

TOY STORY

New Delhi based **Surabhi Khanna** is a reputed design and education workshop specialist but is equally passionate about being a toy and game designer



How has the journey from architecture to toy and game design and design education been?

SK: Studying architecture gave me an overall process of design. But somehow I felt the need to

connect more to working with materials and hands-on activities and learning directly from people. My thesis project in architecture was about school buildings and their relationship with education. Post graduation in Toy and Game Design from National Institute of Design was very fresh and fascinating. It provided me ample opportunity to work on a variety of projects, which provided feedback on the impact of design.

I had never planned to be a design educator. Development projects and conducting design workshops got me interested in this area. Now I work at my design studio, and conduct workshops related to design and education focusing on play, design and product development. There is also batch production of playful ideas and products. I also conduct courses for design and architecture students, the focus is on toys and tales and using design heritage for new innovations. The thrill of learning by doing is visible amongst teachers and students during these design workshops and this gives me immense joy and satisfaction.

Was design always a part of your life?

SK: I grew up in a design and social development environment; my mother is a social scientist and my father a design educator at NID, Ahmedabad. My younger sister and I grew up on the NID campus, which involved a lot of outdoor play, natural surroundings and interaction with design students, bubbling with energy and ideas. During my architectural training at Rajkot, I realized the importance of design programs at NID, which had a multidisciplinary environment and interesting approach towards design solutions. My mother's work for the social and development sector fascinated me. I discovered I wanted to work with a combination of social and design areas.

I suppose playfulness was part of my childhood. Babu (my father, Sudarshan Khanna) used to discover and research interesting toys and ask me to try to find out how to play with them. We used to make many types of toys to gift to friends as New Year greetings. These seem to be impactful design experiences for me. I also used to love knitting, embroidery, writing poems, and making sketchbooks to present to friends. I experienced that the combination of the 3Hs – hands, heart, head - is the foundation of learning with joy. This is the inspiration for my design workshops now.

Can you elaborate on your most memorable projects?

SK: *Khel Manthan*: This involved design and development of playful, innovative products



Khel Manthan - churning learning. Handcrafted story teller and story maker design kit for early education designed by Surabhi Khanna.

with local skills and co-operation. I collaborated with SIRDI, an NGO involved in empowering self-help groups in rural areas. There was a need to upgrade the skills of the self help groups and introduce new products. The project was aimed at designing play products for collaborative play between children of 3-6 years and adults. The exclusive concept of multiple storytelling gave rise to innumerable interpretations through tales and poems made by children and adults for early education. The kits are made in small numbers for batch production by skilled women.

Madhubani Paper Mache Product

Development: This design intervention was for a paper mache cluster in the Madhubani district of Bihar. The specialty of the paper mache craft in this region is the handcrafted organic form and texture and traditional Madhubani painting surface decoration.

It was observed that this craft needed intense creative inputs: an upgrade in terms of new product development, and training for interested people in the cluster.

A new product range was developed using basic molds and creating indigenous forms, such as the Dosti Tray, Swaagat Katora, Peacock Tray and small products like fridge magnets, earrings, etc. It was a successful attempt and helped generate awareness and interest among new learners and the young generation. The excitement of the work and future possibilities brought the group together.

Both these projects were through the design clinic scheme for MSME. Therefore it was possible for the NGO sector as well as the craft sector to bring in design intervention. But this is still very limited compared to the large and medium scale industries.

What kind of toys and games do you create?

SK: The play products created in my studio are usually inspired by heritage and learning through curiosity. I design and develop new play products and work on batch production. All the play products are designed in the studio and produced in small numbers against order. The use of design, innovation and ingenious craft skills are the basis of design and development.



Madhubani Paper Mache product development at Design Intervention Workshop with Salempur village cluster. Design basis formed using basic molds and creating indigenous forms.

The concept behind *Khel Manthan* for instance is to trigger possibilities of multiple storytelling and story making as well as creating poems with just 10 characters and dynamic play. The packaging and the play product have been creatively integrated to facilitate well organized storage and to avoid misplacement of elements.

