Adding plus value to development aid projects through design strategy: experiences from Pakistan

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Abstract: Designers have engaged in design practices and discourses in development contexts since the 1960s. The early focus was on industrial design, and its relationship with pre-industrial techniques. With little industrial design history in Pakistan, designers’ engagement in grassroots empowerment is recent, inspired by international trends like design thinking and social innovation methods. Increasingly designers engage in communities, organizations, social businesses, the education and the policy sector, collaborating with experts, e.g. on poverty alleviation or access to education, health care, infrastructure or income opportunity. While promising, these engagements require critical reflection. This paper draws from my current PhD research on craft projects in Pakistan’s aid sector, from recent conversations with designers, educators and researchers in the Pakistani context, and from eleven years of teaching design in Lahore. It encourages reinterpreting traditional South Asian concepts of making and community engagement in relation to contemporary design methods in grassroots empowerment.

Keywords: Design in grassroots empowerment, Pakistan, South Asia, Histories of making, Community engagement

1. Introduction

In my PhD research I investigate craft projects in the grassroots empowerment sector. Their goal is to create sustainable income opportunities for marginalized producers with a focus on home-based women workers with embroidery skills. I investigated about 10 to 15 case studies in Pakistan and four in India, differing in scale and character: large internationally funded capacity building programs, small private initiatives and ethical lifestyle brands. This field I termed craft for income collaborations (CFIC). I’m particularly interested in transition processes from aid projects to social craft business models. Research methods were interviews, conversations, field visits, focus groups and one self-
initiated project as a form of action research. Self-sustaining value chains and sustainable income opportunity are often not achieved when a project’s funding period ends. Producers regress to their pre-project or worse situations, NGO managers struggle to find new grants, private project initiators pay from their own pocket. Most stakeholders have the will to establish sustainable craft businesses. NGO managers have knowledge and experience in social business and grassroots empowerment strategies. Why does the idea to utilize embroidery skills for poverty alleviation often remain behind expectations? What value hold new interdisciplinary design approaches for sustainable value chains beyond the design of craft products, and for the overall grassroots level? Can the reinterpretation of historic cultural practices add to sustainably root social innovation in the Pakistani context?

Significant are the gaps in access to information, technology and financial services between privileged stakeholders like donors, NGO managers, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and designers, and the underprivileged ones like marginalized producers. This leads to top-down management, and to disconnection from the target groups needs and wishes. They remain aid receivers, whereas empowerment would happen through business partnerships. Many stakeholders are aware and critical of these dynamics and their manifestation in complex social and political systems, but face difficulties in overcoming them. These findings from my CFIC investigations can be transferred to many Pakistani organizations and institutions, and therefore it makes sense to look at design’s value for the grassroots empowerment sector beyond craft production.

Recently designers have become increasingly involved in such settings, applying methods known through design thinking, a method and a mind-set for facilitating participatory and interdisciplinary processes (Manzini, 2015) of ideation, prototyping, testing and implementation, which can help bridge those gaps among stakeholders and achieve design concepts appropriate to their objective and context. While some designers welcome the iterative methods, learned usually during graduate studies abroad, others ask themselves whether it would make sense to contextualize them better in local traditions and habits. Design thinking has become a buzzword¹, elusive and used to describe casual brainstorming sessions and intensive participatory processes alike. However the arrival of design thinking in Pakistan serves as door opener for a larger awareness of design among other professions and a wider public. Subsequently interdisciplinary collaboration gets more chances in Pakistan’s context whether in business, social services or the development aid sector.

The following text locates grassroots empowerment in the realm of development in Pakistan, and then summarizes historic discourses on design’s role in development since the 1960s. It describes how design notion in South Asia has developed, and how traditional cultures of making and community engagement have potential to form synergies and enrich globally promoted iterative design methods trends like design thinking. It concludes with suggestions of how design can help addressing the multi-dimensional complex challenges on Pakistan’s grassroots level.

2. Grassroots empowerment & development aid
Grassroots initiatives are usually described as bottom-up movements, with grassroots referring to people on the base, the masses, distant from the few powerful ones and politics (dictionary.com & en.wikipedia.org). They are associated with community activism and alternative approaches towards sustainable development, involving local knowledge (Seyfang & Smith, no date & Manzini, 2015).

