

OPINION

ARCHITECTURE PRACTICE AND ARCHITECTURE EDUCATION IN INDIA NEED A MAJOR RETHINK

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1. The need for change

The situation differs fundamentally in different places. The voices of dissent searching for alternatives to architectural education, even if the message sounds similar emerging from London, Delhi, New York, Rome and Sydney, believe me, are different, as the systems to which they respond to and are reactions for are different. Also, the profession is tied both to the local market and to international globalization. Anyone seeking change must understand these differences.

India is big and complex in this matter too. With nearly 500 schools and colleges of architecture in the country and up to 30,000 graduates a year, and a history of “foreign” domination, we need very seriously to think how to build the “change” narrative. It has to be a step-by step process. And it has to be a broader coalition.

We need to push for needed changes and use this wonderful opportunity that students have given in the letter from the British Architecture Students (Architecture Education Declares, 2019). And in doing that, we need to reach the students first. Not to say “what to do” and “how to do it”, but to say that we understand you and are with you. We should take the alienation of the students of architecture from the wider societal and sectorial challenges seriously.

It is not only the syllabus that is the problem. It is the mindset, the worldview, the understanding of modernity and disdain for traditional and ‘people’ values. It is not enough to say that things are not right. They must change. Those who see the need for a change have as their onus to work for such change to happen.

Others who have commented on our educational system are right. The problem is deeper and the malaise has many dimensions. It is systemic, with the students largely the victims. They are at the receiving end. And therefore this statement by them, this expression of desire for change, needs to be admired, recognized, complimented and actively supported. I am delighted because this voice, however feeble at the moment, seems to emerge from many corners.

Our engagement is with the well-entrenched system where the internal questioning is almost absent — “There is nothing wrong, what are you talking about? What correctives are you seeking? What changes do you want, and why? It is all great and rolling superbly.” If you put all of these together — architects, architecture, profession, and education — it is a formidable establishment; a billions-of-dollars business empire,

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with power lobbies, fashion czars and modernity enthusiasts as the cause champions. Questioning by “external insiders” — almost all of us are that — is sporadic, episodic and un-orchestrated. And, to be honest, it is just rumblings by some who did not fit well, or succeeded by chance and luck in choosing an “alternative” path and direction.

2. My personal story

That is why I strongly feel a need to reach out to students. To tell them that I understand what they are saying. To tell them that I saw, felt and experienced it 50 years ago. And responded to it: by dropping out of the School of Architecture — now CEPT University Ahmedabad, India — after studying there for 5 years and barely 4 months away from my diploma. (And this in spite of it being a special, progressive professional education institute with liberal approach, nonconventional teaching methods, experimental curriculum, flexible approach to learning, and open environment.) I said then that neither the education being imparted nor the profession were in sync with the demands of the country’s — and its people’s — development challenge. This point the profession as it was practiced neither understood nor cared to understand.

It dawned upon me that the profession was exclusionist, if not elitist, as architects worked only for the rich and the upper income bracket, and confined their work and services to the big cities only. The small towns, villages and the villagers were not their clients, nor the urban middle classes and certainly not the lower income groups. Their client universe was probably upper one percent of the creamy layer: the rich, articulate, fashion conscious, design oriented and, of course, those with a ‘foreign’ tag of some kind and exposure.

I immediately went to some flood ravaged villages to help the villagers rebuild them. Over the years, I have set up a number of non-profits in India to work with ‘alternative’ clients — urban slum dwellers, homeless, disaster victims, tribal peoples, rural poor, etc. I have focused on “development” issues — studying research in support of policy advocacy, working for and strengthening those forces, individuals, organizations and institutions working for broadly defined “change” — systemic, institutional and attitudinal, nationally and internationally. At 77 I do not have a degree. And almost 50 years after I dropped out from architecture school I have not regretted it even in my weak moments.

