

OPINION

NEMESIS IN THE GENESIS: REFORMING ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IN INDIA

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1. The global south and its characteristics

This essay responds to the worldwide awakening on the need to transform architectural education. Voices of dissent are echoing in India as well. The recent *Pune Declaration* is a resonance of this effort in India (Nair, 2019). We identify some crucial issues from multiple fronts in the realm of architectural education. As architectural practitioners deeply involved in academia, these issues and concerns continue to afflict us. We share these hoping that together we can understand the genesis of the plague, and work towards a meaningful architectural design education.

Nation states of the Global South share some strong characteristics. Geographical advantage imparts year-round warm weather and sunny outdoor living. Most nations are densely populous, and poverty is an accepted human condition. Many countries have a long historic lineage and sustainability as a way of traditional thinking and values.

Societies are deeply family-oriented and care for the aged and elderly. Social institutions for their care are lacking. Families place children's education as a priority, especially technical education that ensures employability, migration to better places on the globe, and good life. As is true of populous nations, competition as a way of life occurs at every step. A myriad socio-cultural landscapes and socio-economic inequalities have resulted in dense and diverse spatial environs. Cities are congregations of various orientations of faiths, cultures, and economic backgrounds. Morphologies of such urban centers are unique and manifest a unique set of issues and concerns.

Such a setting is also a rich repository of learning. Problems require understanding, which is possible only through actual hands-on learning. And the education of architects should be based upon a deep understanding of the complexities of the land, its people, their culture, and built heritage that has evolved in response to life over centuries of evolution.

2. Indian urbanism in the millennium

India is a quintessential country of the global south. It displays most characteristics described above. Currently it is ambitiously endeavoring to convert its many cities, big and small, into smart cities. Governmental efforts towards this end are piecemeal and haphazard, however. Cities are being converted into TODs: "Transit oriented

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developments”, and layers of thick ugly infrastructure are being added in the form of new roads, flyovers, and overhead metro rails.

Smaller cities are losing their legibility and character. Old city quarters and the heritage associated with them are going for a toss in the mayhem. The slow pace of life in these smaller cities with their tree-lined roads, human scale, open spaces and parks, and cultural symbols such as small shrines that kept the spirit of the community alive are fast becoming a thing of the past.

There is not much to rejoice about the avatar the new-wave city shall don. For, in the rapid transformation, its character and sense of place are getting disoriented. This sense of loss is writ large amongst those who care: citizens who are sensitive and understand. The promised smart city is far from any citizen-friendly urban center it is hyped up to be. In the wake of such mass scale alterations, many issues and concerns are becoming manifest. Naturally so, most lie in the realm of the built environment. These are live problems that await innovative thinking. Who is better equipped to address these issues than the practitioners, students, and researchers of architecture, design, and planning?

3. Indian architectural education and its perceived orientation

Alas! Wither architectural education? It is a system entrenched in isolated castles, lost in learning the art of making peculiar buildings. Buildings that are individual, and have their own signature; buildings that borrow from modern technology and are influenced by the images that readily float in the cyber media. They catch the imagination of many starry-eyed young students and become an all-absorbing ambition of life. While the architectural syllabi do their bit to educate young people about context, users, culture, and society, those are individual courses.

Users, their behavioral complexities and influence on design and vice versa are also inputs. A drawback of the present system is that these concerns mostly never get woven into design studios. The whole system supports the making of architects whose built creations shall stand alone in individual glory. This attitude leads to the societal role of the architect getting oversimplified, since he/she is perceived as a professional who can be commissioned only by those who can afford it. The architect is viewed as a person who only creates beautiful buildings and interiors. There is enough scope to earn well in such capacity.

Students come to architecture school not just because they want to create better living environments. They come to learn the practicalities of the discipline, as the world requires (Dickinson, 2019). They want to set up practices, take up jobs, be part of infrastructures, contribute and partake in the current urbanization boom. This boom preoccupies many disciplines, including Information & Communication Technology, civil engineering, planning and administration, politics, etc. so essentially it is a mixed bag with varying levels of education, competence, and skills. What lacks at the end is the collective effort to keep our living environments synchronous, homogeneous, and following a shared grammar of aesthetics and beauty. This is due to the excess democratization of design education and the encouragement of individual whims under the guise of “creativity”.

4. Lacuna in school education

This problem is not of architecture institutions and their education alone. Architects design only a miniscule percentage of the built environment; many other players such as realtors, etc. contribute. Awareness and the inclinations of the clientele are also major propelling factors. To bring about a difference, society at large has to have some semblance of pride in the histories of the land, its people, and the built forms that have shaped it over eons. In a globalized world, publications and fancy images from around the world exert tremendous influence on imaginations, not only of architects, but also of the clientele drawn from various backgrounds.

The only common ground is the basic education that all have had at school. It is an unfortunate fact that school-level education does not sensitize young minds about their built environment at any stage. In India, the thrust is on technical education at the cost of all other disciplines of human endeavor. Some neglected arenas are the study of heritage, tangible and intangible, art appreciation, and the built environment. Frampton so rightly stated in the UIA 2009 keynote that education at high school level should incorporate study of the built environment to ensure an aware and critical clientele (Frampton, 2000).

Architects alone cannot shape built environments that are responsive to their users, have a sense of place, and contribute to social security by enabling community networking. This can be achieved only when architects and planners work in tandem with the citizens. This calls for a learned awareness and concern that only education can inculcate. In India, this is a substantial gap that requires suturing.

