Cultural Continuum and Regional Identity in Architecture

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Introduction

The last few years have rightly witnessed a growing debate among the developing countries, particularly those which experienced intense colonisation about the state of architectural design and planning practices. The realisation that Western models of architecture and urban planning introduced by the colonising agencies, as well as the subsequent developments in the West, were not very suitable to their own resources and climatic circumstances and socio-cultural well being has led to lot of healthy questioning. This has also required them to look into their own past heritage to understand the architectural and planning practices which evolved over centuries of adaptation and in few cases adoption.

The theme of this Seminar, some of the recent publications like MIMAR, and a shifting emphasis in research areas among academics are indicative of a very subtle beginning in an extremely crucial aspect of built environment design that of seeking beyond mere visual aspirations dominated by and large by International Modern Movement, and exploring the abstract, cultural undercurrents which nourish society, using the built environment in its dual cause and effect role.

This paper discusses two major parameters of this role of the built-environment. It begins by dealing with more tangible issues, reviewing current design practices vis-a-vis the traditions and resource situation in India. Later it deals with the intangible parameters, which seeks to explain built-form as a manifestation of socio-cultural institutions which are looked into a dynamic relationship nurturing and complementing each other.

Search for a 'Post-Modern' regional architecture

Pre-industrial architecture of any given region had the strength to serve the physical and spiritual needs of people, from a single family to the entire community. At the physical level, it embodied centuries of learning with regard to orientation, climate, building materials and construction techniques. At the spiritual level, the built-form conveyed total harmony with the life-style in all its daily as well as seasonal rituals, unifying the socio-cultural and religious aspirations of the individuals and the community.

To achieve this unity and to integrate physical and spiritual needs, due importance was given to nature and its basic laws. Nature was accepted as it is. Life-style and activity followed in consonance with nature and architecture with nature. Concern for resources and conservation of energy was reflected in all rituals, social actions and very clearly in physical planning.

The compactness of the town plan, building using thick walls with niches, and a variety of in-between elements like balconies, incorporated both the symbolic as well as social meaning. Jaisalmer, old Jaipur and old Delhi are testimonies to such thinking. The application of such realistic and yet value oriented attitudes, gave society a sense of confidence and a much needed feeling of self-sufficiency. External considerations were accepted under duress and were gradually absorbed to facilitate the continuance of the envisaged life-style. The transformation of the Mughal architecture to suit India is a case in point. In this process, the role played by everyone including the architect was that of shareholders in an enterprise.

While the roles of each discipline may be demarcated, the final outcome expressed the multiple considerations that went into making it. That is how all different forms of art in India have, over the centuries, given birth to a vernacular idiom, sustained the culture and in the process, sustained itself.

The transformation

Unfortunately, during the last two centuries, our concepts and life-styles have undergone considerable changes. Initially, it was the internal strife, then the
foreign based crafts which affected the nature of the social pattern. Subsequent emphasis on industrialisation, the advent of new building materials, and a desire to 'modernise' gave rise to different patterns of building and community-city planning. The models for such development were neither conceived on the basis of our climate, nor social needs, nor life-style, nor did they incorporate the attributes of the process mentioned earlier. The consequence was an increased use of resources, of energy and subsequent degradation of the environment.

Today, our situation is even worse. We have a large and growing population below subsistence level, the natural resources are depleting, the forest cover is being used as fuel and the metropolitan cities are expanding. Our physical environment is desolate, without trees, with isolated 'modern' buildings surrounded by slums and pollution is on the increase. Another disturbing factor is the high-technology oriented industry in the metropolis and the neglect of cottage industry in the rural area. The rural-urban harmony and interdependence is broken in this process.