I would like the above story to reach the students. Not because it is my story. But because it strengthens them in their resolve and demand. In more than one way. That the problem is not only in the U.K. and the U.S.A., or the rich and technically advanced North. India and other countries in Asia are no different. And it is not something that happened now. It is an old problem. I have a sense that the above reference is for architectural education in the West (Europe and America). Mine is local — Indian. And though there are similarities I guess they are different. My input broadens the matter by bringing in the Asian drama.

3. The architect Laurie Baker as a role model

My keynote address at the launch of the Laurie Baker Centenary Celebrations (Shah, 2016) does three things: (i). It introduces Laurie Baker as an architect of the people, environment, culture and soil. (ii). It analyses architecture, architects, the architecture profession and architecture practice in India frankly, honestly and passionately. (iii). It calls for major changes — attitudinal, institutional and perceptual. Laurie Baker was

more than a people-focused and local context-sensitive architect working in India; in his work sustainability was not just a consideration but an innate feature.

Here are excerpts from that speech:

“In a manner of speaking, Mr. Baker is to local architecture what Mahatma Gandhi was to India’s freedom struggle. Both led to liberation, both believed in simplicity, both drew their strategies from the culture and tradition of the place, both had a vision of the society they served, and both had implicit faith in the common people and their wisdom. Mr. Baker is a true leader in the field, which has hardly produced a leader of merit.

His contribution and inspiration is not in the form of technology or style alone. It is in the form of change of mindset, in the philosophy of work, and in the attitude to architectural design, practice and problem solving. He made architecture belong to the place — to the soil, to culture, to tradition and, most importantly, to the local people. And that is no small contribution in a country where architecture, in the hands of the foreign-trained and influenced architects, is losing its roots, and where alienation — alienation from the people, from the roots, tradition, culture, climate and soil — is the order of the day. And, in a way, it is a paradox, as Mr. Baker was a foreigner.

Architecture as a subject, as an art form, as a science, as a Shashtra [system of knowledge], is too big and ancient to be treated with anything but respect and pride. But the architecture profession, as perceived and practiced now, certainly needs a rethink, a paradigm shift. The multiple crisis that includes energy, water, space, resources, ecology, governance, values, etc. — the new technologies, changing social equations and emerging realities in the globalizing cities — make it imperative that architects re-educate and re-equip themselves. Both de-learning and re-learning is called for.

Moreover, a degree of de-professionalization of the conventional professional, in terms of attitudinal shift, client choices and priorities, is a necessary part of the change. Architecture is a noble profession. In the hands of its conscientious practitioners, it is a medium to serve the people and also the environment. “Service” is the word. It combines both art and science. Culture and technology are its pillars. It is a vehicle to translate ideas and dreams into reality. It embraces both: reality and vision, creativity and practicality. It has been there from the dawn of the civilization and will always be there.

However, the way it is perceived and practiced, it needs to move from the monuments to people, from magazine pages to practical lives, from the elite to the common people, from top to bottom and, from the pedestal to the ground. That would take nothing away from its hallow, its mystique and its nobility. It will only be richer.”

4. Points for moving forward

What has changed in architecture education, the architecture profession and practice in 50 years? To be honest and truthful, very little, though one should add hastily that there are and must be exceptions. By and large the scenario remains unchanged. The profession remains largely delinked from the societal and even sectorial challenges.

Without getting too ambitious we could easily create a nucleus group among Indian and international stakeholders to push the matter of reform further on a course. We should

prepare a position paper articulating the issues for the establishment, making our position clear and outlining the changes we would like introduced. We should interact and liaise with senior teachers teaching architecture and pursuing an alternative path.

In India alone, we will see a hundred or so new architecture education professionals starting 2021, and every year, these will be professionals who see education as their career. Architectural education in South Asia comprises a hundred thousand people; twice that if you count related disciplines in design, engineering, and vocational training. This is a long-term campaign matter and locating those from within the system who are also on the same wavelength will help. A strategic plan will take us far.

References

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