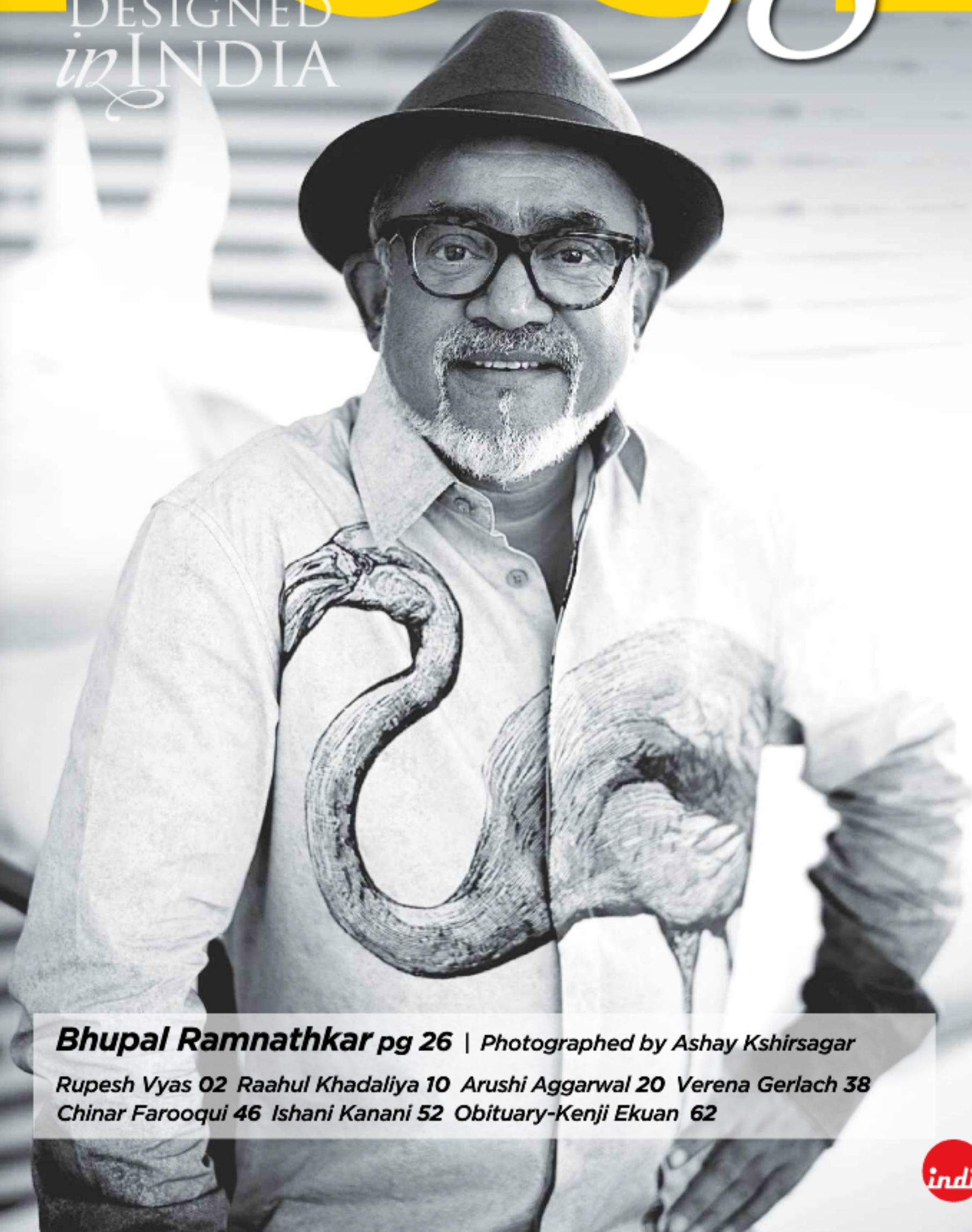


DESIGNED
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Bhupal Ramnathkar pg 26 | Photographed by Ashay Kshirsagar

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DESIGNING FOR *Happiness*

An advertiser, designer and space designer with a penchant for making people happy, Bhupal Ramnathkar of Mumbai-based Umbrella Design dreams about that one big idea that will change things for his country!



