

## Soumitri Varadarajan – Service design for India: The thinking behind the design of a local curriculum

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[1]

I have been working on the design of a curriculum for service design for a university in India. What follows is a reflective account of my thinking through the design. I write in the first person to stay true to the thought process that resulted in this specific design. The text is in three parts; I set up the background as a dip into the development discourse in design practice, I then go on to construct a proposition for a university design program, and finally I sketch a program in service design in three steps.

### **Background**

It was in the 1970s, a full ten years after the new design schools had been set up in India, that you see a lot of activity on the contextual discourse of design for India. The imported curriculum from the west needed to be realigned to suit a developing country. Two events are significant for us in understanding how this realignment was discussed. One event hosted in London titled Design for Need (Bicknell and McQuiston 1977) has designers from India and Brazil where the focus was upon (a) seeking an agreement that design needs to focus upon 'need' (basic necessities) and not wants (consumption), and (b) showcasing projects and experiences in product design in a developing country context. The group is in agreement that design can make a contribution to the less privileged in society by designing new objects. Such ideas of change through technical innovation were at that time also being made popular by the Intermediate Technology movement. The second event happens in India and is a special ICSID-UNDP event that is similarly situated and emerges with a declaration, the Ahmedabad Declaration (NID 1979), that has a more ambitious agenda of transforming society by design. The focus of the declaration is upon the poor, which at that time is more that three quarters of the population of India, as needing design intervention.



[2]

A recent design of the smokeless chulha that won the Idea Award

Looking back at those events 30 years ago we see design professing a belief in the power of

technology, and therefore designed objects, to change peoples lives. Two key symbols of that way of thinking are the smokeless stove, *chulha*, and the mud-block making machine. The improved design of the *chulha* changed the physical environment of countless homes in villages as the hut were no longer filled with smoke, a chief cause of respiratory diseases, from the cooking fire. The mud block making machine, a contribution to the art of building, however did not have the same impact. Though it is better to build with mud bricks for a number of reasons such a building requires constant maintenance over its lifetime. The alternative, conventional fired bricks, continue as the preferred kind of brick. Designers however were not alone in working upon these projects. Engineers and technical people who were doing this work too, and they were doing this as part of the ideology of appropriate technology or intermediate technology.

In some senses looking back we see that design was swept up by the same currents that gave energy to the appropriate technology movement which in this case is big government spending on technical innovation projects targeted at the rural poor. With the liberalization of the economy in India this changed; one, the government retreated from funding such interventions and began to focus on the economy as the key to change, and two, design itself gave up an engagement with development issues as suddenly there was a lot of work from large manufacturing enterprises. With its focus upon skills and urban cultures of consumption design has begun to show a vibrant face in India. Writings in India focus these days upon Indian design's ability to travel across borders and be a force internationally. In this climate design and technical intervention, often articulated as 'design for development', is a marginal discourse and from some student's perspective a distraction. Technical innovation, in the sense of design of better products as a solution to the problem of poverty, had its opportunity and delivered some outcomes. The problem of both poverty and the improvement of the quality of lives of the poor through design however continue as a challenge needing attention.

It is at this point that I propose that service design may be able to do what classical product design failed to do. That is to go into unserved areas of India and make a contribution to the lives of the poor. Service design could also transform the colonial construction of the public services that were designed as an instrument for managing a foreign country. The focus of the course design thus incorporates two key approaches to service design – Design for the Service Sector and Design of Public Services. When articulated as practice this translates to: one, the provision of design consultancy to the service sector (such as health, tourism, and IT) and two, the design of services to replace existing services or to construct services for the unserved! This last is a moral position, and is at the core of the construction of the curriculum.

### ***So what would this course look like?***

In conversation with a new university in India I suggested they leave traditional design education – and therefore the traditional construction of the disciplines and expertises such as Industrial, Graphic and Textile – which focussed upon mastery of technologies of manufacture to the existing and emerging design schools in India. These design schools have robust links with Industry and their students and graduates win prestigious design awards internationally. Multinationals like Nokia and Microsoft run studios about the technological devices of the future in these schools. In these design schools the students do base a lot of their projects upon addressing needs such as ICT reaching the rural poor. However they may be required to show a product outcome at the end of their projects. Often this way of doing design is aligned to the producer perspective and primarily serves the interests of big Indian companies and gigantic multinationals. Framed as the bottom of the pyramid, the poor in this perspective are seen as a rich market for redesigned goods and services. (Prahald 2006)

