

Is the future of design industry collaborative?

The emerging trend of multidisciplinary collaborations provides opportunities to innovate through unconventional means



Sculptor Durga Gawde and Vaibhav Chhabra at Maker's Asylum in Mumbai. Photos: Aniruddha Chowdhury/Mint

Design and collaboration have always been intuitive, natural bedfellows. The very nature of design implies a multidisciplinary perspective where different points of view intersect and collaborate with each other. As the iconic 20th century American designer Richard Buckminster Fuller said, "A designer is an emerging synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist and evolutionary strategist." In other words, think of Steve Jobs, the archetypal designer in Fuller's quote. Jobs reshaped the global computer, gaming, entertainment and animation industries with breakthrough, design-led products which were founded on his ability to intersect art, technology, engineering, economics and business strategy.

Three shades of design-led collaboration

Closer home, design-led collaboration manifests itself in at least three different ways. Most visibly, it is a means to compete through co-creation, as exemplified by one of the most enduring client-designer partnerships in corporate India. Over the last nearly three decades, the Pune-based multidisciplinary consultancy Elephant Design and Ahmedabad-based air cooler firm Symphony have

evolved a symbiotic relationship. It has resulted in consistent product innovation, marketplace dominance and tremendous financial success, even scooping Symphony out of bankruptcy at one point, in 2009.

"We began working with Symphony in the early 1990s, when we had just started Elephant. They had four-five products in their cooler range, and sales of approximately Rs20-25 crore a year, when we first met them, and they were not listed on the stock exchange. Today they're in more than 60 countries. Our relationship has grown from being a design service provider, to playing an advisory and strategic role. We have either worked completely on, or been instrumental in designing, nearly every product they've launched, especially in the last 10-15 years, creating new categories such as tall, slim, space-saving coolers with better aesthetics," says Ashish Deshpande, co-founder of Elephant Design.

Achal Bakeri, managing director of Symphony, concurs. "Design is deeply integrated into our business model and always has been. Through design we have differentiated ourselves from what's available in the market. We don't have any in-house industrial designers, we had them for some time but found it was unnecessary. Our design team would only know air coolers, Elephant designs all kinds of products and has a much wider design understanding than us. Their teams work very well alongside our sales, marketing, engineering and manufacturing teams," he says.

Design-led collaboration takes on an altogether different form at Maker's Asylum, Mumbai's largest makerspace. The 3,000 sq. ft sunlit workplace, in an industrial belt in eastern Andheri, offers a selection of tools, including a suite of 3D printers, laser-cutters, wood-working tools, juxtaposed against groups of tables and chairs. It is a classic makerspace combination of a shared place for members to draw, make, fix and re-make.

For co-founder Vaibhav Chhabra, design-led collaboration is centred on building communities on the premise of co-habitation, united by a common aspiration to design and make. "We have 70 active members, some people come here to use our tools and start a company, others as hobbyists to build, some to learn. There are nearly-retired professionals, others are college students, freelancers, artists and engineers. Where will you see so many different people working at a single table?" Chhabra notes.

An informal open-plan environment actively encourages members to swap ideas. "Ninety-five per cent of our members would have collaborated with someone whom they met here. For example, if someone is drawing, someone else will come over and say: 'What's that? I know someone who can help you with that,'" says Allan Rodrigues, chief executive officer of Maker's Asylum, adding that several new ventures have been conceived or prototyped from the space, including an electric bike maker, a laser-cut jewellery line and a drone company.

In downtown Fort, Marlies Bloemendaal agrees that design can play an invisible hand in bringing people together. The founder of Ministry of New, an effortlessly chic co-working hub where individual members or small teams can rent work space on a monthly basis, she propagates the Maker's Asylum philosophy of collaboration-by-design.

"There's so much space at Ministry of New to have a conversation, that's how I designed it, so many corners. I've also seen that the communal library room, where anyone can come to work or to read or to chat, is always busy. People work here, even when they're alone, they want to make friends. Sometimes there's even romance," she laughs.

Design-led collaboration can lead to creative problem-solving through liaising with seemingly unlikely allies, believes Biju Dominic, the co-founder of Mumbai-based Final Mile Consulting, a pioneering firm of behaviour architects.

Dominic strives to improve intractable human behaviour through innovative human insights and appropriate design solutions. This could mean reducing the number of accidents on a highway by redesigning road signage and markings to influence driver and pedestrian behaviour, or inculcating greater integrity among front-line sales staff at an insurance company. To drive such deep-rooted change, Dominic allies design thinking with cognitive neuroscience and behavioural economics.