Office Space



How did your design journey start?

BR: When I began studying, there was no such thing as a dedicated school for design. During my time at the Sir J.J. School of Applied Arts in Mumbai the only options were applied art and fine art. I chose to study applied art, which would be the beginning of my venture into the field of advertising and then later design.

When I joined Enterprise, I knew on the very first day that this would be the actual launch of my career. Enterprise was where I met my mentor Mohammad Khan. He trained me in almost everything - from typography, and photography, to cracking strong layouts and even design.

Working in an ad agency under the correct guidance of creative geniuses, you soon realize what you are really good at and what you should avoid completely. I was very good at art direction; hence, I decided to follow through with design. I believe I had discovered that with design the sky was the limit. And till today, I still staunchly believe in the idea - everything is design, design is everything.

When did Umbrella Design come into the picture?

BR: There were more than a thousand small and big ad agencies when I decided to start something on my own. I didn't believe that another one would make a real difference to the industry. Back in 2003, there weren't

(L-R) Office Space



many firms specializing purely in design. Since, I had a strong design backing, I thought it was a good idea to start my own design agency.

What were the initial challenges and how did you overcome them?

BR: In order to start something big, you need equally grand resources; mine were scanty. However, I didn't let that wither my spirit. I was quite focused and knew that one day my firm would be highly recognized and respected. I started Umbrella with just one artist. We were everything; we were the servicing, designers, planners and even the office boys. But you could see the pride in our work. Umbrella soon got noticed; our work got featured all over the industry. That is how we grew from just an 8x8 office space to a 3,000 sq.ft. bungalow in the heart of Mumbai, with vintage cars and even geese.

The firm's logo is a black triangle, minimal yet solid and powerful. The name Umbrella was obvious and it fit right into my plans for my company. I wanted to bring the best, young and most willing professionals from the industry under one umbrella. I had

planned to diversify into several fields like design, digital design, retail design and interiors; the name Umbrella covered the entire spectrum perfectly.

How did the shift from advertising to design happen?

BR: One of the major reasons for the shift was realizing that advertising did not hold my interest as much as design did. I have always been a part of the graphics team or an art director. Even when I was working in advertising, I was mostly dealing with the design aspect. I still strongly believe that advertising is annual while design is forever.

How do you blend your advertising experience with design?

BR: I think that design must communicate something. Like in advertising, the main idea must sit well with the consumers and communicate the intended thought. Similarly, the design must mean something to someone. All the technicality is fine, but where is the thought?

There is so much clutter anywhere you look in India. People are suffocated by what I call visual pollution. And like any



other form of pollution, visual pollution stifles. It hampers creativity; it hampers a working thought process. Design that makes no sense, completely effortless and mindless work is what contributes to this pollution.

I think that just like advertising, design must give us a solution, it must be the answer to the problem your client had in the first place. It needs to be a visual graphic with the idea at its core. My work is strongly based on this thought. For example, the logo for the Indian Cancer Society is so simple and in the end forwards an extremely powerful message.

Design is not decoration; I don't know how to emphasize this more. There needs to be a reason behind the design. Just the fact that it looks good is not enough! The reason behind the communication needs to come out strongly. That is what will make your design memorable; in the end, that is what will sell.

What kind of projects do you like to work on?

BR: Projects where I get 100% freedom. When you have full freedom you are 100% yourself, you are the client and the designer. You see you could trick a client by putting in a little less effort or giving an exceptional pitch. But when you are both, you're working for yourself and that is when the real hard work and effort comes forth. I think the pressure of dedicating yourself into making the right design flawless is what creates award-winning work.

Photography and space design are two of my favorite hobbies, so if the scope of work allows me to focus on these then I would thoroughly enjoy working on them.

