

Towards an Urban Renaissance : Enhancing Quality of Life in Cities

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Quality of life in the peri-urban areas

Enhancing quality of Life

Enhancing quality of life of communities has been an underlying objective of many governmental and professional activities existing within them and architecture is no exception. In fact, the practice of architecture is one of the unique professions that aim to enhance quality of life through a considered intervention in what we claim 'qualitative realms'. We talk about for example, 'quality of space' or 'spatial quality' as the measure of good architecture. In all arts, including those utilitarian and industrial arts such as architecture, the quality that is 'evoked' is a major component of its make-up. As we all know, making architecture is not about providing for the quantitative demands of a people but their perceptual and experiential needs, but what does quality of life mean?

Meaning of Quality and Life

There are many things that people tend to understand without having to

define them and having to think what they mean. Like children learn the meanings of words that they come across by sheer exposure and experience, we come to understand most such concepts. People understand them, deal with them, and aspire to acquire or indulge in many facets of them with little need for definitions and articulated clarifications. 'Love' is undeniably one of the most well known such concepts while 'place' is perhaps almost unknown. Life and quality are similar illusive entities that impinge on us and we deal with them almost unconsciously.

When we look at them more closely however, they may illuminate our own perceptions and actions towards them and raise questions that we have never asked. In other words, the issues of life, quality and place are those of the 'taken-for granted' and they can be dealt with both as an everyday thing as much as a specialized act.

If life means 'what we live', then quality is about how 'good that living' is, and without doubt that involves a certain comparison against a set entity of measurement. This entity of measurement is most often an expectation or an aspiration as far as an individual is concerned and a defined set of standards when it comes to external agencies such as governments and institutions that claim to be engaged in dealing with "quality of life" of other people, communities and nations. The former is a fragile array of aspects that exist within a range that is perceived by individuals themselves and undeniably has a clear temporal dimension. In other words, the quality of life as aspired by individuals is related to aspects that are specific to those individuals and may differ from time to time. The latter however remains relatively fixed and is more articulated and measured in given contexts.

Quality

Quality is a perceived entity rather than a reality by itself. In other words, quality does not exist without an individual evaluating it and cannot be commodified by itself. It is an intangible manifestation of either an intangible or a tangible entity and exists almost always attached to an entity that both defines and anchors such quality. Thus quality is not even a single phenomenon but constitute varied phenomena based on the entity that defines its presence. For example 'quality' of life and 'quality' of space do not mean similar things.

It has to be agreed that quality defies definitions. Robert M Pirsig, writing about the 'Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance' writes that, "there is an entire branch of philosophy concerned with the definition of quality known as the aesthetics. Its question, what is meant by 'beautiful' goes back to antiquity". But he raises an important question. 'If you can't define it, what makes you believe that it exists?' Pirsig uses the philosophical position of realism to offer an indication. He says, 'Since the world obviously does not exist normally when quality is subtracted, quality exists, whether it is defined or not. As Paedrus wrote, in the intellectual world, quality does not exist until it is defined, but in the real world, it exists whether it is defined or not. As Pirsig points out, quality is a value ascribed to an aspect of an entity and is first and foremost a perceived existence associated with a real one. It is measured in terms of value laden adjectives such as 'good and bad', a semantic differential that we employ to measure its 'quantity' of presence.

The city is believed to have evolved in the quest for the improvement of quality of life; a perceived quality that did not exist in the village. Urbanity; the way of living in close proximity it is argued to have existed in the village except that the 'luxuries' of urbanity did not exist there. Thus what the

cities have brought are the facilities that we have now recognized as luxuries. The ability to have running water, electric light, transport to and from places in convenience and comfort, telecommunication, access to medical facilities and education etc. are the abilities that have improved in the city.

