

TRIBUTE

A TRIBUTE TO THE CELEBRATED ARCHITECT BALKRISHNA DOSHI BY ONE OF HIS OLD STUDENTS. WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

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Abstract. A personal tribute to the late Indian architect and Pritzker Prize-Winner, Balkrishna V. Doshi, by his old student Kirtee Shah. With an Introduction by Nikos A. Salingaros.

Keywords: *Balkrishna Doshi, architecture, architectural education, planning, India.*

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Editor's Introduction

New Design Ideas was very fortunate to receive this personal tribute to India's most distinguished architect, educator, and planner, Balkrishna V. Doshi, written by one of his oldest students, Kirtee Shah. In his reminiscences, Shah presents the touching humanity of Doshi's personality, far and away from the usual behavior of "star" architects the world over. At the same time, Shah takes this opportunity to advance the cause for a human-scale approach to architecture and planning, and the vital necessity for re-orienting current architecture education and practice to solve the pressing problems of a country such as India. Shah mentions his attempts to sway Doshi in this direction, and the interesting (all too human, yet honest) reactions of the famous architect.

It is worth mentioning that Doshi was great friends with Christopher Alexander, who had spent time in India in his youth designing and building a village school using local materials and labor. Alexander maintained this friendship over the years, even as he criticized Doshi for sticking too close to the modernism that Doshi had naturally picked up during his apprenticeship with Le Corbusier in Paris. Alexander told me that he felt that Doshi's otherwise heartfelt efforts at solving the housing problem in India and the developing world could have been far more successful had he not tried to impose the modernist ideas and images that he had internalized, and which were in fact responsible for Doshi's international success as an architect.

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Shah hints at something like Alexander's criticism implicitly, by what he omits to say in his obituary tribute for Doshi. Shah does not mention Doshi's buildings or architecture even once. Doshi was one of India's most decorated architects nationally and internationally, and also the founder of the school of architecture and planning at CEPT University, Ahmedabad, India. Yet Shah's emphasis here is in rethinking architecture and the city, and in changing the education system to serve that purpose. He argues for a new orientation for young professionals and a new thrust on architecture for people. For this reason, this essay should be of considerable interest not only to architects in India, but for the global community of designers as well. (Nikos A. Salingaros).

Doshi I Discovered: Six Decades Down Memory Lane



Picture: The Last Meeting between Kirtee Shah and Balkrishna Doshi. Image: K. Shah

The old times studying under Doshi

Some of the old students of School of Architecture, Ahmedabad, India (now famous as CEPT University), especially from the earlier batches (the School of Architecture started in 1962), run a celebratory program called "Doshi We Know". Under its banner the admiring and grateful group of alumni meet occasionally, interact with 'Doshi Saheb' when possible, felicitate him on special occasions, feel proud of this bond, the informal nature association, with him and run a fellowship. At the heart of it is genuine love, affection, admiration and gratitude for the man who created that unique institution with an uncluttered vision of education that unburdened, practiced philosophy of open mind to create and fly, was easily accessible and unassuming to a fault, despite his many

achievements and high national and international reputation. Many of them believe Doshi made a lasting contribution not only to their becoming good professionals but to their overall persona as well. He was charismatic, largely because of his humane qualities, effortless ease and warmth with which he related to each one and carried no intellectual baggage of any kind.

I was one of his students in the first batch at the School of Architecture. I was also fortunate enough to enjoy a personal rapport over the years. Could talk to him openly and frankly, even critically. He was a father figure and I called him *Guruji*. He passed away last week, in good health at 95, after living a full life and a long distinguished career as an architect and educationist.

Whereas my colleagues call it “Doshi We Know” in my tribute to Doshi Saheb I would prefer to call it “Doshi I Discovered” as I recall three different encounters with him over a long period of 60 years. The stories I narrate will tell why.

Doshi got interested in the problem of women architectural laborers — but unfortunately too late

The first one is quite recent. It occurred about four weeks before his passing away. Nearby to his residence for some work, on an impulse, I landed up in his house unannounced. He was sitting in the lawn, in bright sunshine with his daughter, Radhika. As we started talking, came the usual question: What are you doing these days?

