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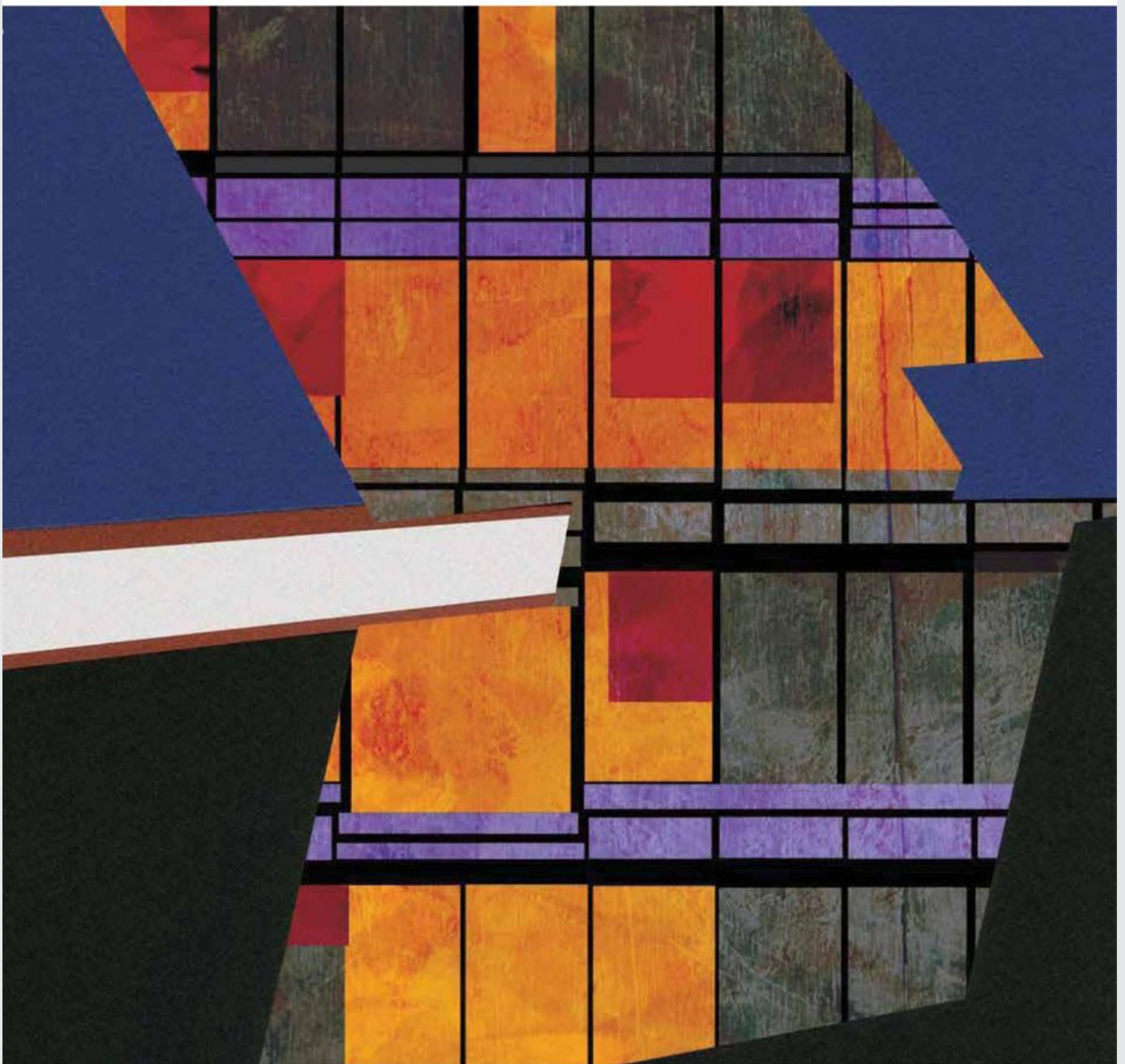
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"IS THERE AN INDIAN WAY OF DESIGNING?"

