built using a rare technology pioneered by Ray Meeker of Golden Bridge pottery, which consists of baking a mud house, after constructing it. A fired house or a fire-stabilised mud house is in principle, a mud house built with mud bricks and mud mortar that is cooked after building as a whole to achieve the strength of brick.

This highly experimental project is an example of radical thinking that is being explored to approach the problem of affordability of housing for all, and more over integrally sustainable in all its aspects.

Unbound, The Library Of Lost Books

Liberation is lightness. These are light-weight structures for heavy-weight books that transcend the sense of 'weight' to focus on the perception of the 'light' element of the book: content.

Yet, books 'the building blocks' of society are facing extinction. Transition/evolution in the 'form' of the book through time has led to books becoming lighter, losing their materiality, now often only virtual. However the act of 'reading' continues. Books, as beings in transit, pass through the hands of many readers as in libraries, rather than sitting on shelves of owners, or still with publishers. 'Obsolete' books locked in storage about to face their end, are rescued from pulping, brought back in circulation, and liberated, and are available for free exchange.

Books made of paper are at the environmental cost of trees. Recycled books are used to reconstruct trees as a symbol of the acknowledgment of these resources to create an open-air library for 'reading'.



A signage at Ahilya devi mandir, Maheshwar

Am I conditioned?

One eye in, one eye out

While discussing the abstract of the project, my guide said "Kawal, can you wake up like a baby for the next one month?" I immediately said yes, but I realize now that it is far easy said than done...

When was the last time you smelled the earthy smell of rain on dry soil, instead of cursing the pour from the inside of taxi stuck in a jam. Do you remember just sipping a warm tea by the balcony gazing in the horizon...or lying under a blanket of a clear night sky dotted with countless stars and a shooting star or two.

During my stay in IDC, I got time to reflect on my own conditioning, that is to say things I 'assumed' correct because it had been that way, and no speculation seemed necessary. This particular module I took in first year was interesting. It was the 'image making' module, and the first thing professor says is "I am not here to teach anything, we commit to meet at four in the evening everyday, and before that you are pretty much free to do anything." So this class had not PPT, students jotting down notes...instead I was roaming in the campus for inspiration. We tend to get too comfortable in ac classrooms, with professor teaching something while we wait for the class to finish, and most often the discourse is left in the empty classroom and we repeat the process till we graduate...thinking we know it all! I now know that until there is active and consistent engagement from the student there is no learning. As design students, it is the doing and not thinking alone to learn something. Specially as visual designers, perfecting one craft, one medium and keeping at it through 'riyaaz', is a lifetime of learning than just attaining a degree in design.

I have been for the last seven months as a part of my project, and I now realize how much the activity has shaped my view about creativity. Passing the shuttle each time through the warp, made me think how much experience and knowledge one requires to create a motif, a zari border, to ensure the thread don't break, set up the warp....while for an ordinary eye, it's just a cloth..a fancy cloth at most...no big deal...

I got to travel to various clusters, all tucked away in rural areas where generations have been doing fine weaving, doing exquisite embroidery...without any formal education...and one thinks, how little we cite these craftsman when we talk about design let alone respect their skills.

The work they create are the best teachers a student can learn from.

One thing is clear to me now, that as a designer one should always come back to ask "why am I doing"....but also follow the rhythm of daily engaging with a medium...it is this careful planning of work...when the unplanned happen...

References

<http://www.ilpnet.org/PawanGupta>
<http://www.thealternative.in/society/KBJinan>
<http://www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/claudeIs3.htm>
<http://www.anupamakundoo.com/>
<http://thanima.co.in/>