All this is occurring in the villages, towns and cities, which have a rich cultural heritage. What we constantly realise is the apparent contradiction between what we had and what we have now. Thus, we live in an atmosphere of contradictions because, we like what we had, but do not yet know well how to improve the present and ensure a better future. As a result, we attempt superficially, certain measures in town and city planning, house designs and housing layouts. The cultural heritage does not appeal to the heart of the younger generations, they do not wish to retain it since it does not symbolically or culturally belong to them. They look towards the new world which they witness through the ever expanding communication media. The young generation's image is that of the outside world, because they do not have any clue of our own heritage.

The confusion we face today

Since Independence, either due to an urge to keep up with a rapidly modernising economy, or lacking a societal concern, the profession has followed a different path. As against the traditional solutions which responded to the local resource and climate, the designer has opted for techniques and forms propagated by the new technology. The hot, impersonal bee-hives of flats, in concrete, in isolated locations, separated by unsuitable public spaces have led to social disintegration and environmental degradation. In settlement planning similar things followed. As against mixed land use which promoted economies of various types, the single function zones were created. This not only wasted space but also added strain on energy in transportation of goods and people.

This situation, coupled with an irrelevant academic curriculum, and lack of professional leadership, developed a breed of professionals whose main interests revolved around the estate developers needs. Social responsibility and cultural values were too dangerous to seek for fear of losing the commission.

Because of tempting commissions to build for an elite group which responds to an alien 'modernity', the professionals and the academic institutions failed to advocate the achievements and the essential order of the dynamic design process of the past. In the absence of this, a formal character of design was repeated without hesitation as the only solution.

The cultural shock is even greater. It even makes the uninitiated question the basis of earlier life-styles and the worth of past architecture and city planning practices. The conflict is between the 'old' which was one's own and the 'new', which though alien, is apparently impressive.

A case in hand, at national level, is our more than half a million villagers with about 580 million population. Even today, after 38 years of independence, our rural economy is faced with the problems of shortages in food, clothing, shelter, educational and health facilities. This is the result of our initial emphasis on heavy industries and not on developing small and medium towns as integrated communities providing opportunities for a wholesome life.

We have today extremes of development without proper links. We have sophisticated technology including the atomic power plants, and jet air-transportation on the one hand, and bullock-cart on the other. A few cities are becoming over populated with the concentration of industries, and the smaller towns and villages are becoming depopulated due to lack of basic needs and work opportunities. In such a state of unbalanced development, what should be the priorities of architecture and planning? What is the so called 'true' architecture? Which end of the stick should we grasp first?

Such a state of affairs, once it has set in, is difficult to correct. In such a situation, the technologies for production of basic needs are in great demand. The mass media, radio, television and films, have brought to the mostly uneducated population an awareness of the life in developed countries. As a consequence, the growing number of people dependent on a limited developed land area, aspire for a new world; a world of plenty and comforts. New gadgets that are seen through the mass media become a fascination. The choice open to them is to search for a place where the happiness of their dream can be realised. The reaction
The emerging issues

We note that this situation is an unavoidable consequence of industrialisation. What solution do we have for either the urban or the rural areas? Since the technological benefits should be given to the masses, irrespective of their location, what are we, as architects and planners doing? Are we really developing a technology for orderly and contented living circumstances and has discounted 'man', what style of environment and planning some ways of helping the rural population to have a better place or well conceived industrial activities for lean periods, or better tools for farming?

In such situations, what kind of role can be expected from architecture and community planning? Since the entire development has depended on uncontrolled circumstances and has discounted 'man', what style of buildings can we expect? What can be taught to the coming generations? What professional services can we offer? Where do we really begin?

The effects of such uncoordinated development has had more disastrous effects in developing countries than in the developed countries. For where can the poor nations find additional resources to rectify its ever growing mistakes of blind imitation?

The Indian cultural heritage and community environment

Over the centuries, Indian culture, through its socio-economic ramifications has given a sense of security and yet allowed wide choices. In the traditional Indian society, one is not alone, but part of a community. Buildings are not built in isolation, but in groups leading to a total environment, merging buildings, spaces and culture in a unified whole. The community shares everything, be it an economic activity or a festival. Unless this socio-cultural tradition is understood, the organisation of buildings, streets, spaces and their forms cannot be the desired fabric wherein the community wants to live. It is, therefore, necessary to talk about physical environment in terms of culture rather than only in terms of buildings, space, technology or economy.