¹ Design thinking to me is a critical term: a) ist meaning is not clearly defines, and b) designers have always been thinking and aimed for improving situations, not only with large companies like IDEO promoting that understanding.
The term empowerment is not easy to grasp. It can signify a status and a process. Empowered people have the right, the opportunity, the ability, and the means to access information. Thus they are aware of possibilities, chances and threats, can negotiate and make conscious decisions concerning their lives. Empowerment is also the process to achieve this position. Methods are discussed in fields like psychology, pedagogy, gender studies or community development. Until today this discourse is inspired by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s ideas. In the 1960s and 1970s he developed literacy programs, encouraging people in rural Brazil to observe and describe their own situation. This critical consciousness would enable them to question power constellations and address concerns in their communities themselves, rather than being exposed to top-down measures (Freire, 1970). The empowerment discourse became part of the development debate in the 1970s and 1980s (Calvès, 2009), and until today is concerned with questions of agency of marginalized people, e.g. women or ethnic or religious minorities (Luttrell et al, 2009)

Empowerment processes involve power relationships. Jo Rowlands distinguishes four dimensions: 1) Power over: ability to influence and coerce; 2) Power to: organize and change existing hierarchies; 3) Power with: power from collective action; and 4) Power within: power from individual consciousness. While the first signifies a top-down process where people are directed to behave in a certain way, the second points at access to knowledge and opportunity, the third at collective community engagement, and the fourth at personal awareness and reflective capacity.

Important empowerment dimensions today are economic, social, human and political empowerment (Eyben et al, 2008 & Luttrell et al, 2009). Those are closely interrelated, e.g. someone who earns a decent amount can invest in children’s education, or someone with access to information can negotiate his rights. Reality does not always unfold so linear, but displays complex interconnection of different empowerment dimensions. Cultural empowerment refers to the strengthening of traditional cultural practices, in danger to disappear, e.g. of minorities (Luttrell et al, 2009). Its relationship with economic, social, human or political empowerment can be ethically controversial, when people living and producing cultural heritage don’t benefit in the other dimensions.

Grassroots empowerment in Pakistan is usually located in the field of development aid, a controversial concept permeating international relations. Definitions place development close to the idea of advancement. Characteristics of advancement though are not clearly defined and depend, e.g. on time period or region. What is considered advanced in one culture might not be in another (Gad, 2014). Intentions of people from one culture to help those of another to advance are critical as seen during colonialism and in the international development aid agenda, established since the middle of the 20th century in the aftermath of World War II, the beginning of the Cold War and during independence processes of previous colonies. Early development ideas, based on economist Walt Whitman Rostow’s theory, pictured a process through which all countries go alike in five stages:

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2 This model has been referred to by the feminist movement in the 1990s but to me makes sense in the larger empowerment debate in the development aid field.

3 The dictionary provides different meanings for the word ‘development’: a) the process in which someone or something grows or changes and becomes more advanced, b) a recent event that is the latest in a series of related events, 3) the process of developing something new, and 4) an area on which new buildings are built in order to make profit (dictionary.cambridge.org/).

4 This paper cannot discuss the colonial period in detail. Colonizers though, besides being motivated by ambitions of power and wealth, were under the impression that they were helping the societies that they suppressed to advance economically, administratively and culturally.

5 The United Nations, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were founded in the late 1940, predominantly led by the USA and Great Britain. After supporting West Germany and West Europe to rebuild after WW II, they aimed to do the same with poor countries of the South, many of them previous colonies. The first world offered help to Third World countries in their independence processes, also to keep them away to turn to Russia and communist countries of Eastern Europe were the Second World.
at the bottom are traditional societies and at the top the age of high mass consumption. Countries of North America and Western Europe have reached the highest stage. Poor countries still have to go through the development process. This early development agenda focused on modernization through supporting developing countries’ industrialization processes by providing engineering knowledge and machinery (Ottacher, 2015). With this one-dimensional approach failing, focuses shifted towards partnership with local experts and on entrepreneurship and privatization of public services. It is understood today that development is a highly complex interplay of factors. Amartya Sen’s capability approach defined human development as a set of personal freedoms: democratic and political voice, economic facilities, social opportunity, information access and security (Sen, 2000). The Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) feature eight, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 17 different areas (un.org). These multi-dimensional approaches require new forms of action. Currently two directions I find especially interesting in relation to design practice: 1) systemic action research, and 2) social innovation. Both acknowledge the failure of top-down development, focus strongly on participation and collaboration, are concerned with facilitating multi-perspective stakeholder interaction, and aim to implement ideas and innovative improvements in iterative processes (Burns, 2007, 2015 & Davies, 2012).

