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Volume 01 • Issue 09 • August 2012 / **Rashid Rana** to view, to inhabit / **Rooshad Shroff** craftsmanship of risk / **Vir Mueller architects** crafted articulations / **Madan Mahatta, Annapurna Garimella** mirror with a memory / **Kamu Iyer, Mustansir Dalvi** shaping metropolitan India / **Luc Durand, Smita Dalvi, Etienne Desrosiers** making architecture in interesting times / **IMKadri** structuring beauty, sequencing thoughts / **Nate Berg** the militarisation of makers / **Max Gadney** in-screen sports graphics

India

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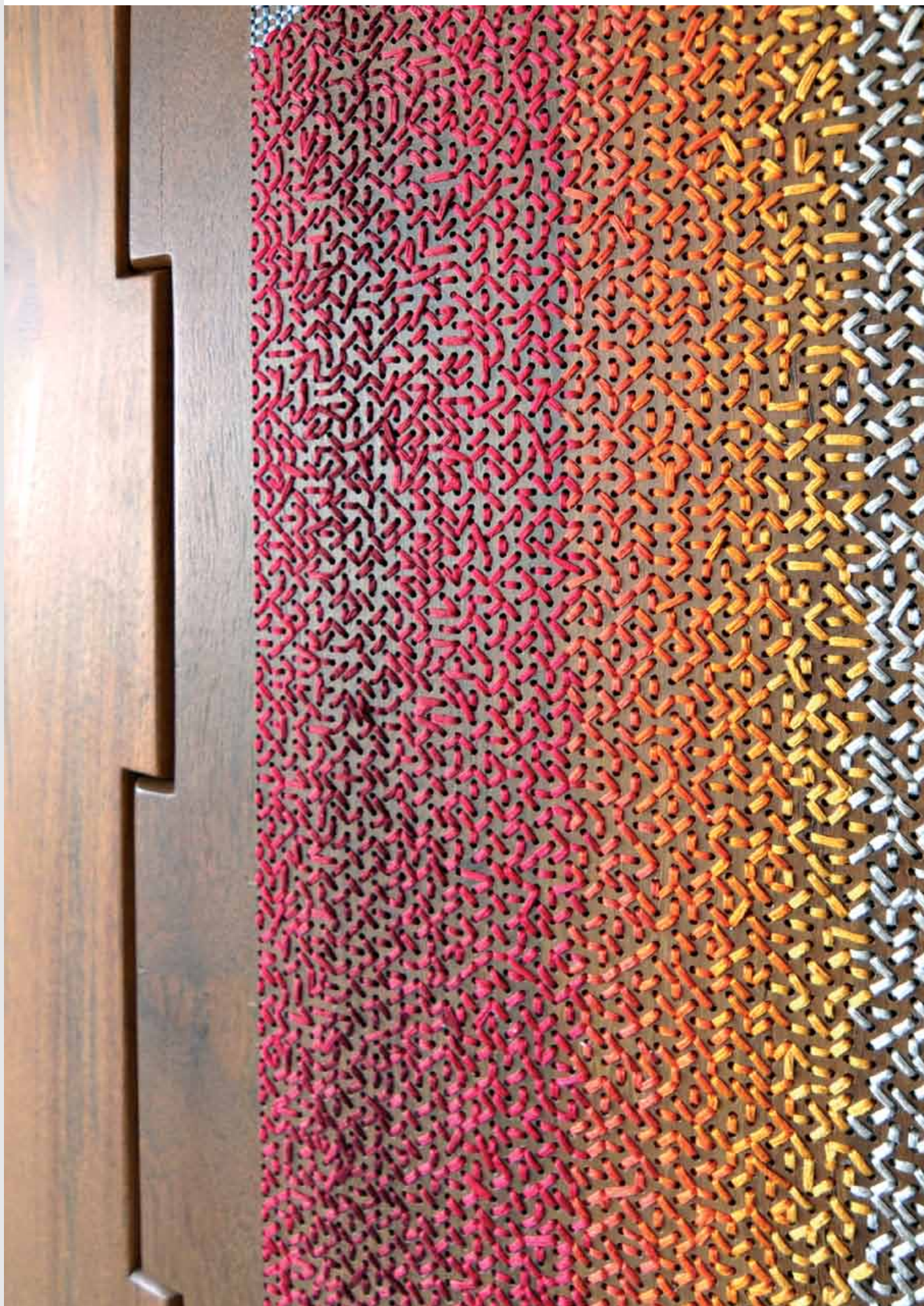


