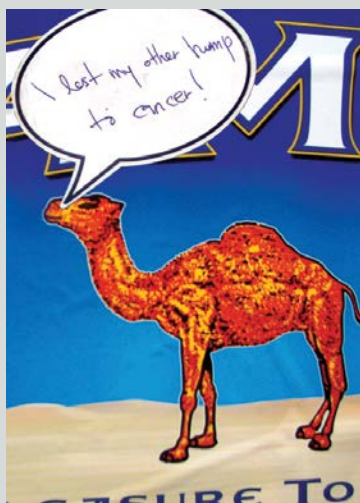


By Payal Khandelwal

PERSONAL PROJECTS

This edition's Special Report by *Kyoorius* talks to design and advertising professionals to understand what actually motivates them to work on personal projects or alternative ventures along with their successful and hectic main careers. How do they juggle between the two? And most importantly, how do these ventures help them or influence them in their main careers?



The Bubble Project was started to transform the 'ugly and intrusive' ads in the streets of New York to start a public dialogue. It soon became a global project.



Ji Lee

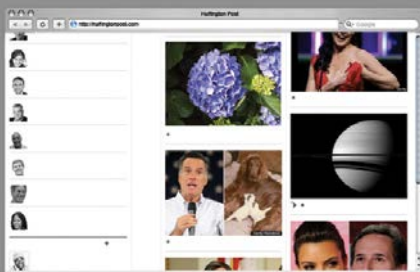
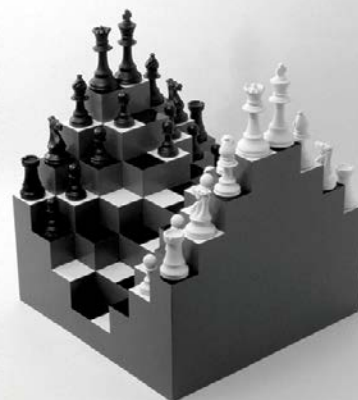
At one of the big advertising agencies he was working for, Ji Lee, who is now Facebook's creative director, had a brilliant campaign idea to talk about the five different flavours of Cheerios, 'Only their holes taste the same'. The idea was initially loved by the client at the meeting but was eventually smothered to death over a discussion on 'taste vs flavour' that went on for 40 minutes.

After four years of trying to produce other such good ideas and then seeing them being killed over something ridiculous and silly, frustrated Lee to no end. He then came to the conclusion that if he really wanted to make something happen, he cannot depend on others, he would have to do it himself. And that's when his first in the series of many personal projects, 'Bubble Project', was born.

For the Bubble Project, Lee spent a few thousand dollars out of his own pocket and printed 30,000 stickers in the shape of speech bubbles which he placed on various "boring, formulaic and predictable" advertising billboards and posters all over the town. He left the stickers blank and not surprisingly, people

eventually started writing things on them. The stuff that people wrote was either funny or nasty or political or promotional etc. The project soon became viral. People even started printing their own speech bubbles or downloading them from the website that Lee had created. And more importantly, ad agencies started using the 'Bubble Project' as a tool for guerrilla marketing.

Today, Lee works on a huge number of personal projects (including Wordless Web, 3D Chess board, Parallel World etc.) along with his Facebook job and is a great advocate of these projects as he truly believes that they add a lot of skill and value to his professional life. Based on our conversations with various creative professionals, we have divided the report into three parts based on Lee's three important ideas on personal projects and their transformative power. Read on.



"I can't depend on others to make things happen. I'll just have to do it myself."

One of the most common reasons is a need-gap situation which has led professionals to set their alternative/personal projects in motion.

When Sudhir Sharma, who runs his own agency Indi Design, felt that conventional media was not interested in covering design, innovation and creativity, he took the onus upon himself and launched *POOL* magazine. "We have a huge talent pool in design, we just need to look for them and put them up in media. I also felt that there was no publication that is truly documenting contemporary design from India and therefore I decided to bring out a publication that becomes a valuable resource or 'Pool' of this information," he says.

V Sunil (executive creative director) and Mohit Jayal (managing director) of advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy had pretty much the same reason for launching *Motherland* magazine. "We talk about our deep culture and values all the time, but there is no one including all the top publishers and brands doing anything about it. We thought that it is our responsibility as a creative organization to help package culture well," says Sunil.