3. Design in development since the 1960s

Discourses on design in developing countries were initiated in the 1960 through conferences like Design for Need in 1976 at the RCA or the Ahmedabad Declaration by UNIDO in 1979, the latter hosted by the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, founded in 1961 and a landmark in India’s design education. Early discourses focused on the role of industrial design (Bonsiepe, 1977 & Papanek, 1985 & Er, 1997), and especially in India on its relationship with pre-industrial modes of making. Interestingly, while the development agenda and international politics were dominated by the USA and Western Europe, from early on in the 1960s designers from countries in Latin America, South Asia and Africa shaped the design discourse with international colleagues. (Fathers, 2012 & Ranjan, 2013 & Saad, 2013). But already Charles and Ray Eames in their India Report, taking the example of a *lota*, unfold a long list of subjects that should be considered in its design process (Eames, 1958). Without terming it they propose a systemic approach, in which the impact on the larger system of each design decision is considered. Development concerns can be seen as what Rittel described as wicked problems, aka those complex challenges, which cannot easily be defined and solved, which involve multiple, and even contradicting perspectives (Rittel, 1973). This motivated designers to engage with systems thinking, and they do so until today (Sevaldson, 2015). Since the 1990s the notion of design is expanding into dimensions of designing services, management processes, businesses, organizations, systems and policies. This has repercussions for design

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6 This patronizing view reflects in terminology: developed versus developing or underdeveloped countries, industrialized versus emerging markets. During cold war times the terms Third World for poor countries, many previous colonies, First World for Western industrialized countries and second World for the Soviet Union and communist countries was shaped. More correctly developed countries are sometimes called the centre and developing countries the periphery. Today, with no more Cold War, power relations have become more complex, but nonetheless poor countries of the South are still seen as backwards.

7 United Nations Industrial Development Organization

8 International Council of Societies of Industrial Design

9 The National Institute of Design was founded in 1961. Charles and Ray Eames formulated recommendations for a design curriculum in their India Report, commissioned by the Government of India in the late 1950s, ten years after independence, in the context of a national industrialization program.

10 A vessel used across the subcontinent for personal hygiene
approaches in development, which too changed towards participatory methods and entrepreneurial skills training. Discourses have been dynamic with multiple perspectives. In Pakistan it is emerging in the past four to five years, seemingly through designers, educators and researchers returning from their graduate studies abroad, where they are exposed to expanded understandings of design like design for services, organizations, businesses, systems and policy making. Design no longer is limited to designing products, but now designs processes and formats of collaboration between designers and non-designers (Manzini, 2015).

4. Emerging design practice in grassroots concerns

4.1. Experiences of from the field

The Pakistani context is eclectic and diverse, and in today’s interconnected world inseparable from regional South Asian and global concerns. It is characterized by co-existence of age-old beliefs, traditions, habits, service systems (like informal saving committees) and governing institutions (like assemblies of community elders for judicial decisions) with modern global lifestyles and processes. Gaps in access to education, health care, infrastructure, wealth and power are extremely large between different parts of society. Permanent change, disruptions and inventions inspire and disturb everyday. Combined with a culture of spontaneity, high flexibility and improvisation skills, it forms an ecosystem difficult to provide design solutions for.

Designers today predominantly design services, apps or products for the more affluent and educated social classes, not differing much in task and solution from any Western country. On the other hand, especially in the past four to five years they are increasingly concerned with pressing challenges of marginalized people on the grassroots levels.

