

103 (1) - 29



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# Making Architecture

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Making architecture is primarily 'making of an experience' irrespective of the scale, cost or scope of a project. Be it the experiencing of a city by the public at large through massive projects that highlight its identity, or the individual house that provides an 'experience' through the architect's interpretation of a client's brief, as manifested in the built form through concrete, steel, bricks and mortar. I use the word 'make' consciously, since the experience does not just happen. It is brought about by the architect's subtle manipulation of human behavioural patterns, using the built form as his medium. Hence I wish to focus my presentation on this rather interesting aspect of making architecture, the "making of an experience" through the architectural choreography of human behaviour.

My thoughts on the subject stem from a deep fascination for ancient architecture and its power to define and determine human behaviour. I like to use it as a model to build up a case for what I call "Experiential Architecture".

Architecture is strongly relationship-based. Ancient architecture expresses clearly the stratified and hierarchical nature of society at the time - a society, which owed its being to a hierarchy, showing allegiance to a single dominating power, either king or religion. The different strata of ancient society were held together by their relationship to rituals, of which architecture was a very important part. These enacted

rituals through architecture, expressed a territory or place for each stratum, from the king to his noblemen, to his subjects. Each individual was given cues as how to behave in his territory. In other words, architecture was used to control the behaviour of an individual.

Aananda Coomaraswamy in his Book "Sign and Symbolism in Architecture" says,

"In ancient societies where the written word was confined to certain segments of the society, ritual became virtually an art, thinking in

images, so that man did not have to descend to the verbal logic of philosophy". Architecture of course provided the images, which were really behavioural cues presented so as to have cultural identity".

Historically, the act of building was seen as a co-existence with the forces of Nature. This is true of many of the Eastern cultures, where an individual's right to build and way to build were not arbitrary, but were governed by a set of rules, spelled out in ancient *shilpa* texts. These texts speak of principles and rules governing village planning, town layouts and orientation and



organisation of temples and houses. They point to the creation of habitats, as bounded by a cosmic order, which was known and understood by the ancient architect or "Sthapati", as stringent rules on proportion, scale, relationship of parts to the whole and relationships of built form to the earth, sciences of astronomy, mathematics and astrology. Thus man and his built environment were inexorably connected with Nature and the laws of Nature.

One therefore, sees ancient architecture as a series of three-dimensional relationships held together by these social rituals, which were basically celebrations of the architecture. These rituals established Man's place in the context of those of his fellowmen and the prevailing natural forces of a site, or what I call "energies of a site".

In modern society where social stratification is no longer applicable, the ritual has lost its social significance, to be gradually relegated to the level of a cultural spectacle. Architecture, which in ancient society was an integral part of the ritual, has suffered a similar fate to become basically a random collection of arbitrarily designed spaces with nothing to hold them together. Those spaces that are universal, could with a bit of imagination, be used for a diverse array of functions. Because of this I believe, Man is facing a crisis of identity. Deep down, the human psyche needs to establish social and territorial relationships with the environment to which he belongs. Perhaps this explains our fascination for ancient architecture.

I see the modern architect's role as a maker of modern – rituals, where the experiencing of a building, in reality, is a series of planned encounters, orchestrated by the architect, using a simulated programme sequence. I use the term

"planned encounters" to highlight the architect's manipulative role in choreographing these encounters. The "programme" thus establishes "territories of spaces" and connects these territories using "avenues of movement". The simulated ritual, thus guides the user by establishing relationships through the built form. It fixes his position in the building by identifying with the "here" and its spatial relationship to the "there", providing cues that trigger behavioral responses. Thus, architecture provides a setting for an activity by highlighting its inherent drama through a series of choreographed encounters.

I like to quote Roland Reiss, a sculptor, whose work is significant in the creation of spatial scenarios. He uses the metaphor of a dance to describe the inherent drama of an activity.

"The term dancing really refers to the dance of life, a very simple metaphor that we dance under all kinds of circumstances. When we go to the bank, we do the bank dance. When we go to the post office, we do the post office dance. These are rituals. Some of them are formalizing rituals. Some of them are rituals in relation to work that we all perform, choose to perform





and are compelled to perform. Basically art is a beautiful kind of fiction – its magic made up of practically nothing and it lives as long as the dance lives”. Inspiring words indeed, for us architects, these are. As architects, something that we often forget; architecture in addition to being a science of buildings is also a form of art. But then someone also said that science and art in its highest form are one and the same.

For me as a practitioner running a small comparatively young practice, any commission is a search for a spatial combination that best highlights this inherent ritual. What makes it more interesting is that it is basically a figment of the architect's imagination of how an activity might be performed. Reality is given a fighting chance to follow the simulation, through the architecture.

I would like to present two examples of my built work which are primarily used to illustrate my thinking on the subject. The first example is a house, in my opinion one of the most difficult commissions for an architect. The architect needs to break through the façade of a client, which often hides and hides very effectively its true personality. This particular client was a young stockbro-

ker going places in the business world and his growing family. His was a dominant personality, with a passionate interest in Nature. I saw the house as a refuge, a total cut-off from his office environment, a house you do not bring your office work to, a house for recharging batteries after a heavy day, a house that provided him, in his own words, “Space”. I conceived the house as a series of confrontations with Nature, which sets the stage, as it was, for the rituals of daily life; a house where the curative powers of Nature were allowed to take hold and influence the ritual.

The second example I would like to present is also to do with housing, but in this case, mass housing. The commission was to design staff housing for a government institution at three different locations in the outskirts of Colombo. The brief was unique, in that it dealt with three sites and called for some uniformity in the design. This was officially termed as Grade ‘C’ Housing. What it actually meant was housing for the lowest category of employees. The project was to be completed in two phases, which called for minimum of 25 housing units at each site, to be completed to a very strict time frame and an extremely tight budget. One of the first decisions that came to mind was the need for standardization. As such we felt it necessary to come up with a strong design concept that was flexible enough to be accommodated in three different locations.

The existing staff housing shown to us as examples reflected the client's concept of Grade “C” category housing, basically a series of separate two-storeyed blocks, where the only identification of the occupant was a number on a door. The challenge architecturally was to give these faceless entities titled Grade C, an identity, if not a personality. With this in mind we developed the project on the concept of a three-storeyed walk-up

apartment complex. Architecturally we made an issue of the one thing these faceless individuals had to do - that of walking up, a ritual climb-up to each one's personal space, accessible through a series of corridors, conceptualized as elevated streets. The total project cost of approximately Rs. 1000/= per square foot, was low even two years ago. The clients of course were so impressed with the result that they decided the completed units were too good to be given to the “Grade C” staff and were handed over to a higher category of employees.

As a practitioner I find the search for architecture to be a complex, but extremely stimulating one. The fact that we as architects can shape people's lives using concrete, brick and mortar is a responsibility not to be taken lightly. The architect needs to look deeply into a brief, to read between the lines, to search. For me the search for architecture is almost always generated from deep within the immediate contextual parameters of brief, site, culture, tradition, budget and available technology. The deeper one digs, the closer one gets to generate an architecture that satisfies the above parameters; and more importantly, that elevates the human spirit. This, I think is the essence of “making architecture”.

