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AXIOMATIC DESIGN

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Jacques Barsac

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The avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s shared a concern with social and even political issues. The creators' struggle for modernity – and it was very much a struggle – aimed at bringing progress and wellbeing to everyone. Most joined the communists, hoping to contribute to the creation of a 'paradise on earth'. Consumer society did not yet exist, nor did design as we understand it today, and its creations were not yet known as products.

European avant-garde architects gathered under the name Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Founded in 1928, CIAM sought to develop a new doctrine of urban planning to meet the housing needs of a rural population that had been pouring into urban areas since the industrial age. In 19th-century Europe, millions of farm labourers joined the ranks of the working class in increasingly unsanitary cities where tuberculosis was rampant and slums proliferated (a massive migratory movement that cannot fail to remind us of the recent situation in emerging countries). The aim, therefore, was to invent 'the modern city' by using every kind of innovation in the field of urban planning and architecture, and also home equipment – including furniture, storage, household appliances and so on, all the while taking account of the economy and mass production for the greatest number as a prerequisite for meeting social needs.

Craft and Pragmatism

In the 1930s, however, the economic crisis, the failure to mass produce furniture and housing, and the economic reality of production methods prompted Charlotte Perriand to take a different approach. "We will no longer engage in formalism or constructivism," she wrote 1935. "We will no longer favour curved or straight lines, stone or cement, blue or red, wood or metal, but instead, we will use each of them where it is most practical – technologically and physiologically." [1] Her pragmatic approach led her to reconsider traditional crafts as production methods equivalent to industrial manufacture – complementary, and not in conflict with each other.

The advantage of crafts, which are found all over the world, is that they benefit from the proximity between the production site

A Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM) at the Chateau de la Sarraz, CH, 1928. Courtesy: Archives Charlotte Perriand, Paris, FR.

B Charlotte Perriand with Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret, CIAM, Athens, GR, 1933. Courtesy: Archives Charlotte Perriand, Paris, FR.

1 Charlotte Perriand, 'L'habitation familiale: son développement économique et social', in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, Boulogne-sur-Seine, FR, January 1935, p. 25.

and place of use. They also favour a fruitful dialogue between designer and craft practitioner, allowing them to benefit from each other's knowledge and creativity. Crafts offer the opportunity for a fair relationship on a human scale in a local economy. They provide knowhow and express different regional and national sensibilities, helping to preserve cultural diversity and not reducing creation to a unique, universal functionalist formula. Crafts broaden the creative palette by offering a wide diversity of locally produced materials and unusual techniques that industry cannot provide.

Formula-Free Design

In the mid-1930s, Charlotte Perriand reacted to the International Style then spreading, as evidenced by the laudatory Philip Johnson exhibition at MoMA in 1932. 'There is no formula,' she argued. 'We should take the production site, practices, cultures and programmes into account.' A similar understanding of the artisanal combined with industry and animated by socio-cultural concern belongs to Satyendra Pakhalé.

Pakhalé cultivates ideas and critical thinking about what he calls 'social modernity'. These are rooted not only in his knowledge of history, but also in his own life experiences. His ideas about the human being as a social animal come directly from his birth country, his continued curiosity about the human condition, and the socio-cultural awareness of his family upbringing and education. Pakhalé highlights a new perspective on social modernity in contemporary societies around the world. Keeping in mind the idealistic views of the early modernist movement, and at the same time with a keen awareness of the problematic side effects of those early modernists on society at large, Pakhalé takes the view that: 'The project of modernity is still a work in progress in most societies seen from the point of view of social cohesion. Design has to help to bring the disintegrating elements together and unite them in a given society. It ought to rebuild society on the foundations of "social modernity".'

Human Skills

Stepping away from any glorification of the industrial process and technological innovations alone, Pakhalé pursues the appreciation of very different, apparently opposite, production techniques, by returning attention to human skills – both of the hand and the

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intellect. The artisanal element represents a world in itself and offers the advantage of proximity between workshops and users, but also a fruitful dialogue between designers and craftsmen. For each, it gives access to mutual knowledge and creativity. It offers the possibility of a fair relationship on a human scale. It also spreads knowledge and expresses different sensibilities from one region to another, and from one country to another, and therefore maintains an international cultural diversity rather than reduce creativity to a universal, unique and functional formula. The consideration of craftsmanship enlarges the creative field and offers a great diversity of locally produced materials and special techniques that industry cannot offer.

Pakhalé understood all this intuitively even at the beginning of his practice. It is evident in his approach design, which entails engaging with a wide range of projects with industry as well as artisans across the world. By actively seeking collaborations with craftsmen as well as industry, he acknowledges complementary opportunities which require the creator to be flexible and accommodating in his approach and design possibilities.