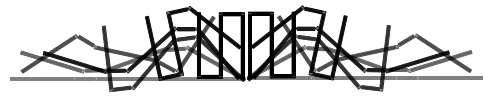
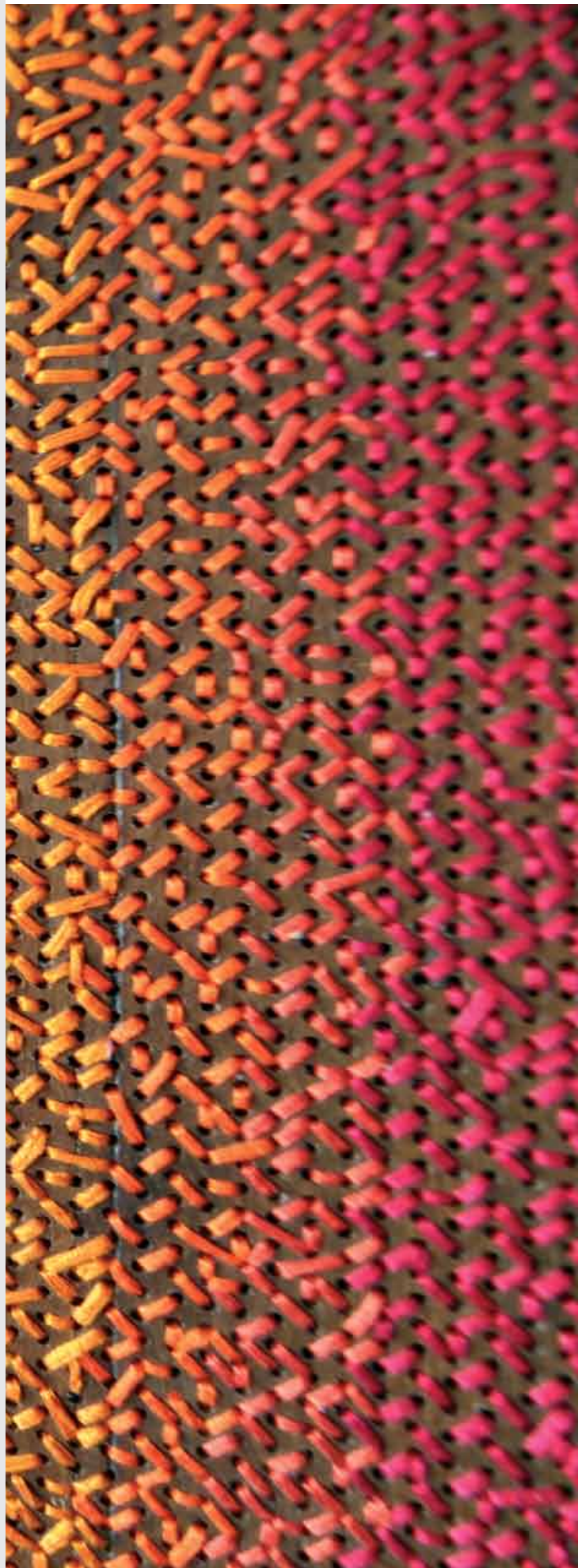
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Cover

Rashid Rana, *Desperately Seeking Paradise*, 2007-08. As images of architectural details reflect in, and camouflage with the mirror fins, the magic-like cube of mirror plays a series of visual games — a clear picture of a city skyline emerges. This skyline is universal, and aspirational. The small images of architectural details accumulated like an archive in the background actually are the bedrock and backdrop for the skyline of fantasy buildings to appear from.

