
A Case for Indigenous Development

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Three years ago, we were huddled at Minette de Silva's house. Minette and Lochi Gunaratna from Sri Lanka, Ruslan Khalid from Malaysia, Anuradha from India, and I from Pakistan. Earlier, at the Arcasia Forum in Colombo, we had begun to feel a common bond, a sense of affinity during the formal paper presentations. Now, in Kandy, our discussions became charged with a rare excitement and tension.

The subject was architecture in our region. We were troubled and angry with what had been happening in recent times. We knew we had all the answers, but were frustrated by our environments which were unresponsive and unreceptive to our ideas. We wanted an architecture which was contemporary and rational, not bound by the limitation of any 'style', not an extension of the international style but an architecture which would be appropriate to our own regions, our climate and our materials. We talked of launching a movement, of concepts and theories which would transform the environment, in the architectural profession to begin with, but ultimately, of course, the totality of our respective regions.

This scenario is, of course, a familiar one, equally familiar is the shadow in the wings: the Modern Movement, with its manifestoes and proclamations under its arm. The backdrop to the act is the projected image of Marx, proclaiming his dictum: "The point, (of all philosophy) however, is to change it (the world)!" You will notice that every time this scenario is played out, the actors are always black, or brown, or yellow, and they always speak rather fluent English or French.

Indeed, "Regionalism" is NOT an issue in Europe or North America for the same reason that it IS an issue in Asia or Africa. Is it that so many professional architects have been schooled in a Europe-centred tradition and "Modern Architecture" is a product of that tradition? It "belongs" to the European, and by extension, North American tradition. Its theory was formulated by the "Modern Movement" in Europe, inspired by the materialist philosophies and "scientific" theories of behaviour, evolution and

solution development provided by Darwin, Marx and Freud.

Rooted in the humanism and rationalism of the Renaissance, (which had placed Man, not God, in the centre of the universe and made him the measure of all things, the credo of the Modern Movement went something like this: "The universe is knowable, and, knowing it, man with his intellect and capacity for rational thought can manipulate it and change it. Man can thus redesign the world, but to create anew he must start, god-like, from zero. That is to say, he must reject all preconceived forms, precedents and traditions. Being purely based on logic and rationality, the new world will be composed of 'pure' forms. That is, undiluted, pure, elementary geometric forms, abstract forms, forms that exist in themselves, not dependent on external objects. The new forms thus created will be determined by the logic of 'function', they will be designed like machines for efficiency. Better still, they will be produced by machines. They will thus be perfect in their precision, cheap and abundant.

"Decoration", the credo went, "was redundant, and must therefore be rejected. The materials of construction must be left pure, with no applied decoration. The finished colours and textures of the buildings must be those of the natural materials themselves. The structural system must be expressed externally as well as internally."

The building that resulted from this new philosophy quickly established an aesthetic of bare, unadorned surfaces of glass, concrete and steel; crisp rectangular planes and grids, or deliberate asymmetries and highly sculptural forms which defied all established conventions and did not relate to any historical style, indeed, the new aesthetic of the Modern Movement soon became one of the most recognisable symbols of modernity.

Inevitably, however the movement which at the outset rejected all styles became itself an identifiable style. The movement which had denied all symbolism in

architecture became one of the best known symbols of the culture and philosophy which had inspired it — the culture of the industrially developed West. The movement which had rejected all forms of historicism, historical references or allusions became the most frequently alluded to point of historical reference. The movement which had recognised no distinction between men or nations, became the most visible manifestation of the cultural domination by the countries of western Europe and North America over the less developed countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Le Corbusier himself had demonstrated that the strict adherence to the principles of the Modern Movement, when applied to the tropics, for instance, must result in correspondingly different forms, functionally appropriate to the peculiarities of the climates and materials in those regions. This concept of 'regionalism' within the framework of the Modern Movement was pursued by some other western architects working in the tropics — Fry and Drew, Ecochard, and by the more conscientious of the western trained architects from the Third World. Despite their best efforts at evolving a regionally appropriate vocabulary, based on careful analysis of the solar angles, wind movements and the thermal properties of materials they failed to produce an architecture that 'belonged' to the region. Their bris-soliels and louvres were simply added to the inventory of 'modern' forms identified with the west. Their undecorated concrete and brick surfaces appeared as alien as the curtain walls and straight lines of the international style. This is not to say that it was not popular but it was popular because it was 'imported', 'foreign', 'western'. Modern, yes, but not indigenous. It was even imitated, but for the wrong reasons. Indeed, it is this very popularity which has occasioned not only some of the worst abuses of our built environment, but has contributed to the erosion of our own indigenous architectures.

Where, then, have we gone wrong?

I submit that in our search for an appropriate architecture FOR the region, we have ignored the architecture OF the region.

It is a sad reflection on ourselves that we, the heirs to Sigiria and Anuradhapura; Fatehpur Sikri and the Taj; Mahastangar and Gaur; Wazir Khan's Mosque and the Shalamar Gardens, should be lamenting the lack of regional relevance and appropriateness in our contemporary architecture.

It is sad, but it should not be surprising. After all, how many of us ever heard these names mentioned in our architecture schools? History of architecture began with Greece, maybe Egypt, and Rome, and went on to Romanesque, Gothic and the Renaissance, and ended with Art Nouveaux and the Modern Move-

ment. History was considered a bit suspect anyway for we had decided to reject all styles and precedents, and rebellion against conventions and traditions had become an article of faith with us. So we returned home, ready to throw ourselves into the process of 'change' and 'progress'. We had no time for our own indigenous traditions of architecture. We had already rejected our past, we were committed to the future.