New Craftsmanship

Glancing at history, the gap between industrialization and manual work has never been as unbridgeable at that described by historians who refer to the ideological conception of modernity as the enemy of crafts. From Pakhalé's perspective, this is a bizarre point of view. He is interested in 'new craftsmanship', which allies modernity with tradition and daily folklore with advanced technology in the eclecticism of its methods, by establishing itself as the catalyst of universal communication. Creation is indeed part of tradition. This is the refreshing view that stands out against the conventional notion of modernity, and with this approach he articulates a view of modernity that his ideas, notions about social modernity that at its core is social cohesion rather than social charity for the third millennium.

Looking at European societies with their migrant populations, a new vision of social modernity is very much needed in our times, as Europe learns to put its Eurocentric perspective aside to accommodate the newcomers with a renewed energy. At the same time, fast-developing economies like China, India and Brazil cultivate their own approach to social modernity in their own manner.

C–E *International Style* exhibition by Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art New York, USA, 1932. Courtesy: © 2019. Digital image The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA, Scala, Florence, IT.

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Satyendra Pakhalé

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It will be fascinating to see how designers contribute to this journey of social reconstruction in the third millennium.

Cultural Innovation

Pakhalé's keen interest in material and technological innovations is evident in several projects. 'When we speak about innovation,' he says, 'most of the time we just refer to technological innovation which is important and often challenging to achieve. However, the ideas, especially design ideas, that make an impact on social change could be termed 'social innovation'. Furthermore, if society accepts those innovations and they then become part of the culture, they could eventually be called 'cultural innovation'. I like the idea that design could lead to cultural innovation.'

Pakhalé is enthusiastic about one of Charlotte Perriand's innovations, that of bringing the kitchen into the living room. He considers it a germinal example in the history of design, a praiseworthy innovation that has had an emancipating impact on societies around the world, freeing women from the traditional kitchen that used to be located at the end of the corridor of the apartment or house. Thanks to Perriand's vision, the kitchen became part of the living environment and the woman became part of the family once more, sharing the cooking and at the same time being together in the living space adjacent to the kitchen. She is in the midst of the living environment and engaged with family and friends and no longer cut off.

Pakhalé thinks such cultural innovations are of great importance for our current human condition as we learn to live together as a global human family and learn to achieve social cohesion.

Global Contexts

Although Charlotte Perriand was one of the greatest modern designers and a pioneer of contemporary design, for her the creation – the design – of furniture or objects extended far beyond the object itself and was situated within a global context.

The positions held by Charlotte Perriand in the 1930s and thereafter are shared by Satyendra Pakhalé. They are an echo of the contemporary world and the world of tomorrow in that they strive to satisfy the needs of the many with a social aspect. They demonstrate cultural diversity in their human scale, in their use of artisanal capacities to complement industrial ones and in their singular products. They produce honest and fully useful objects in

F, G Charlotte Perriand, prototype of the kitchen-bar for the cell of the *Unité d'habitation* in Marseille by Le Corbusier, fabrication CEPAC, 1949. Courtesy: Archives Charlotte Perriand, Paris, FR.

consonance with the present and not dominated by it, and never lose sight of the object's socio-cultural, socio-political dimensions and aesthetics.

The human being is a social animal and at the root of human life is hope. Designers have a commitment to empower social messages. Social modernity, and with it social justice, is more important in a vertical society than economic or political justice. Almost all societies to a lesser or a greater extent are vertical societies – especially India, even today. As Pakhalé points out, 'What we see as modernity in India is a visual modernity, there is still no comprehensive modernity in all walks of life. Unless there is social modernity no society or country can be called modern.'

Design Shapes Society

Design is not the result of society but in fact the very opposite. Design is the shaper of society, the foundation that allows people to know more about how to live in the world. It is a source of knowledge in itself, yet it is hidden. People can discover it by experiencing and allowing the design piece to disclose all the potentialities of the atmosphere it creates, showing the many sensorial, intellectual, social, modernist aptitudes a human being has. Design is a way of knowing more about ourselves as humans and social beings. It is the foundation of a way of life – if created with a deep understanding of its meaning.

With its secular-humanist insight and inquiry into the human condition, design is a primary aspect of cultivating social modernity to rebuild society; and social modernity has to be further cultivated in order to reconstruct society as the basis of secular humanity. With this sensibility, it will be fascinating to see what sort of axiomatic design for social modernity Pakhalé will evolve in the years to come.