In many cases, frustration with the existing situation or scenario has also led professionals to dive into personal projects. Nicolas Roope, founder of the digital agency Poke in London, launched Hulger phones in

Hulger offers a range of boutique phones. The idea was triggered by the new age designs of phones which are sleeker and smaller but also more 'complex and unusable'.



order to take a radical departure from what was happening in mobile phone products ten years ago. He says, "They were getting more and more complex and smaller and smaller. They were more seductive but also more unusable. So we created a huge, single function nostalgic handset that was an artistic statement but also created some functional benefits (you could hold it between your ear and your shoulder for 'hands free' use). We were really critics of what was happening in the tech world and how their products were alienating us all, but rather than shouting from the rooftops we created a product that encapsulated that reaction and celebrated a counter movement to it." He has also launched a range of designer bulbs, Plumen.

Raghu Bhat, co-founder of Scarecrow Communications, was frustrated with the fact that Man is destroying God's designs and replacing them with his vastly inferior designs. "This has led to a drop in the aesthetic consciousness levels across the planet. People are

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Plumen is a range of designer energy saving light bulbs which use 80% less energy than the traditional light bulbs and last around eight times longer.



Nicolas Roope





Held in New Delhi, UnBox is an annual festival which celebrates action at the intersections of different disciplines.

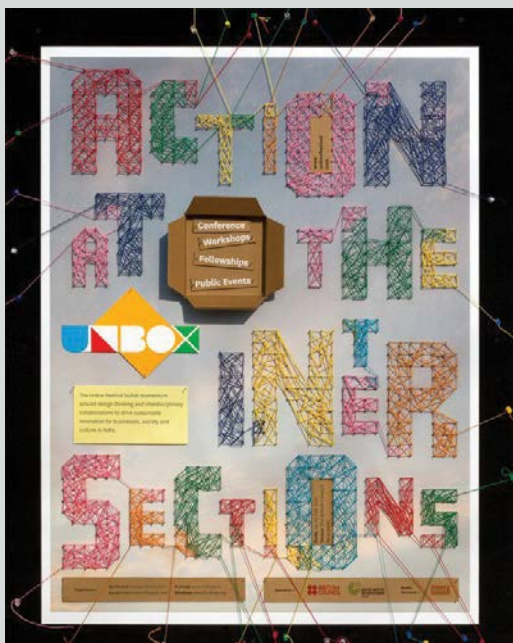


Rajesh Dahiya

not only ignorant of what beauty is, they are also becoming increasingly tolerant towards bad design." According to him, his personal venture Fungus Designs (which produces a range of designer laptop bags, notebook cases and sleeves) was a psychological outburst towards the fast spreading epidemic of ugliness.

Not all projects, however, are born due to need-gap or frustration. Rajesh Dahiya, founder, Codesign and co-founder, UnBox Festival says that UnBox was an outcome of two creative groups coming together. "In 2009, our studio Codesign co-located with Quicksand Design Studio to a new office in Gurgaon. We started with a 'let's create an inter-disciplinary platform' discussion and ended with the UnBox festival. We wanted to create this platform for ourselves, to make new things, meet new people and to engage in activities that we would love to be part of but are unable to find time and opportunity in a typical professional practice." Codesign also launched a design book *Dekho* last year.

Himanshu Dogra of Illum Design says that his alternative venture Play Clan, a home, apparel, gifts and stationery store, was inspired by everyday observations and local culture. "The idea was to narrate stories through product design in a playful way and that is how it all started. No business plans and numbers, just a simple belief."



In the case of Roweena Bhatia of Yellowink Design, her Fat Free Almost venture which offers healthy recipes, food combination ideas and kitchen merchandise, was a result of combining her love for both design and food. "Just being a designer wasn't enough for me. I wanted to take it to different aspects of life," she says. She also believes that with clients it becomes difficult to think out of the box at times. "With Fat Free Almost, I am completely free to do what I want to and it is definitely more fun."