I told him about the work INHAF, Habitat Forum, with which I am associated for a long time, is doing with the women construction workers. Told him that in nearly 50 years of architecture practice, while doing small or big, rural or urban, public or private projects I had never seen a woman carpenter or a woman mason or a woman plumber or a woman site supervisor or even a woman petty contractor.

I told him that INHAF was trying to understand this phenomenon, as in India out of 50 million construction workers some 35% are women. But they are only in unskilled, drudgery jobs. They start as construction labour, as *majdoor*, and retire as one. They get exploited, do not get a chance to work on skilled jobs, do not earn decent income and do not climb the social ladder. I told him that it was patently wrong, unjust and that something should be done about it.

I told him that he was a celebrated architect, a big name, a thinking and influential individual and a caring and responsible professional. Also, while he designed his buildings on paper or a computer, it is these construction workers who gave real life to his creations, his buildings. They gave concrete shape to abstract ideas. Had he ever thought about them? Had he ever thought about doing something about their conditions? Are the working and living conditions of the construction workers a concern for the architect? Is the construction worker a part of their universe? Are they a stakeholder in his professional practice as an architect? I also added: should a millowner care about their employees, workers? Is their welfare the millowners' responsibility in some way?

His eyes popped up. The famous mischievous glint in admiration and even silent approval. He was candid. Truthful. His immediate response was that he had never thought about it.

While on the subject, he suddenly excused himself to visit the washroom, and asked me to wait to continue the talk. He did not return for a while. Radhika (his daughter) told me a little later that he was tired and had slept.

To my surprise he called the next day. Saying he wanted to continue talking about the woman construction worker. And when I suggested that we could continue talking over dinner at my place, he promised to come, as he was keen on talking over the matter further.

It did not happen. He died.

I had not known that Doshi would be so open, frank, reflective, socially aware, and willing to at least think about something he had not done all his long professional life. To be honest, I did not think he had it in him, that he was too much of an ‘architect’ to bother about the woman construction worker, about the supply chain and the role of a non-visible, non-directly-related small role player. I was wrong. It is not that I thought he would make a new start. It is that he had the openness to admit, wanting to learn, to think afresh, to re-sensitize himself at 95!

Doshi’s immense humanity

The second story goes almost 60 years before that. It was the first year at the School of Architecture. There was no campus; not even a building. The school was running in a classroom borrowed from the local commerce college. I was one of the 28 students in that first batch.

Almost 6 months after the schools started I went to meet him to suggest that I was thinking of leaving the school, dropping out, as I could not afford the expenses that the class work required: one day buying colours, second day, buying papers, third day, buying model making material! I told him that I was poor, a widow mother from the village was supporting me, and that it was almost impossible for me to continue.

He advised me not to quit and promised to look after the expenses. He suggested that I work in his office to earn the required money. I politely refused saying I neither had the skill and the competence nor did I want to be influenced early in my career. He was not offended with an upstart’s attitude, who was refusing an offer by a master architect to work with him. In fact, he told me that was okay and offered that I give his three daughters tuition at home in return for him giving me some money to pull on. I do not remember how long the arrangement lasted. But Tejal, Radhika, Maneesha, his daughters, and Kamuben, his wife, often remember and talk about it.

That was my first discovery of Doshi. Not the famous architect. Not the founder and director of the school I was a student at. But a kind, caring, sensitive, giving and considerate human being. Over the years his first inquiry, whenever we met, was about my mother. And that was the charm of this place called The School of Architecture, Ahmedabad. The school as a family and the teachers as caring, helping guardians. “Doshi we know” is an acknowledgement, a reflection of that spirit, that relationship, that bond, that culture.

I had 35 years of deeply rewarding working relationship with another founder, teacher and a long time director of CEPT University, Ahmedabad, Dr. Rasvihari Vakil. He was a Rishi (a Hindu sage). We worked as equals. And we did not work on buildings. But on homelessness, poverty, slums, affordable housing, policy advocacy, neglected villages, and what would constitute good professional education for the country and the society’s challenges!

