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Architectural Capital, State of Architecture, State of Profession, Culture of Building

State of the Profession – An Overview

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ABSTRACT

The nature of the 'architectural capital' in post-independence India and its social contribution remains largely unexplored. Focus on visible characteristics of architectural object comes at a cost of ignoring the deep structure of the profession that is responsible for its production. The state of architecture is linked to the state of profession in a social context. There is a need to identify patterns/ threads of profession. How do we perceive our professional mandate, whether it has a wider social role beyond the project at hand, nature of professional knowledge and its impact on 'culture of building' - these questions need articulation. The state of the profession in India is not flattering. When one looks around, one sees ample evidence of the degraded quality of the habitat. Here the problem is very basic: the inability or unwillingness of the profession to recognize its intimate link with society, culture and politics and develop strategies to mitigate it. This paper proposes a four-fold strategy for consideration while discussing the state of profession.



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Architectural Capital after Independence

While many books have been written on the architectures of India, similar attention has not been directed to understand or explain the characteristics of the profession itself and the nature of the 'architectural capital' that is developing. Consequently, the significance of its origins in the colonial era, the narrative of its post-Independence development and the expectations it nurtures to contribute to the welfare of society remains an unexplored area of research. The focus has invariably been on the product, not the producer. Seen in this light, we can understand why the picture of Indian architecture is incomplete and what is missing.

Deep Structure of the Profession

This conference is therefore significant because along with the enquiry into the state of architecture, it also examines the state of the profession, thereby highlighting the causal link between the two. It is important to foreground this relationship because the state of the

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profession mirrors the state of society, which we know from other disciplinary perspectives, is in a state of dynamic flux due to the diverse internal and external forces operating on it in an increasingly networked global environment. How that process is impacting the profession needs to be understood in order to appreciate its influence on the production of architecture. For example, both display characteristics of

fuzzy boundaries which confound the predispositions of analysts who seek neatly defined categories: social scientists have been better able to accommodate the nature of fuzziness in their studies than architectural critics. Thus the anthropology of the profession needs to be studied assiduously in order to gain deeper insights into how architecture responds to the diverse and complex changes taking place in society. Such a perspective should be used to throw light on the deep structure of the state of the profession; otherwise we will merely be enumerating and pontificating on the visible characteristics of the architectural object without understanding the forces that generated it.

Enquiring into the State Of Profession

It is only through such forensic enquiry into the state of the profession that one can lay bare the absence of self-reflexivity among architects and why they continue to indulge in the convenience of complaint – it is always someone else who creates problems for architects and architecture. Of course, such forensic examinations can be a profoundly unsettling exercise, but if as architects we profess intellectual and moral integrity can we avoid confronting it and not try to develop an appropriate road map to explore the state of the profession based on its insights? By and large the profession has seldom attempted to define their role in the development of the 'culture of building' that, through their work, could have improved the conditions of living. To achieve this objective, the profession will need to self-consciously define its relation to the society in which it operates.

Some of us here in this conference had tried to undertake such an exercise earlier. In 1974, Ashish Ganju and I edited a volume on *The Architect in India*, for the Seminar Magazine, New Delhi.¹ It examined the problems of the

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profession under three broad, but overlapping categories.

1. The problems of the architect's self-perception and their definition of their role as professionals.
2. The problems of developing a rational base for the profession to contribute to the spatial needs of society.
3. The problems of identifying the level of technology to be aimed at to meet the needs of development.

The issues we addressed in that exercise reflected our concerns of that time, but what I would like to highlight is that we tried to correlate the state of architecture with the state of the profession; *mutatis mutandis*, I think we can revisit that strategy today because the nature of the problems we face today are basically similar.

Many 'Professions'

We recognized then that there are many 'professions' in India, as there are many societies: the most compelling expression of our different societies is embedded in the iconic

nomenclatures – India and Bharat. In a similar vein, even today there are at least two types of professions in India – the formal profession of the modern architect practising in "India" and the continuing practices of the various vernacular traditions of the country, "Bharat", and of course, many variations of the two in-between. In our discussions on the state of the profession we elide the relevance of the latter, but it would be salutary to remember that the modern architect in India accounts for only about 10% of the built environment. At a recent conference on vernacular architecture held at the School of Planning and Architecture, Bhopal, the continued saliency and significance of the 'informal profession' was widely discussed and affirmed by drafting the *Charter for the Propagation of Vernacular Conventions for Architecture in South Asia*.² Therefore, while examining the state of the formal profession of architecture it is relevant in India to also consider the more informal vernacular practices which exist and its contributions to not only the built environment but how its presence continues to inflect the ideology and practice of architects in the formal sector.

