

Interview with Sonia Dhillon-Marty Metropolis Magazine

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Q&A: Sonia Dhillon-Marty

Erin Moore



Courtesy dhillonmarty.org

Sonia Dhillon-Marty is planning Community Week: Material Equilibrium in Japan this coming October (23-29). The event, like others before it and those in the works, is a thoughtful assembly of everything “instinctual,” as the head of the Dhillon-Marty Foundation likes to say. Her mission is to bring together “social activism through art, architecture, design, sustainable farming, and technology to cultivate civil engagement for global impact.”

The upcoming program in Japan will connect art and design with social and environmental issues. It includes “a pilgrimage to Ise Jingu Shrine, a design charrette at the site of the Tohoku tsunami, and an architecture symposium at the University of Tokyo,” promises a missive from Sonia Dhillon-Marty who has held positions at Deloitte, Touche and Tohmatsu as well as Cisco Systems.

Here she shares her thoughts with Erin Moore, about her belief that “leaders create leaders,” adding that “When I create opportunities for individuals and communities to enrich, contribute, participate, and transform, leadership goes viral. When you capture the mind, followers become leaders of change.”--SSS

Erin Moore: You live in Tokyo and your roots are in Punjab and the Silicon Valley. What lessons about living do you take from each of these places?

Sonia Dhillon-Marty: In Japan, I have learned about taking just what you need. After the earthquake and tsunami in Tohoku, some friends and I hosted a dinner to uplift people who had lost everything. We had ballet and taiko drummers, wine, cakes, and fish from Yamaguchi. People stood very calmly in line and took just one meal. Nobody hoarded anything. One of the guests waited to ask me if it was okay to take a cake or if they were only for the children. This is the ethos; the salary difference between the top guy and the worker is not huge, there is a low crime rate, and people’s sense of duty is higher. I am humbled by this way of being that is so different from the extreme greed that I have seen elsewhere.

In Punjab where I was raised, I remember many lessons that I learned from stories that people told me. I was raised with the identity that we are brave, loyal, and bold people, proud of our connection to agriculture that provides most of India’s food. My dad would tell people that his daughter had the guts of two men. We learned morals from parables and from my lesson books. One phrase from my English lessons--“My rights stop at another person’s nose”--continues to guide me in thinking about individual contentment in a harmonious society.

At the same time, I see this part of the world being divided by globalization and disconnection from these traditions. Such industrialization without moral education makes for a very unstable society—gang rapes, violent crime, and worker unrests leading to killing factory bosses. Part of what

I am looking for in my work with the Dhillon Marty Foundation is finding ways to re-connect people with both fundamental morality and with beauty.

EM: You also live in Portola Valley, California, in the Silicon Valley. Has this also influenced your way of being?

SDM: In Silicon Valley, people are always on the lookout for good ideas that they can run with. If an idea is good, grab it and do it. I was only 19 when I moved to the Silicon Valley. It was a surprise to learn that just with a degree in fine arts I could pursue an MBA in finance and become a certified public accountant. In Silicon Valley, you can explain your idea to someone over breakfast on a paper napkin and if your argument makes sense you get support.

EM: The Dhillon-Marty foundation uses art and design to take on very difficult social and environmental issues and you are an artist yourself. Can you talk about why you have chosen to use design as a means to do social and environmental good?

SDM: I do think that the world is a bit at sea—that we have lost some connection to moral living or the framework for knowing what is right and wrong. Globalization and the Internet have given us so much information that it sometimes undermines our cultural and religious upbringings. As a result, we do not have absolute rules to guide us. Such freedom requires more intellectually, morally sophisticated people. The objective of the foundation is to re-root today's globalized society. Using art and design to communicate messages makes it possible to transcend religious or national barriers. Design is a very old and inclusive form of communication.

Design can also be a way to shine light on things that are good—like the 2013 Community Week that I am hosting in Japan. I have invited 20 architects and architecture students from around the world to visit the Ise Jingu Shrine with me. The shrine is very small and also very important. The shrine is re-built every 20 years by a Shinto carpentry guild. This is its 61st rebuilding year. It is a wonderful example of sustainability in design through perpetual renewal and also of building a powerful institution with very modest means. We will also go to Tohoku where the 2011 megaquake and tsunami were. The architects will do some design for the community but mostly I want them to reflect on the idea of using material reverently and in keeping with ecological cycles—in the context of both the Ise Jingu Shrine and the Tohoku rebuilding.



Ise Jingu shrine in Japan.

Courtesy © robizumi

Design can also be used to protest and provoke reaction. Last year when there were some publicized rapes in India, some people responded by suggesting more conservative dress for women. My daughter and I designed shirts that say, “ban rape not skirts.” Now the foundation is planning to host fashion shows in collaboration with many institutes across the globe to engage in dialogue about the state of sexual violence.

Just like we need to remind people of traffic laws, we do need to remind people about right and wrong. In today’s society, people are constantly moving and living with other cultures. Technology gives us access to more information and points of view. This all makes it hard for people—for cultures—to hold on to values. We need to offer simple guidance. I do this for my kids just by making sure I stay near them. For a broader impact, I continue to be interested in using art and design as a way to communicate, to share my values, and to spread empathy.

EM: You have talked about how it is important to value design and creativity as much as material things—that we should produce ideas and art rather than use up resources to fill up landfills. What does this mean to you?

SDM: The old phrase “All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy” means to me that we should always see beauty. Life is a balance between working many hours to make more and more money and taking the time for nurturing our senses through leisure and cultural experiences. In economic terms, a fulfilling life and a truly prosperous society is the optimal return. There is a fundamental principle in economics called diminishing marginal return—that is that everything reaches a point where additional effort leads to a lowered return. Can we use this principle as individuals to maintain a sustainable civilization?

We obviously are living in a time of tremendous waste. At the same time, our economy depends on consumption and growth. I believe that we need to continue to produce and consume a lot for circulation of money and generating wealth for prosperity, but that we should shift our consumption and investment toward immaterial things—creativity, ideas, experiences. This is even more urgent with our growing population of 7 billion people. We cannot keep up our rate of material consumption. As I just read from Paul and Anne Ehrlich, “If the 5 billion-plus people in developing nations matched the consumption patterns of the 1.2 billion in the industrialized world, at least two more Earths would be needed to support everyone.”

I thought that the Rain Room at MOMA that I visited recently with my family was a wonderful example of creating experiential value for many, many people by just having a very good idea. I also just hosted another salon about food and our relationship to nature. Stanford University Dance Department faculty member Aleta Hayes and her students performed a work during the dinner to connect the guests with the tastes and the smells of our urban farm, Champ de Portola. The next farm salon will be for the harvest of our olives in the fall where we will have a taiko drum performance and olive pressing and offer freshly press oil for tasting. I am hoping that designing these kinds of non-material experiences and gatherings can help reinforce our collective social and ecological fabric.

Erin Moore is an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Oregon.