



Opposite: Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien stand in the doorway of their Spitalfields studio. This page: Indian posters depicting electrical appliances and kitchen articles are displayed above the hospital trolley that holds the tea-making apparatus

FUNCTION & FANTASY

Strange and wonderful objects – a transparent medical bag, wildly patterned frying pans, a mutant stethoscope – abound in the east London studio of Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien. They're all part of an idiosyncratic approach to design which marries rigorous utilitarianism with the exuberant style of Doshi's native India. Text: Albert Hill. Photography: Rachael Smith





In among the sketches, models and moulds that litter any thriving design studio, a selection of strange and wonderful objects can be found scattered across the east London office of Doshi Levien. Up in the window sits a crystal-studded doctor's bag, while an eerie imitation lampshade dangles from the far wall. A delicate paper-silk dress, patched up with embroidered plasters, hangs above a desk.

Meticulously hand-crafted in Britain and India, each of these curious items was designed by Nipa Doshi and Jonathan Levien as part of a striking window display that recently occupied the windows of the Wellcome Trust on London's Euston Road. Now dismantled, the display (which depicted a fictitious doctor's surgery) was the first in a series of three that the couple will install over the course of a year. Intended, as Levien says, 'to present to passers-by the missions, objectives and history' of what is the world's largest private biomedical charity, the engaging displays have not only brought some much-needed life to one of London's dreariest thoroughfares but has also firmly established the reputation of the fledgling Doshi Levien design office.

Doshi and Levien, who live together above their studio, first met at the Royal College of Art. Levien was born in Scotland, leaving school at 16 to train as a cabinetmaker, while Doshi was born in Bombay, gaining her first degree from the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. After graduating from the RCA in 1997, the pair pursued separate careers – Doshi with architect David Chipperfield and Levien with product designer Ross Lovegrove – before joining forces three years later. The union was made with little fanfare: 'one day we just answered the phone with "Doshi Levien" rather than our usual "hello",' laughs Levien.

Doshi and Levien's differing approaches to design dovetail astonishingly well; 'Nipa prefers to sit and dream and produce paintings,' explains Levien, 'while I try to translate them into real life.' Levien's very British background also seems to sit snugly with Doshi's typically Indian upbringing. A quick glance around their studio space proves just how seamlessly the two cultures have been intertwined in the life of the couple. Sipping spiced chai tea at a table designed by Terence Woodgate, the pair point out that while they are great admirers of the sort of utilitarian design frequently encountered on the streets of east London, they also revel in the 'myth and magic' that abounds in Indian culture.

Doshi Levien's infatuations with function and fantasy emerge strongly in their work. The tajines, karhais and woks they created for Tefal, for instance, look the very definition of rigorous design. Hang them up, however, and you see elaborate Eastern patterns swirling across their bases. 'We think a lot about what makes you enjoy something you own,' says Levien. 'In India,' adds Doshi, 'objects are seen as your companions, so a lot of love is invested in them.' Bus drivers routinely decorate their vehicles and, every day, women make a pattern from rice flour on the ground outside their houses.

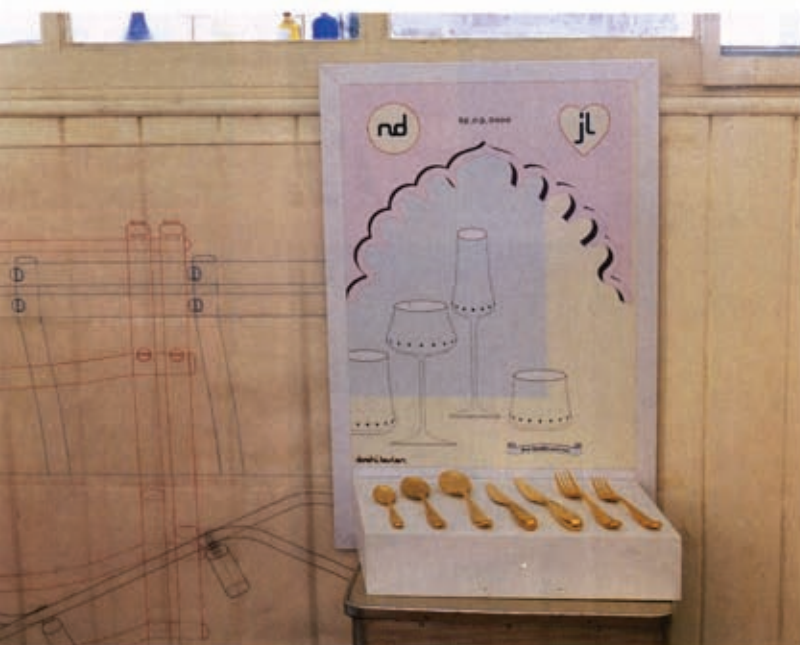
Doshi is always amused that it took her move away from India to prompt a true appreciation of the visual culture