We did, sometimes, look tolerantly back upon our rural craft and urban vernacular buildings to the extent that they represented a primitive 'purity' and 'functionalism'. Other than that our traditional cultures were seen as anachronisms, riddled with feudal values, decadent idealism and metaphysics at best, superstitious mumbo jumbo and old wives tales at worst. These, we were convinced, belonged to "the rubbish heap of the past".

So we turned our backs upon our past, and marched boldly forward, leading the way to the future. In our hands we carried the banners of 'science', 'technology' and 'progress'.

The process of alienation and isolation from the architecture of our own regions has been accelerated and intensified by our schools. To begin with they are modelled on western institutions. Architecture is compartmentalised into discreet subjects arranged in a linear sequence. The student enters the system at one end, follows a prescribed course, and emerges with a degree at the other. In the process he expects to acquire a 'modern' education. If his teachers are 'foreigners' he counts himself lucky. If they were taught by foreigners he is satisfied. Increasingly, of course, they are products, like himself, of 'local' institutions. His experience of 'architecture' is through the glossy pages of foreign magazines and books. He cannot relate the theory he is taught to the actual buildings he sees around him. The buildings he experiences, walks through and lives in are never discussed, far less explained theoretically. The aesthetic sensibilities he acquires are acquired uncritically, because they are from a culture to which he has no direct access. The aesthetic sensibilities of the culture to which he belongs are rejected before they are studied critically. He is not required to dirty his hands with the bricks and mortar with which his buildings will be built. He cannot touch the glass and metal of the buildings he is required to emulate.

In the absence of a firm theoretical base related to the cultural realities of our regions, we cannot expect our contemporary architecture to be either boldly innovative or truly regional. Yet the crisis is even deeper. We still have, in our region, a living tradition of good craftsmanship in our hereditary craftsmen. They have retained not only the technical skill and knowledge of their materials and methods but also the vocabulary, syntax and grammar of traditional designs. Deprived

of the patronage of the elite and the intellectual leadership of the professional architects, they have been left out of the mainstream of 'legitimate' architecture. In the stagnant backwaters of our 'native' culture their art has tended to become sterile, stereotyped and vulgarised. Many a mason and carpenter on our building sites today is descended from a long line of building craftsmen and yet we have been blind to their existence, demanding from them absurd parodies of the machine aesthetic and high tech precision with totally incompatible processes, tools and materials or organisational framework. In the process we have had to make do with lower standards of workmanship. Thus at both ends, design and construction, the quality of our built environment has declined.

Fortunately, in our societies the process of transformation has not been thorough. The indicators of change, the islands of industrialisation, westernisation, may be more visible but below the surface, the dominant aspect of our societies is the survival of tradition, of traditional values, concepts, social relations and patterns of behaviour. Fortunately, because part of these traditions are the indigenous architectures of our regions, thus our indigenous architectural theory and design principles, no less than the indigenous building materials and techniques, have been, and continue to be an integral part, a product of our own environments. This is our total environment with its material, physical and climatic aspects, as well as its cultural, philosophic and aesthetic values. The traditional link however between the professional architect and our indigenous building craftsmen has been one of the casualties of the colonial experience. As a result, the process of continuous and parallel or complementary evolution of both architectural theory and building practice has been interrupted.

I do not believe that a meaningful and relevant architecture is possible unless this link is strong. I also believe that it is not too late to restore it in our regions. The task will certainly not be easy, it will be complex and demanding but it can be done. I suggest that a beginning could be made with a new kind of teaching institution. One that (a) reintegrates learning with practice; (b) encompasses all the building arts in a common framework; and (c) provides a forum for critical analysis and debate on the theoretical issues of architecture in our respective regions.

We could take as our model the traditional institution of the masterbuilder who was at the same time architect, builder and teacher. The 'faculty' would thus be practising professionals. The 'students' would be apprentices actively employed at various levels in the process of design and construction. The 'studio' and 'laboratory' would be replaced by the project office, site and workshops. The 'linear' sequence of prescribed syllabi would be replaced by a holistic approach in which the novice would be exposed to the

totality of his art by immersion into the real world of building, and guided individually by his master in acquiring the skills and concepts needed for his profession. The formal 'lecture' would be replaced by spontaneous discussion arising out of real problems encountered on the job. The institution would provide a common framework for training in all the building arts: from masons and carpenters to building supervisors, and from draftsmen and architectural assistants to professional architects. By working together they would each learn from the other: the designer would learn from the builder the processes of his craft and the potential limitations of his materials, and the craftsman would learn from the architect the relationship of his work to the larger scheme and concept of the building as a whole. In this process much could be learnt from the numerous hereditary craftsmen, the last repositories of the grand traditions of building in our region. A prerequisite to the understanding of the underlying principles of design and construction would be a systematic programme of research and publication based on available documents and the monuments themselves. This will be a prerequisite also because in many cases we lack even the most rudimentary teaching tools and materials such as dictionaries of indigenous building terms; catalogues of decorative motifs and symbolic forms; manuals of traditional building materials and construction; traditional responses to climate; modules of measurements and proportioning; the sacred geometries and their relationships to cosmological doctrines, metaphysical concepts and the science of numbers.

Such an institution could be a first step in restoring the link between the architect and the builder, and in providing both a firm basis upon which to continue the process of evolution and development of the art of building in our regions so that it remains responsive to the changing material and cultural realities of its environment, yet is continuously nourished by roots which penetrate deep into its native soil.