



NEWSPAPER

DESIGN

## MADE FOR INDIA

Tired of second best from the West, Indian design is finding its own identity, says Nipa Doshi of London designers Doshi Levien

I was born in a white art deco apartment block in downtown Mumbai and brought up in a dusty peach and cream deco house in New Delhi. I grew up thinking that 'deco' was a distinctly Indian vernacular style that originated in Mumbai. In the 1970s, the only cars on the street were the Fiat Premier Padmini and the Morris Oxford or Ambassador. We had Vespa scooters, Moulinex food processors and Philips light bulbs. My understanding of what was 'modern' was defined by things either imported from Europe and America, or left over from the British Empire.

With a vague idea of becoming a commercial artist or an architect, I found myself at India's National Institute of Design. This was the country's first design school, founded in 1961 and based on the recommendations of Charles and Ray Eames's *India Report* of 1958. The Institute later adopted the tenets of modernism envisaged by the Bauhaus. It is a beautiful exposed brick and concrete building, with large glass windows and vast open spaces, but totally unsuitable for the heat and dust of Ahmedabad. Opposite stands a magnificent abandoned relic of modernism, the Kite Museum by Le Corbusier. Unloved and unvisited, except by a few design students and stray tourists, the museum – like India's post-independence, Le Corbusier-designed city, Chandigarh – failed to endear itself to Indian people.

I found it hard to reconcile the principles of modernism taught inside the walls of the Institute with the irreverent, improvised creativity that existed on the streets outside. Embellished rickshaws, the vibrant traditional outfits worn by the women, the celebratory environment of the markets. Seemingly lacking in good taste or 'aesthetic' guidelines, this sensual world was spontaneous, unselfconscious and rooted in the plurality of contemporary India.

I came to London to do a master's degree in design, as I wanted to understand and experience 'good design'. At the Royal College of Art (RCA), I tried to find relevance for my skills outside the context of India. I knew so little about Europe and struggled to create something meaningful and useful for a new culture. It was at the RCA that I first began to explore Indian identity in design. Being in London gave me new eyes



### EASTERN PROMISE

Clockwise from left, Nokia's ad for a dust-resistant phone; detail from a 2005 window installation by Doshi Levien for the Wellcome Trust's London office; a karhai, Indian cooking pan, part of the 'Mosaic' range for Tefal; the screen-printed bases for the pans

perception is that design is about a look and not innovation; it is 'designer' as opposed to 'designed'.

The Indian government's relaxation of trade barriers has led to the disintegration of collaboration between local and international brands. Indian companies can no longer rely on the research and development of Honda, Suzuki or Yamaha, for example, as foreign firms can now sell in India without having to team up with local companies. Recently, I was driving into Delhi and the road was lined with Nokia billboards for the launch of its anti-slip, dust-resistant phone. The sign read, 'Made for India'. Replacing just one word in the accustomed phrase, 'Made in India', with all its negative connotations, reflected the way business relationships between India and the rest of the world are changing. Jonathan and I were so struck by this campaign that I made a call to my screen printer, who provided the number of the Indian advertising agency responsible for the ad. Within 20 minutes, I had arranged a meeting for the next day. Jonathan is always taken by the spontaneity and accessibility of Indian people.

What is exciting for me is the emergence of a new and confident Indian sensibility. The country's biggest resource is its cultural wealth, which will drive design and innovation. And, like Italy, India has the advantages of an industrial production capability, skilled craftsmanship and well-established indigenous brands. Most importantly, manufacturing at both the industrial and craft level is economically viable. But, unlike in highly developed economies, design has yet to become an integral part of a company's business strategy.

Since I first came to the UK in 1995, I have witnessed the transformation of the design profession's ambivalence towards China and India into an obsession with the potential of these countries. What we have to ask ourselves as designers in Europe and America is, 'Are we genuinely interested in these cultures? What can we learn from their approach to life? Are we ready to have a genuine and equal exchange with them?' ★ [www.doshilevien.com](http://www.doshilevien.com). For more on contemporary Indian design, see our feature on Bangalore, page 192

to see the potential in my own country. I began to wonder why, with all the inherent diversity in Indian life, did we not have our own unique approach?

The potential for design to address the specific needs and aspirations of Indian people is overwhelming. Scooters, for example, look the same all over the world, and yet they are used so differently in India. We are all familiar with the sight of children wedged between their parents on a family outing by scooter, and I cringe whenever I see women sitting side-saddle, balancing an infant on their lap, with their saris flapping dangerously around the rear wheel of the bike. I want to design a scooter as a family vehicle.

I formed the Doshi Levien design office in London with my partner Jonathan Levien in 2000. On a research trip to India, we noticed that Tefal was selling a pancake pan as a chapatti tawa. During a meeting later set up with Tefal, they asked me why I thought it wasn't doing well. Indian manufacturers would not have made this mistake, and would create products that were culturally appropriate.

Design as a profession, as we understand it in the West, is still in its nascent stage in India. The popular