An essay attempts to dissect the all-embracing notions of art, craft, design, and technique, revolving around the idea of 'Indian' homogenisation and plurality in tandem with current design practices

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"Is there an Indian way of thinking?", asks A.K Ramanujan in one of his informal essays. This question initiates several debates that centre upon the ideas of 'Indian' homogenisation and plurality. Putting across various arguments, he also suggests that what we like, what we talk about, and how we think, are factors that reflect where we come from and what social position we occupy. While he elaborates on the issues of globalisation and modernisation by bringing examples of various kinds, what forms the key theme of the following essay is the question he poses: "Is there an Indian way of thinking?" This argument could lead to many discussions, but the essay looks at the current design practices and questions, "Is there an Indian way of Designing?" Ramanujan also discusses in his essay that the question can change the way it is asked, depending upon where the stress is placed, and the answers would vary. Building upon his arguments, the essay discusses the following:

*Is there an Indian way of designing?
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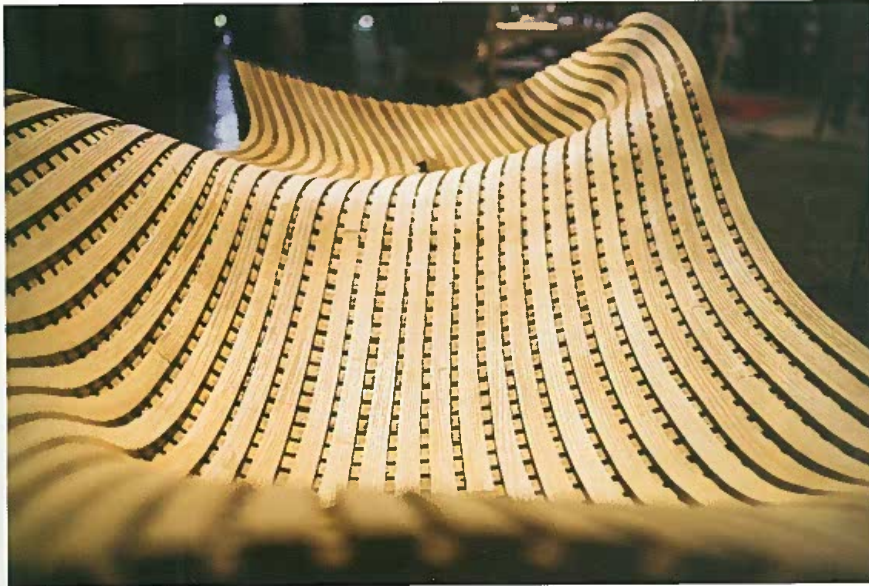
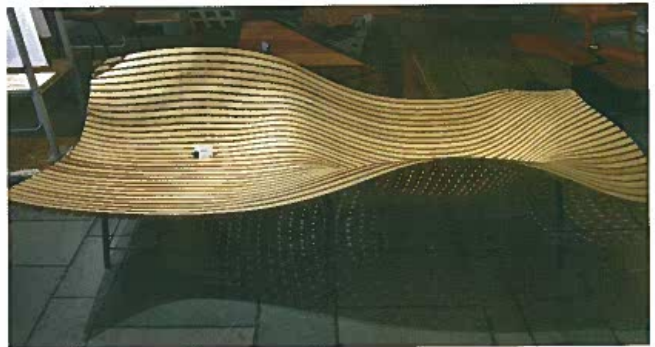


Photo courtesy: Andblack Design Studio

This page, clockwise from top-left: The Inverse Bench by Ahmedabad-based Andblack Design Studio explores wood-bending techniques to the fullest; an installation view of the exhibition; the Inverse Bench uses two layers of wood in different directions to achieve a double-curved surface; the lotus-inspired wall lamps and the Four Seasons lamp

from the collection of Waylin by Anushree Patel; the furniture collection of Waylin Opposite page, top: Rooshad Shroff displayed a series of benches, tables, partition screens, and chairs from his collection titled 15,556; bottom: the exhibition was held at the Ahmedabad Textile Mills' Association building in September this year





