

A proposal for Writing a History of Indian Architecture from an Indigenous perspective

The recently published essay, "The Discovery of Architecture - a contemporary treatise on ancient values and indigenous reality", by MN Ashish Ganju and Narendra Dingle, seeks to articulate an understanding of the discipline from a theoretical perspective somewhat different to the one we have received from Europe via the Beaux Arts and the Bauhaus. The essay calls for an engagement with indigenous reality, which in our subcontinent would emerge from the conjunction of history, geography, and philosophy giving rise to our architectural ethos. The variety of environmental conditions resulting from the geography of this region has produced a range of vernacular building types, found even today within the matrix of historic monuments and sites which reveal a remarkably rich treasure of architectural form and iconography; with its understanding and appreciation informed by powerful philosophical schools such as Vedanta, Buddhism, and Sufism.

It is evident that architectural education today is not grounded in this indigenous reality, and this may well be the primary reason for the architectural profession's lack of grounding in our social and cultural milieu. We produce an architecture which imitates Western values and forms; even as the West is becoming acutely aware of the problem of global warming being a direct result of the way we have built our cities in the last couple of centuries. The vicious circle of pedagogy and practice steering us toward ecological disaster can be broken by a fresh understanding of our architectural beginnings. We need to research and articulate a history of architecture with a focus on this subcontinent. Extending the framework of the essay referred above, the history we research will be of several layers, only one among these being the chronological study of ancient monuments and sites. Other layers of geography, culture, society, and philosophy will need to be integrated within the discourse.

The first task will be to evolve a taxonomy more suited to our time and place than what is available in the received texts from European archaeologists and art historians. It is proposed that a 3 day workshop be organised to bring together a few scholars, including architects, historians, and social scientists, prepared to look beyond the received wisdom. The workshop would be directed towards arriving at a taxonomic consensus mentioned above. The School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal could host this workshop, which would be attended by a maximum of six or seven architects, one or two historians, and two or three social scientists, the total number of invitees being not more than twelve.

A tentative list of invitees is as follows:

Architects: Anirudh Paul, Director Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture and Environmental Studies, Mumbai.
Neelkanth Chhaya, Academic Chair Goa College of Architecture former Dean School of Architecture, CEPT University Ahmedabad.
Rabindra Vasavada, former Head of Centre for Conservation Studies, CEPT University, Ahmedabad.

Narendra Dingle, Academic Chair Goa College of Architecture, 2011-2014,
Design Chair KRVA, Mumbai 2006-11.
Snehanshu Mukherjee, Eminent Architect and Visiting Faculty, SPA Delhi.
M N Ashish Ganju, Founding Director TVB School of Habitat Studies, Senior
Consultant, Delhi Urban Art Commission.
A Srivatsan, Academic Director CEPT University School of Architecture,
Ahmedabad.

Historians: Shonaleeka Kaul, Assistant Professor, Department of History, Delhi
University.
One more to be decided.

Social scientists: K L Nadir, Political Scientist, Faculty in Delhi University, IIT Delhi and
TVB School of Habitat Studies.
Savyasaachi, Professor and Head of Department of Sociology, Jamia Milia Islamia,
New Delhi.
One other to be decided

The workshop could be followed up by a program of coordinated research by a team
selected from the workshop participants, assisted by a team of research assistants
assembled from several schools of architecture and allied institutions. The objective of
this team work will be to write a more relevant history of architecture in the Indian sub
continent, in several volumes, to be published by SPA Bhopal.

Financial Implications

The cost of such an enterprise is difficult to assess, since we have no precedent, in this
country, as far as I know. In order to establish accountability we can develop the work in
phases.

Phase 1 - Acceptance of the proposal in principle, and invitation to the author for
initiating detail discussions regarding a framework of action and logistics with senior
faculty at SPA Bhopal, possibly spread over 2 days.

Phase 2 - The 3 day workshop with about 12 scholars will be the next step. Logistics and
costs of the workshop will be worked out in the first phase meeting. Recommendations
of the workshop will outline a plan of action for generating the manuscript. The
resources, both human and financial, for the next phase of work will also be worked out
in this workshop.

Phase 3 - The writing of the manuscript can take a few years of joint effort by the team
identified in the workshop. At this stage it would be best to plan for a working period
of 3 to 5 years. Financial resources may be raised by SPA Bhopal to start with. It is
possible that other institutions, both public and private, may become interested in
supporting this effort and make this a sustainable venture.

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