Chapter 12
Looking Back While Looking Forward:
Integrating Craft and Culture as Part of Interior Design Education and Practice

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing globalisation and modernisation, the recent interior architecture practices across the globe seem unified and present a huge departure from a sense of identity and belongingness of where it is at. The built landscapes that earlier reflected a rich craft culture are slowly transforming into standardized and homogenized boxes with very little cultural meaning attached to them. This is no different for a country rich with craft traditions like India, where the contemporary interior architectural landscape seems highly disconnected to its craft culture and surrounding context. The chapter focuses on two major discourses; the first one sets up a base with discussion on the notions of craft, space making craft, and contemporary interior design practices in India; and the second one focuses on the need of integrating crafts in interior design education through case studies of a variety of academic courses offered at Faculty of Design, CEPT University, India.

INTRODUCTION

The identity of interior design, both as a profession and as an academic subject evolved out of the mid-nineteenth century crisis in building and decorative arts. Caan shares

The realization that mass production had greatly changed the work of the creative individual in shaping an object led to a massive debate about the role of the designer; and the rationalization and industrialization of the manufacturing and building process had a direct impact on the efficiency of design in all its forms. (2011, p.122)

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Craft, which was considered as one of the defining criterias of any designed building, suddenly found a little place in the highly industrialised building methods of construction. Kaufmann (1960) in his essay on Nineteenth Century Design, shares that many designers who welcomed the machine believed that the medieval methods could not satisfy the wants nor express the character of their time. This not only remained in practice, but many new interior design educational institutes adopted the modern or professional modes of production that the industrial revolution brought with it. The traditional methods of making became more informal and were limited to workshops and making studios. With the advent of industrialisation, a huge emphasis was seen on industrialised materials and methods of construction.

This happened across the world, and India with its rich craft traditions, faced similar issues. With a background of rich ancient craft traditions, Indian buildings have been an interesting panorama of people, culture, religion and social values that are all deeply rooted in heritage. The traditional interior architecture evolved as a craft which reflected the socio-cultural milieu and was deeply rooted to the context in which it was made. With the external influences, the contemporary practices were introduced with a new range of materials, technologies and aesthetic sensibilities. In 1919, Gandhi in the weekly paper *Young India* complained about the lesser attention paid to the Indian crafts: he writes, "The Industrial arts and handicrafts, considered as inessential luxuries, are practically ignored even by recognized authorities on economics. Because such authorities never attempted to interpret national worth in terms of life, they found it impossible to realize the connection between art and industry and to appreciate the value of quality or a high standard of workmanship" (McGowen, 2009, p.1). Later, with independence and building of the new India, the aspirations of people were often met by designers by integrating a 'modern' material palette. One of the most important agendas which modernism faced was the problem of duality which often became too difficult to resolve. The duality was referred to as creating a balance between the folk tradition which was associated with a revivalist point of view, the other being propagated by Gandhi of simplicity and minimalism.

In the indian context, Lang, Desai and Desai (1997) discuss that 'the concept of skills was much detailed in the Mansara Shilpa-Shastra and was very closely related to construction and architecture. The word 'Mansara' essentially in its etymological meaning means, 'the essence of measurement', Sara means essence and mana means measurement. It contains 64 treatises which specify various different things from the layout and plan of cities, villages, dwellings to the details of columns, doors windows etc. It also includes other forms of practical arts like jewellery, acting, music, poetry etc.

For anyone who practiced crafts, the knowledge of such literary references was a must. The proportioning systems, the building methods, the tools and techniques to be employed were all elaborated in such references and were strictly followed by the master craftsperson as well as the apprentice craftsperson while working with his master. The traditional education system in India was based on a shared knowledge exchange relationship between the teacher and the student.

With the western influences, the modern day design education in India is a huge departure from its traditional perspective. With easy access to almost everything in the digital world and possibilities of producing an idea anywhere, the contextual processes of making are being neglected. This could also be often seen in the absence of enough active cultural and contextual discourses happening in academic projects. The design discourses need to reposition themselves from looking at craft as a historical component viewed through the 'past' lens and shift to 'craft as a forerunner of future design' through the future-present lens. In a country like India, where there is a plethora of opportunities available at the intersection of craft, culture and design, it is imperative that they form a part of the mainstream educational system.