The house form which has evolved in India, say in Ahmedabad can be cited as an example. This form has behind it centuries of tradition, which not only ties the community of one generation together, but also the successive generations within the house. In the house plans, it is difficult to perceive this immediately, but seen through the minute activities and functions carried out in the house, it can be felt that there exists a strong sense of identity. This must be incorporated in designing new environments and, to do this, it is necessary to understand the socio-cultural patterns.

The village well over centuries has grown as a very prominent social institution. There are a large number of such manifestations in the old and existing institutions which tell us about the socio-cultural tradition of the community. Detailed study of these can provide us with a genuine understanding of the real community needs, which must be given importance in architecture and design.

Therefore, institutions became the primary design elements in creating an environment. Religious institutions particularly the temple, through the ages have greatly influenced the community environment. There are temple cities in India which have survived for centuries because the religious institutions have provided the community with cultural stability, occupation and guidance in its behavioural patterns. These also helped in establishing value systems and a strong conviction in continuous community belonging.

For the institutions to survive, grow, expand and be a part of the culture, there was an organisational structure evolved by the society. In the Ajanta and Ellora caves, while the building activity continued over centuries, the quality of execution and the craftsmanship continued to grow better. Today, the work assigned to an assistant or to a contractor cannot achieve the expected quality if the designer is absent for even a few months. In the case of these caves and temples, the chief architect or the 'sthapati' would come, spend some time and then go away. He perhaps would not come again, but the work went on through generations, with the quality remaining constant and often improving. This process had within it the built-in mechanism of community commitment and convictions passed down through generations. The generations of designers, builders and craftsmen would continue to build the institution, each excelling the previous one, motivated by their commitment to remain true to the major principles, and guidelines, established by the sthapati with regard to the location, the materials, the technology, the design of the carvings and the sense of depth. This suggests that within a main concept, an organisational system and a method must be developed to continue the work, to provide choice for participants to identify themselves with the work and thus generate excellence. This
quality of transition, of commitment to the community, and the ability and sanction to interpret principles by individuals are very much in contrast to contemporary practices. There, perhaps, greater importance is given to the individual and his role, and not to the organisation. People today, presumably believe that when the individual dies, the organisation also comes to an end.

It is interesting to see therefore why Indian culture has survived through many centuries and why it is good in some ways. This is because, through centuries, institutions have evolved along with the living environment and provided a broad flexible structure which an individual has the ‘choice’ to interpret in his own way. As a result, the commitment to the concept of community has been deep-rooted and this has tended to provide for total harmony. The built-in variations in all aspects of Indian life, and activity-creation always provide an ‘open end’ with regard to growth, evolution and change. This is another very important aspect to remember. In our modern attitude to development planning, building and designing, these issues, though basic are often ignored when preconceived or alien strategies do not work and hence planning and designing becomes totally inefficient.

Such attitudes to organisation, structure and design can be discovered in past Indian architecture, particularly that of the temples which have served as the most important catalytic institution to preserve the culture. In Indian architecture, the creators, the designers, thought about many functions other than just simply the basic functions the buildings should perform. The idea of a staircase performing only the function of movement, a window that of lighting and ventilation, or a roof that of providing shelter from the weather, are basically alien to Indian culture since such cannot satisfy the diverse needs of diverse groups. A staircase can mean many things, a place to sit or if bigger, perhaps a place to sleep.

All elements were considered as multifunctional. That is what Indian culture has grown with, and that is how the Indian temperament is built. Growth of buildings are not just additive but are basic to the balanced life. Therefore, all elements of the environment must be designed to satisfy more than one situation.

