



DesignerswithaCause

DESIGN & PEOPLE CONSISTS OF GRAPHIC, INDUSTRIAL AND ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNERS WHO VOLUNTEER THEIR SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE TO SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN PROJECTS. MARIA LOUIS INTERVIEWS GRAPHIC DESIGNER SETHU DAS AND ARCHITECT SUKU DASS, THE BROTHERS WHO STARTED THIS INITIATIVE

What prompted you to start an organisation like Design & People?

D&P: Though we came into existence as an organisation only on August 9, 2003, most of us were already involved in similar activities – but at an individual level. Till then, there was no common platform for designers and architects to work together towards humanitarian and social causes. As the people who founded Friends of Tibet

in 1999, we knew the difficulties faced by non-profit organisations. Most deserving organisations are handicapped when it comes to design. They deserve, but they cannot afford. So in 2003, we felt that it's time for us to give back our skills and experience to the society which created and supported us from the very beginning. Design & People was formed with the aim of uniting and bringing like-minded designers

and architects under one umbrella. Today, we are a global network of hundreds of creative professionals from all over the world working voluntarily towards social and humanitarian projects in India.

How did you go about getting people to join hands with you?

D&P: From the time of the formation of Design & People, we've been getting a

1. Sethu Das and Suku Dass, the founders of Design & People



very positive response from individuals and organisations. We have designers from more than 15 countries and from almost all the states in India. Most people get to know about the organisation and its activities through our website www.designandpeople.org and through our social campaigns. In the beginning, we did not know how to go about getting more people involved with the organisation. Slowly, designers – mostly students and teaching professionals – started contacting us, usually with the question of whether they could start a chapter of Design & People back in their country. We encourage and support such initiatives. Many art schools in the USA and Europe encourage their students to get involved with our activities.

Was it difficult to rope in like-minded designers to give their time to such a project?

D&P: When we started, most people did not understand the aim of our collective effort - not only designers, but also our beneficiaries. No one really understood what we actually meant by Free Design (Free as in 'Free Gifts' and Free as in 'Free Tibet'). Some of our beneficiaries were not comfortable with the idea, as they suspect anything that is free - which is natural.

What steps do you take to ensure that this group goes beyond posturing to further social and humanitarian projects?

D&P: What probably make us unique from the rest of the design groups and organisations are the campaigns we continue to run for the last several years - namely Save Periyar, anti-Cola, Save Vaduthala and Free Design campaigns. We believe that issues around us are much more important than design itself. We want designers to play a

very important role in society rather than the traditional role of a creative person confined to four walls. So those who approach us to work with us as Design & People volunteers are also those who want to share their skills and experience for the less fortunate and for a better society. Most creative people are self-centred and not involved with any issues other than their own. We were surprised and humbled when we found a copy of 'Creative Resistance', a journal published by Design & People, on the library shelves of IDC (Industrial Design Centre), Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai – simply because the entire journal had no single chapter on Design, but chapters on various issues of global concerns. Later, in my conversation with Prof. Kirti Trivedi, one of the foremost designers who leads Visual Communication at IDC, I understood that he too believes in our philosophy and our approach towards design. He appreciated the approach 'Creative Resistance' had taken because he too believes that design is about issues we are surrounded with and our methods and initiatives to resolve them rather than an individual, creative expression. This is the thought and philosophy we wanted to convey. The Open Design philosophy of Design & People advocates an economy appropriate for art – based on sharing, exchange and joyful giving.

Could you mention some of your successful projects?

D&P: There is no success or failure once you're in the field. Success was never our ultimate goal, though survival is. But if you ask us to talk about the joyful projects we have undertaken in the past, we would mention our architectural contributions towards Buddha Smiles Education Movement, the work we do for Friends of Tibet since 1999, and our involvement with

the activities of Pratyasha: Cancer Children's Welfare Society. What makes these projects more enjoyable and meaningful is our common beliefs and direct involvement. (More information at www.friendsoftibet.org and www.pratyashaforchildren.org)

Any interesting anecdotes that you could recount about working with NGOs and the triumphs/failures you have encountered?

D&P: One of our 'hidden' agendas is to promote the culture of helping each other. We encourage organisations to work with other organisations and towards common goals. We find this difficult, as many organisations are comfortable seeking our free service but not comfortable doing the same for others, as such a practice is against the constitution and not a part of their organisational agenda. Their inability to work for others without expecting anything in return also amounts to our failure.

What are the important projects you or members of the group are working on now?

D&P: Design & People work for more than 25 organisations on a regular basis. One difference you might find is our long-term involvement with issues and organisations. We generally do not get involved with short-term or crisis projects. The purpose is to help those individuals and organisations in need, not those in greed. We admit that we have a lengthy and laborious selection process, slower than our government process. This is to ensure that we do not waste time supporting wrong organisations, but those who cannot afford design. **AM**

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2. An aerial view of the Buddha Smiles school.

3. Design & People architects having a discussion with Dr Ramu Manivannan, the founder of Buddha Smiles.

4. A paper model of the cow shed built for the school.