
THE GROWING YEARS

-Shabbir Sabuwala

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my parents who ensured that I received sufficient education to be able to write a book someday. I also attribute to them my genetic ability to be creative.

This book is for Anagha, my wife, who has been with me through thick and thin over the last 20 years of my life.

This book is for Shirin, my daughter, who looks up to me and admires me for my knowledge and creativity.

This book is for Rachna for being a wonderful human being and the inspiration for this book.

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PREFACE

They say that 'Truth is stranger than fiction' and I strongly believe that, but I also believe that narrating bland facts can be boring. They need to be delicately seasoned with the flavors of drama to make it a spicy read. Hence, I preferred to author a fiction inspired from real life events. It always proves to be a much more interesting and inspirational read - an ideal blend of drama and the strange reality. Of course, one has to wait for an incident worthwhile writing about, before actually writing a complete book on it. In my case, it took 17 years of professional experience before I came across such an incident. But, in the meanwhile, I congregated sufficient professional knowledge for me to write a book which is not only an interesting story, but also imparts information which can transform a young designer to a successful entrepreneur.

I am Shabbir Sabuwala, a qualified architect and the Director of Ddesign7 Interiors Pvt. Ltd., an interior design studio. We specialize in architectural and interior designing for residential projects. I have always been assisted in business by my lovely wife Anagha, a qualified electronics engineer. And what keeps us going is the love of our lives, our daughter Shirin. She has spent most of her growing years in Ddesign7, learning from all adults around her.

Throughout my professional tenure, I have come to realize that an individual's capabilities are limited. Without intelligent help, growth in business is just not possible. Finding this help is a rarity and because of this most proprietary businesses cannot break through the glass ceiling. Fortunately for me, this help has always been extended to me firstly by my wife, who has always held my hand encouragingly and supported me throughout rough and smooth journey of life. The second intelligent help came from Rachna Vora, a ten-year younger junior, who never failed to surprise me with the immense capability she displayed from time to time. Her relationship with Ddesign7 was symbiotic, where they both catapulted each other to greater heights.

I would also like to commend her parents for her qualities, because without their intelligent upbringing she would not be what she is today.

This book is about Rachna's journey in Ddesign7. Since I have seen her grow professionally only, I have restricted the content to her professional growth. I would assume that someone who has grown professionally so much over the last few years has definitely achieved greater milestones on the personal front, but Rachna will have to find someone more apt to write about those.

I am not a professional writer. I started by writing memos to congratulate Rachna on her growth in Ddesign7. These memos expressed some of the most unforgettable incidents which helped Ddesign7 soar to greater heights. But, eventually an incident which shook me up, ensured that it became a full-fledged book with a logical climax. So, if scholars of English feel that grammar or literature rules have been broken, please blame the software which did not highlight these mistakes in time.

So, let me begin from the end, the day I decided to write the book.

The End

I looked at the two ladies leave my cabin, as they slowly allowed the frosted glass door to close behind them. I looked around the cabin, a little lost in memories of yesterday's incident. I could still see vivid flashbacks of yesterday's event. I could see my cabin full of people, shouting abuses at each other while shedding tears. Images of people at loggerheads with each other. Friends and well-wishers I loved and cared for were flashing before my eyes, arguing like there was no tomorrow. I recognized the faces, although they appeared blurred through the tears in my moist eyes. I was hurt and shattered, strongly feeling the pain I had felt yesterday. All my questions were answered except for one, "What wrong had I done to suffer this torment?" I repeatedly asked myself the same thing. But I could neither find an answer to my question nor could I find the people who had the answer to my question. I could only find myself sitting in my empty cabin.

I snapped back to the reality of the empty room which I solely occupied. I glanced to the wall on my left which displayed my certificates and photographs, neatly composed against the white painted wall. I caught sight of one frame in particular and although I had written the poem myself, I felt like reading it again today. The title read "My First Earning" and below it was stuck a ten rupee note. The frame was a gift that I had given to Anagha, my wife, a few years ago, on her birthday. The ten rupee note was the topmost bill in the bundle of money she received as her first salary. And to immortalize it, I framed it, with a little inspirational poem written below it. Till this day, I have treasured it. My focus shifted for a couple of seconds as I heard a giggle outside the cabin and I saw the hazy silhouette of one of the ladies leave the office. Although the giggle distracted me, I was content knowing that someone in the office was happy. I continued to read my poem framed on the wall:

*"With every growth, and every milestone,
With every obstacle that you cross,
Remember the spark that ignited the fire,
Always remember the very first.
Look forward to achieve greater tasks
March ahead to amass more and more,
But once a while, reflect on the past,
To take a look at your very first."*

The words "Remember the spark that ignited the fire" haunted me, especially in context with yesterday's event. I journeyed deep into the past to remember the spark that ignited the fire. But ventured a little too deep into the past.



Since the age of three, I spent my childhood in Kuwait. I was a good student, almost a prodigy to my parents, and my father never spared any costs in ensuring that I received the best education. He went beyond his means when he registered me with New English School – the top -of -the-line Cambridge board school in Kuwait.

