

OPINION

FOR RELEVANCE AND BEAUTY IN ARCHITECTURE

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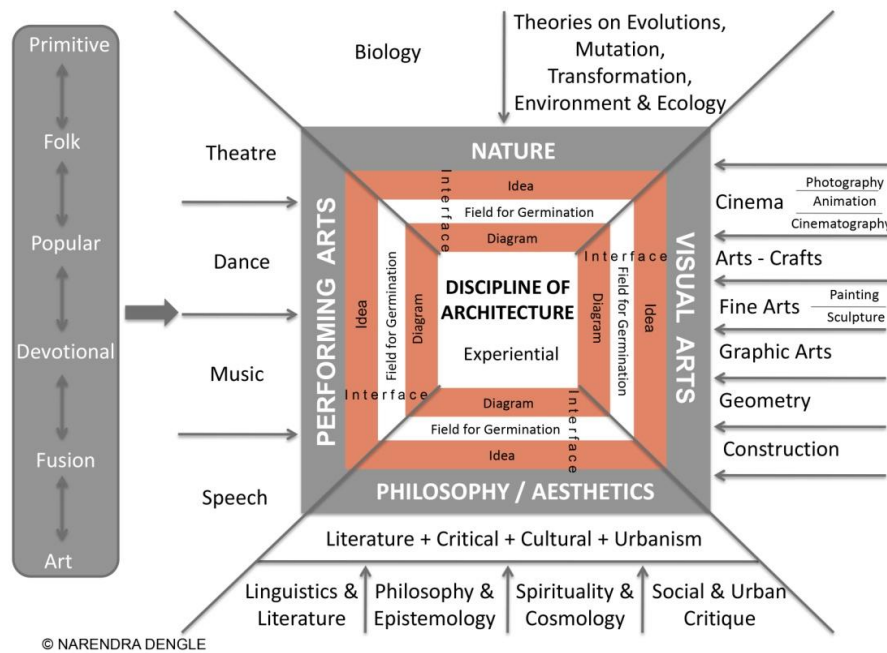


Figure: Six categories with distinct constraint-configurations (on Left-hand side) coexist in time albeit with a lot of overlaps. Rich and varied resource fields contribute in numerous ways to the shaping of architecture, both in our consciousness as a formless idea, and to its convergence through synthetic diagrams that explore the wholeness of life.

1. An alternative to the mechanized way of living

The recent appeal by the students of architecture at the *Architectural Association* in the UK for a change in the curriculum seems to indicate the uneasiness with the current form of education (Architecture Education Declares, 2019). But it may be seen as an uneasiness not only with the pattern of education, but with even the relevance of the profession for people and the environment.

One must be able to read at the root of this dissatisfaction the disillusionment with the direction, content and perception of the phenomenal world — all of which contributes to the conceiving and making of architecture. In India the situation is not dissimilar, and one can completely empathise with this appeal.

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The devotion with which technology is worshipped by some nations (and architects) forms one pole of perceiving this world which directs their action with consequences that are universal. This devotion seeks greater dependence on a machine taking all decisions for the human, and a resultant mechanised way of living. Some architects proudly boast of the most exclusive software employed in their indulgence in form making. The more wired the form, the greater is the star status.

The other pole of the profession shows people who have turned decisively away from the tenets of modernism, with a responsibility to nature and other organisms, while planning human habitats. For them the rationalism inherited from modernism has assumed a greater significance in life, going beyond the cause-and-effect kind of rationality. Ironically, both these poles believe their pursuits to be creative and imaginative. One pole envisions the visual delight synonymous with desperate form-making, whereas the other pole recognizes that the self can draw a much deeper sense of delight by being with the processes of nature.

Form-making as a goal is obsessively sought by the *mechanized* pole at any cost, while those who follow the *natural* pole believe in being sustainable in their approach. The profession continues to have a muddled theoretical view of what it is facing, however. Naturally, the critique within the profession and therefore in academia at large is equally confused.

2. Indian scenario — relevant for the rest of the world

Content, curriculum and syllabi of architectural education in India are monitored by the Council of Architecture, which is responsible for its revalidation strategies. It is ironical that the Council, which is a professional body, should be entrusted with the task of monitoring education and academia. The above-mentioned radarless thinking cascades down into academia with varied demands of the profession on academia.

While the responsibility of an educational institute would have to account for the seriousness of professional obligations — by honing competence and confidence among students to take on projects as professional architects — academia ought to be left free from any form of control. Controls create comfort zones for teachers and evaluators, who do not have to reinvent their idea of architecture, and are happy to be in the grooves of standardization made by them. Evidently, the students who are able to see beyond such straightjacketing are disillusioned with the system.

Freedom is not wantonness. Many individuals realise that they are very much a part of the collective, and represent universal consciousness. They will always work with the sense of responsibility and sensitivity for society and nature, from which architecture can never divorce its sense of delight.

