



Towards a History of Architecture In India -

Exploring ways to connect with our sense of reality as it reveals our architectural legacy

Concept

The history of architecture is presently researched and written mostly by archaeologists and art historians. The approach has been to study buildings and monuments in a chronological matrix, separating the object from its lived reality, rendering the study as a lifeless art form. Our attempt is to modify this approach and present architecture as lived reality discernible in building complexes which are part of urban as well as rural natural systems.

The theoretical anchor of our approach is the principle of indigeneity. We are concerned that this is not to be confused with nationalistic identity politics. The principle of indigeneity uncovers reality regardless of national boundaries and politics of the state. It is therefore important to extend the study and include researchers, practicing architects, and teachers from other parts of the world where similar concerns are surfacing, as the threat of ecological disaster tends to unite people across the planet.

Approach

A full discussion of our approach has been undertaken in a recently published essay, “The Discovery of Architecture – A contemporary treatise on ancient values and indigenous reality”¹, which starts as follows: “Architecture is an ancient discipline and the results of its thinking and endeavour provide us with some of the most lasting examples of our culture”

The essay recounts how the theoretical underpinning of this discipline has emerged in recent times from the academics of Europe. A most influential French school, ‘Ecole des Beaux Arts’ codified post European renaissance thinking on architecture which held sway till the establishment of the ‘Bauhaus’ in Germany with a pan European faculty, in the early part of the twentieth century. This gave rise to the Modern Movement in architecture, and it spread across the world, powered by modern means of transportation and consequent globalisation of trade. The architecture and building practices of ancient societies and indigenous people were marginalised in academic study.

1. Ashish Ganju, M.N., and Dingle, N., 2013, *The Discovery of Architecture: a contemporary treatise on ancient values and indigenous reality*. (New Delhi: GREHA Publications).

Modern architecture represented the technological developments of the industrial revolution started in Europe in the eighteenth century. The consequent imperative of accelerating industrial production led to the emergence of a building culture which thrived on exploitation of natural resources and the use of energy intensive processes. As a result, in the span of two centuries, we have managed to destabilise the planetary ecosystems, set in motion unpredictable climate change, and are now threatened by recurrent unmanageable disasters caused by natural elements as well as civilisational collapse. The majority of the world's population now lives in urban centres where industrial building culture flourishes at unbelievable human and environmental cost.

Proposal

Hope may lie in the fact that the believers and purveyors of disastrous industrial culture are still in a minority overall. The majority of the world's population still belongs to ancient societies where indigenous culture is still a reality. In the Indian subcontinent we retain a feeling for the sacred, maintain ecologically viable craft and building practices, and believe in transmission of knowledge from generation to generation. It is such a combination of theory and practice which has sustained ancient societies over millennia. The seeds of civilisational wisdom may well be found by studying their history.

With this intention a group of scholars, teachers, and practitioners have started a process of researching and articulating histories which will connect us with native reality while revealing our architectural legacy. The research project was formally initiated at the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, in 2015 with a three day workshop, the proceedings of which are published by the SPA Press in December 2015².

The group of scholars consists of 10 architects, which includes urban planners and designers and conservation architects, along with a historian, an anthropologist, and a political scientist and policy planner. Brief profiles of these scholars are attached as appendix-1.

We have evolved a working methodology of meeting in workshops of 1,2, or 3 days at regular intervals of 2 or 3 months while we progress the writing of individual essays on related topics converging on an examination of architectural history from an indigenous perspective.

2. Ashish Ganju, M.N., Kohli, S., Sheuli, M., 2015, *History of Architecture: Towards Writing from an Indigenous Perspective* (Bhopal: SPA Press)

One day workshops were held in New Delhi in November 2015 and in Bhopal in December 2015. A three day workshop was held in New Delhi in May 2016, the proceedings of which are expected to be published by INTACH in the near future.

We propose, therefore, to convene an international conference on this theme in the latter half of 2017. The initiating agency being Greha, a research organisation (registered as a charitable society in 1985) which does not have its own corpus, we are approaching the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) to host the conference under its aegis. The conference can be planned as a 3 day event, inviting 10 to 12 scholars from within the country and 8 to 10 scholars from around the world to attend and present the lead papers. More papers from a wider spectrum interesting in contributing to the discourse could also be selected to be included in a publication of the proceedings of the conference to be produced as a book.

Collaborating Institutions

Other agencies with whom Greha is already collaborating in linked initiatives could be the Council of Architecture (CoA), the Indian Institute of Architects (IIA), Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), Schools of Planning and Architecture, Ambedkar University Delhi; and these can provide support and resources. The lead institution can be ICCR, with its past record of hosting such events in the national and public interest.

Approval Required

The logistical details and budget can be worked out together once an approval in principle is communicated. We hope the ICCR will find our proposal to be significant in terms of cultural endeavour, and hold promise of making a contribution to the nation's intellectual history.

MN Ashish Ganju
President GREHA