"It's healthy for the team to let loose and go back to their passion and creating for the simple joy of creating. Working for yourself as the designer and the client allows you to work on the ideas that truly matter to you without the pressure of deadlines or budgets (well, sometimes!) and experiment with varied tools and techniques. In a sense, you unleash your creativity in a way that is the closest reflection of who you are as a designer and an individual," says Hemal Kapadia, founder + design director, Olive Design who started her alternative venture East India Dezin Co which recently launched the 'Maharaja Collection', a range of cushions.

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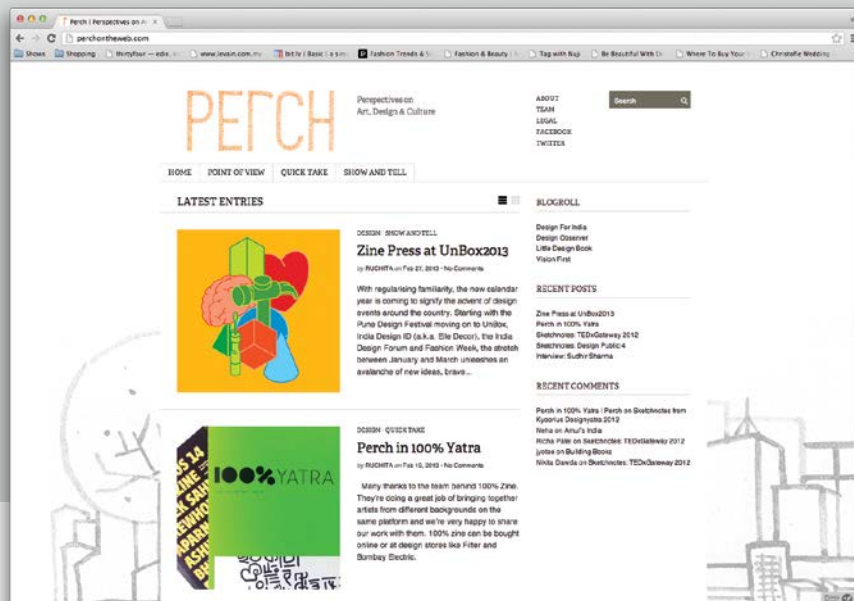


Roweena Bhatia

Fat Free Almost combines innovation and design with food and provides healthy food ideas and quirky merchandise.



Perch is an online platform for Indian perspectives on art, design and culture. It aims to build meaningful discourse about the place of art and design in everyday life.



"Time is a concept which can be stretched."

The juggle between professional commitments and personal/alternative ventures cannot be easy but if Lee is to be believed then time is just a concept which can be stretched and one hour can become three hours. Each and everyone that Kyoorius spoke to for the report agree that it does get hectic at times and managing both things together does get difficult but the passion is so great that it all works out.

Ruchita Madhok, founder and principle designer at Kahani Designworks, along with Aditya Palsule, started Perch, an online platform for Indian perspectives on art, design and culture. Talking about the time management needed for both the agency and the web project, she says, "We are very deliberate in the way we dedicate our time and resources to Perch. We consider it a part of our studio's work and not just another side project. We're committed to the effort and make sure to write even when we're travelling, visiting design events or having conversations with people." She agrees that sometimes time does



Ruchita Madhok





Fungus Designs is a range of designer laptop bags which was mainly created as an alternative to 'The Black Bag', which the creators feel is amongst the 'ugliest design innovations of all time'.

become a constraint, but the opportunities that have opened up through Perch have had immense rewards personally and professionally. "We've been able to interview people that we look up to and share our passion for design. It's always amazing to look at the archives to see how much we've learned and how much our ideas have evolved," she says.

With POOL, Sharma has a very practical strategy in place. His Indi Design team works for the magazine too and the work is well delegated. "The team at Indi is a 24 hour thinking team and we work fairly well in advance with many backups in place. So every cover has two or three options ready." He thinks since POOL is a passion project, it just gets done during the time when people are not really working.

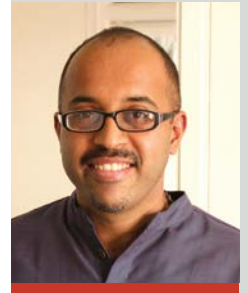
Kay Khoo, creative director, Figtree Design and Addikt, who also works as creative director at Kyoorius feels that he doesn't consciously think about juggling between things as he takes everything as a project. However, he admits that sometimes it gets difficult in the case of Figtree as it has real clients and deadlines whereas Kyoorius is more of a passion.