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Craftsmanship of risk

Exploring a working process that is workshop-intensive and collaborative is the mainstay of Mumbai-based architect and furniture designer Rooshad Shroff's studio. Discussing precarious issues like the involvement of *karigars* in a design-and-make process or 'loss of authorship', the furniture and accessories designed and built in the studio also try to challenge the thinking and production integral to digital systems

Design

Rooshad Shroff

Text

Rishav Jain

Mumbai



In the industrial scenario, where the fast increasing approach towards mass production appears everywhere, the dividing line between craft and design has started becoming more blurred. The entire emphasis goes to the object made or produced; and the maker or the process becomes less important. Rooshad Shroff responds to this as an issue of 'loss of authorship' and this has pushed him towards a new approach in working and developing a fresh method towards interpreting design processes. Today many designers respond very differently to working processes – on the one hand there are designers who prefer to work with captivating technologies and large mass-produced objects, while others believe in the veracity of hand skills and local techniques, making the products more unique and associated to the place. Such associations with the local techniques of production and work-process is itself becoming one of the dominating ways in which one is trying to engage with the range of working traditions that India possesses.

Rooshad comes from a family of architects and interior designers; after almost a decade of studying abroad and working with leading architects across the globe, Shroff returned to Mumbai, India, last year to run his own multidisciplinary studio. His practice is geared beyond the boundaries of architecture and interiors including furniture, products, publishing, fashion and graphic design. Shroff prefers working more on product and furniture design projects, as for him they are not governed by



The screen is designed combining a high degree of workmanship in wood craft and embroidery in a deliriously captivating manner. Previous page: Embroidery in wood is the central feature of this experiment in design

any building codes and regulations, and hence open up larger avenues for exploration and innovation at these scales. What makes Shroff's work stand out is his passion for the local skills and techniques which have been the backbone of traditional Indian interior architecture. Being exposed to world-class technologies during his stay abroad, he was introduced to a new vocabulary of design enabling complex geometric forms to be manufactured with ease using laser cutting and CNC mills. Although this was breath-taking initially, but later these seemed too standardised to Shroff. Despite being well-versed with all these latest digital processes, he prefers the indigenous working methods and techniques inherited by craftspeople. He believes that technology may simplify the process, but the end product becomes too predictable and feels disconnected with the process of design. He points out to 'a loss of authorship' in such approaches, where there is complete detachment with the sense of authorship of the maker. "Authorship not in terms of the 'designer' – but as mass production happens with the click of a button, the individual piece loses a sense of authorship – being one produced by a craftsman (maker)," he mentions.

This became one of the important issues that he addresses through his design practice. Another reason for him to come back to India and start his own practice was the abundance of manual skills available here. Undoubtedly, India is a repository of crafts, thus offering Shroff a wider range of possibilities to experiment, innovate and explore. He initially started with the range of 'C-series' chairs where for the first time he put to use the idea of craftsmanship and working hands on. These furniture pieces show a sensitive attempt that integrates a structurally intriguing form – combining innovation, craftsmanship and good quality wood into a clean-cut, purified design.

Passionate about integrating crafts into design, he has recently explored different craft techniques and tried to collaborate with karigars working in different mediums with varied skills. His explorations and consistent, dedicated research culminated in the form of two unique pieces that portray a high degree of workmanship in wood craft and embroidery in a deliriously captivating manner. The idea of blurring the boundaries between craft and design, a craftsman and a designer, became one of the impulses for his two embroidered pieces – a seating structure and a partition screen, both of which are acquiring recognition as important ideas in craft and design. Shroff explains how these pieces were possible with an intensive collaboration between various experts, year-long research and continuous experimentation done with the craftspeople on various scales.