In a recent series of conversations with five designers, educators and design researchers, associated with different established and emerging design programs in Lahore and Karachi, common points highlighted were: designers’ responsibility to address environmental, infrastructural and social concerns, the need to collaborate with the industry (textile, fashion, product, communication technology), and the need to involve the government in establishing a design policy and design council to raise awareness of design’s value and scope.

Karandaaz is a company specialized in financial services for small businesses. In a recent project the design collective GRID Impact developed guidelines for designing mobile financial service apps for illiterate or semi-literate users (Fiorillo, 2016) in a strongly participatory and iterative process with several prototypes tested with potential users (Fig. 1). An important feature is a character guiding users through the menu and symbols, referencing users’ experiences. In the project Har Zindagi – Every life matters, initiated by the Punjab Government, the Innovations for Poverty Alleviation Lab at the Information Technology University in Lahore re-designed a children immunization booklet for illiterate mothers. Colour codes now help mothers to identify which body part the vaccine is for. For parents not knowing their child’s exact age illustrations signify the developmental stage of a child.

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11 Called Jirga
12 Personal Skype conversations between Dec 16 and 22, 2016 with Ali Murtaza (Information Technology University, Lahore; former Beaconhouse National University, Lahore), Umar Hameed (Pakistan Institute of Fashion and Design; former Beaconhouse National University, Lahore), Qazi Fazli Azeem (Karachi Institute of Technology and Entrepreneurship; former Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, Karachi), Razia Sadik (Pakistan Institute of Fashion and Design; former Beaconhouse National University, Lahore & National College of Arts, Lahore; Art Education researcher), and Ahmed Ansari (PhD Candidate in Design at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh; former Szabist, Karachi).
The aesthetic of the booklet resembles a passport, so it is given importance. Ali Murtaza, member of both project teams describes his positive experience of transferring design thinking methods to the Pakistani environment, seeing them as tools, applicable in diverse cultural contexts.

Outreach projects are common particularly in textile design programs. Students travel to rural places and utilize existing skills to develop sellable products for urban centres, sometimes in collaboration with a local NGO. Objectives are to raise awareness of craft traditions, expose students to environments outside their own privileged ones and to support income for producers, with the latter hardly achieved. According to almost all conversation partners, these projects require critical reflection because there is a risk that they form an unhealthy system of people objectification: donors objectify NGOs, NGOs objectify design students and everyone objectifies marginalized producers.

Design educators Razia Sadik and Qazi Fazli Azeem highlight the need to rethink design education in light of an expanding design profession towards interdisciplinary approaches in social innovation and beyond object design. Business and technology institutions are responding through initiating design courses, but existing design programs stagnate in traditional curricula. Closer collaboration between institutions is suggested in order to share knowledge and skill. An expanded design understanding involves the risk to overwhelm young students with complex information. Design educator Umar

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13 Conversation with Ali Murtaza, member of project teams, and Mustafa Naseem, initiator of IPAL
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Figure 2. Page of a design toolkit developed for companies that want to offer mobile financial services to illiterate and semi-literate users. Image used with permission from: © GRID Impact for Karandaaz Pakistan 2016

Figure 3. Har Zindagi – Every life matters: children vaccination booklet re-design. © Innovation for Poverty Alleviation Lab at Information Technology University for Punjab Government 2016
Hameed suggests breaking up methods and information, despite their interconnectivity, into small understandable portions for undergraduate students.

The design researcher Ahmed Ansari appreciates emerging design projects with a social agenda, but criticizes their lacking radical transformative character on current systems of power and inequality. Being a member of the group Decolonizing Design (Abdulla et al, 2016), consisting of design researchers from the global South, he questions the uncritical implementation of methods learned abroad in Pakistan. He asks for more contextualizing in local culture. Razia Sadik acknowledges that Pakistani culture is already an eclectic mixture of external influences and cultural traditions and thus wonders about the common juxtaposing of Eastern and Western cultures.