Trying to fix the architectural vulgarity of cities in India

The third Doshi story relates to our meeting on a flight from Ahmedabad to Delhi, some 15 to 20 years ago. He spotted me seated, requested my neighbor to exchange his

seat, and we chatted for about 60 minutes. The meandering conversation brought me to remind him of a challenge Mr. Romesh Thapar, an early public intellectual, had posed to the designer and the professional educationist community. While delivering the keynote address at the National Institute of Design's (NID's) international conference on "Design for Development" he said that the waves of vulgarity were invading Indian cities (in an apparent reference to deteriorating landscape of the cities with unplanned growth, vulgar display of growing inequality, destroyed rivers, polluted environment, a large and expanding number of people without adequate shelter and basic services, and visible erosion of human values), and the choice before a sensitive designer/architect was either to design one sensitive building among the 99 ugly ones or to work to sensitize the society to prevent or reduce those 99 ugly buildings coming up!

In the early years of India's independence, Mr. Thapar was articulating the public versus the private debate, the product and the process argument, and the individual and society choice for the designer community. Quite mischievously, I must admit, I suggested to Doshi Saheb that he, having done so much of 'architecture', having earned so much of reputation, it was time for him to devote his time, energy and skill to 'sensitizing the society'. To that his clear and prompt answer was 'no'. He said he could not do it, that he was not a *sadhu* (a Hindu holy person) or a reformer; he was an architect and wanted to remain one.

That was also my discovery of the man. An honest person. A professional knowing his boundaries and wanting to work within them. No illusions about changing things — people or behavior or context.

The important work ahead needed to save Indian cities

With Doshi's going, undoubtedly, an era has ended. Not many know or would want to admit that he had internally and emotionally distanced and disassociated himself from CEPT, 'Doshi school' as many called it, for some time. Not necessarily with the philosophy of professional education or the way he saw the architect, architecture profession and practice and architecture education. In a manner of speaking "Doshi-ism", both in architecture and education, remained despite his physical absence, and I mean it in its positive connotation.

But it is time those who are there, who will continue doing and deciding things at CEPT, use the occasion for reflection, stock taking and new departure. The reality is such that we do not need a Romesh Thapar to tell us that the waves of vulgarity are invading our cities and settlements, and that we do not need the Covid 19 to realize that the India's human settlements — cities, towns and villages — are not in good health, and especially that our urban systems are faltering. In many respects: be that environment or water or sanitation or governance or finance or institutions or slums or sustainability or mobility. It is a seemingly endless list depending on where one starts and what the vantage point is.

Correctives are needed. Almost transformative changes in the way we see, govern, manage and live in our cities, if we want them to be livable and inclusive. And the way we produce, grow, transact, move and develop, if we want our cities to be sustainable. And anyone who knows the gravity of the situation knows that the palliatives will not work, and tinkering with the system here and there is not the answer. As Wally N'Dow, the Secretary General of Habitat 2 said, "Urbanization holds out both the bright promise of an unequalled future and the grave threat of unparalleled disaster. And which it will be depends on what we do today."

Unless a revolution in urban problem-solving takes place we are headed for an uncertain future. If the city's development impulse defies '*Sanskriti*' (culture) and '*Prakriti*' (nature), it is hard to imagine where will it lead and what it will be. Because the city is not only a place, also people.

'Revolution' in urban problem solving is the need of the hour and, in my view, a good definition of India's urban challenge. It is time we responded with vision, conviction and creativity. And a place, and an institution called CEPT University, because of its history, its status, its unique environment, its special people, and its uncommon genes must be the first to respond, by changing itself, if necessary. The question that needs to be asked as Doshi Saheb departs is: how do we go about it?

And as I am an alumnus of CEPT and always had high expectations and hopes from it, I feel strongly that CEPT should lead the way. That is its *karma* (fate). CEPT's status as one of the leading institutions of professional education in human settlements makes it obligatory for it to play the lead role. And that is because some 60 years ago Doshi brought in a new, a fresh, a more open, a more informal, a more non-structured way of teaching, educating, training young professionals and approaching problem solving. Recognizing the need to see architecture in its broader and wider dimensions and contextual framework, he also initiated the planning school. But as everything around us tells us, the context has changed, and that demands a different response.