In response to the first question, "Is there an Indian way of thinking?", Ramanujan answers, "there was an Indian way of thinking; there isn't anymore." If I try and repond to this in the context of the essay, the following answer emerges, "there was an Indian way of designing; there isn't anymore." Building on the arguments Ramanujan discusses, if we need to learn about the Indian way of designing, an answer cannot be merely sought from designers. One needs to go to the master craftspeople, the *shilpis*, the makers who developed a language of what we call 'Indian'. The concept of *kala* — and its all-embracing meaning of notions of art, craft, design, and technique — itself indicates the profoundness that existed in the Indian way of thinking. Although there are various contradictions centering around the relevance of such traditions and its meaning today, often wherever there is a mention of the term 'Indian' the discussion falls back on the concepts of craft, the local, the regional, among others. In an essay titled *Architecture and Contemporary Indian Identity* authors Rahul Mehrotra, Prasad Shetty and Rupali Gupte discuss that "often buildings are conveniently bracketed into themes like 'nationalist', 'regionalist' etc. to very clearly distinguish them from the other 'internationalist' or 'global' ones."

The second argument Ramanujan discusses, and which essentially is the theme of this essay: "There is no single Indian way of thinking." This is resonant with what we see today in the fields of architecture and design. There certainly is no single Indian way of designing. There is the old and new, there are traditional methods of making and there is digital technology, there is a local market and a global market, there are master craftspeople and there are studio craft-designers. It would be rather hard to claim that there is an exact or homogenous concept of Indian design. Now let's hold on to this argument and look at



This page, clockwise from top-left: A scaled model of the art installation 'Shrine' at Andaaaz Delhi by Andblack Design Studio; an embroidered screen from Rooshad Shroff's 15,556 collection; the Tokri pouf, the Safa chair, and cushions from the Design Clinic India exhibits. Opposite page, from top: bulbs

made out of marble from Rooshad Shroff's collection; Gathri stool by Parth Parikh of Design Clinic India; the Kalam table by Anantaya Decor, decorated with a miniature painting, is a reinterpretation of traditional wooden lacquer trays



Collaborative'. According to the concept note, "Raw Collaborative has been conceived as a platform to showcase the works of Indian designers bound by the philosophy of creating handcrafted products that are inherently Indian in their expression, process, and outcome." While I read more about the platform and its attempt to bring forward work of Indian designers expressing the idea of being inherently, 'Indian', it essentially brings me to the central argument of this essay, which builds upon Ramanujan's question regarding Indian thinking: "Is there an Indian way of designing?"

Spread over two days and housed in the iconic ATMA Building designed by Le Corbusier, Raw Collaborative was a tribute to this structure celebrating Indian contemporary architecture and design. With an idea to present Indian design, the show spanned various products — furniture pieces, home furnishings, and lifestyle accessories — all true to the core Indian aesthetic.

The show witnessed around 22 participants responding to the brief of the event. While it would take longer to deconstruct the design philosophy and understand the 'Indianness' in design, let us look at few of them closely here.

Rooshad Shroff presented his collection titled *15,556*, showcasing a series of partitions, seating elements, tables, and so on, which used the traditional 'Indian' techniques of craft, thereby re-actualising the handmade. The exhibit attempted to integrate the Indian knowledge resource with a wide pool of highly specialised and exclusive objects, making their way to the international market. Here the idea of Indian design was looked at with the aim of exploring traditional craft with new materials and giving it a global appeal.

Ayush and Geetanjali Kasliwal from AKFD and Anantaya Decor, a studio practice based in Jaipur, exhibited furniture and lifestyle accessory products. They used local, sustainable, and repurposed material, combining ancient techniques with high-tech modeling. The product range was a convergence of India's past and present, activated by the efforts of awarded designers collaborating with skilled artisans. The idea of Indian design here is looked with an attempt to embrace the craft sensibilities in modern design.

The work of Kanika and Jwalant Mahadewwala from Andblack Design Studio represented a way of thinking that involves marrying emerging technologies with craft traditions. The use of parametric tools and physical modeling is seen in the way the design manifests itself. Taking a huge





leap from what we think of material, their designs test the strength of traditional Indian materials by exploring them in depth. The idea of Indian design here is looked as an outcome of the intersection of crafts and technology.

Design studios like Rhizome by Rebecca Reubens emphasise on the idea of sustainability in design practice, ensuring a longer sustenance of craft communities. Reuben's design showcase presented products made using locally available, renewable materials, produced by local communities. The idea of Indian design here is building equitable sustainable practices with traditional craft communities.

