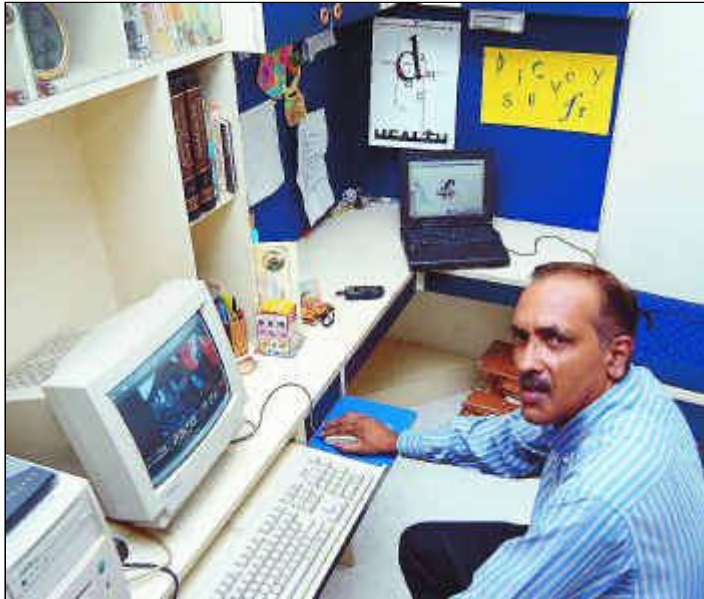


Life - Interiors & Homes

Form follows function

Lalitha Sridhar

While designing, it is important to understand the need for practicality, for design attempted superficially is empty, says J. Menon, leading consultant and cartoonist.



How would it feel for an 'ordinary', untrained individual to be given the label of a designer? But then you don't always have to graduate from the National Institute of Design (NID) or take a degree from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) to wear that label. Or so thinks J. Menon, the Chennai-based design consultant, editor and cartoonist.

"When a child arranges his books on a shelf or a woman organises her kitchen in a particular way or someone in an office puts things on his or her desk like this or that, we are all designing our space. Consciously or unconsciously, and this is true universally, we are all designers. It could be a modular kitchen put together by an interior decorator, but it is still the woman who chooses what is kept where. The only difference when it is done professionally is that designers — be it of furniture or software or corporate communications — are not doing it for their personal preferences but for a different set of parameters."

Elaborating on his several definitions of the term 'design', he adds, "Though the putting of decorations or frills is commonly considered as design, decoration is really secondary. A design emits the personality or image of an individual or a company. The well-known maxim applies here — form follows function."

With a Masters in Economics, Menon's understanding of publishing comes from his early stint as a journalist. In "those days of letter press technology", a writer also pitched in as editor, proof-reader and layout designer. "I became very interested in design and typography," he says. "It was possible because the entire production activity took place in the same premises. It encouraged a very serious level of involvement. People would ask, what is there to design? You just pick up a book and read it. I was like that too. Then I found out."

Menon discovered "how typography reacts to the reader" during his 11-year tenure at Macmillan. "With technology, it became possible for the designer to take control. The entire flow of work could be done from a desktop." Leaving to spend a few hectic years with Sankha Graphics, pioneers in digital prepress work flow, Menon went on to diversify as a freelance consultant. He now handles communications for

corporate clients, has worked on multimedia projects for children and is particularly involved in editorial design, "an area heavily influenced by typography and very content-driven".

Typography was also the subject of his Masters' dissertation, as a Charles Wallace scholar of the British Council, at the Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design in London. Menon describes his one-and-a-half year stint at one of the "oldest, most wonderful" institutions as a "totally different kind of learning. It facilitated enormous access to fantastic facilities. Till then I was largely self-taught and had no formal training. St. Martins was an eye-opener. There were 40 students from 22 different countries leading to tremendous cultural diversity, which was reflected in their responses to design briefs on the course. There would be violent criticism in the 'crit' review sessions and everybody was free to say whatever was on their minds".

Under the guidance of Course Director Andrew Haslam, Menon's thesis was judged as one of the best and earned him a Dean's letter of commendation for excellence in dissertation. "I gained conviction, confidence and courage to do things differently," he says.

"Experimentation should not stay in the lab. It can work in the marketplace. To think that the majority cannot appreciate the unconventional approach would be an underestimation of people," he says. "The response to some of my typographic experimentation even in a conservative market was tremendous. Even children should be exposed to the fundamentals of design — it is a part of the curriculum in schools abroad. Children react spontaneously to everything and go beyond logic."

Talking about his approach to design, Menon says that it is important to get a feel for the subject, look for related information, get a feel of the mood and atmosphere. "Something then comes out of it. Even accidents are valuable in experiments — a wrong command (given to a computer) may lead you to a different path. Design is also about problem solving. But you can't have an interesting solution if the problem is a boring one! Sometimes it is important to make the problem interesting, to begin with."

Menon views the changing scene with optimism, "We do have the NID and NIFT and umpteen little setups offering courses in design now. So there is a greater awareness. But when design is attempted superficially, just for the sake of it, then it is empty. An established company may choose to change its image since its employees, clientele and products have changed over time. A corporate identity speaks in many ways and represents the company and its brand equity. It is critical to do research and understand the need for designing or redesigning things."

"There are two ways that editorial design can work — transparent typography, which the reader won't even notice. Then design happens seamlessly," says Menon, who also lectures on typography. "On the other hand, a deliberate typographic intrusion into the text can be an intervention, an interpretation of the content. But very often typography and design are influenced by work pressure and production conveniences. With computers you are given a lot of ready-made choices. Click a couple of times and you can just do it from two hundred different options. But that would be making the mistake of thinking the music is in the flute. Be it a routine corporate communication, or a winning project proposal, some basic understanding of type, space, column, arrangement and disposal of that space can make the document a hundred times more readable."

Also an avid photographer, painter and writer, Menon is more than happy with the tiny, tucked away byline he sometimes gets, for instance, if it is a book cover.

So how does this feel? His response is a smile.

"I would rather put it as taking responsibility than credit."

Picture by Bijoy Ghosh