It is true that the early educative years are the formative years in one's life; and learning with the best also gave me a cultured perspective of life. I was trained to become a gentleman with a strong foundation in language, mathematics and sciences. Innovative ways

of teaching serious subjects made learning a complete experience. In an era where rap music was at its peak, our class of thirty five students was divided into groups of five and each group composed and performed a rap song on one of the 'The Seven Systems of the Human Body'. We had chosen the digestive system. We wanted to add humor to our performance, so we made funny posters to complement our song. We won the first prize - a bag of fruits 😊. Interactive teaching methods made learning fun and subconsciously I also began to like teaching. Learning and teaching became such an integral part of my character, that later in life, when I entered the business arena it gave me a competitive edge to expand my organization rapidly.

I was enjoying my life in Kuwait with my family until a minor turn of event called "The Gulf War" changed our fate. We shifted to Pune, Maharashtra, India. Since our shifting to India wasn't planned, we weren't carrying any 'certificates of our education' with us. Of course, we had our passports, but that didn't help me prove my educational qualifications to institutes. An unplanned migration to a new place made me realize the importance of having official documents. I understood that it's not so important to be educated as it is to be able to prove your qualification. Otherwise the authorities refuse to accept facts. Fortunately, the government eventually realized that there was a large number of such migrants and instructed schools and colleges to accept migrant students without a complete set of documents. So, I finally got admission into Wadia College, where I completed my high school. I also met Anagha there - my better half.

Life in India was an absolute contrast to life in Kuwait. In Kuwait, life was always air-conditioned. It was a weird adjective to describe my life, however, it was the most appropriate single word adjective I could think of. I woke up in air-conditioned bedrooms, went to school in our air-conditioned school buses, studied in our air-conditioned classrooms and then returned to our air-conditioned home. It was a well-cushioned life. I spoke to friends on the phone endlessly, discussing fancy cars and the latest computer games without having to worry about the phone bill. Once a while we celebrated birthday parties, but that was the only time I met friends outside school. As kids, we were not independently mobile and parents never had the time to socialize.

In India, people were more humble and down to earth. They were more social and spared leisure time for each other. They sought satisfaction within the smaller things in life. They loved to bargain a rupee for a bunch of bananas, even though their time spent bargaining was worth much more than that. They enjoyed street food for dinner after a casual evening walk with family. The more adventurous lot simply waited for a bus to leave the bus stand and then ran behind it to grab a foothold in it. Just like its colorful flag, there were many colors of life yet to be explored by me in India.

Coming from a safe, conservative and secure environment, I found this lifestyle challenging. An average Indian's life is lived on the streets and to succeed here, you had to be street-smart. From my friends in Wadia College, I acquired street-smartness, but at the same time, I retained the polished attitude learnt from my British teachers. Later, this 'schizophrenic personality', as I always called it, helped me shape my career. In the field of interior designing, one not only has to deal with the client - who is rich, elite and cultured, but also has to manage the laborers - who at times can be quite crude. Whilst I was shaping my personality, subconsciously, I was laying the foundation for future success.

After completing school, I had shortlisted two career options - Hotel Management and Architecture. My career counsellor advised me to pursue hotel management. I even secured admission in the best hotel management college in the country, but it was my perception that

a career in hotel management would be job-dependent, and that was a major drawback to me. Being brought up in a business family, I wanted to eventually start my own business, which seemed more feasible in the field of architecture. So, I went on to acquire a degree in Architecture.

I had grown ambitious with time and strived to become financially independent as soon as possible. After I completed the third year of the five-year architecture course, I started working part-time after college hours. I even started executing small independent interior projects at meagre fees. Although these projects were not highly profit-generating, they gave me a lot of practical insight into the field. It also inspired creative ideas in my academic work. Owing to my hands-on experience, my college design portfolios improved in terms of my presentation of ideas and the technical viability of my design solutions. My fellow students made preliminary presentations of their conceptual sketches for me to assess the technical feasibility of their designs, before presenting them to the faculty. I enjoyed the teaching process.

As soon as I graduated from college, I worked as an intern with Ar. Amala Sheth, a prominent personality in the prestigious interior designers' circle of Pune. I trained with her for two long, hectic and exhaustive years, during which I learnt about detailing a concept to create a good design; using new materials innovatively; the intricacies of project management; accurately estimating a project cost and optimally managing a vendor's resource. I'll always credit her for my business acumen. Whilst working there, I also understood the standard of professionalism that a client demands and how to succeed in business by surpassing his expectation. But of course, it is well known that a cent percent satisfied client is a myth. What is lesser known is that a cent percent satisfied employee is also a myth.

I closely observed my colleagues to figure out how they perceived the company and what they expected from it. They were lured by the small perks they received, like additional travel allowance or an unexpected incentive on a project. It wasn't the salary, but this little extra money which motivated them to stick on to their job. Usually, it is the lack of growth in salary, authority or learning that is the major reason for employees to resign. I resigned for the same reason. Although I respected Ar. Amala Sheth, I resigned primarily because my request for a pay raise was rejected. I had a better paying, part-time job offer, leaving me with a few spare hours a day to undertake projects independently. It gave me the security of steady salary and opportunities to generate the additional income.

