
Architect-Government Relationship Session IV

Raj Rewal — Chairman

Our subject is “Architect and Government relationship”. We generally agree that the methodology of building has a lot to do with the ultimate product. The kind of patronage and the building system helped to create the form of the great cities of the world — the complexes of Fatehpur Sikri, Jaisalmer or even Venice and Florence. Now, what has gone wrong? What are we building today? Many people might agree that there has been a general decline in urban values, at least in our part of the world. This decline was noticed by Havell a British art and architectural historian. In 1906 he wrote a long paper about how the Indian craftsman, the master-builder, the *mistry*, was being eliminated from the building scene and his place taken over by the engineers who were being imported from England.

Initially the public works department’s responsibility was building canals, roads and bridges. Slowly they took over the design and construction of buildings. They prescribed how the building should be built and in a way they laid the foundations of what we have today in the entire sub-continent, i.e. the methodology of building through the Public Works Department, and the culture of the Public Works Department. In around 1918–1919 when there was a great debate going on about how to build New Delhi, Havell sent a petition to the British Government suggesting the inclusion of Master Craftsmen in the Design Team. The petition was signed by about a hundred British and Indian intellectuals including Bernard Shaw and Kumaraswamy. They opposed the P.W.D. methods of building which depended on sterile standard type designs devoid of any feel of regional values or craftsmanship. That led to the situation today, where the architectural professional in the sub-continent is generally shabbily treated by departmental engineers. The profession is not fully recognised. It has serious problems in terms of training of architects through the educational systems and it has serious problems in terms of dealing with the Government which is the major patron throughout the sub-continent. The architectural profession is not recognised by the

Government and is not assigned the pre-eminent role. This is obviously a situation we need to discuss. Meer Mobashsher Ali will explain what is the position in Bangladesh today

Meer Mobashsher Ali, Co-Chairman

The situation in Bangladesh is that the Government plays a very important role in all the construction that goes on in the country. The bureaucracy is so strong that nothing comes off the table unless it has the seal of the government in one form or other. Whatever the procedure the sanction of the money, the approval of the drawings, the procedure of tendering; in every stage government has a very strong say. If we take a typical project, the government usually do not give a very detailed programme and the architects usually have very little say in the preparation of the programme if the brief has been prepared, and it has not been done correctly it is difficult for the architect to proceed with the work. Decision making becomes difficult unless you have a very detailed programme to which the architects have contributed

The selection of architects is another important matter for ensuring a project is done well. We do not have a standard selection procedure or indeed any procedure at all. Architects even today are considered in line with engineers and contractors and often architectural projects are tendered out and given to the lowest bidder. We have not yet been able to convince the bureaucrats that an architectural project or any work of art cannot be done on that basis. You may be surprised that the Foreign Office even called a tender for buying paintings for different offices! So we have not been successful in evolving a method by which the selection of architects can be carried out.

The Institute of Architects Bangladesh, initiated architectural competitions and through competitions some good projects have come about. Competitions have now become a fad and all the rules, regulations and principles are difficult to follow. The majority of

work however cannot be done through competitions. The degree of independence that the architect is allowed also raises questions.

A further problem is that after the design work is completed the method of contracting is fifty years old. It still continues unchanged and I do not think any respected contractor will sign a contract with the Government agencies as it is being done today. In fact when a foreign agency comes to do work or an international tender is called for, the contract forms and terms of agreement are different from those used when a local contractor tenders. No significant effort has been made to change this. So from the very beginning to the end of a project the role of the architect has to be clearly defined and he should be allowed to play a significant role.