'Fill and Feel' is a hand-embroidered textile play-gift product. One has to fill, feel and guess what is inside, then open it and eat all of the edible fill. Playing with natural textures is one of the best play therapies.

'Friendship Grip' is based on gripping a finger. The concept is that nothing works with aggression but everything works with gentleness. The Friendship Grip is an innovative, interactive gift.

How important is design education at the school stage?

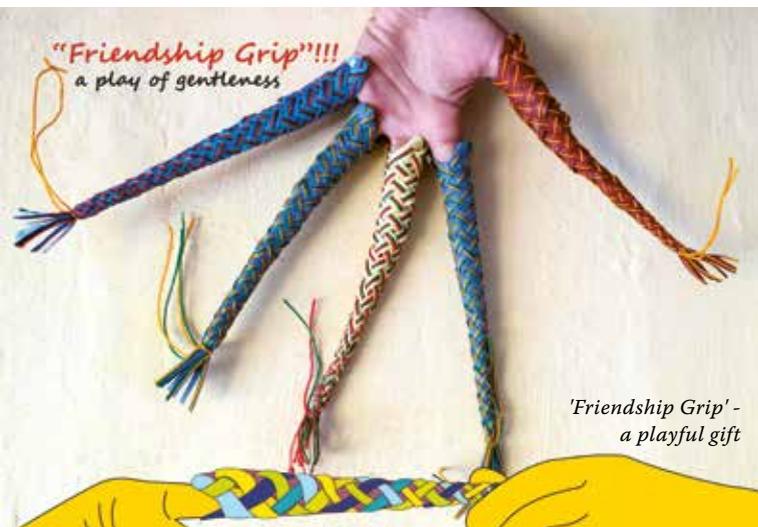
SK: For the last three years, we have been conducting many design and education workshops with teachers, trainees, and students. Interestingly though the school education system is opening up to new ideas

and experiences, it is still rigidly structured and focusing only on cognitive development.

Often introducing design activities is welcome more for skill development rather than idea explorations. Yet, many teachers open up in the workshops and are able to feel the need to introduce creativity and innovation in their teaching. One of the best experiences was with teachers at Katha, an NGO working for education for neglected communities though story books and activities. I had conducted workshops on Play, Design and Education. Since the

'Fill and Feel' - refillable dry fruits, containers for gifts & play therapy





groups enthusiastically create many tales with sounds and play.

How was your experience at the UNESCO creativity workshop in Germany?

SK: The creativity workshops are organized by Spielmittel, Berlin and endorsed by UNESCO Germany. These focus on working with special groups and designing new toys and games. Twenty invited participants from different countries including

teachers take the path of storytelling in all classes, they meaningfully utilized these design workshop experiences. Design is an important yet unutilized input in school education.

The workshops do wonders. For teachers, the focus is on pedagogy. They are taught to make playful products, especially toys which are culture, nature or tradition inspired. The next stage is story creations relating with dynamic movement and playfulness of the toy. For students, this leads to understanding of materials, mechanism, science and technology, story formation and creative expression.

An example is the Mimicking Whistle - the toy is created by placing a paper strip in between two ice-cream sticks.

Traditionally, it was a puppeteer's whistle made with bamboo strips. In workshops, the idea was further developed by adding graphics, mimicking the sound created by the specific creature; hence the name Mimicking Whistle. The process of making and incorporating graphics changed the nature of the whistle, from being a hidden thing in traditional puppet shows, to a lively sound-making puppet-product in itself. Both teachers and children's

designers, teachers, therapists, and social scientists stayed in a school for children with special needs. The emphasis was on discovering the abilities rather than the disabilities and using that as a basis to create new designs. I worked with a group of older individuals suffering from partial dementia. There were board games and group activities and sessions with their facilitators to help them remember things and carry on their daily lives with some help. It was quite challenging since no one remembered the rules! Then I took out a traditional palm leaf Jigging Puppet and started playing with it. Suddenly, each of them wanted to play. They asked me about the puppet, where and how it was made, why it danced, where I came

Play, design and education workshop with teachers of Katha





Creativity Workshop Exhibition at Nuremberg, Germany in March 2013

over the years. The institutions also involve their design alumni actively in the curriculum.