What is important in your scheme of things...the project or the client?

BR: Personally, I think it is a balance of both, they are both equally crucial for good work. The project needs to fit well with my interests, because good work is only created when you actively indulge. It must also be challenging, in the sense that it will push me to create something unique.

The client on the other hand must trust you completely or else your relationship is faulty and the end result will never be satisfactory. Umbrella has a very selective clientele. We believe in forming solid bonds that last a long time.



'Kala Ghoda Arts Festival' creatives



Umbrella believes in people over money. For us the client is like a partner, we need to understand each other best to build an effective and strong association.

However, whatever you design, regardless of the client or a project, you must ask yourself four key questions: Is it original? Is it impactful? Is it meaningful? And is it relevant?

Do you tend to favor bright colors and Indian elements in your work?

BR: I feel bright colors make people happy. Personally, I love bright colors; they are a staple for me, and in some way they define my personality. In fact, when I was on the Cannes Design Jury in 2006, I was asked what would I have been voted 'Most likely to...' by my colleagues? I replied that...

"I would probably be the man most likely to wear pink shades, a scenic Hawaiian shirt, scarlet red pants and canary yellow loafers to his own funeral!"

I want people to look at my work and be inspired, not disheartened. Bright colors are motivating, captivating and brimming with positivity. Life is so beautiful; wherever you look there is a flood of color. Imagine life in grey scale; it would be so dull and boring. However, designers need to know that the proportion of the colors used should match the purpose of the design.

I've noticed that several designers tend to be inspired by or replicate projects from abroad. They believe that Indian designs, motifs and colors are easily available, thus they don't value them enough. When foreigners visit India, they have such a vivid idea about the country. Their photos capture intricate details that we might not even glance at. They seem to appreciate these finer points more than we do.

'Chemistry' campaign





Brand name creation and packaging project comprising designs for logos, bottles, labels and outer cartons for Raymond Men's Perfumes.

I don't think Indian designers realize that in order to stand out they need to be different from what is already tried and tested abroad. Look at Japanese designers; they always have some influence of their rich culture within their designs. People need to realize that something home grown and ethnic is more relevant and connects more easily than something foreign and unheard.

What would you say is your strongest skill?

BR: I think it is necessary to make a design perfect. Be it branding or space design, I like to make sure everything

from top to bottom is seamless. Imperfect designs would mean you haven't given it your ultimate. And I believe that it is very important to put in full effort, because otherwise you'd just be contributing to visual pollution.

When did you decide to move into space design?

BR: While designing you tend to get restricted by generic sizes. But with space design, your canvas is different every time. It's four-dimensional and offers you limitless freedom to ideate. I am not a professional interior designer or architect, nor have I studied these



Saraswat
Bank

Logos

fields. But I love space design; it just opens up a completely fresh and different design perspective. I first dabbled in space design when I designed the interiors of both my homes.

But, your home is a very personal space, it defines you and therefore it is not judged stiffly. However, when designing a corporate space, which potential clients would visit and notice, I felt it was important to make a statement, leave my mark, so to speak. When Umbrella got featured in top interior design magazines, I grew more confident of my space design abilities.

When I bought the current space for Umbrella, I had no extravagant amount to hire a firm to design a look. So I thought I would try my hand at it. Umbrella is designed using recyclable material. I try to make full use of recyclable elements; it is my small contribution towards sustainability. Today, the design is a part of me even when I am not in office.

Tell us about your latest project MILLK.

BR: MILLK is India's first pleasure (play and leisure) center in Mumbai, which caters to both children and their parents. Spread over 8,000 sq. ft. it boasts a play gym for children, along with a café and spa for adults. It was a great task to work on MILLK, as it was necessary to appeal to both children and parents. It turned out to be an exciting and memorable experience.

MILLK gave us an opportunity to create something special and inspiring. We maximized the use of renewable energy. The large façade outside the center was built using squares of clear stainless steel that flows every time the wind blows, creating a lovely mirage effect whenever you see it. Design needs to move with the need of the hour. Making full use of sustainable and renewable resources, designers can support the environment in their own way...even create viable solutions for the impending problems of sustainability.