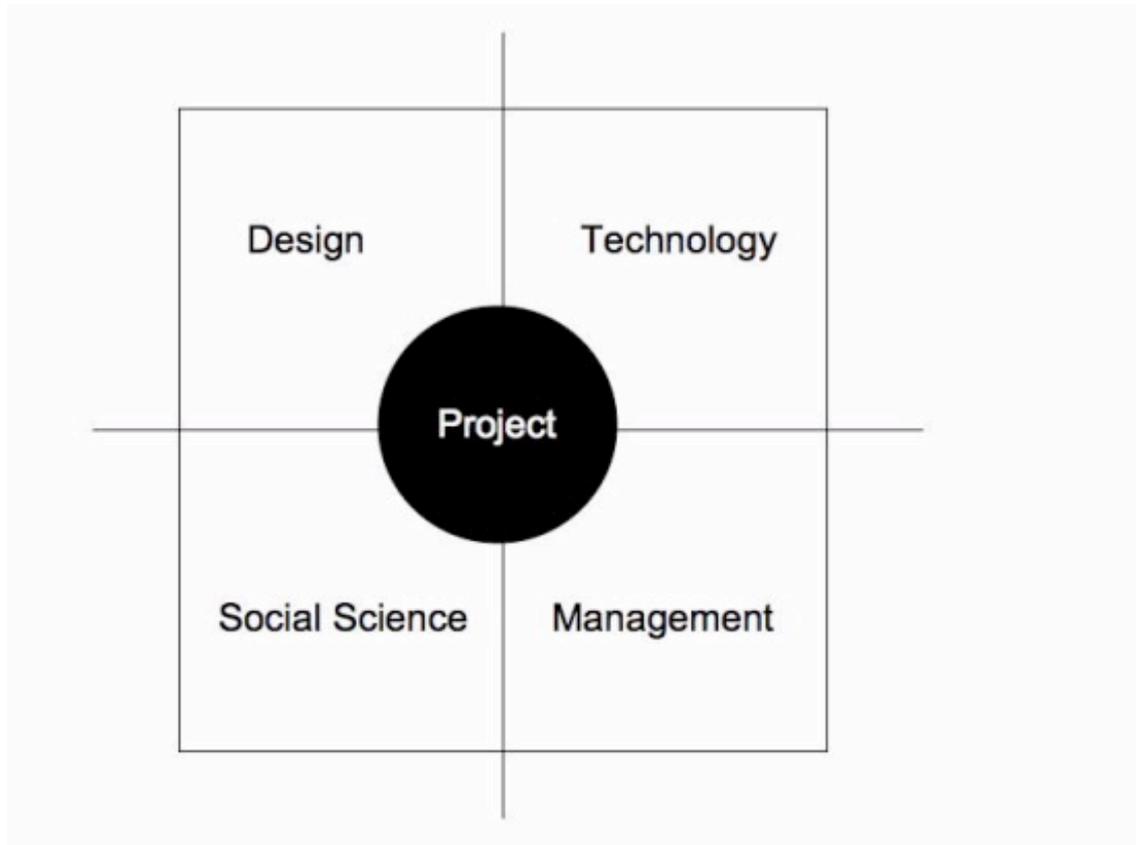
Instead I suggested a view of design as primarily a dematerialised practice – where the technology constituted an instrumentality of this practice. I also located the practice in the field or among the people, as against in the studio or atelier, thereby cutting off the links of design to art and instead substituting a relationship with sociology. Ethnography could be the primary research method, and consultation could be the primary design practice. The 'client' is replaced by 'community' and the designer does not come to the project with an expert discourse of knowing a market, for the market itself folds into the community. In simple words I was now imagining a design practice that would do projects as campaigns that would directly benefit society. Change and transformation would not be imposed or required as necessary but would be the community transforming itself in a participative way. In this way I was travelling down a path that was true to the spirit of the utopians among designers. But I had a problem – this work was already being done by a multitude of untrained people whose primary ability was a

tremendous passion for helping fellow humans. Was I then imagining a cadre of designers going into the field replacing these people and potentially creating a superior class of professional? I answered this question by visualizing a master's course in design for field workers to acquire design abilities. Where designers who wished to work in the field could convert their knowledge orientations to align it to the greater community need.

