

Plenum 1: Urban Societies

ARCHITECTS AND ARCHITECTURE FOR A NEW WORLD

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PREAMBLE:

The XXI UIA Congress in Berlin is framed by two earth shaking events, which has shaped its themes. The first is 9/11 and the other is the global economic downturn. In a deep sense, these are tidal waves of the 20th Century. They will continue to wash over the 21st Century before it comes into its own. Both events have immense implications in society, nature and architecture. Their far-reaching implications lead us into many unfamiliar areas of thought. So we must let it. Architecture thinking has to go beyond the materiality of the object.

“The end of history” was greeted in triumph. But the ‘post modern age’ awoke to rude shock. “The primacy of the subject” was demonstrated in a most horrific and shocking way. Post-modernists have cause to ponder. Predictably, there is a swing to the political right accompanied by clamours for law and order, sabres have been drawn, and aggressive rhetoric against a presumed “axis of evil” has been uttered. Architecture journals continue to dish out the old diet of ever more exuberant architecture seemingly unaffected by the momentous events that grip the rest of the world. Rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Is it paralysis or conservativeness in this time of crisis? What do the disciplines have by way of bold environmental, cultural and intellectual initiatives about their own milieu and bridges between civilisations?

MODERNISATION, ALIENATION AND HOMOGENISATION

Disparity, disorientation and dis-equilibrium result from rapid change. Yet the world accepts that rapidity is part of an equation wherein northern markets justifies increased direct foreign investment into southern growth centres so that the trickle down can address the plight of the poor while making an affluent but culturally timid new middle class. The result is the whole sale transformation of the entire human and natural landscapes. Thus, the non-west is witness to the rapid erosion of sacred notions, loss of humane traditions, despoliation of beautiful sites, history muffled and tranquillity dispelled. All this, with the complicity of the new middle classes but accompanied by a sense of loss and the disorientation.

Calls by developed societies for environmental concern and human rights must be backed by remediation if they are to have moral clout. Otherwise, bad conscience goads cynical support for extremists posing as champions of the oppressed or be dismissed as hypocritical sermonising by everybody else. Despite the stark prognostications unpalatable to the academic elite of powerful states, the Huntington hypothesis is taken seriously precisely by those who feel most violated. Outward shows of solidarity can conceal private reservations and

regrets. Still, on the surface, life goes on and the making of a new life gathers apace.

CATCH-UP ARCHITECTURE

Asia, having passed through the post 1945 phase of nation building gives way to fashionable temptations emanating from the West. The architecture from the spirit of self-reliance up till the 70s is inexorably displaced by a stylistic prostration before the altars of Western Star Architecture even if strenuously denied by its perpetrators. The drive to catch-up gathers momentum in every field. Even the nation-builder-generation of architects is stampeded by younger ones. A new generation of managers and designers are 'sold' on the 'universality' of Western taste in architecture and design. Their idea of being up-to-date is to subscribe to western styles and tastes. They all assert that independent creative expression is confined to the expression of the nuances of place alone. The stage is set for the total homogenisation of the world according to the West. This is "the triumph of the West". If it is fashionable among the star architects of the West to ignore or pay lip service to the environment in their quest for hyper-subjective design, then non-west architects will follow suit too. They, of course, claim that any similarity is purely coincidental. Since style is referential, creative consideration of local realities is not a priority in the mind. The possibilities of an environmental aesthetic are thus obviated.

Fast track, cut-throat conditions of architectural practice in Asia do not favour any deep design considerations for program, function or form. Given this eco-design considerations simply do not enter into the mental horizon. Ready-made design concepts selected on reputation and brand name obviate any need for critical discrimination or localisation. Under such conditions of practice, any breakthrough is a miracle.

HUMAN ECONOMY IN A "FULL" WORLD

In an 'empty' world the eco-system can cope with the debris of the human economy. In a full world, the eco-system is stressed to its limits. It will be hard put to supply the commodities and process the waste generated by an economy of six billion people. And this is not helped by human instincts of use and throw. Human judgements, instincts and cultures were formed in a relatively 'empty world'. Thus being local does not mean being global unless there is a sea change of attitudes. This is the dilemma of Asia's entry into the world arena. If she should succeed with the outmoded technology and consumption pattern, any hope for global environmental resuscitation would be foreclosed for everyone. It will help if there is a global environmental barometer to measure comparatively cumulative damages. Deficiencies in current accounting methodology also need review. "Externalities" in conventional economics must be accounted for in the "full" world otherwise a false picture is formed.

NOIA AND PARANOIA AND THE POSSIBILITY FOR SUBSTANTIVE DIALOGUE

Methodology apart, human appetite is the major contributing cause of environmental degradation. It is thus necessary to understand the nature of the human appetite beyond needs. The starting point has to be an understanding of the dynamics of the human condition.