Dahiya thinks that difficulty in managing both the agency and the festival together is actually the exciting part. "We learn much more by doing difficult stuff and resolving difficult situations. Everyone in the group

works hard and pulls it off eventually."

With Bhat, it has actually been quite difficult managing both Scarecrow and Fungus Designs in terms of time. However his zeal for his project is making him work his way around it and he now has renewed ambitions for Fungus. He has decided to rope in "more evangelists, more believers" for his project to sustain itself. "I need to infect more people with my vision. So I'm making a concrete business plan to expand the scope of Fungus Designs that involves hiring people, revamping my supply chain and getting someone to invest in the venture," he says.

A similar problem was faced by Rohit Malkani, senior executive creative director and Mumbai creative head at Grey Worldwide whose personal passion is theatre. He is a well-known theatre artist and acts in various ad films too. While he managed to juggle the two quite easily so far, things got quite tricky when the workload at Grey became too heavy. However, again due to sheer passion for theatre, Malkani has made a strong resolution this year that come what may he will figure a way out and go back to theatre even if it means doing just one play a year.



Raghu Bhat

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Sudhir Sharma



POOL is a monthly magazine with the aim to inspire people via 'approaches in never-seen-before design/ innovation/ creativity features.'

"Personal and professional projects complement each other."

Interestingly, while they get the freedom to do what they want to do without a client's brief looming large over their heads, most professionals we spoke to genuinely believe that starting their own personal ventures have actually helped them in understanding their clients' point of view and their issues better.

Poke's Roope thinks that a personal project is like having a second eye which gives him a much better perspective on how things work and fit together, what motives and connections are important across the chains that join businesses with their customers and with other partners and facilitators. "It's easy in an agency to become academic in your opinions, but running a global product business with digital in its veins gives me a chance to test my ideas and theories without the pollution brought about by too many participants. So when I talk to clients at Poke, I often speak with much more confidence as I have seen how things play out in reality and have been close enough to them to really feel what components are important in driving the desired outcomes."

Kapadia of Olive Design feels that while working on a personal project, she began to respect her clients' perspective more than ever. "You understand their need to question everything, and to affirm that the design put forth identifies best with their brand. Clients can be restrictive, but they're not always wrong. Sometimes, they bring a fresh per-

spective and we exceed our own creative expression (while sometimes we can't help but pray for some divine intervention!)" she says. She has also realised that it allows designers to think of the commercial aspect in design and its marketing.

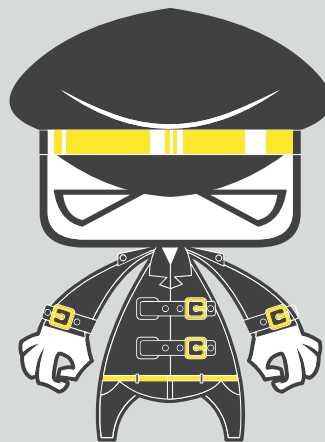
Dogra of Play Clan also thinks that doing something on your own puts you in your clients' shoes and eventually you understand their perspective. This he feels creates a fine balance in their roles as marketers and designers.

Putting themselves in the clients' shoes is one part of how professional and personal ventures complement each other. In terms of skills, there is a clear interlink between the two for many professionals.

Madhok thinks that writing helps them articulate design concepts more clearly. She says, "We're a team of thinking designers and we can't help but observe, comment, critique and record our encounters with design. Perch gives us a space to express ourselves in ways that are not always possible with design projects and complements our practice. The chance to write regularly has improved our writing skills and in turn, made us better at what we do best: communicate."



Hemal Kapadia



Maharaja Collection is a range of 'opulent cushions' from East India DeSign Co, a luxury and lifestyle brand.



Play Clan offers a range of home, apparels, gifts and stationery that 'carry a playful, individualistic and humorous attitude'.



Malkani thinks that theatre has given him a lot of confidence about his presentation skills so it really helps when he has to present an advertising idea to a client. In fact, there is a lot more that he draws from theatre to his advertising career. "Observation, for example, is something that crosses both the fields and it also helps me in constantly building a reservoir of doing things differently. Working as an actor in 30 second ad films taught me about the economy of words and thus helped me as a copywriter. It taught me how to get compression in the copy when I am writing," he says.