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The hinge was designed all in wood with a capacity to pivot 180°

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The screen panels during construction process at the workshop



He credits his close friend and embroidery designer Maximiliano Modesti (the creative mind behind the Ateliers 2M in Paris and Mumbai) as one of the driving inspirations behind the two pieces, who also put in his expertise as the embroidery designer for both the pieces.

These works of design intend to break the boundary between the integral structure of the product and the upholstery fabric, making it a unified whole — coming up with an innovative solution to the standardised upholstery patterns on most furniture pieces. The attempt was to allow room for flexibility and change for the end user, who could easily change the embroidery pattern as per his desire. A good number of hands-on experiments in the workshop brought to light the myriad possibilities of such techniques. The first experimentation and consistent ideation and collaboration helped Shroff to design a seating element where the intention behind the furniture element was to blur the line between skin and structure whereby the sofa re-defines traditional upholstery by enabling the embroidery to be an integral part of the piece. For understanding the entire structure and envisaging a method for accomplishing this, he made various scaled prototypes to understand how it could be done. This led to the embroidered sofa which is made using 32 handcrafted pieces of wood. These are joined together without the use of metal fasteners but using exquisite traditional joinery in recycled old Burma teakwood which he had procured from various old bungalows and workshops giving it a second life. This also very sensitively addressed the issues of sustainability — of both resources and craftsmen. What makes it more interesting is the possibility of complete disassembly of the entire piece with ease, thus facilitating convenient transportation and re-assembly. This was achieved using a complete knockdown construction where only the traditional joinery techniques were employed. There is no usage of metal fasteners, screws, nails etc., which makes the joineries much more captivating and intriguing. Being an architect, the fondness for straight lines and angles is clearly evident in the final form of the sofa.