From its original state of undifferentiated consciousness i.e. bliss or 'noia', human consciousness increases through categorical differentiation we call knowledge. This increasing differentiation is experienced spatially and psychologically as separation and alienation. This is thus, an existential condition of anxiety we literally described as being beside oneself, i.e., 'paranoia'. The paradox accompanying this condition is a simultaneous longing for noia and a reaching out for ever greater differentiation. They pull in opposite directions. To assuage anxiety an artificial self is constructed at each stage of life to represent self. It is not self. It is persona. In other words it is **identity**. Maturation is achieved when paradoxically there is a certain release or abandonment of the constructed self. The matured person needs no other externally derived identity other than self-identity. If indeed this description is accurate of the maturation process, indeed this is the motor of history. It is that which drives economy and culture.

Sharing such a perception of human nature is deeply humanising if not humbling, necessary pre-conditions for proper dialogue untainted by presumed purity or superiority across peoples, cultures and faiths. Perceived this way, human dis-equilibrium and its impacts on the environment can be understood as phasic with each stage acted out characteristically but clothed differently depending on cultural and environmental contexts. But they are all essentially the same.

IDENTITY

Culture, as basis of identity is a divisive politics when used as barriers. The truly modern individual has the identity of a minority of one. Group identity if exclusivistic is an invitation for political exploitation. Architecture based on such identity this is thus a tool of politics, not something to be exonerated in the "New World". The modern culture project must be emancipative. To do so it must be premised on a process of raising human capacity. This is the nexus between architecture and human development. The modern individual is an autonomous person whose communitarian instincts and affections are real and authentic. His or her compassion and empathy for others does not have to be obligated to any exclusivistic claim of any group. It is derived from trust gained through successful sharing. The aesthetics of identity should thus consist of the particularistic realities of each and every place and with no chauvinism about it. There are natural differences to be recognised and expressed as distinctive qualities but belonging to a shared universe of civil values.

KITSCH, THE NARCOTIC OF CHANGE

Kitsch is a widespread phenomenon in all urban societies undergoing rapid change. Because kitsch is wasteful and callous of nature, it needs to be understood. The explanation that kitsch is linked to education or the lack thereof is insufficient. Kitsch results from the workings of existential anxiety. Kitsch is thus not to be interpreted as failures of culture, faith or civilisation.

Kitsch is pleasurable anaesthesia. It is thus a narcotic. Thus the typology of Asian metropolises are predictably similar given the trauma of rapid change they all experience. All city centres consist of steel and glass towers ala New York or Houston; the outer city is made up of kitsch condos and pseudo Mediterranean

villas. While kitsch is a narcotic against the pain of change, terror is the other response. Its expiation is however different, it is through inflicting pain on the presumed perpetrators of the torment they endure. Terror is thus the counterpart of kitsch. The two are collaterally inverse.

BIG OR SMALL: HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

We cannot halt large-scale developments and only encourage small-scale interventions when pent-up needs are great. Social justice demands resolution in quick time. Politically, how will it then be possible to legislate incentives and disincentives to prevent the worse aspects of environmental degradation which affect bottom-line profits in countries eager for direct foreign investment to fuel the needed change? Equally, how can appetites be moderated on the demand side of the equation in a media space dominated by advertising?

These are difficult questions given the dependency on global capitalism and the growth economy as the means to solve outstanding developmental problems. An ageing population in the developed world with dropping birth rates is a major factor in the next decade. Lowered western import will prompt a shift to local and regional markets. Export substitution may become a necessity. Weaning away from fossil fuel dependency is going to be traumatic. All these will have serious effects on globalised economies. Looked at positively, this will lead to greater local environmental consciousness and possibly stimulate a different eco-regional economy.

While some have advocated the "small is beautiful" strategy, and this is attractive for societies where the basic infrastructure has already been built, the reality is that the deprived masses of the non-west cannot wait for the promise of slow incremental gain. The proposition is in any case academic. China and South East Asia have forged ahead with their market-driven growth premised on global capitalism. Universally, the impact of science and technology cannot also be denied. There is no going back. Closing in is no option either. It is an invitation for old tyrannies to gain ascendance. The growth model has to be moderated. Presently it holds undisputed sway. To introduce needed modifications, civilisations and cultures must bring up to the contemporary surface all the reverence for life and nature they can find in their traditions and heritages. To do this, they must be willing to re-open the books that have been closed from critical review due to politico-institutional contingencies of the past or due to the grip of orthodoxy. The stewardship of nature enjoined upon all humans in sacred Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian and Islamic texts can together form the common moral basis for a new dialogue aimed at sustainability. The disappointment is that thus far such a dialogue has not taken place to any appreciable extent. This is an important project in the context of the environmental ethics of a "full world". The resolution of ethical issues cannot be bombed or terrorised into existence.

RE-READING HISTORY

An analysis of western history since 1500 shows the rise of materialism with the corresponding decline of non-material values up through the industrial revolution to the present. Architecture is a faithful representation of the trends. Sometimes direct sometimes paradoxically. In my reading, consciousness of the contention between non-material and material values in the West was sparked

by the crisis of the military-industrial complex experienced culminating in the first oil crisis of 1973. With it arose the anti-war movement, banning of the bomb, eco-feminism, and the hippy movement in the 'making of the counter culture'. If such a historiography is to be applied to the non-west, the suggestion is that this scenario will repeat itself. The pattern is already clear. The non-west is predicated on catching up with the West. The inference to be drawn is that a level of material satiation must first be attained, as it did in the West, before a value shift will occur. What the level of material satisfaction might be in the non-west is a security of livelihood question. But the definition is not in isolation. It will be also be defined by good local and Western lifestyle exemplars. Traditional Asian examples in the divestment of self have limited appeal for those climbing the ladder of success and they are the majority. Thus, the West has a great responsibility to set a good example of living well on less. It must also transfer the best non-polluting technologies to the non-west in their rapid growth phase to limit the damage to the eco-space of everyone. There must also be a global consumer movement to establish desirable standards for durable, low in embedded and operating energy, environmentally responsible products. Architecture must do likewise.