This page, from top: the studio wall has been painted with green from the RIBA's 'Art Deco' paint collection; cooking vessels with elaborately patterned bases, designed by Doshi Levien for Tefal, hang from the wall; an aluminium flight case props up a large H from their Wellcome Trust installation. Opposite: the silk dress, hand-made in India, is another relic from the Wellcome display





A sculptural 'stethoscope' from the first Wellcome Trust installation is displayed in the centre of the exposed 19th-century brickwork. The 1950s school desk came from Spitalfields market



with which she grew up. 'When I was studying in Ahmedabad, my designs were very strict, very Bauhaus,' she says, 'but coming to London made me realise just what I had.'

Today Doshi keeps numerous reminders of her homeland in their east London studio. Brass rice paddles hang alongside richly coloured fabric swatches and thick, gleaming strings of bangles. Two Indian posters depicting electrical appliances and kitchen articles also display a rather more exuberant approach to graphic design than that seen in the anodyne pages of British catalogues.

Providing a backdrop for Doshi's selection of Indian ephemera are the austere walls of this ex-industrial space, built in the 1850s. Levien discovered it was once a print works, when a shower of letters fell on him as he stripped the ceiling. Keen to retain the industrial feel of the space, Levien has left many of the walls bare and covered others in subdued RIBA paints. Adding to the air of pragmatism, their Miele washing machine has been given pride of place ('It has so few buttons,' Doshi enthuses, 'and it's so heavy it doesn't shake'), while a hospital trolley holds their tea-making apparatus. Making the most of their proximity to Spitalfields market, they have also acquired numerous useful-looking sets of drawers and a sturdy 1950s school desk (which they had to spend hours ridding of decades-old chewing gum).

Despite owning such a seeming pick and mix of objects, the overall appearance of their studio space is commendably coherent. Such talent for presentation, clearly, prompted the Wellcome Trust to ask Doshi Levien to do their window displays. 'Story-telling,' Doshi says, 'is a big part of our design.'

The story to be told about the Wellcome Trust is one that many have struggled to comprehend. Established in 1936, the charity does not accept donations, surviving on the abundant legacy left by the pharmacist Henry Wellcome. Neither does the trust, as people seem to assume, produce drugs. Its field of research is also confusingly non-specific. The general aim is to further the understanding of human and animal health, a mission on which the trust spends upwards of £1 million a day. 'Curiosity funding' is how Doshi Levien have described the trust's remit, spelling this phrase out in a large, elegant typeface across the façade of the charity's HQ as part of their second installation.

Doshi and Levien now declare themselves hungry to create proper theatre sets. They have already sent a pleading letter to the Old Vic, but have yet to get a reply. In the meantime, the pair have been working on luggage, a range of cutlery and graceful, lightly hued glasses for Habitat plus a collection of motorbike accessories for a firm based in India.

Indeed, Doshi Levien are seeking more collaborations with Indian companies and eventually hope to maintain offices in both Britain and India. The couple certainly make a convincing case for this cross-pollination of cultures. But Bombay must wait, as Doshi and Levien continue to concentrate on brightening up the everyday lives of Londoners ■
Ring Doshi Levien on 020 7375 1727. Their displays can be seen at the Wellcome Trust, 215 Euston Rd, London NW1 until 23 Sept

This page, from top: stationery is made from old Indian packaging; gold-plated cutlery lies beneath a presentation board for Doshi Levien's 'Melba' glassware; the trompe-l'oeil lampshade was used in the fake doctor's-surgery set. Opposite: a crystal-studded acrylic medical bag, from the same installation, stands alongside a Tefal tajine and moulds for a new range of utensils

