

Architecture and the People

Architecture is a cultural expression of the economic, political and social fabric of our society. It is imperative therefore that our perceptions are influenced by these issues thereby influencing Architecture.

However, in the Indian context, life as such is strongly influenced by increasing privatisation and luring consumerism resulting in an Architecture that is often imposed or borrowed and imitated. Due to high concentration of power, politics and development coupled with irrelevant and unsocial programmes, a sense of alienation is generated leading to apathy and disregard.

This lack of concern and apathy is more clearly evident in our urban life. Alienation to one's own self and to the environment around is seriously affecting the growth of a humane society.

Man in the village, no more likes the calmness and serenity of village environment. He is often shy of his house, the mud floors and the wooden doors and windows. His dreams are to own an apartment house as seen in the urban context and perceives urban life as a symbol of prosperity. The urban man too, though in different ways, has exactly a similar apathy towards his own environment. In both contexts, there is a lack of feeling and attachment to one's own home and to the environment. This alienation is also apparent in the relationship between people. The contradiction that exists in Architecture today is a reflection of this alienation and apathy.

In such a context, Architecture reduces to mere images having increasing concern with the exteriors. These images and the exteriors are considered as simple objects whose production is dictated by the terms of technology. Concern for technology precedes sociological factors.

Buildings are therefore looked upon as end products, pre-occupied with form aesthetics and finish - the physicality of the structure. These are important aspects but on their own do not constitute architectural development. Clarity in Architecture cannot be achieved through physical rejuvenation. What sets the trend is the social relevance.

Though revolutionary changes are necessary in our social and political structure for enabling a more relevant and humane Architecture, the immediate need would be to introduce revolutionary architectural percepts, contributing to the greater cause of social change. This effort must be consciously planned and introduced in coalition with a wide array of revolutionary forces in all walks of life.

Today, we have broadly two contrasting architectural positions and attitudes towards the role of Architecture, viz-a-viz society; one being architectural autonomy and the other social determination of Architecture. The first position characterises the prevailing architectural establishment and the second is that of an emerging movement against exploitation, oppression and degradation of life and environment and for equality and dignity. Architectural autonomy is nothing but a cover designed to hide the bankruptcy and social irrelevance of Architecture today. The established Architecture based on these weaknesses, provides a means to reinforcing the fundamental contradictions that the society entails today.

In the recent years, Architecture has been greatly corrupted by builders, real estate developers, financiers and speculators. The building industry has been monopolised by a very small group of these businessmen. These groups not only corner but even forcefully take over land. They also control the production, distribution and availability of building materials. Increasing privatisation coupled with speculation and profiteering has led to a total degradation of human life and environment.

The degradation today has reached alarming proportions, posing a serious threat to the ecological system. Destruction of forests, draught, industrial and environmental pollution is a part of our daily lives today.

These conditions have affected Architecture and its expression. Architects too, have fallen victim to the business and market dictates. They are being used as tools by the profiteering agencies. The situation does not allow to question principle issues of equality and dignity of human life. Architects are manipulated through the use of fancy industrial and monopolistic produce without understanding their social implications. It can be said that the profession has served the present irrelevant, oppressive and exploitative system to run smoothly. Under these conditions, Architecture can never gain clarity and social-relevance.

Architectural expressions of the people has been greatly affected due to professional intrusion. Historical and traditional building materials and architectural vocabulary have been ignored for merely allowing 'modern' industrial and monopolist ideas that have mostly proved unsocial and irrelevant. By introducing high skill, high cost and hi-tech methods, people have lost control over their living and built environment. Dependency on professional services and skilled labour has increased, tremendously helping the monopolies. The resulting architecture therefore does not reflect the desires and aspiration of people.

On the other hand, more conscious and socially aware professionals and Architects, propagate alternate materials, alternate technologies and even romanticise certain traditional construction methods. But often this group and its movement has a limited scope (mostly physical) which is also detrimental to the ultimate objective. It does not question the political implications of non-availability of superior and modern materials and technology to the poor. It also does not say that the alternate materials and technology being propagated by them be adapted

for the rich. A clear example of this is seen in today's housing for the poor. In order to build low cost housing, we are standardising the substandard and degrading living conditions and environment.

People's Control :

It is necessary that people at all times maintain control over the designs, construction, maintenance and expansion of their built environment. We have to look in a new direction, establish close contact with the society at large, understand the social, cultural and political needs. This will affect our perceptions resulting in a tremendous variety of form, structure, colour and framework of an ever-evolving and living aesthetic.

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