It was during my tenure at Ar. Sheth, that I eventually exchanged my wedding vows with Anagha. I am a Muslim and she is a Hindu. Since we had both decided against converting from our respective religions, hence we decided to get married as per the Indian Marriage Act. We pledged our vows before the appointed registrar and we were married within a few minutes. On the same evening, we hosted a lavish reception to complete the ceremony. Close friends and family attended the function, wishing us luck to start a new chapter in our lives. Indeed, it was a landmark day in my life, which I'll always stop by and cherish whenever I travel down the memory lane.

After I resigned from Ar. Sheth's office, I took up employment as a project manager with M/s. Cube Contractors, a premier interior turnkey contracting company in Pune. There I learnt the intricacies of contracting. I started looking at a site from the viewpoint of a contractor, as compared to earlier when I would see the site from the eye of a designer. I developed skills to negotiate with a vendor or a sub-contractor either to reduce their price or get additional perks for free. Every rupee saved was a rupee earned. I maintained detailed

inventory of all raw material that arrived on site and optimized material wastage to ensure maximum profit to the company. I closely monitored all the laborers and their methods of working to understand legitimate shortcuts we could use to expedite work on site. After all, time saved is money saved and money saved is money earned.

At every site, there was an ever-conflicting battle between the designer and us, the contractors. The designer's perspective of a site was very different from our expectation from the same site. He strived for perfection in design, cost being his last concern, whilst our primary motive was to optimize the cost of the project in order to ensure maximum profits for us. An ideal balance of these conflicts often benefitted the client. He ended up with a classy-looking place well within his budget. It was this ideal, value-for-money solution that fascinated me. I decided that someday, when I start my own company, I would neither be only a designer nor only a contractor. The model of my company would principally promote design-and-build solutions. Towards the end of the year I felt that I had gone beyond the learning curve offered by my current company and my ambition got the better of me. I ventured into my own business - Ddesign7.

DESSIGN7. The name of the company had its own short story. Since I was born on the 7th of July (the 7th month of the year), a prominent numerologist suggested that the number seven should be incorporated in the company name. So I adhered to it and christened our company DESIGN 7. To this, our lawyer objected citing that it could prove difficult to get this name registered for trademark, because it was a word in the English dictionary. We added an additional 'S' to 'DESIGN'. The two 'S's next to each other also abbreviated to 'Shabbir Sabuwala' and the lawyer was finally comfortable registering our trademark on this name. Ddesign7 was thus born and christened. And it did indeed prove lucky.

Shortly after launching our venture, our lucky charm, our daughter Shirin, was born. Anagha realized that Shirin would require more of her time and wanted to spend a substantial amount of her time monitoring her development. On the other hand, my business was at a nascent stage and any additional help was welcome. So, she left her job as an electronics engineer to partner with me in business. It allowed her to help me and yet keep her time flexible enough for Shirin.

The growing business eventually saw progress and with time we recruited a number of employees, some lasting longer than the others. But employee attrition was a constant problem and our search for new recruits was always ongoing. It was during one such search for fresh interior designers that I first met Rachna Vora.

Beginning of a Journey

It was some time in the last week of June, a very regular day with only work and stress to look forward to. We had a continuous lack of staff and finding the right recruits was a task which made me look up to the HR guys as demigods. Also, I wanted my existing designers, Devika and Aisha to have a promotion by giving them suitable juniors. The only ray of light in an otherwise bleak day was a call I received the day before from an accented, fast-spoken female voice, "Hello, I am an interior designer fresher, recently passed out of FIID and I was wondering if there was a vacancy in your firm." Without betraying any anxiety, I requested the voice to come for an interview at 10:00 in the morning.

Weaving through the usual traffic, I made my way to the office, hoping to see the unknown face of a possible new recruit. As I entered my office, pre-occupied with mentally planning the schedule of the day, Zeenat - our front desk manager startled me with her pleasant "Good morning, sir". I casually greeted her the same, as I quickly stole a glance to my right to see two fresh faces sitting on the two-seater sofa next to the pantry door. I swiftly made my way, past the reception and into my glass cabin where I settled myself into my chair, dialed a 308 on the phone and instructed Zeenat to send in the girls who had come for an interview.

The door opened and the girls walked in, each of them individually holding a file and a design portfolio. The tall, fair and slightly healthier girl introduced herself first.

"Hello sir, I am Palak Lalwani. I have recently completed interior designing from FIID. This is a portfolio of few of the works I have done," Palak introduced herself as she put her portfolio of A3-size drawings on the table for me to study. Having conducted numerous interviews by now, I had realized that the formality of going through a design portfolio was necessary to boost the morale of the candidate; however, it never really helped to select the right candidate. Anyone adequately experienced could easily spot a hundred technical mistakes in a school portfolio.

I questioned her about a basic drafting error, "So, Palak, do you think the drawing dimensions are legible?" She gave a confused look, nodded in agreement and muttered something, which I chose to ignore. I closed the portfolio and asked a few basic questions and assumed the interview closed. That's when I got a second portfolio on my table.

"Morning Sir, I am Rachna Vora