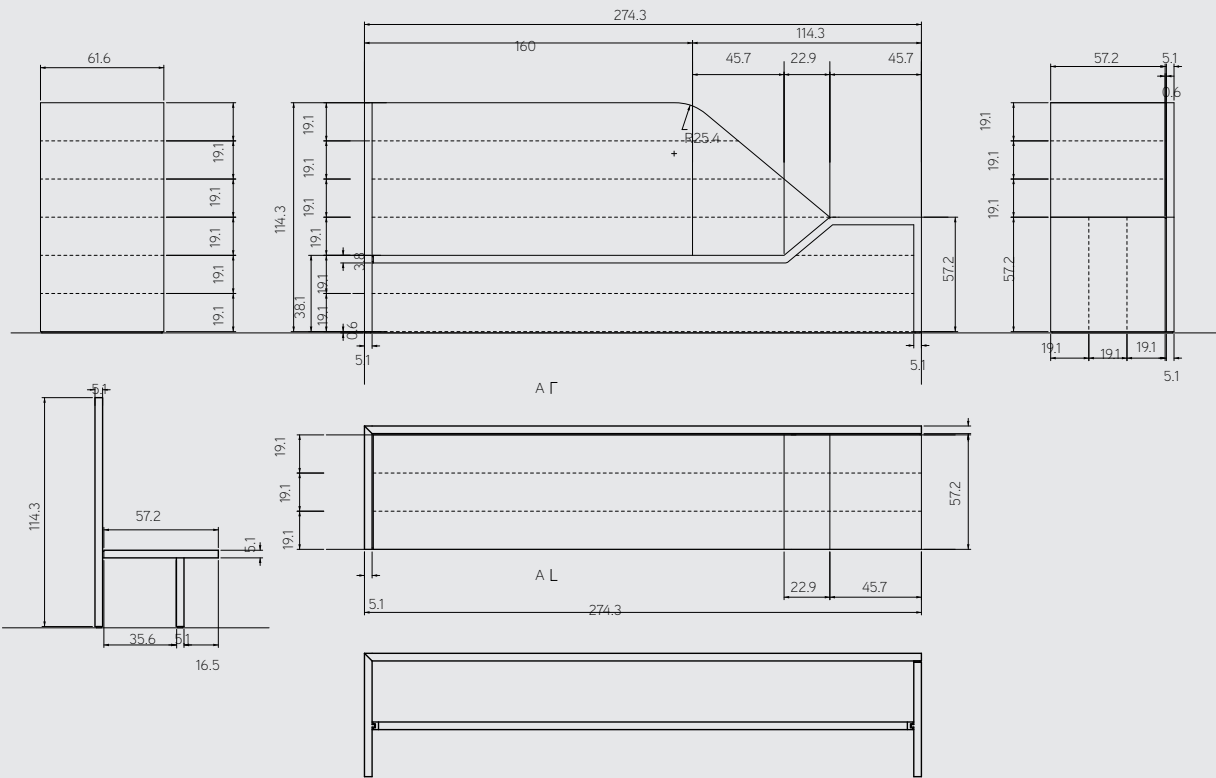
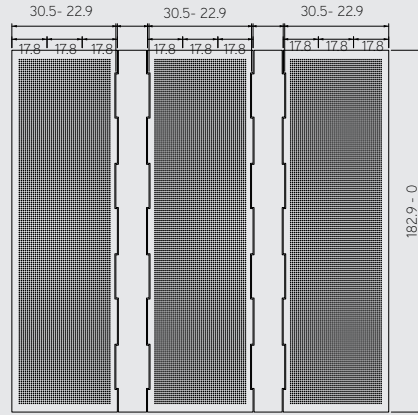
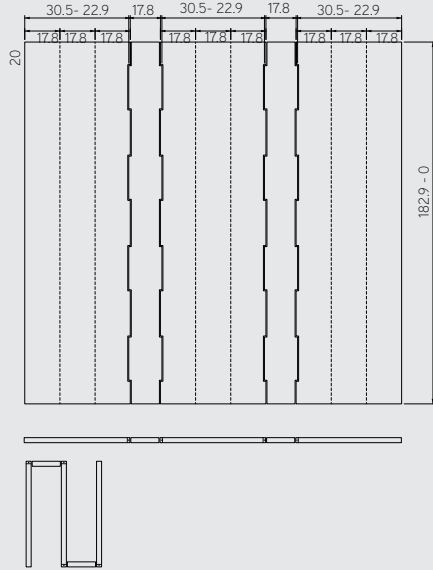
The entire making of this was quite rigorous and labour intensive where over 50,000 holes were hand drilled into a two-and-a-half inch thick seating area spacing at one-eighth of an inch, allowing the seating area to be upholstered using 'zardosi' hand embroidery based on the French knot embroidery techniques. The entire process demanded more time as it had to be done by hands avoiding the use of CNC, laser cut machines as the machines split the wood due to the vibration. This was quite exhaustive as the

holes were to be drilled from both the sides, and making them straight for integrating the embroidery within. The grid base serves as a canvas that allows for the imagery to be altered when desired. The entire embroidery was designed collaboratively by Modesti and Shroff, also involving few master craftspeople. The pattern of embroidery selected is the big flower pattern which has references of the 15th-century upholstery; it is a reinterpretation of the conventional upholstery. The slight variations achieved in the technique of the embroidery makes the piece richer in its visual appeal, where they have varied the size of knot, the thickness of the thread and also the colours making the pattern much more three dimensional. In total, there are 750 man hours for wood work and 550 man hours for embroidery that have gone into the making of the entire piece. And the selection of colours for embroidery in contrast with the wooden polish, leaves the onlooker spellbound. This was taken to another level of complexity in the second piece designed on similar lines but moving ahead from the experiments done during the previous one. The second piece designed by Shroff — a partition screen — is an excellent portrayal of the possibilities of working with hand as opposed to machines. This screen re-looks at a traditional room partition and substitutes the metal hinges with a smaller wooden panel that also allows for the screen to pivot 180 degrees. Here the idea also emerged from exploring the possibilities of replacing the metal hinge with a very intelligently designed wooden hinge which not only serves the purpose of movability but also enhances the aesthetic appeal of the entire screen. The major challenge faced with this piece was the idea of making the embroidery double-sided, as opposed to the embroidery done on the sofa which was single-sided. There were new experiments done, newer techniques explored, new patterns were devised which after a long research led to this piece which has more than 1,00,000 holes into one-inch thick panel at a spacing of one-eighth of an inch. Here as well, each hole was hand drilled with utmost precision and perfection. Unlike most of the existing partitions available, this screen renders the possibility of dismantling each and every piece into components supporting easy movability and thus occupying very little space when not in use.