'MILK' Facade



Any words of advice for fellow designers?

BR: There are two core thoughts that I think are a necessity for all designers to understand. One is that all designers must have a sense of dimension; they must know what generic sizes look like at the back of their minds. The other is that design should be minimal, yet strong and meaningful. After all, conceptual design is what stays with us for eons. Decoration design has a shelf life, it comes with an expiry date, avoid it at all costs.

Do you have a dream project?

BR: In 1989, I bought my first car, a red Maruti 800. To celebrate this, I distributed sweets and on top of the box, I stuck a red flying Maruti (Hanuman) figurine. I thought it would be a clever way of telling well-wishers that I had bought a red Maruti. The sweets got over that day and I hung the Maruti figurine on my car's rear



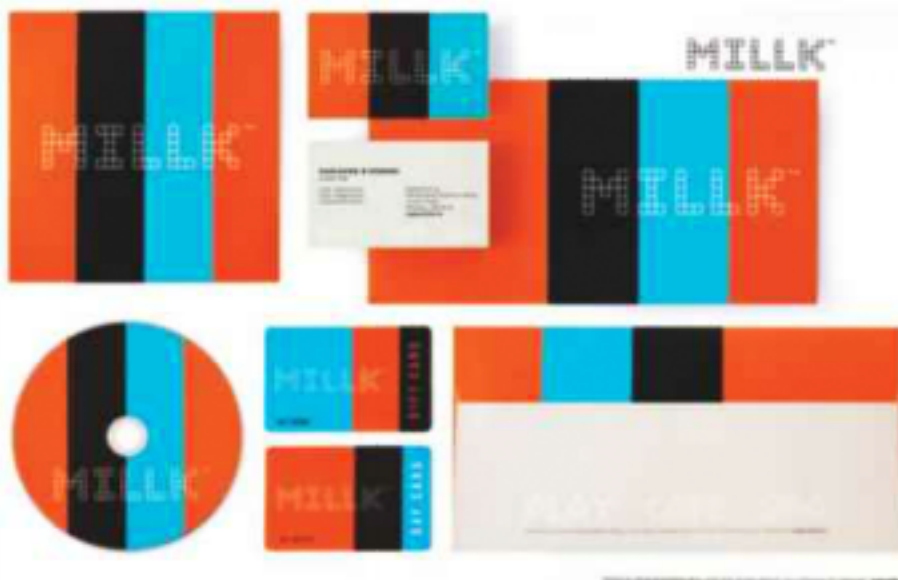
'MILK' Bag

view mirror. After that, whoever sat in my car would be amused to see the flying Maruti and ask about it. It always put a smile on their faces.

In 1994, I left for Dubai. When I returned, I hailed a taxi from the airport back home. I was pleasantly surprised when I saw a red Maruti hanging on that taxi's mirror. When I inquired about it, the driver replied that it was quite the trend amongst car owners. I was quite overwhelmed that day. I realized that if the Maruti hanging in my car was



'MILLK' Cafe



'MILLK' Stationery

a small source of happiness to some then this new trend might be a source of happiness for so many others.

My dream project will be for the happiness of my country and the common man. A big design idea that will use renewable resources and help further human development. I believe design has a major responsibility towards change. In today's age, designers

need to be smart and help create something worthwhile. Design needs to be a sustainable solution. It should be a motivating answer that will change mindsets easily, economically and for a long time.

I want to give back to society in my own way. Make a difference by changing something in someone's life. And by helping them create a happier and more ecological environment for all.

What next?

BR: Along with being the founder and chairman of Umbrella Design, I am also the managing partner at Company Creative Works, an ad agency I began three years ago. The future for Umbrella is vast too. I plan on introducing Umbrella into different verticals like digital, retail and interiors. Let's say, I want to bring a 360° perspective to design under one umbrella.

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