There is another reality that we need to come to terms with. It was implicit in our formulations for the issue on *The Indian Architect for Seminar Magazine*, which is becoming increasingly apparent today – not only in India, but world wide – that the trained professional architect is not the main actor in the drama of building. Howard Davis, for example, defined a 'culture of building' in which the architect is only one among the many contributors to the creation of the built environment.³ Under the circumstances, any examination of the state of the profession should be contextualized in the larger framework of

building culture in order it avoids being reduced to a 'frog in the well' exercise.

But if one stood back – as social scientists do when they examine the state of Indian democracy, or economics or society – one will be able to identify in this dynamic state of flux that we are experiencing in our contemporary society, many important threads in the fabric of the profession that begin to form recognizable patterns, which when taken together define the state of the profession. Studying these patterns can provide relevant insights to understand the complexity of the state of the profession and, in turn, the state of architecture. Let us examine some of those threads

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through the lens of some questions that plague the profession and professionals.

Is the architect simply a provider of services or is there a larger contribution that the architect is expected to deliver? The answer, I suggest in the Venturian sense, is "both-and" and not, "either-or". Architects are service providers *and* have larger contributions to deliver through their projects. The essence of working as an architect has always been to believe in one's ability to improve local living conditions. It invokes an ideal in the minds of architects even as they are dealing with the mundane problems

at hand that are greater than the project. Whether in developed or developing societies, architects are inspired by the belief that they can make a positive difference to the built environment. This accounts for their passion for a profession that many, including successful architects, would aver provides inadequate recompense for their labour, both in material terms and in public recognition; lawyers and doctors, they know, are on greener pastures.

The State of Profession is not Flattering

In this light, however, the state of the profession in India is not flattering. When one looks around, one sees ample evidence of the degraded quality of the habitat. To a visitor, slums and pollution, both visual and environmental, are the most striking manifestation of this. To inhabitants, it is evident in their daily experience of living and working: the virtually non-existent civic services and infrastructure, and the pernicious harassment by municipal authorities. While architects cannot be held accountable for all these failures, the truth is that there is little evidence, in word or deed, of the profession being sensitive to the context in which they operate. Architecture is, after all, a product of its time and place; yet, so predictably focussed are Indian architects on the project in hand, that they remain blind to the surrounding conditions – its problems and potentials – and are therefore unable to tailor solutions to local circumstances. By and large the profession has seldom attempted to define their role in the development of the 'culture of building' that, through their work, could have improved the conditions of living. To achieve this objective, the profession will need to self-consciously

define its relation to the society in which it operates. It will have to come to terms with the ontological significance of its origins in colonial times and redefine its role to meet the expectations of contemporary egalitarian and evolving society.

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So, in what way does the profession relate to society, culture, and politics? The picture that emerges in this context is that the architect has found it sufficient to 'get things done' and be pragmatic. Architects have remained wary of contentious theoretical debates that explore the subtext of how things get done. Perhaps one can infer from this that in a country like India, desperate to develop, the imperatives of 'doing' frequently trump the importance of 'thinking' which is disdained as a luxury the profession cannot afford. The potential that the two acts are far from antithetical to one another, that indeed, the only way to make the profession responsive to society, culture and politics, is to intellectually reinvigorate it and link the act of 'doing' and 'thinking' has yet to take root in the profession.

The range of issues to be examined in this context are vast and the prospects of dealing with them in a comprehensive manner daunting. However, the problem is that some issues are self-evident, while others are not even recognised as problems. Thus, on the one hand, many will understand the need to adequately train architects to competently fulfil

their complex professional responsibilities but it raises difficult but equally important issues to do with the strategic development of scarce resources and limited infrastructure, which are needed to produce competent professionals. Will the 400 plus Schools of Architecture now operating in the country be equal to that task? Are we able to discuss, debate, and formulate appropriate policies and programmes to confront these issues because they have already been acknowledged as matters of professional concern.

