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DESIGN DECOLONIZATION

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ENGLIT 1913

Design and culture have always been interconnected elements for me. One cannot exist without the other. With time, they can become influential to each other. Growing up in two very different worlds, I was exposed to two different cultures, and subsequently, two different designs. When a design loses its connection with its culture, or when it becomes reminiscent of another, it can stick out like a sore thumb. Not only visually but functionally. Design decolonization was born from the differences and similarities of design concepts I noticed in the US, India, and Britain. More specifically, I was interested in the development of these designs on Indian soil and the effects of colonialism during these developments. Using my personal experiences with the two worlds gave a more intimate understanding of the cultural practices and the ways in which they are incorporated into design. Often, there is a hierarchy within Design in which functionality precedes all. This is a linear conceptualization of the process. Rather, cultural design seems to follow a more continuous process away from hierarchical importance and celebrates all facets of design as important.

My personal experience with design was within the range of my family, friends, and community, and I still felt there was a larger pool of resources that could paint a longer picture. The first step was collecting the data and resources needed. A brief delve into Indian history helped to further pinpoint the times and places where colonialism was at its peak. Once a timeline was established, there was also the importance of analyzing work from pre and post-colonial periods, especially post, to understand the changing design theories. This project resulted in a large amount of information, oftentimes an overwhelming amount. However, it also opened many avenues for possible narrative routes.

Prototyping these projects requires a lot of back and forth between shuffling content around and editing the current narrative thread. Originally, the idea was for a fully open layout with full freedom of choice for the user in which route/page they wanted to start on. I realized there were some setbacks with this prototype as it required some assistance from the interface that would have to prompt the user to take certain steps, essentially rendering the purpose of the open layout useless. Rather, I decided to apply a more structured approach, albeit hesitant. I worried that it would become too structured and become a more passive viewing of the slides. Overall, there are some interactivity elements, but creating more avenues that stray from the linear progression of the module would be where the narrative structure can turn away.

Reflecting back on the process, there was much time spent on the actual collection and organization of information. It became a large task to delegate what would be cut down and how. That was something that did set me back, but ultimately I was able to move past it. It also made me realize the scope of the project was much larger than I had anticipated. There were many avenues of design and culture that I wanted to cover. In addition, critically thinking about the design of the website itself was a daunting task.

Narratively, I wanted to create a condensed but digestible amount of information that allowed users to follow along with the main topics of Decolonizing Design. Visuals were important during this process, and starting off with traditional visuals was something that I wanted to prioritize. I began with the popular states in India and found the common traditional art forms. When looking at Bengal’s Kalighat paintings, Pichwai paintings, or Mandana Paintings, you are left with an introduction to the vast different culture and subsequently their methods of expression in the form of art. Later in the process, when looking at India-centric Design, these points can connect and reveal the ways in which their unique nature contributes to the functionality of specific areas. Since the main focus was on decolonizing design, I did not want much stagnancy on the first pages, so the page jumps into introducing colonialism. The colonial page is one area that has more outcomes in future iterations. The page introduces the three main colonial powers during those years, and upon further analysis, users can look more into these different regions and get some insight into their specific impacts. Looking into the post-colonial period, two main moments from research stood out which I decided to incorporate. MARG magazine's first publication and their staunch advocacy for a contemporary ‘modern’ India, that depicts neutral tones, minimalistic functions, and a cubic design. While MARG magazine's audience was aimed towards Indian architects, they decided to focus on Eurocentric design theories with their publications and labeled them as “contemporary” “modern” and “innovative”. In reality, they diminished the long traditions of Indian architecture and design. This effectively also bled into their function and decreased their efficiency. The same magazine incorporated architectural concepts based on concrete. Concrete was popular during the British colonial expansion, as they introduced it as a way to increase exports throughout their other conquered territories. MARG magazine created a spread depicting their use in a more design-oriented way that gave the illusion of modernity, but in reality was a facade for the continuation of Eurocentric practices (Design and Modernity, Rajguru). Functionality also decreased, as concrete is not suitable for hotter climates as it absorbs heat, as opposed to traditional Indian materials such as mud and other sustainable materials. With that in mind, the second photo showcases a different example that utilizes these traditional practices in their combination of something new. Laurie Baker is a good example of a post-colonial design practice that still pays homage to its roots. The final slides are conclusive chapters and bring forth the topic in question: India-centric Design. These four themes conclusively take into consideration the cultural importance and awareness to these themes can lead to a more fruitful product for the people involved. The idea of continuity, color, community, and coexistence are crucial in any Indian design. The idea of the product utilizing feeling rather than function as its point of importance (Gupta).

On the computational side, there were many elements at play, and deciding their importance and integration was particularly difficult. The project itself was planned to be an interactive space, which I later specified as a website. The main languages used would consist of HTML, CSS, and JS. I began the project with HTML and CSS and later realized the crux of interactivity within any website utilizes Javascript. There was a steeper learning curve with JS, but it turned out to be worth it as the real interactivity was able to be implemented into the website after.

The main areas of interactivity revolved around revealing informational content. Starting with the map which formed into an image map the more I worked and learned with javascript. The process resulted in many tutorials and introductory courses to familiarize myself with the interface. I attempted to use React.js but realized, without a fundamental understanding of JS, it would be difficult to implement a package system. The process wasn’t linear but it progressed, and after some setbacks, I was able to get some understanding of what the principles and important features of scripting were. In addition, I also made it a point to learn Blender to incorporate some 3D elements into the site; however, using WebGL to incorporate them proved to be a task I wasn’t familiar with. I struggled with adding CSS and other styling elements to the item itself and decided to use Spline, another open-source 3D modeling platform. Spline turned out to be much more user-friendly, and I was able to create an interactive 3D globe with that.

The process of design was iterative and revision-based, and at every step, I incorporated accessibility checks such as contrast checkers, font sizing, and alt text. With every revision, I would go through the process once more to make sure it continued to show accessible content. In addition, the final page takes users to a static site in which sources and works cited can be found for more information on the content presented. I wanted to create this space for those who were interested in a deeper analysis of the content and also to attribute the sources used if they contained licenses.

The purpose of this project was to open a dialogue about conscious design practices and the importance of understanding our past to be better creators for our future. The project is a working document, and I plan to continue to extend it into a larger scope. There are still many implementations and ideas I have for this project and the more work put into it, the larger the growth as a creator and designer I come out.

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