Young design studio practices such as Design Clinic India by Parth Parikh embrace the narratives embedded in our day-to-day life. Their collection at display drew its inspiration from India, its customs and traditions.

Not only do these design practices showcase the diversity in their approaches, they essentially brings us back to the argument: "Is there an Indian way of designing — there isn't a single one." The multiplicity that I witnessed through the design practices showcased in this exhibit is essentially a testimony to the diversity of what we understand about the idea of Indian design. It is important to know that they struggle for authenticity and identity while attempting to resolve the intellectual complication and undercurrents of craft and culture in India. While few designers showcase the convergence of India's past and present, others use emergent technologies and physical modeling as primary tools in which their designs evolve. As Tanvi Karia, one of the members of the organising team who conceptualised the show, says, "From the patented technique of combining wood & French knot embroidery in Rooshad Shroff's signature furniture pieces to the 'safa' and 'tokri' inspired unique experimentation by Design Clinic India, you see how designers are exploring colours, textures, layers in blending 'Indian' to fresh new aesthetics."

For Tanvi, the idea of 'Indian' in design is the one that evokes a sense of nostalgia, relating to something that feels vaguely known, seen somewhere, felt sometimes along one's journey through India. Talking about Indian designs, she also says that there is always a vernacular flavour, picking up cues from everyday life as well as local crafts and livelihoods of different regions. Turning around to other central questions which Ramanujan asks in his essay, the third one we need to ask, "Is there an Indian way of designing — what we see in India is nothing special to India". With an effort towards glorious past of the cultural heritage of India with varied and diverse craft traditions, the aspirations towards a global identity cannot be neglected. In the book *History of Interior Design in India Volume 1: Ahmedabad*, Muktirajsinhji Chauhan and Kamalika Bose lend the title 'Global Kitsch' for a period starting in the early 90s, where they mention that with the presence of an Egyptian themed jewellery showroom to the Bali themed marriage ceremony venue, the last two decades portrayed the effect of various global forces on the interior design practice in India, and Ahmedabad in particular. With global ambitions of the clients, the design scenario in India has been trying to find new possibilities, while there is nothing exclusively special to India, but what we often see today are 'glocal' attempts. This is often an attempt to find a balance between the global aspirations, and the local traditions and knowledge we possess.

We need to raise a final question based on the Ramanujan's arguments, "Is there an Indian way of designing?" He further adds, "Whether Indians think at all: It is the West that is materialistic,



This spread: the two-day long exhibition of furniture design, contemporary design studio practice, and experimental and bespoke interior products – an endeavour of the Raw Collaborative in Ahmedabad – drew several crowds

rational; Indians have no philosophy, only religion no positive sciences, not even a psychology." Though this question will need a larger discourse in the field of design and architecture, one definitely needs to question the presence of huge glass façades in a moderate climatic zone, the blind use of modern materials and buying of furniture from the west for a vernacular dwelling. The question of what we know about design and what it means to us as Indians is beyond the scope of this essay, and is a debate for another time. Amartya Sen, in his essay on the Indian identity, discusses that such diverse notions "share an inclusionary reading of an Indian identity that tolerates, protects and indeed celebrates diversity within pluralist India". It remains to be seen whether these culturally diverse and regionally grounded practices can have a sufficient following among both consumers and fellow designers to represent a renewed cultural resistance, in the context of the current market forces, love for local and regional designs to the increasingly expanding allure of international-global design practices across the world. And as William Koehler says, "Perhaps no nation is as impossible to characterise, to summarise in a few stock phrases, as is India. Thus categorising a particular architectural work

— or even an entire urban scheme — as 'Indian' is certainly problematic; the many streams that have washed across India are all part of Indian soil. The soil, however, has tended to break down and assimilate, over time, any foreign architectural influences." @

The exhibition, an endeavour of the Raw Collaborative, and conceptualised by Tanvi Karia, featured the works of Andblack Design Studio by Kanika & Jwalant Mahadevwal; AKFD by Geetanjali and Ayush Kashiwal; Anantaya Decor; Design Clinic India by Parth Parikh; Rhizome by Rebecca Reubens; Rooshad Shroff; and Waylin by Anushree Patel. It was held at the Ahmedabad Textile Mills' Association building on 9-10 September, 2017.

