

FREE THINKING SPACE

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THE VIRTUAL DESIGN STUDIO

Before the advent of formal design education, in fact even once it had started, the great designers learnt on their own. But not entirely on their own, they learned by watching, touching, smelling, listening, feeling, basically observing all the things around them. They then mulled over these observations; which led them to explore, experiment, and develop their skills and concepts; in effect leading to a new way of thinking.

The experiments were not only metaphysical but physical too. They applied various techniques to a variety of materials. A technique traditionally used on a certain material was tried and tested on a different one with sometimes hazardous but sometimes brilliant results. There was no 'design school' telling them that they were doing it all wrong. Their bodies and minds worked in tandem.

Open ended learning and exploratory nature of doing things and getting lost is not always a 'bad thing' and could result in interesting new discoveries, especially in design schools.

Online teaching is not only forcing us to reimagine the studio and workshop spaces but rather design education itself. Lesser guidance might actually lead to better tinkering and learning by the students.

The paper aims to discuss the positive effects of the challenge thrown up by the Corona virus. These difficult times are not for the weak hearted. It is time for the passionate to rule. So get ready to embrace the emergence of some brilliant design languages which we have not seen in a long time.

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“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high,
where knowledge is free.
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls.

Where words come out from the depth of truth,
where tireless striving stretches its arms toward perfection.
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit.
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever widening thought and action.
In to that heaven of freedom, my father, let my country awake.”

- Rabindranath Tagore's poem 'Gitanjali'

Invoking Rabindranath Tagore's iconic words, one would like to reflect on the circumstances that these words were written in, in a very simple manner which will lead us to ask some pertinent questions:

When did art begin?

Why did art happen at all?

What constitutes a good design?

How does good design come to be?

The answer to all such questions, the behind-the-scenes main player, is the availability of free time. Time to be able to think freely, time free of thinking of feeding oneself, time free of worry of being violated, free time passing by slowly in an idyllic setting.

When man came to be, there was neither any art, nor could he think of art. He was too busy looking for food and/or saving himself from predators.

Art started only once his basic needs of food and security were met. Only then could he think of art. As there were no previously done work to be inspired by, creativity had to be on an all time high. So basically we realise that one needs peace of mind - free from worries and responsibilities - to be able to innovate.

Then once religion came into being, the idea of a Sabbath day was introduced - a day to rest and recuperate, a day of religious observance and abstinence from work. It was observed by Jews from sundown on Friday until the appearance of three stars in the sky on Saturday night, and by most Christians on Sunday. This weekly rest day had nothing to do with working very hard the rest of the days, rather it was with the understanding that the mind like the body requires rest and rejuvenation.

This idea was taken further to formulate taking a sabbatical. Sabbatical leave was a period of paid leave granted to a university teacher for study or travel, traditionally one year for every seven years worked. Sabbaticals were taken to discover one's calling by reconnecting to the self.

Children be given 'time outs' for misbehaviour has been quite a popular form of 'disciplining' the child. This has also been widely adopted because of the positive results. Reason being that 'time outs' not just help the child to calm down, but also to reflect. Sometimes the children are even asked to face a corner to further this goal by removing visual distractions too.

"You've got to sing like you don't need the money,
You've got to love like you'll never get hurt,
You've got to dance like there's nobody watching,
You've got to come from the heart if you want it to work."

- Susanna Clark's song 'Come From the Heart'

It is great work only when one does it for oneself without any constraints whatsoever. You've got to do it for yourself, for the heart that beats inside. Then does it really matter if it is quarantine time or not? Shakespeare wrote 'King Lear,' 'Macbeth' and 'Antony and Cleopatra' during the turbulent times of the bubonic plague.

"Peace of mind is the most important prerequisite for creative work"

- Richard Feynman

Remembering Nobel prize winning physicist Richard Feynman's simple thoughts in simple words through which he explained not only the most complex of theories but also proposed new theories in the most matter-of-fact way. These new ideas were his creativity which flowed when he put everything aside and went 'home' with his family. Assimilating all our knowledge and experience into something of consequence requires reflection. And reflection is only possible when one is able to sit back and think.

"I think therefore I am."

- Rene Descartes

Recalling artist Rene Descartes' famous words, we are reminded of the importance of thinking. In the fast-paced jam-packed schedules that we have built around us, the one thing that we tend to forget scheduling in is to keep time for slowing down and just being. If we were to do so, it would be a quiet time, one in which we would be able to hear one's heart's desires and hopefully follow them too. Fewer distractions will lead to greater focus, giving us the vision to follow our passions and dreams.

"Any talent I may have was due to a long illness as a boy, which afforded me time to think, and subsequent ill-health, because I was not allowed to play games, and so had to teach myself, for my enjoyment, to use my eyes instead of my feet."

- Edwin Lutyens

Recollecting architect Edwin Lutyens' life, we are forced to question structured learning. Perhaps structured learning is sometimes unable to leave space for creativity and impossible outcomes. Perhaps unstructured and exploratory way of doing things is a possibility. Many see unusual unprecedented circumstances as times of introspection and evolution. They see it as an opportunity to be seized. There is no black day to mourn. Rather they see the silver linings to be explored.

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

- Buckminster Fuller

The pandemic and living with the virus are a reality that we must learn to live with instead of fighting and thinking of getting 'back' to the normal. There is no going back. Going ahead is the only way. And this is how things are going to be. So, virtual online distance learning is here to stay. We might as well not only get used to it, but embrace it with all we've got. Only then will we be able to see it's goodness which is sometimes hidden away from sight, but it is still very much there.

"I'm not trying to counsel any of you to do anything really special except dare to think. And to dare to go with the truth. And to dare to really love completely."

- Buckminster Fuller

Architect Buckminster Fuller implores you to think. There is nothing new to be said or done. Things just have to be done. Let people's minds be free. If lockdown is the way it will be, then let there be lockdown. Let there be peace.

“You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.”

- Mae West