Another complexity was to achieve a smooth gradation effect as a pattern for the screen where there are no boundaries between one colour and the second. They merge into each other, thus creating a seamless gradation. This was achieved employing Zardosi- double needle embroidery using the DMC cotton thread. This stitching technique is quite similar to the saddle stitch embroidery. This,

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This seating structure is designed with only wood joinery, and no metal fasteners are used; it is designed to blur the line between skin and structure and attempts to redefine the traditional upholstery by enabling embroidery within the wood panel



PLAN AND ELEVATIONS FOR THE SCREEN
 PLANS, SECTION AND ELEVATION FOR THE SEATING STRUCTURE

A
 B

0 50cm



Various stages in the process of making the screen and the seating structure in the workshops



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Using the technique of wooden inlay and taking inspiration from Braille this screen was designed as an alternative to the embroidered screen

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Other pieces of furniture like the shelf, the dining table and the platter designed using a strong sense of materiality and form relationship



as Shroff mentions, was possible “with constant experiments happening at the workshop, where we would go check the samples, evolve them, reject on few of them and perhaps explore many new ones.” This piece was more labour intensive especially for the embroidery, as multiple colours had to come together merging into each other, and this process of achieving double sided embroidery took around 900 man hours and the wood work was simpler taking around 600 man hours. One of the most exciting features of this embroidered screen is proportions of the hinge — which increases the aesthetic appeal of the piece considerably while adding to the function as well.

Apart from these, he also interpreted the technique of wooden inlay (a screen done with inlay similar to the embroidered piece) which takes inspiration from Braille and the inlaid screen has text converted to Braille and then inlaid. He has experimented on various scales using the techniques of wood carving and crystal carving.

Rooshad prefers working with ‘craftsmanship of risk’ which makes his work appear strikingly different from the other design professionals in the field. Rarely deciding the final outcome at the beginning of the project, what he emphasises is the research, the reasoning, the craftsmanship, the process which makes the final outcome far more interesting than could be envisioned. While he has worked one-to-one with the craftspeople during the making of the two embroidered pieces, this has further strengthened his interest in such approaches. He works on a single platform with the craftspeople and always believes, that “it is always a two way learning process which happens while working with them, they are better at many things, we just need to tap the right point to

derive the maximum involvement, thus creating opportunities for work of different types and a job satisfaction for all involved.” This is clearly reflected in his work as well, where the collaboration between the craftspeople and the designer is evident in the workmanship of his furniture pieces. His practice could be termed more as a workshop-oriented practice where the architect and craftspeople come together to produce work as opposed to a studio-based practice with drawings made by the architect and executed by laborers on site.

Exploring healthier prospects of interactions between a craftsman and a designer, Shroff recently acted as a facilitator at the Space Making Wood Craft workshop conducted and organised by Design Innovation and Craft Resource Centre, CEPT University Ahmedabad, where he once again collaborated with wood craftspeople experimenting various new possibilities, and shared his expertise with design participants on wood craft. He is presently researching on various other craft techniques and is already experimenting with the similar techniques explored changing the scale and function of the products thus made. His innovations and ideations in this new direction are opening up various design possibilities, integrating traditional processes of making in contemporary situations and demands. The process may be tad slower than usual in such approaches, but then the end product speaks of its worth, expounding the potentials of working with hands as opposed to digital machines.

— RISHAV JAIN

Interior architect and researcher

↑ Working and designing with *karigars* at the workshop is the essential aspect with which design is approached as a collaborative and process-driven method