Kumar Vyas

the way they adapted themselves to new materials and skills. Basically they were all carpenters but with a fantastic eye for minute details and could transfer their skill into 'alien' materials like metal and plastic with great ease. The next couple of projects referred to NID were from machine tool manufacturers, one of which was a facing machine for Cooper Engineering in Pune.

**What are your early memories of NID?**
**KV:** Dashrath Patel had joined NID two months before I did. We took a tremendous liking to each other. This was not just friendship but more like comradeship or companionship and it lasted all these years till he passed away. We were to work on several projects, small and huge, together. In the early days of NID, a closely knit group of us would brainstorm regularly. This included Gautam, his sister Gira, Dashrath, James Pristini from Berkley University's School of Environmental Design, and I. Senior professors from IIM Ahmadabad, which had just started, would join us

sometimes and all kinds of questions would be posed, starting with simple things like what is education and how does one learn, and how does one learn design, and can design be ever taught. This really churned our minds and we would all get ideas. The basic building blocks of NID's philosophy and ethos and educational methodology were laid during these meetings.

**What role did you see a designer playing in the development of the country at that time? Was industry the focus then?**
**KV:** Right from the beginning, real life projects of national and social relevance were accepted as one of the three 'tools' for education; the other two being studio assignments and small production runs at NID workshops. Industry would naturally be included in the ambit. In his India Report, Eames too had stressed on real life projects and had given a few examples. It was also agreed that NID would have to do it in its own way; no one could

describe and dictate how to go about it. Eames wrote a brilliant proposal but we would have to do our own homework and evolve our own tools for education.

**Did you interact with Eames on this?**
**KV:** Yes, a couple of times. When Eames brought his team for the Nehru exhibition in 1964 he suggested we work along with his team. "That is one way to inspire you to evolve your program," he would say. When he came to India again in 1969 he had a long conversation with us as we had already begun the faculty training program. The first program to start was graphic design and photography followed by product design, which became my responsibility. In between I had been to the Ulm School of Design in Germany not only to observe their product design program but also to get some idea of their Foundation Program (Grundlehre). On my return I selected 12 graduates to begin the faculty training program for product design; similarly faculty training programs for textile

design, furniture design and ceramic design were initiated. By the time Eames came, most of these programs were operating, so he had a good idea of what was going on. While he expressed his satisfaction on the whole, he also had some suggestions to make. He was quite impressed by the kind of projects the faculty trainees for product design were doing, and suggested that they be properly recorded.

**What kind of projects were these?**
**KV:** One of these was related to agriculture, a seed drill; another one, electric drill design for small-scale industry; one was the design of a hospital trolley, and another, prefabricated toilet facility for an urban slum. There were also a letter sorting system for post offices and furniture system for primary schools. The projects were apparently relevant to what was happening around us. Also this was the first time when, following Eames's suggestion, we introduced the idea of systematic documentation of students' projects.

Among the memorable projects are those on which I worked with Dashrath. One was for the India '72 exhibition; it was related to the overall progress of the Indian nation with emphasis on various activities of governmental sectors. We worked on the main pavilion that provided the visitors with a huge interactive audiovisual experience. The second was also with Dashrath, the AgriExpo 77. For us it was a great opportunity to learn about all aspects of agriculture and proved to be a fantastic experience. Yet another memorable project entrusted to me was the exhibition, 'Design in India' for the India Festival in Britain, 1982. It later travelled to various design schools in Britain.

**You sowed the seed for industrial design in India, and it has since grown significantly, with several colleges now offering the course and various specializations.**
**KV:** I am not at all sure about my contribution, but it certainly is quite exciting the way it has grown. We see many new disciplines of design in light of post-liberalization developments in the 1990s and after the introduction of information technology. These have had a tremendous impact and made design known to the corporate sector; whether they understand it the way it

should be is still a question but designers are in demand one way or another.

The first ever 'undergraduate' or Professional Education Program in design began at NID in 1970. I remember talking to the first batch of 30 students on their first day at the Institute. I told them that this happened to be the first time ever, not just for them but also for the Institute and for the country; so we as faculty would be sharing our knowledge in the spirit of experiment and they would be the guinea pigs for these experiments! Two students objected to the idea of being treated as guinea pigs and dropped out. The remaining 28 stayed till the end. Not surprisingly, it was this batch that was to be a role model during the initial years for those who followed! In 1973 NID suddenly found itself in a big crisis. As both Gautam and Gira Sarabhai had decided to resign, we were left without a chairman and a director. So a core group of senior faculty members called the Internal Management Board had to carry on, and act as a steering committee. The students had heard rumors that the government was planning to close down the institute. They sought a meeting with Dashrath and me and we assured them that so far as we were concerned, NID was not going to be closed. Some of the students said that even if the institute closed, they would still come and learn from us under the tree. In a strange way, this rather naïve but touching faith in the Institute's education also made us feel that things could not be that bad after all.

When the guinea pig batch got their diplomas, they just went out and fended for themselves. Some of them teamed up and did their own little thing and some got jobs, while others had difficulties finding a foothold. There was a regular intake of students after that and that also gave us support for what we were doing.

Things did change after liberalization in the 1990s. New types of IT based courses were introduced. Today they all call themselves user centric, as if they've found a user for the first time! But, with all this the quality of education also got affected. While the computer has revolutionized the ways of solving problems, we are also losing some of our very essential inherent skills, mainly those of the hand, what I would call the 'intelligence of figertips'.

**Have the requirements for being a designer changed over the last 50 years?**
**KV:** There are several new ways of working and there is no denying that computers have changed a lot of things. But the designer's approach to a problem and the problem solving process, to my mind, remains the same. There cannot be a change and the computer cannot help here, since it cannot yet replicate your brain functions. If at all, it may still take some time.

Mind is the software of the brain. That is the software you operate and the computer cannot. What happens when you are confronted with a problem is that you immediately begin to work out possible solutions. This is the way the human mind is 'programmed' to work; these are what I would call the 'conjectural solutions' or design conjectures. They will happen all the time. No computer can reproduce this yet. What you require is a paper and a pencil to put these conjectures down using both words and images.

**How do you see this changing in the future?**
**KV:** I don't know – it is difficult. One thing, it will become more and more complex, I can see that. The expectations are there but the designer will also have to play a role of sieving through all this. He should be trained to tell the client where exactly or how far he or she can go and what the client can expect from him or her. It's a question of convincing. Formerly, designers couldn't have this kind of dialogue but they are much more articulate now and the kind of clients they get also like to talk about design! This is a better, healthier situation. When this kind of dialogue happens, the designer by his or her training will have to be able to draw a line somewhere; for example, everything cannot and should not be controlled by the market. There is something beyond the market, there is society and people and environment and ecology and there is the greater cause of designing for sustainability.

That goal may seem pretty far away, but that is something designers will have to aim at, because we know that Earth's resources are getting depleted. Sustainability is an imperative that cannot be wished away. It is here that the old