3. An overhaul inspired by Nature

This overhaul should be seen as placing Nature at the core of one's consciousness. For far too long we have looked at the phenomenal reality as the only reality and worked hard to build it and 'perfect' it. In architecture this factor reflects much more than in fine arts, leading to indulgence in form making activity. But the human is an integral part of Nature's own processes, and if this somehow becomes a 'reality' in our consciousness, then perhaps the same would percolate down into one's work as well.

I believe that this would help us get closer to what Christopher Alexander discusses as ‘wholeness’. Wasn’t it Albert Einstein who sounded the warning bells for future generations about stupidity that over dependence on Artificial Intelligence would bring to our lives? Human engagement can be seen in terms of certain precepts that M. N. Ashish Ganju and I wrote in our book *The Discovery of Architecture: ancient values and indigenous reality* (Ganju & Dingle, 2013). The book itself resulted from our discussions over two years on how to reinvent the direction for academic and professional pursuits in architecture. We found that our discussion vibes well with the Building Beauty programme being run at Sorrento, Italy based on Christopher Alexander’s theories, and with the essays in this series.

(1) Self as Community.

This is observed even today, in some traditional communities, not only in tribal areas but even in cities like Mumbai where decisions about individual and community space are taken collectively. A number of exemplary participatory acts in knowledge-sharing and construction continue to make sense. Here, the process of ‘Design’ is conceived as a kind of a reunion of the individual and the collective that leads to newer discoveries.

(2) The Act of Architecture with the Awareness of the Evolving Universe.

How can the act of architecture be least invasive to the processes of nature? Thinking in this direction brings a sense of responsibility towards LIFE which is different from an individual’s life-time; the thrust of market compulsions in the form of new techniques and materiality would then be seen in a different perspective.

(3) Maintenance as Renewal.

Maintenance is often left out of the scope of the architect wearing his/her designer hat. It is imagined as ‘someone else’s responsibility’. Traditionally, maintenance is seen as part and parcel of holistic thinking in the conception of human habitat. In the times that we live today, this needs to be examined again for newer inferences.

(4) Regeneration with Learning.

Time brings us to similar situations albeit garbed differently. All the four points mentioned here are revisited for a contemporary relevance in the socio-political context we live in. However, negating them brings irreversible damage for our planet as well as to the human spirit.

The uneasiness felt by the students who wrote the above letter, is not about how they will earn a good living, or accumulate wealth on course to becoming *starchitects*, and I see this therefore as a very positive turn in consciousness. The total disconnect with people has brought the “Ministry for Loneliness” to the UK. At least this has been recognized there as a serious problem, rather than shoving it under the carpet. This disconnect not only affects individuals’ relation with society in a sociological sense, but it is manifest in all walks of life, including architecture and allied disciplines.

Architecture, unlike modern painting or sculpture, is primarily a process of dealing with the human habitat. The habitat itself consists of living beings with ideas and aspirations wanting to celebrate a life by living there. It is not about watching fatigued forms of structures that consume enormous amount of resources. But people have somehow been made to believe in a set of visual symbols to be a futuristic way of efficient and

organized way of life! The act of architecture which does not balance the resources from the head, heart and the hand tragically becomes lopsided in its manifestation.

Sustainability also cannot be inferred as *sustainability of the self* at the cost of the other! Actually exploring processes that have made historically-relevant architecture possible should erase this paradox from the minds of the students. They will then realize that the sense of the contemporary can always be a newer investigation of lessons from the histories of human habitations.

4. Regaining the respect that architecture has lost

Geographical and political barriers must be transcended in the minds of creative humans, who will always be aware of the three approaches to knowledge: *Physis, Ethos and Techne* [*Nature, Character and Craft*]. These should be our major concerns as modes of knowledge making.

An architect must build a trusting relationship with his/her patron and society, which would mean that she would have to learn to recognize herself to be the 'other'. It is not possible to achieve this without actually working on observation, inference and comparison as three modes of making knowledge: by being and working among the people.

The respect that architecture has lost in some countries, including India, shows a schism between the patron and the architect. Their coming together on one plane is vital to sensible architecture. They can come together if they believe in the same principles and by chalking out a path through understanding each other's concerns. With fame, glamour and money as common convictions of a good life, however, society and nature become the losers. The results adversely affect the planet and its balance.

Christopher Alexander is perhaps an exception in the West: he challenges the status quo in western-style education in architecture with a spirited pointer through his consistent writings and works. It is possible to seriously consider the core of his thinking as a viable alternative to educational thinking.

Whenever one thinks of energy as something like a power to be consumed by humans — like electricity — one also must appreciate that energy *within* and *outside* the self are actually no different. The more one goes into learning about the self the greater one becomes aware of the other — as part of oneself!

Nuclear waste is now being dumped in the south of Tibet, which is thought of as not only the source of water in the region, but as a kind of ancient source of spiritual energy. As a result, Tibet, as part of the globe, is threatened with changes in the climate and drying up of resources, but even worse, the entire world suffers.

References

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