Recently, I conducted a course for architecture students in Delhi called 'Developing installations inspired by ingenious toy designs'. The students studied traditional and existing toys, their mechanisms, and then worked on concepts inspired by yet entirely different from the

from, and so much more. I realized that play, specially dynamic play, can trigger so much emotion and excitement in a person.

Towards the end of the workshop, all participants had displayed their designed products in a public exhibition in Nuremberg, Germany. The outcome of the workshop was not only to get new products, but to have a direction to be able to design with feeling and care for interested groups and to get a sense of purposefulness. This workshop reconfirmed my deep interest in working with people with special needs. What is good for people with special needs is definitely good for all; this approach is a part of universal design.

In your opinion, has design education finally come of age?

SK: Design education in India is growing. Many new institutions are coming up and there is much more public awareness about design professions and institutions. The overall framework of the design curriculum at most institutions is still similar to design programs elsewhere. Design education can be different, relevant and richer in India, primarily due to our crafts, heritage and cultural resources. This has been clearly realized by NID and some other institutions, which have been modifying their curriculums

existing ones. We decided to scale up the concepts to know what difference it would make. One outcome was of a simple string-pulled puppet, scaled up to life-size. Students made a large figure to encourage people to become part of the playful installation. This 'Hulkfie' was put up in their annual fest and people took selfies and photographs to see their Hulk form. It became such a hit at their student fest!! The whole process was eye-opening for architecture students, since they could feel there are other parallel design directions of interest. The input gave them enthusiasm and confidence to explore.

Another example is the "Toy Design Workshop: Nature Inspired" for the form exploration course of students of IIT M.DES, Kanpur. The process of inspiration and exploration with specific living forms and features inspired from nature provided interesting ideas and playful products as specific outcomes.

Designers mostly tend to work with large establishments. Can we think of design education directed at Indian SMEs?

SK: Small and medium sized enterprises are slowly and actively becoming an alternative for many designers. Design education now also considers society aspects. Courses like craft study, system design introduced at



Toy Design Workshop - Nature Inspired conducted for M.Des students of IIT Kanpur

NID, are examples of this design direction. But often SMEs do not have the professional culture and hesitate to spend on design and development. There are many designers and design students involved with the NGO sector. This is another alternative opportunity. Some of the NGOs are able to manage funds for seeking design support. But there are still problems of sustained and professional ways of working for SMEs as well as for NGOs. This needs to be resolved as these sectors will provide an opening for design for social needs.

What should design students try to get out of their education?

SK: The best part about of good design schools is involvement in live projects while

Elective Developing Installations inspired by ingenious toy designs for students of architecture



studying. Freelance designers, in the initial phase, do face difficulties in getting projects. Working for alternative sectors such as special need groups, rural sector organizations and small development organizations seems quite difficult and uncertain. These aspects need to be addressed as part of design education.

What, in your opinion, will be the next big theme in Design Education in India?

SK: Design education through experiential learning is an interesting process. The craft sector is slowly getting some attention and support. There are sectors which really need more work such as design for special needs, old age groups, and public facilities. There has to be active encouragement and planning to give support to interested designers and organizations for design development. Design education in the future would be much more multi-disciplinary. It will also be more linked with design practice and practitioners. Design for industry will be one sector of specialization; design for social and community needs and design for special need groups hopefully will receive their due importance. Design also will be more active part of management programs.

What are your future plans?

SK: I will be expanding my work in the design and education sector and also include play therapy. There is also a plan to document and present our toy collection. I will be developing new designs and play products inspired by heritage and nature. Workshops and courses on toy design and education for different groups and institutions will be sustained.

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