



*The Indian* **EXPRESS**

JOURNALISM OF COURAGE



**THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS**

[www.financialexpress.com](http://www.financialexpress.com)

Read to Lead

# Bathing in disruptive aspiration

*Shombit Sengupta*  
Aug 31st 2014

Real examples on design perversity form the basis of my learning in the 5 countries I wrote about last week. Let me start with the ingenious design principles I've lived with in France. From them I've learnt that every selling proposition has to be aspirational and disruptive.

Nearly every day, coming from Left Bank to Right Bank in Paris, I had to cross the world famous Louvre Museum. You can't imagine the controversy at the time of commissioning Pyramide du Louvre by President François Mitterrand in 1984. This huge 71-foot high pyramid structure, its square base having 115-ft sides, was objected to as ancient Egypt's Pharaoh culture entering the heart of liberalized Catholic French society. Not only that, detractors said its architect being Chinese American IM Pei, he perversely stuck plastic American ways in front of an European Palace. Counter-arguments came when the pyramid was first reported to have 666 glass panes, the number of the Beast in the Bible's New Testament. Actually it was 689 glass segments, but even Dan Brown's best seller Da Vinci Code referred to this Satanic number later. In reality there is extensive learning here. The expanded museum entrance now effectively guides people to numerous destinations within its large

subterranean network. Juxtaposing the Louvre's medieval classicism with an ultra-modern structure actually established a traditional-contemporary blend that's both disruptive and aspirational. This stark harmony is pulling in 10 million annual visitors and considerably higher revenues for the renovated Louvre.

Japanese businessmen have long been enamoured of French luxury design. They order a special travel bag from Hermes that takes 6 months to make and costs 30,000 Euros. This stand-up bag opens on the side to accommodate 2 wine bottles and 2 wine glasses. There is sophisticated artistry in every square centimetre of the bag. It's incredible how the Japanese appreciate this authentic, original product from Hermes, saying they come to France especially to buy it. Hermes is undoubtedly a very big French luxury products brand. Wouldn't you say their paying attention to a niche market of aspirational travel bags for rich Japanese business people is a disruptive way of creating product design?

Artistic living style is not only for rich people. Many French stores sell only disruptive and aspirational objects of art, from low to high price. You can't ever experience such an unstructured entertaining paradise with preconceived ideas of what to buy or why you are entering. Just watching the unique stationary, home decoratives, miscellaneous functional items gives you myriad ideas. One store I visited was selling wooden hand mannequins where all the finger joints can move. These are generally required for learning anatomy drawing or measuring man-machine ergonomics. A shelf here had hundreds of hands. Funnily enough all of them had 4 fingers

pushed down, one pointing upwards. I laughed, making the sales girls immediately get busy putting the other fingers up or down. “We have to rearrange these fingers all day,” they laughed, “because when no one is looking, shoppers get tempted to be naughty to put the middle finger up!” I was lured to buy this beautifully designed mannequin. As an object of art on my table, I can see how every guest gets attraction to play with different gestures of the fingers.

In Place de la Madeleine near Place de la Concorde where Queen Marie Antoinette was guillotined, there’s a crystal objects-of-art store called Baccarat. One day, as I was explaining to my wife how Indian Maharajas were among the biggest Baccarat customers, the salesman heard me. I too could surprise my wife to experience carrying Baccarat every day, he suggested. I dismissed him saying its glass that breaks. Undeterred, he displayed a range of exquisite glass rings in different colours saying they are marvelously crafted to match beautiful Indian saris draped by beautiful Indian women. I was left with no choice. Baccarat rings burn your pocket less than diamonds do, but I can tell you their elegant, disruptive looks will turn more heads than diamonds ever could.

To establish their supremacy, French Kings wanted control over Nature too. Their palace gardens were designed with total disruption. Outstanding human handicraft was used to maintain hedges in incredible geometrical shapes that have rounded architecture, unlike skyscraper buildings with sharp edges. When you walk down half a kilometer with French gardens on either side to enter a French castle often surrounded in majestic water reflection, you feel you are in another world. Visiting 16th century Château de Chenonceau with my author friend Abhijit Bhaduri, I was indicating to him the embellishment factor in French culture. The stained glass design on the window has exactly the design of the wooden floor, so you can see just one contiguous idea being driven from floor to window. The French frequently use a driving force called “fil conducteur” for big ideation. This is a sensitive nerve that harmoniously

creates coherence among different subjects. In 2003 I had written a white paper on how business needs a fil conducteur to grow with coherence.

Here’s my analogous learning. A company’s strategic team has to be like an English garden where plants of different shapes and sizes thrive independently to bring different ideas on the table. When strategy comes to operations for implementation, the French garden’s stringent, uniform design can be compared to a company’s operational processes and its workforce. If operations is driven like a French garden with no choice to deviate from the structured pattern it is set in, business result will be achieved with coherence and consistency.

Aspiration and disruption factors are so profound in French culture that with the passion to embed them, you bathe in them. I’ll continue next week on how I’ve imbibed knowledge of design from the other 4 countries, Germany, USA, Japan and Italy.

**—Shombit Sengupta is an international consultant to top management on differentiating business strategy with execution excellence.**

**Reach him at [www.shiningconsulting.com](http://www.shiningconsulting.com)** ■