Sociology of the Profession

On the other hand, there are problems associated with less tangible issues such as the sociology of the profession and the nature of professional knowledge in post-Independence India that have to be dealt with. We flagged it as an important issue in our 1974 publication, but even today, not many professionals recognize it as an issue of any consequence that the profession must address. The status of the architect in society has critical impact on their work. Here the problem is very basic: the inability or unwillingness of the profession to recognize its intimate link with society, culture and politics and develop strategies to mitigate it from that understanding. As a consequence professional objectives are confined to the 'here and now' leaving the field open to the interests and initiatives of the other protagonists in the culture of building to mediate the role of the architect.

Such formulations raise foundational questions on the nature of the profession in India and its position on the subject of professional ethics – is it situated in the process of production or in cultural engagement? Since, at least, the promulgation of the Architect Act in 1972, the focus of professional ethics has been towards

regulating the process of production. The profession has invariably referred to the Act to highlight the manipulation of the structure of professional fees by clients and not draw attention to the quality of services required to be performed by them to justify the prescribed scale of fees. Not surprisingly, a recent circular issued by the Central Public Works Department of the Government of India states that the stipulated fee structure should be ignored and consultants should be engaged on fees determined competitively.⁴

Four-Fold Proposition for the Profession

So what patterns emerge by drawing these threads from the fabric of the profession? The themes of this conference are interlinked, therefore, any conclusion one can draw from examining these threads of the state of the profession will link with the other themes that are being discussed. In this spirit, I offer four propositions for consideration.

First, the profession must appreciate the diverse nature of building practices in the country and cultivate an inclusive vision in the formulations of its role in society. The exceptional characteristic of the cultures of India is its **diversity and heterogeneity**. The challenges of accommodating this characteristic should not be sacrificed in the process of architectural production in the formal sector of the economy. It offers the possibility of developing different paradigms of professional practice rooted in the realities of our society-in-transition.

Second, a society-in-transition should seek to transform the existing by addressing the ground realities instead of transferring models from elsewhere to address the contingent issues of local building: the objective should be **transformation and not transference**, as Charles Correa once famously pointed out. Architectonic imagery therefore remains an important agenda for architects and under the circumstances are derivative and merely poor imitations of original models. In terms of the state of the profession the ideology and benchmarks of the profession's engagement with society therefore needs to be reconceptualised and restructured in order to become more relevant and less alienating to local users.

Third, the profession needs to polemicize its predicament into a conscious **culture of resistance** to the hegemonic forces of globalization. The creative potential offered through taking a contrary – and I suggest, an appropriate – strategy for the production of local architecture is being ignored in our attempt to 'catch-up' with the practices of developed economies.

Finally, the focus of attention must shift to architectural education. Education has always received the lowest priority in the development of the profession, and consequently, architectural education continues to exclusively address narrow vocational objectives and has never attempted to determine the architectural debate in the profession and thereby influence practice. The objectives of architectural education need to shift its focus to its **disciplinary potential** in order to develop rooted architectural capital.

Architectural scene in the country is in great ferment, where the forces of several ideas are jostling together and attempting to assert their stamp on the development of the profession and develop the culture of building. This is the state of the profession: it is at the cusp that can be determined from within or without. To build local 'architectural capital' we need many more conferences as this one, where we engage ourselves in critical debate – as a professional imperative. ■

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Notes:

1. *The Architect in India*, Edited by M.N. Ashish Ganju and A.G.K. Menon, The Seminar Magazine, New Delhi, volume 180, 1974.
2. <http://spabhopal.ac.in/Events.aspx>
3. Howard Davis, *The Culture of Building*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999
4. Circular No. DG/P & WA/79 dated 16.12.2015 issued as an Office Memorandum by DDG (Works), Central Public Works Department, Government of India, which states as follows:
“All CPWD officers are advised that the conditions of engagement and scale of charges prescribed by the Council of Architecture shall neither be used for granting work to any consultant architect for his services nor shall be used as a justification for the quote received from any architect. The same is against the interest of Government”.