TOWARDS A NEW VISION

Who is responsible in the big picture is less important. What to do is. We need to make a "New World" based on a better appreciation of the human condition. Examples of successful regional eco-repair work, eco-responsible buildings and settlements, co-housing, eco-villages and eco-urbanisation demonstration projects need to be commissioned and built in both the West and in the non-west. Architecture must go beyond eco-gesture. International sponsorship for well research and community embedded new model projects to counter the fast-track mode in all non-west building projects. What is clear is that thinking architects must lead the profession in a dialogue across the disciplines, with developers, city officials and financiers etc. to set a new agenda at least for eco-responsible demonstrative projects. Sadly, so many awarded 'green' buildings do not inspire the public or the profession being unattractive. The contribution of architects to the new environmental dialogue is our ability to visualise beautiful and fully adapted architecture.

This is a task for the best minds and the most sensitive of souls be they civic, artistic, philosophical or religious. Thinking on architecture must return from its hyper subjectivist detour to a spirit of accountable critical inquiry premised on deep moral commitment to all life. When design extravagance will be seen as anxious adolescent experimentation, and no more than this, it is a sign that health has returned and a public can respect the architect again. This is the professional dimension of the new environmental ethic: an invitation for professions to dialogue across civilisations, cultures, disciplines and the public. It is a new professional vision.

Specifically, better ways must be found for big to work with small. Big capital with small capital, big infrastructure with small infills. Many kinds of social, financial and administrative structures to accommodate many small kinds of small initiative. Architects, especially those in the context of locations undergoing rapid transformation, should conceive of extensive yet inclusive spatial geometries, which are capable of integrating large-scale eco-systems

with many small incremental interventions in the creation of habitat. This is architecture not conceived as buildings but as infrastructure.

NEW ARCHITECTS FOR A NEW WORLD

Architects need to see themselves as artists whose egos are not separated from the entire living community of peoples, animals and plants. The exonerated infantile excesses in design currently portrayed as creativity and high achievement is to be criticised if wasteful and polluting. Architects could become the 'Udangi' (traditional Balinese architect and master of sacred ceremonies) again. Architects should not only be building designer but social agenda facilitator and choreographer in the celebration of life, nature and the profound. Architects have to be among the 'wise persons' in society not the wild exhibitionists of wanton imagination. Every wanton Western architect breeds many more wanton non-western architects. Such is the asymmetrical nature of current culture-politics in an unequal world. The design and consumerist media presented as 'lifestyle' thrives on this.

MEGACITIES: AGGREGATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Given the development equals growth paradigm, the dynamics of rapid transform of the non-west is characterised by Mega cities. Since cities are regarded as the most efficient engines of economic growth they attract capital and migrants. Within the historiography cited earlier, it is posited that a point in time on the trajectory of growth when a level of material saturation is attained is a critical moment. It is at that moment that a value change occurs. Non-material values come into contention with the dominant material values. Two critical issues need clarification. The first is what constitutes a definition of saturation. This is essentially cultural in nature and also linked to a perception of long-term security. Ideas can be shaped and livelihood and income distribution made more equitable. The second issue that is apparent is that the faster the arrival at that point the better so that the painful part in infrastructure building is got over quickly. The caveat to this, of course, is that eco-efficient technologies be fully employed in the duration to control and limit the damage.

CONCLUSION

The task ahead is a mighty challenge to architects and thinkers everywhere to imagine a new, quality-life-modern-human-culture with spatial and technological features that are compatible with nature and human nature. It is not a utopia but an entopia, one that is achievable. If the kind of energy architects are capable of in pursuing imaginative and exuberant designs should be applied to eco-responsible design thinking, much headway can then be made with clients and governments.

The purpose of development must finally be about building human capacity. A participatory system of building habitat has to replace the technocratic regime of 'robocrats' and technocrats who presume to do it for people. This requires architects to assume a new role as facilitator besides formulating designs. To build big structures they conceive, they must allow for many small interventions by disparate groups and individuals. The old totalised solution is not in sync with 21st Century Information Culture everywhere. Buildings must be designed for changeability and adaptability so as to last long. Architects have also to be masters of ceremony in the building of homes, civic places, industries and

communities. In other words, they must help shape a new development and spatial economics that is premised on the sustaining of all life forms. In anticipating such a move, architects must become be active dialogue partners with thinkers in other disciplines and active in enlightened community formation.

Architects must articulate a new spatial system that facilitates human life but which co-exists with nature in an economy that has close-to-zero impact on the eco-system starting from now.