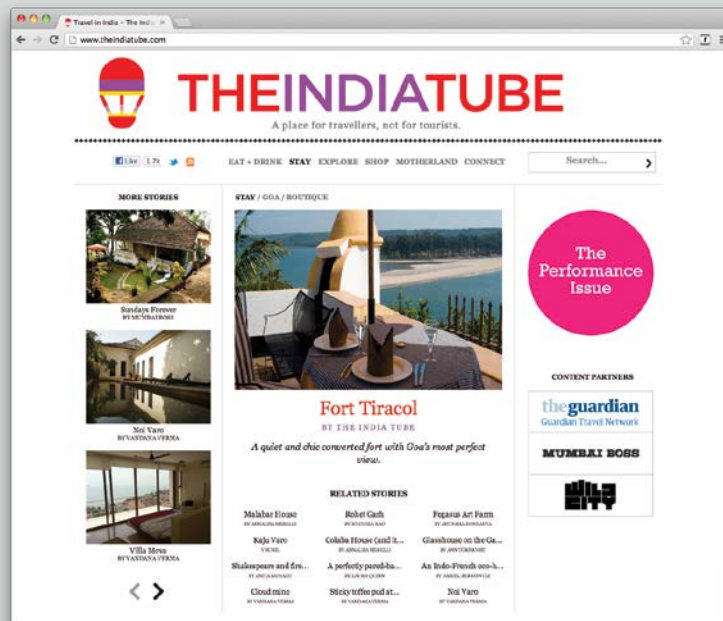
Sharma clearly sees POOL as a clear advantage in positioning his agency Indi Design. "Another reason for me to start POOL was that I wanted to attend all the design festivals in the world. I started getting invitations as the editor of the magazine. And soon, I also started receiving invites to come and speak on Indian design and to help curate exhibitions on Indian design in some of the museums across the world," he says.

Meeting a new set of people through personal projects is something that provides creative stimulus to professionals and help them widen their skills. Bhat feels that through Fungus Designs he is in touch with designers across the world. "Interacting with them has widened my horizons. Most of them are very interesting people who I would have never met otherwise. My innate interest in world cultures, history and the possibilities of the internet, all find a funnel in Fungus Designs."



Rohit Malkani

The India Tube is an online portal that positions itself as a 'place for travellers, not for tourists'. It provides insights into travelling in India, rather than just information.



Sunil also feels that it gives them access to all kinds of creative people too (artists, writers, musicians etc) from all over the world and that helps build a larger community of like-minded people, which help both the company and individuals. Moreover, he thinks that all of W+K's alternative ventures like the gallery (WK EXP), *Motherland* and IndiaTube play great influence in a lot of the advertising work they do.

Khoo has taken up a lot of "personal" projects over the years along with his studio work. He has managed a café, a bookstore and has also worked for a news portal. "Doing these projects not only gives me energy for my commercial work, but they also help me meet different people. If I hadn't done all those things I would have probably only dealt with clients and briefs all my life," he says.

With *Kyoorius* specifically, he gets to meet a lot of Indian and international designers which gives him a fresh perspective on things which goes back to his professional work.



V Sunil



Motherland magazine adopts one issue per theme to provide perspectives on trends, issues and ideas that shape contemporary Indian culture.



Kay Khoo

"Through Kyoorius, I have met some of the world's most famous designers and I figured that while most Asian designers have these ego traps, these big guys have absolutely no egos. I realized that ego has to completely go away if you actually want to be someone as a designer. That is probably the best life experience I have got."

Dahiya sums this up very simply. He believes that if through their main careers and personal projects, people learn to tackle difficult situations, meet interesting people, curate rich content, and manage to remain happy while doing so, they will chart their own successful and meaningful design career.

Clearly, personal/alternative ventures seem to be assimilating well with the main careers of these creative professionals. Not only do they get to follow their passions on their own terms, they understand their clients' better and leverage their skills in their professional assignments. And time, as Ji Lee pointed out, seems to be stretching itself for them, with a little effort perhaps.

How & Why bookshop has a huge collection of design books and stationery.



Big Fat Bird Cafe caters to the lunch crowd and also doubles up as a meeting place for professionals.



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