Comments

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I could not agree more with Hasan-Uddin Khan — the discussion of the house is not a side step, it is the essence of the issue.

What is housing but houses. The very fact that we may think it is something else, shows how wrongly we pick up the problem. When we think of the numbers to be housed, if there is a way we could disaggregate this issue down to the end user which is the single house then you would have a totally different attitude.

In this process of dissagregation the essence as Mona Serageldin pointed out is a shortage of land. Tasneem Siddiqui in his very fine paper, shows how the land is being given so slowly and in such negligible amounts to the squatters, that the prices rise and it becomes a commodity which the rich buy and speculate in.

If the government policies change, you immediately come to what Hasan-Uddin Khan is talking about. We have dissagregated it and now we want to know what the individual house can be because that is what each family will live in. There are three very important things that the individual house can teach us. One is by definition it deals with open-to-sky space. Whether it is for the very poor or very rich this is tremendously important. About 70 per cent of the people are very poor and if you give them one room or two rooms, this open-to-sky courtyard or terrace becomes an additional free room. Calculations can be done; there is a production cost of the land, and there is a production cost of a built room and you can see that this is very effective and economical for the poor. And for the rich people too in any country who like to sit on lawns and to have receptions. Which people do not need open-to-sky space? I do not know. Maybe the 10 or 15 per cent in-between. So you can hardly avoid open-to-sky space in an individual house and much of the impact of Hasan-Uddin Khan's images was due to the fact that they had this wonderful relationship of graduated space from covered to open.

The second thing is that it gives us a "typology of continuum" so we do not polarise our society into one typology for the rich and another typology for the middle-class and then a ghetto for the people who live in what we call slums. We

have a continuum. There is no difference between a site and services scheme and suburban America. These are also sites and services. You could call it informal or you could call it formal. Many of them go to architects and they have a house designed. It is done within a context so we have much to learn from this.

The third thing is very important. Geoffrey Bawa's house is probably the most beautiful house I have ever seen and the sensibility is discernible at every moment. Every inch of it makes a nuance and we know the nuances. When we try to design a hospital, we don't have that feeling for the problem. When we try to design 500 houses simultaneously, we lose those nuances. It really is tremendously important and that is why almost no architect can do a bad house even if he is fresh out of school. Whether he makes it out of aluminium or mud, puts it upside down, or hangs it from a tree, it is going to be real, because he is making real decisions. The individual house is a continuously differentiated programme, as you go from room to room, the needs of the room, the quality of life and the privacy is changing and the architects respond to that. As opposed to that a 500-room hotel is a "dumb" programme. By that I mean it is almost impossible to arrive at as intelligent or as fine an answer as for a house. I do not think it is just the size of the programme; a palace for instance can be large, but it can be wonderful because it is a differentiated programme. So, there are these three things; the open-to-sky spaces, the continuum of typology and the third aspect, is the sensibility the architect brings to bear on the problem.

The question is how do we repeat these things so that they reach many, many people as opposed to the single family? I would like to give you just two images. This point is important and it concerns the need for repetition. Using just two different typologies the variations are infinite and that is totally different from cloning.

The reason why this happens is that decisions are not all made at one time by one person but there are layers of decision. It is like looking at a tree. Every leaf has the same principle and yet every leaf is different. We do not know how to reproduce an artificial tree and that is precisely the problem of housing. We

do not know how to make decisions all at once and so we do not end up with the modern equivalent of these models.

Another thing is the malleability of the environment. That is very, very important. Cultural expression can come from an architect's dictatorial decisions or it can come through an environment which is so malleable that people can express their gestures, not only in the public realm but in their private realm and in the sacred realm, both religious and primordial, that lies within them. If we give too hard a context, the people cannot express this. The individual house gives you that feeling. It is a starting point for any architect who has to design housing.

My other image illustrates exactly the opposite — a totally unmalleable environment. It is central New York. The scale is really frightening. On the other hand, the fact that Mildred Schmertz who works there stays human and humane tells us that we are perhaps exaggerating the power of architecture in our lives. One probably develops a sense of humour, having to work in such an environment. What interested me when we took a drive around Zanzibar Island was that there were a number of houses made of mud and bamboo and thatch. There were also a growing number made of concrete blocks and asbestos roof. I have no doubt that the people who built those houses do not worry about identity, they do not have any such insecurity. I am sure that after six months or two years those houses will be totally East African or Zanzibarian because of their scale. It is very important because these people work on an individual basis.

There is something further which the poor bring to their houses and that vernacular architecture also possesses and that is ingenuity. With a rich client, an architect has more flexibility but there is less demand on this particular aspect of his imagination. If you think for instance of a typical house, like the ones we see in rural Zanzibar or all over India which is a poor country, or Pakistan or Bangladesh, nothing leaves a village. The leaves which fall from palm trees are used for the roof and it is incredible the amount of recyling that happens in a perfectly balanced eco-system. We have to learn that. We talk about these things but there is no architect that I know of,

who can do it as superbly as it is done in the vernacular through the villagers. We must realise that self-help is only one form of the vernacular, in fact it is not really vernacular. Vernacular is much richer because it has tradition, and it has this experience. All the things which we are concerned about, the economy, the balancing of the ecology; all these exist in the vocabulary of people. The only unfortunate thing is that the urban context in which these solutions will be viable does not exist. It is for us to create that urban context and that is basically a matter of density because these solutions are absolutely viable up to certain densities.

In such a process the architect as site planner and as the builder of prototype units could play a tremendous role. In such housing other determinants would be the tradition, and the craftsmen; the carpenters and masons. They have their own ideas and could also contribute. In this, aspirations are tremendously important and what an architect tries to do is not only heed the past but also heed the future. That is tremendously important in the Third World. We can perhaps avoid imitating industrialised countries and not go through the misery they went through.

In other words most of us in the Third World start with individual houses. Maybe we do not have to go through the terrible dehumanising process of mass housing only to come back to individual houses. Maybe there is a way we can take these skills, this vocabulary, these traditions, and go straight to housing which is really a collection of houses.

In that process, I would limit the number of houses any architect is responsible for. Hassan Fathy once said that the trouble with architects is that they design too many houses If you take the greatest surgeon in the world and ask him to operate on 200 people in one day, he would kill them all.