Humanitarian architecture — what is it? It demands putting people before the place, forum (fragrance) before the form, and the contents before the container. People's/users' welfare is its domain. If the country, in its desire to correct the past anomalies and make society a little more equal for its disadvantaged citizens, is building 12 million houses in the cities and 30 million in the villages (the second 30 million after the first 30 million under the Indira Awaas Yojana program) this, by intent, almost automatically, calls for the designer's role.

As making good houses, liveable houses, comfortable houses and good-looking buildings in which those houses are staked requires, besides the money, also good and sensitive design. An affordable house is a greater design challenge as the area is small, money is limited, land is constrained, space is cramped, wastage is unaffordable and options are few.

Also, Romesh Thapar's waves of vulgarity invading our cities also include those ugly buildings, called affordable housing, coming up in our cities. A well-designed affordable house — comfortable, healthy, functionally appropriate, letting the old live without guilt and the young with dreams — is humanitarian architecture too, as it would help a large family live better for something like the coming 20/30 years, a period that would shape a new-born baby into a citizen contributing to nation-building.

These projects and programs, their design quality at least, needs to become a moral, ethical responsibility of CEPT and the 400-odd other schools and colleges of architecture and planning in the country. The younger generation of the designers and the planners needs to see, understand, and internalize this challenge. And a little that I see tells me that they are ready. I am not sure if the institutions training them are, however. It is difficult to concede that caring for the masons and the carpenters is also a part of humanitarian architecture, and a step in making our cities inclusive.

Some remarks from the Laurie Baker Centenary Celebrations

Let me end by quoting myself — sorry for the indulgence — as to why there is a need to change and why would I expect that thought process to start from CEPT. In a

keynote address at the launch of the Laurie Baker Centenary Celebrations at Trivandrum a few years ago, while reflecting on the architecture profession, the professionals and the professional education this is what I had said , “[...] And I believe that Architecture as a subject, as an art form, as a science, as a *shashtra*, 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., and the new technologies, changing social equations and emerging realities in the globalizing cities make it imperative that the 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.”

“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 and from top to bottom”.

That would take nothing away from its hallow, its mystique and its nobility. It will only become richer.

“This is not an outsider’s view based on ignorance, prejudice or ideological baggage. It is an insider’s view, based on experience and borne out of a belief that the architects, as a community, as professionals, as privileged citizens, could do much more, serve many more and contribute so much more meaningfully to this emerging society. It stems from an understanding that given an orientational shift and attitudinal change, they could be leaders in making our cities and settlements better places to live, work, grow, develop and prosper. This view does not negate the need for monumental architecture and the architects pursuing it. It only says that if 80 are chasing the monumental dream let us have just 20 who are concerned about the common people and their building needs. “

A demand for change

It is not only the architecture and the buildings that matter. Also the cities. Interestingly, it was Romesh Thapar then, a public intellectual and not a planner or an architect who talked about the waves of vulgarity invading our cities. Today, many decades later, it is a politician, Varun Gandhi, and not an architect or an urban planner, who in his book “The Indian Metropolis” is talking about Urban India’s ‘lack of humanity’. He asks and I quote:

“Why are our cities so hard to live in? Why do they lack in the most basic of facilities, such as pedestrian-friendly areas? Why are India’s cities so bereft of beauty and a sense of aesthetics? Why are the ground water and the air so polluted years after identifying the problem? Why do our policy makers remain apathetic in solving such issues?”

Yes, our cities must change too.

I am not sure if Doshi would approve of this demand for change for the institution he started. But a thing on which one would have little doubt is that he would, even if reluctantly, agree that the context has changed. This is new India that needs to quantum jump in its quest to make it not only prosperous but also equal and just. Doshi is not there to comment or respond. It is the next 30 years that we must think about, up to 2050. And it is for that relatively smaller trajectory that we need to prepare for and change. After we have created a level playing field we may seek and demand more creative freedoms.

But also remember, that is not either or.