"These fields provide a deeper, specialized understanding of complex human behaviour. Good understanding of human behaviour leads to good insights, and only from these inputs will good design solutions emerge," he says. This version of design-led collaboration is based on mutual intellectual interdependence as different disciplines intersect.

The workshop as the embodiment of collaboration

The three versions of design-led collaboration—as a means to compete through co-creation, as shared platforms for learning and growth, and as allies for creative problem-solving—characterize how these disciplines relate to each other.

How do they blend together so easily? Why does designing—and especially making—fit hand-in-glove with collaboration?

Richard Sennett, a globally renowned sociologist and academic, provides a nuanced hypothesis in *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures And Politics Of Cooperation*, his 2013 groundbreaking book on collaboration in modern life.

For Sennett, the craftsman in a workshop, designing and making things, "embodies" three of the most important skills needed in social life. "Craftsmen who become good at making things develop physical skills which apply to social life....these skills lead to insights about social relations," he writes.

First, the act of making anything involves building skills attained over time. Skill-development, or putting in thousands of hours of practice, turns into a certain rhythm. "The rhythm of skill-development becomes a ritual, if practised again and again," says Sennett. This is a central point.

"Ritual makes expressive cooperation work...in religion, in the workplace, in politics and in community life." For example, he points to small rituals, such as saying "please" and "thank you", that "put abstract notions of mutual respect into practice". More complex cooperative rituals relate to codified diplomatic relations between nation states.

In other words, making is inherently about acquiring skills, developing a rhythm and performing rituals, in the same way that we employ rituals to help us collaborate with each other.

Dominic supports Sennett's view. A weekly ritual promotes collaborative learning at Final Mile: "Every Monday morning, our team meets to discuss which books we've read on human behaviour in the last week. It creates a strong learning culture in the company, keeps us humble."

Second, Sennett believes that the craftsman's workshop embodies the notion of the "informal social triangle", which is vital to cooperation. "Three elements of informal relations compose a social triangle. The three sides of the social triangle consist of earned authority, mutual respect and cooperation during a crisis. The social triangle of this sort creates civility in a workplace," he believes.

In a workshop, this social triangle of informal relations manifests itself through non-verbal communication—for example, in the gestures between craftsmen. "The better we get at gestures, the more visceral and expressive informality becomes," and the stronger the social triangle, he notes.

Bakeri of Symphony endorses the role of informality in promoting design-led collaboration. "Over the years, Elephant and Symphony have understood each other very well, we don't need to talk much.... The organizations have a good chemistry," he says.

Sennett's third and final embodiment "relates the artisan's encounters with physical resistance to difficult social encounters. The artisan knows one big thing about dealing with resistance: not to fight against it, as though making war on knots in wood or heavy stone; the more effective way is to employ minimum force...."

Working with resistance, not against it, is a fundamental reason for makerspaces to exist. "Making stuff by myself can be non-exciting, because half the time I could get stuck. It's helpful to be around people with particular skills who can solve a problem," remarks Chhabra.

Design and collaboration thus share an overlapping trio of skills. Skills-based rituals, the informal social triangle and working with resistance draw parallels between life in a workshop, and our social life outside it. In a world where social life is marked by increasing tribalism, high-decibel hostility and online trolling, these two buzzwords offer a window of promise. If you're searching for a brighter future, put on the twin lens of design and collaboration.

When design-led collaboration fails

Future designers and collaborators, please note

■ Collaboration and design are naturally harmonious, but can sometimes fall out with each other. Design-led collaboration warrants patience and resilience, believes Ashish Deshpande (Elephant Design co-founder). “Design needs patronage. If it is nurtured over a period of time, it starts delivering. If it is confined to only a one-time period, it doesn’t always work. In many companies, people keep changing and it is harder to maintain consistency in the relationship.”

■ For Vaibhav Chhabra (Maker’s Asylum co-founder), collaboration is founded on openness. “If there are too many closed doors at the beginning of the project, it’s less likely to succeed. Both people need to be passionate, clear, and trust each other,” he points out.

■ Allan Rodrigues (Maker’s Asylum CEO) says, “Demotivation can set in if there’s a glitch somewhere in the project, or if both parties are not aligned. They can feel like failures because they’re not moving forward. It’s important to find others who can help to solve the problem.”