5. Architecture is a reflection of the society

If the current chaos, disorder, and ungainly development of Indian cities are a proposal of the government, then their fruition is at the hands of politicians, public works departments, and others in that ilk who are citizens without any iota of aesthetic awareness. Studies claim that ordinary citizens have a different sense of aesthetics — it is true (Salingaros, 2019). But as is commonly experienced in our contemporary times, social media and mass-scale western publications of signature buildings and high-tech projects influence the public more often. The percentage of population that takes pride in and would like to conserve its living heritage is miniscule.

Old city cores are dilapidating and fast depleting; although the new urban sprawl is planned, it is devoid of any romance. This brand of urbanism is individualistic, mostly modern, and lacks any sense of belonging. Unfortunately, it is rampant. Those who have grown up in such sterile neighborhoods cannot identify with heritage. Our heritage is most often referred to as old, and a thing of the past.

6. Way forward: now or never

The strategy has to be two-pronged. Education at a basic level requires strengthening to make the young aware of the complexities of the built environments, wherein they live their entire life. Sustainability, the judicious use of natural resources, recycling, reuse, and socially-responsible architecture are critical issues of our times to be included in a school curriculum (Architecture Education Declares, 2019). This effort shall go towards forming an aware and responsible citizenry that takes pride in one's heritage, cultural ethos of the land and its people. In the case of India, students should already know at

school level about the existence of pluralism, its manifestation through signs and symbols, non-verbal communication, identity and its deep connection to the socially-sustainable urban environs.

If such were the foundation at school, architectural education can well be spruced to take on advanced issues that aim at identifying problems faced in urbanism. The curriculum shall weave through an understanding of one's communities, their lifestyles, patterns of living and such other live and pertinent enquiries. Environment Behavior (EB) studies shall open up many unexplored avenues for spatial response. Appreciative enquiry (AI) shall be the basis for education. This gives live exposure to the community, and learning happens through real-time observation of the way citizens organize their life in urban environments. EB parameters such as personal space, privacy, the need for territoriality, social networking, sense of belonging etc. are human traits that shape the built environment for conviviality. These are fundamental to understanding human society and designing spaces for it.

Simultaneous to this learning are lessons from the history of architecture and the evolution of spatial patterns in indigenous communities. India has layers of historicity and a heritage that is alive and kicking. This living heritage shall become live labs for ingraining the spirit of humanity.

An example is a study of the well-documented Brahmapuri, a 500-year-old housing settlement in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, where the spatial pattern has been developed keeping in mind the contours of the land, the harsh climate of the region, local building materials, and lifestyle preferences of the community. With all fundamentals of a human habitat in place, the architectural form of Brahmapuri charms by its well thought-of interconnected spaces, the many shrines that dot its porous fabric, the integration of interaction spaces, its shared community facilities such as wells, taps, shady trees; its indigo blue symbolism that is both functional (by way of keeping off excess heat) and aesthetical, since it binds the urban fabric and imparts a sense of identity to the community. Brahmapuri is not the only example of such responsive settlements in India.

Given the immense building traditions of the land that apply sustainable building techniques and contextuality, lessons in architecture should initiate with studying the vernacular, and its material and construction techniques. Pertinent lessons of how urbanism develops in a syncretic manner through a shared grammar emerge from such a study (Boys-Smith & Scruton, 2019). Beauty emerges as a core value of the human habitat. Its production is not synthetic, but comes from deep within the inner consciousness of the community that shares its living spaces.

Only a pedagogy that is rooted in the timeless built environment can sensitize students, growing up in our chaotic city, unexposed to the old city milieu and its sense of scale and place. Appreciative inquiry (AI) shall be the basis for architectural education of the future. Only by anchoring to the timeless building traditions of the past can we leap into the future, and be certain of not losing the core values of humanism (Alexander, 1979).

7. Council of Architecture Minimum Standards: issues and reflections

The minimum standards of education prescribed by the *Council of Architecture* (COA) effectively assess the quantitative aspects of an academic institute. Although there exists a framework to assess *qualitative* aspects as well, we feel a need for a better and more

effective mechanism. This is where intervention is needed and a direction has to be given. Most institutes/schools grapple to meet the minimum standards stipulated by the COA, since registration mandates it. However, since the *qualitative* is not being addressed, education is suffering.

This suffering also occurs because of several other reasons:

- i) Teachers are not allowed to practice. Research is in nascent stages. Quality of faculty is an issue.
- ii) Many architecture courses are part of a technical campus, where the course has to fit into the straitjacketed systems of technical schools.
- iii) Practicing architects do not want to get involved due to water-tight compartments that academia and practice have fixated into.

These are some issues that have resulted in a gap between the profession and its education, which is increasing by the day.

The problem in architectural education in India is that in following the *Minimum Standards of Architectural Education* prescribed by the Council of Architecture (COA), all aspects are incorporated. But care is not taken to implement them with any philosophical bearings; either those of the local region and its available resources, or those of local communities and their cultural and spiritual ethos. If such were to happen, the school would become a center of documentation of specific regional studies, leading to plentiful research activities. India is a vast nation replete with traditions that go far back into the ages; if every school takes upon/adopts its own domain region, it shall connect students to the roots of their land.

While such orientation shall of course be enriching, it is imperative to also instruct students in the latest technologies, materials, research, and happenings on the ground. Each can then make a conscious choice through informed decisions. As we move ahead in time, technology is here to evolve and enrich human lives. A well-balanced amalgam of high technology, cyber-tech, and a responsive and people-centric built environment is the need of the hour. This effort has been termed, 'Contemporary Vernacular'. Under its aegis, a system of architectural education could develop that opens up fresh young minds to explore state-of-the-art technology in conjunction with innate human processes.

The issues and concerns of architectural education are experienced worldwide. They have a deep relationship with the land and the people for whom the education is being imparted. Albeit, at a philosophical as well as on a human level, many problems are identifiable. We wish to offer our support and contribution to this endeavor.

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