In the process of acquisition of these however, some values of the village have been lost. For example, the movement from the village to the city took away the sense of community, the natural clean water, natural food and fresh air in as much as cohesiveness of culture and society. Thus the quality of life in the city has improved in one way, but has also deteriorated in a different way. The idea that quality of life is better in the city is thus a perceptual condition created by the presence of amenities and infrastructure that makes the task of living easier and convenient but the 'joy of living' difficult to achieve so much so that the urban dwellers are compelled to engage in specific activities that will inject 'joys' in life. The dichotomy between urbanity and ruralness has divided inhabitants of these places aspiring to acquire a greater quality of life that can sustain the cherishable characteristics of the rural societies and the amenities and facilities prevalent in the cities.

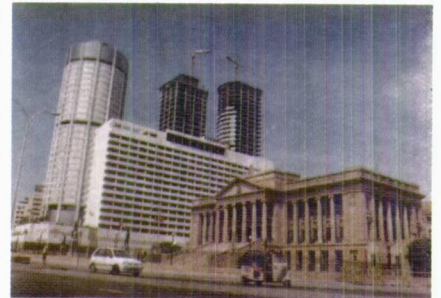
Quality of Life in the Village

Although rural areas are considered to have been the adobe of a pre-industrial society, a majority of people lived in small, homogeneous groups based on tightly knit primary relations usually involving family and neighbors. Despite the fact that they are perceived to be crude, rugged, backward, less developed and primitive, they have also acquired the qualities associated with scenic beauty, peacefulness, unpollutedness and unspoiled natural settings. Thus in the rural areas, people feel that they have a very strong attachment to land and their life history and culture are profusely inter-connected with land and people. They

live in the absence of modern conveniences but feel that there is a distinctly good quality of life there.



Rural scenic beauty



Secluded luxuries of the city



Squalor of the urban space

Quality of Life in the City

Urban areas on the other hand are considered industrially advanced and represent all that is progressive and prosperous in the society and claim a higher quality of life. They are

perceived as developed, stimulating and exciting places. Material culture is believed to be refined and rising and systems are considered sophisticated and well developed.

Complex production processes driven by vibrant economies are said to form superior communities living in well-planned settlements enjoying higher quality of life. However, urban places are also believed to be unpleasant, noisy, polluted and artificial settings that are infested with drug abuse, crime, mental illness, vandalism, truancy, and social-disintegration.

Urban Renaissance : Peri urban villages as a focus

This dichotomous perception of quality of life in rural and urban areas suggest that enhancing quality of life in cities implies the acquisition of those aspects that seem cherished in the rural, while retaining those amenities and facilities provided by the urbanity itself. This however is an uphill task and given that the two are perceived to be opposite to each other may seem almost impossible. There is however a growing awareness that such a possibility may still exist at least in the 'peripheral areas of the cities. The peri-urban areas in particular have the advantage of being in close proximity to both the city and the village and therefore the opportunity to acquire and adopt those that are appropriate for their own circumstances. The idea of urban villages' has concretized this perception in that it is now seen possible to have villages which possess urbanity and thus acquire balanced levels of development that offer the best of both the worlds.

The other half of the city

There is also however another aspect that matters in enhancing quality of life in cities. Although cities in general are considered affluent and have the amenities considered as luxuries of urbanity, it is well known that the majority of urban dwellers particularly in the cities in the developing world do not enjoy these facilities at all. Instead, there are many who have been attracted to the seductive images of the city but are unable to afford and acquire either of those physical luxuries, social status or the urban culture that they have aspired to. For the majority of the poor in the cities, urbanity is associated with poverty, squalor and meager subsistence living, in the midst of a disturbed culture. For them, enhancing quality of life means the provision of basic amenities and a stable income, and perhaps as basic as a 'decent place to live' away from the squatter settlement and the garbage dumps.

Architecture without doubt thrives in the midst of these realities, perhaps serving only the former aspirations for enhanced quality of life rather than the latter. Despite the fact that it's ability to cater to both realities are amply within its professional responsibilities and abilities, architecture far too often seem to rely on the individual commission and the enhancement of the private space of the paid client. It is perhaps time that a broader view of the task in front of them is cultivated and a pro-active role for a positive intervention in urbanity is conceptualized if we are to become the 'architects' of value and enable an Urban Renaissance in the fast developing but deteriorating cities.

References:

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