This reminds one of Charles Eames’ description of a ‘lota’, the traditional vessel for fetching water, and also a conversation recorded in ‘Vishnudharmottar Purana’, a 12th century treatise of arts. In the example of the lota, Charles Eames, with his highly developed sense, saw in it the total process of not only its making, its form or its use as a container, but also in it the users’ various postures when carrying it from the well or the river, on the head or on the waist or in the hand. He also heard in it the sound of water, and therefore, regarded the form of the lota as a demonstration of one of the most essential process of design which is neither time nor space bound. How its design came about or who was the designer is not clearly known. The fact that it has so many attributes, gives it a place in the history of design.

In the other example from Vishnudharmottar Purana, the King asks Lord Markendeya how to build a shrine for Him so that the Lord is available for daily worship. In His reply, the Lord explains to the King, the process of design and how to learn this process.

Here, phonetics, poetry, literature, art, music, painting and sculpture are mentioned as basic and successive tools of learning without which a designer cannot fulfil his task of building a temple cohesively related to the symbolic and functional aspects.

It is apparent from the above that a good design must include several tangible and intangible functions: what Louis Kahn called the measurables and the unmeasurables, the physical and the spiritual or the symbolic.

Directions for the future — the possibilities

With today’s technologies, it should be easy to build a new world, a world which can be linked with the past by building on the basic values, and with the future in terms of the well-being of a larger number of people. Planning will only succeed, provided uncertainties about ‘values’ are reduced to a minimum and not subject to pressures of immediate circumstances.

Fortunately, we are becoming aware of the consequence of our present day actions and we are dissatisfied. We realise that it is necessary to accept technological advances and explorations of new avenues for growth. It is of great importance to harness resources and energies to support the ever increasing population. What we have not, perhaps, understood properly is a place for the technology. It is really a tool but the tool has become a hammer which we can’t wield. Technology is not an end in itself. Unbridled technology can lead to overproduction resulting in wasteful consumption. Essentially, technology should be utilised in relation to man’s welfare.

Our main aim should be to become industrious not merely industrialised. By becoming industrious, that is, through skill and healthy competition and choice, we can have a better rapport between work that one enjoys doing and leisure as its counterpart. Our approach should be based on using life, time and space more fruitfully. With this the problem of quantity, that is, the needs of the large number of
people will be interlinked with quality. This will improve the values since, quality will convert the quantity into an expression of life’s desire and will not belong to the realm of competition, because, it will not be superfluous but inherently essential.

To this end, what sort of planning and architecture is most helpful? What considerations should the professionals have, so that its expressions have a bearing on the history and the culture of the people? Should our architectural and community planning focus on social expectations, religious faith, aesthetic outlook, or only an economic affluence? It is accepted that we as professionals, with a limited field of control, cannot directly provide for the amelioration of economic conditions. We may however be able to decide on courses through which, economic growth not only becomes possible but progressive. This we can do. On the other hand, we may not be able to change the social customs and manners of a people, but we can plan in a manner that provides for a healthy accommodation of these. The architect-planner, naturally cannot preach any religious doctrine, but whatever the religious form, he can plan and provide for the individual or for the community, choices for prayers, for meditation, for ceremonies or for festivals.

In terms of operation and management for balanced growth, we need to discover scales which are self-sufficient in certain respects and, at the same time, inter-dependent for certain operations.

We should define, at least to a close approximation, the scales of various operations for an individual, family and community in villages, towns and cities so that their mode of living is in relation not only to a cycle of 24 hours but also in relation to weekly, monthly and annual needs. In this way every individual, who ultimately constitutes the community and the city, has his own choices for work, rest, reflection and creation.

Quality will naturally emerge in time, provided the entire process is nurtured with this faith. This should be the basis of planning or architecture. This is what we call culture, and the structure around which people like to throng are the ‘institutions of man’. We should search for our cultural ‘catalysts’ which become the institutions of man and which give life its meaning. In planning practices and in architectural expressions, this is what we have to look for and build.