In the design of such a curriculum my objective has been to keep the structure of design education familiar and similar to the way it is constructed in India. Inside a familiar structure my attempt was to substitute the technical, as an engagement with materials and processes, with the social, as an engagement with people and their practices. Additionally the design has taken into consideration the strength of this university as privileging the social and also its desire to set up a system "under which every teacher appointed would be attached to more than one School or Centre" (2009). The content of the course has been written to facilitate the resulting multidisciplinary teaching practice where teachers from the disciplines of Design, Technology, Management and Social Science teach into the course. In the long run such a sharing of teachers between the different schools of the university has the potential to make the course content agile and capable of adapting to developments in the respective disciplines.

### **Sketch design**

A universally applicable model of design education would keep the design project at the centre and hang courses off it. Such a model portrayed graphically, see image below, would do a few things: one, it would set up the technical and the social in opposition, and it would set up an opposition between design and management. These oppositions are in themselves interesting and a reading can see them as highlighting trends in emerging design discourse. The technical has been the dominant discourse in design till the recent ascendancy of the social brought on in no small measure by interaction design. Similarly management has emerged as a strong voice in design discourse with the privileging of both innovation and projects being viewed as the engagement with complex systems. Though this model permits many readings, I am using it for a more prosaic purpose to depict design as a multidisciplinary subject that can emerge from the collaboration of different disciplines.



[3]

I then directly used the above model to derive a typical time-table, with equal weight being given to the 4 disciplines. This gives me a scheme of components that constitute a curriculum on the ground.

| Weeks | 1                     | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8                 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
|-------|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------------------|---|----|----|----|----|----|
| 24 CR | Project (1-3)         |   |   |   |   |   |   |                   |   |    |    |    |    |    |
| 12 CR | Design (6 CR)         |   |   |   |   |   |   | Technology (6 CR) |   |    |    |    |    |    |
| 12 CR | Social Science (6 CR) |   |   |   |   |   |   | Management (6 CR) |   |    |    |    |    |    |

[4]

Proposed credit structure and typical semester time-table

Once the components of the curriculum were set out as above I then fleshed out a two-year masters program in service design (image below). The process of fleshing out required me to set up names for courses that serve as an exploration of territories of knowledge.

|                       | Semester 1                                  | Semester 2                                      | Semester 3   | Semester 4                                      |
|-----------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Project (24 CR)       | Digital Service Design                      | Services for the Unserved                       | Designing the Public Services                                    | Service Venture/<br>Entrepreneurship<br>Project |
| Design (6 CR)         | Elements of Interaction<br>Design           | Elements of Service Design                      | Graphic Design, web Design                                       |   |
| Technology (6 CR)     | Digital Technologies/<br>interaction design | Prototyping                                     | Electronics, tangible media                                      |   |
| Management (6 CR)     | Project Management                          | Marketing/ Finance/ Economics                   | Entrepreneurship   |   |
| Social Science (6 CR) | Ethnography                                 | Applied Sociology for<br>participative research | Sociology in Service and<br>Interaction Design - case<br>studies | Electives                                       |

[5]

Proposed curriculum in Service Design

### Conclusion

The curriculum design shown here will go through a consultation process later this year. What the design also does is throw up the essential transformation of the notion of design practice that any design education program trains its students for. Early design education took the artists studio as the location of a particular practice that privileged art and aesthetics. Then a lot of post-war programs began to be called courses in Product Design, and these took the design consultancy or the R&D offices inside manufacturing concerns as the location of the practice of design. The subjects taught and the words privileged hinted at a desire to fit into corporate culture. Significantly, these first two discourses of design education privileged the shop, the location of consumption, where their design would be assessed and then purchased. In the construction of this curriculum I made a call that the location of consumption was out in the field, deep within the community and amidst the conversations in the community. The practice of this kind of Design would therefore potentially be located within agencies such as NGOs or Corporate organizations where the discourse would be based around the speculation of change.

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[3] Image: <http://www.re-public.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/sketch-design.jpeg>

[4] Image: <http://www.re-public.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/credit-structure.jpeg>

[5] Image: <http://www.re-public.gr/en/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/curriculum-service-design.jpeg>

[6] <http://www.aud.ac.in/>: <http://www.aud.ac.in/>.

[7] *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid: Eradicating Poverty Through Profits*:

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