4.2. Links to historic cultures of making: risks and opportunities

Designers engaging in grassroots projects in Pakistan often refer to cultural traditions. This approach is a double-edged sword. I observe historic references appearing on two levels: 1) the revival of traditional patterns, forms and techniques, and 2) learning from historic concepts of making and community engagement. The first focuses on objects and asks what has been produced how. The second is concerned with why and for whom something is made.

There is a strong focus on the first. Product, fashion and textile designers engage with specialized artisans, block printers or weavers, or with random producers like embroidering home-based women workers. It can be beneficial for all: the designer’s collection gains exquisiteness, producers earn sufficiently, and craft traditions are featured to a broader public. Such collaboration though involves the risk of objectifying marginalized people for cultural heritage conservation (Bonsiepe, 2007 & Mathur, 2007 & Vanketesan, 2009). It is disempowering when producers earn little, and their work is used by powerful stakeholders to promote national or cultural identity to the outside for their own benefit, e.g. in tourism or trade shows. I found this risk rooted in popular narratives: women in poor neighbourhoods and rural areas are backwards and therefore must know traditional craft techniques. NGO managers, entrepreneurs, designers and philanthropists tend to romanticize this as a wealth they themselves have lost, due to their privileged modern lifestyle. In my findings this narrative is a limping myth. Some poor people know traditional skills, some don’t. No generalization can be made. Poor women embroider for home use, whatever they like: traditional patterns or new motifs such as characters from popular cartoon books. Knowing market demands is crucial for creating income opportunity, and authentic purity of the craft is only one among many aspects of designing desirable, marketable products.

The second level, concerning historic concepts of making and community engagement is considered less in design practice and education in Pakistan today, though in my view holds value for emerging holistic design approaches. Notions of design in South Asia are not as closely linked to rational function an industrialization as in Europe and North America, but impacted by prehistoric practices of making such as the holistic concept of *Kala* (Balaram, 2010 & Vyas, 2000) that integrates art, craft and design alike and does not differentiate between applied art and fine art, function and decoration. Rabindranath Tagore’s reform pedagogic arts institution Visva Bharati in Shantiniketan, founded in 1921, in rural Bengal engaged in community development through agriculture, theatre performances and drawing courses for village women (Mitter, 2007). In Calcutta in the early 20th

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14 This risk became clear in my research focus groups: asked about their motivation for collaborating in craft projects, the producers mentioned the hope for regular income opportunity, other stakeholders (NGO managers, designers, social entrepreneurs) wanted to preserve national identity and cultural heritage, or had philanthropic motivations.
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century different forms of critical discussion circles took place to raise a critical awareness of political conditions in pre-partition India (Chattopadhyay, 2013).

Those concepts have common characteristics: they are interdisciplinary, holistic, and inclusive of practical and atmospheric or spiritual aspects, foster critical awareness and contextual sensitivity, and can provide inspiration for current, more contextually rooted forms of facilitating participatory design activities in communities, organizations, businesses and policy development in grassroots empowerment. The risk lies in trying to imitate them literally: drawing classes might or might not be useful in social innovation projects today. The learning transfer lies in designing activities in an interactive, reflective and experimental manner. This might sound banal today when toolkits for iterative design practice are circulated widely. But even those might be reviewed for more contextually relevant activities.

5. Findings

5.1. Development & design: parallels as limitations and opportunities

Concepts and methods of development and of design share interesting parallels:

- **Static goals**: Development and design each aim to change a situation into an improved one, e.g. more enabled people, better functioning infrastructures, services, organizations or businesses. Usually this is approached through projects with pre-defined termination date and goals. They work towards indicators, e.g. access to health care or income amount. In design it shows in the problem solving mind-set. However in today’s complex, fast changing world, an achieved status outdates quickly.

- **Hierarchical hegemony**: As a consequence of critiquing top-down implementation almost all stakeholders articulate the need for participatory methods or have tried them. But power relations, of which they are part too, don’t change solely through working together: they depend on how participation is conceptualized and facilitated. Ideally people in weaker positions are given responsibilities already in the project identification and planning. As this is difficult to implement, it doesn’t happen often.

- **Streamlined efficiency**: Strategies are supposed to be scalable and transferable to different settings through outcomes like toolkits or guidelines. While occasionally that can provide successful methods to more beneficiaries, this practice ignores contextual diversity and rapid changes: solutions are often only appropriate for a point in time or a certain context.

- **Tangible successes**: Development and design projects aim to present successful results, especially if donor funded. This pressure and focus limits honest and critical reflection and leads to overrated displays of success stories.

These parallel characteristics all point at gaps and contradictions between good intentions and ground reality. Objectives seem of static, prescriptive and controlling character, which are not most appropriate for increasingly complex, diverse and fast changing environments. It can be useful to arrive at milestones, e.g. certain insights, certain structures like a school or a commonly organized

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15 Tagore himself when founding Visva Bharati was not interested in reverting to traditional practices from pre-colonial times, but rather aimed to learn from the traditional thought of creating in interactive processes with the context. Drawing classes in villages were offered because Tagore and his colleagues considered it appropriate for achieving social and human empowerment, but today the format and activity might be another.
workshop in the case of craft businesses. However those should not be considered a final arrival, because circumstances, parameters, boundaries and possibilities, e.g. technology will continue to change and diversify. Expecting human beings to follow guidelines, which they do or do not understand, or maintain out-dated solutions without reflecting on their relevance for today or the future, does not acknowledge this enough.

The four characteristics are not entirely negative. Practitioners and researchers have arrived at them over time often for good reasons. Without a continuous culture of critical reflection though, there is the risk of repeating out-dated habits, constellations, methods and products. There are opportunities too: motivations and methods overlap among design and development practitioners. Especially the fields of systemic actions research (Burns, 2007 & 2015) and systems oriented design (Sevaldson, 2015) show similar approaches to intervene in increasingly complex environments.

6. Concluding suggestions
I investigated craft projects in Pakistan’s aid sector, led conversations with current design, education and research practitioners, located grassroots empowerment in the larger development context, and reflected on traditional cultures of making and community engagement. Difficult interrelations of cultural, economic, political, social and human dimensions of empowerment have been pointed out. Currently emerging design approaches in this field were described. Parallels of the development and design professions are outlined in four points, that seem to require re-thinking in light of increasingly faster changing and diversifying contexts, while age old cultural perspectives, habits and mind-sets remain. It leads to the question of what the complementary additional value of including strategic design in development aid projects is?

If one accepts development and empowerment as open-ended processes, designers can add significant value through facilitating iterative processes of ideation, prototyping, testing, reflecting, modifying, implementing, assessing, re-thinking and so on, as an approach to embrace experimentation and continuity. However there seem to exist, admittedly at times justifiable, ethical objections regarding experimentation with marginalized people. In my view though if those are aware of the experimentation character, and are engaged through intensive participatory methods, it fosters increased ownership, responsibility and subsequently agency and empowerment.

A mind-set shift from static towards fluid empowerment objectives might be helpful, accepting insecurity, imperfection and failure in projects as chances to constructively reflect and treat development as an open-ended task. Consequently iterative design processes need to extend into post-project collaboration in newly to define formats, e.g. designers as long-term consultants with development organizations. Spaces can be re-thought beyond studios and offices, e.g. co-working labs, maybe mobile in areas where development aid and grassroots empowerment activities happen. Exchange, locally and internationally, at conferences, institutions and in the field, is important for new knowledge, inspiration and critical reflection.

Systems thinking, known to both, the development and the design field can be beneficial. Systems, if made accessible through designerly and participatory visualization processes enables people to analyse and counter factors that impact them negatively, e.g. power hierarchies. Understanding that umbrella solutions for many concerns of the grassroots environment are hard to achieve motivates to leverage the aid system at a human and doable scale, e.g. in craft for income collaborations developing different value chains according to each project’s circumstances, infrastructure, capacities, concerns and opportunities, together with all involved stakeholders. Only when those
understand processes, they can manage them even under difficult and changing conditions, which creates financially, socially and personally empowering experiences.

Last but not least elements from holistic regional histories of making and community engagement, and from a culture of spontaneity and improvisation offer rich information and opportunities for designers in Pakistan to refer to.

Recommendations for further research include questions of how to address the opportunities and changing roles of designers in design education in Pakistan.

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