

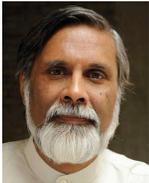
Rethinking Values in Designing Architecture

Ashok B. Lall

Tekton

Volume 5, Issue 1. March 2018

pp. 82 - 87



Ashok B. Lall is the principal at Ashok B. Lall Architects, Delhi. Among India's most respected architects, he has been a pioneer in formally integrating sustainability into his architectural works – decades before the term attained significance.

He studied architecture at the University of Cambridge UK and the Architectural Association, London. His practice, established in 1981, is committed to principles of environment sustainability and social responsibility. The firm has won a number of awards and its work has been published widely. Among several notable accolades, Mr. Lall has been nominated for the prestigious Aga Khan Award for Architecture twice and served on the international Holcim Foundation Jury thrice.

Engaged in architectural education since 1990, he has developed curricula and teaching methods to address environmental issues. He has published many articles and presented papers on environmentally sustainable design while being an active member of institutions and groups promoting awareness and building competence in sustainable design of buildings. He has been invited to present his work on sustainable design for a developing world at various for a in India and internationally, including the UK, Australia, Switzerland, Egypt, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Uganda, Iran, Philippines and Mexico. He is presently Design & Technology Chair at KRVI, Mumbai. His current interest is in developing strategies for sustainable urban development in the context of rapid urbanization.

In this essay, Ashok B. Lall throws open a discussion to rethink in the context of today's changed scenario, the values and purposes of creating architecture. He expresses a desire to both expand the scope of nomenclature of architectural design and the ambit of its professional categorization by bringing in the idea of trusteeship in the way a designer needs to function.

✉ ashokblall@gmail.com

An invitation to Discuss Architectural Design

Can we engender a discussion about the values and purposes of architectural design by thinking of dissolving the words “architecture” and “architect” into the phrase “built environment and design professions engaged in its making”? Many of us “architects” would agree that this phrase provides a more real and a more appropriate frame of reference than

Seen from this broad perspective, the architect as philosopher-artist dependent on the indulgent or generous patron would shift to the periphery whereas the design professional wrestling with the real world of rapid urban transformation would occupy our field of vision and become its focus.

the term “architectural design” to discuss our work in today’s world. Indeed, the renaming of schools of architecture as “faculties for the design of the built environment” the world over confirms this shift in the contexts in which the architectural profession finds itself working today. This view of the architectural profession has its genesis in the Modern Movement in the West at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its truth and foresight were aptly acknowledged in the naming of the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) at Ahmedabad, under B.V. Doshi’s leadership, almost half century ago.

Seen from this broad perspective, the architect as philosopher-artist dependent on the indulgent or generous patron would shift to the periphery whereas the design professional wrestling with the real world of rapid urban

transformation would occupy our field of vision and become its focus. I am thinking particularly to the fast-changing scenario here in India where the processes of rapid urbanization and urban development will determine a significant aspect of the quality of life for 40% of the nation’s population that will be living in cities by the next decade.

Profession as Trusteeship

While I would happily dissolve the identity of the architect into a greater broth of “designers of the built environment”, adding to the broth a vital and distinctive flavour (more on this later), I find myself protecting the status of “profession” zealously. In the project of Modernity, professions are distinguished from trades and guilds. In this scheme, many of the popularly acknowledged professions of Modern India—law, medicine, teaching, engineering, architecture etc. are deemed to have a tacit social contract – a contract of trusteeship.

Each profession endowed with its specialized knowledge and skills is entrusted by society to serve and protect the general good. Each profession becomes a critical agent of change and development through the individual actions of the professional, and more importantly, in the sum of its impact as a collective on the nature of change and development. There is an important assumption that underlies this tacit contract. The contract assumes that the profession is aware of and knowledgeable about social needs and priorities, about the implications of the processes of change on available wealth and resources, and on the social and environmental infrastructure – on which security, well-being and enjoyment of life rest. It is assumed

that the profession is actively engaged in developing this awareness and knowledge and that through this process it continually

The notion of trusteeship acknowledges the complex and specialized nature of professional knowledge. The responsibility of understanding the potential as well as the implications of professional conduct in the light of such knowledge rests squarely on the shoulders of the professional. And this responsibility transcends the specificities of contracts of professional service.

evolves and defines its specific tasks and roles. The notion of trusteeship acknowledges the complex and specialized nature of professional knowledge. The responsibility of understanding the potential as well as the implications of professional conduct in the light of such knowledge rests squarely on the shoulders of the professional. And this responsibility transcends the specificities of contracts of professional service. The profession, as a collective, establishes its values and responsibilities as trustee.

My purpose here is a limited one – to attempt a framework for discussion that could reach beyond the philosopher-artist identity of the “creative” architect to the broader field of “professions of design engaged in the making of the built environment” for the general good. This field necessarily encompasses the complete array – transport engineers, mechanical and electrical engineers, landscape designers, environmental systems designers, structural designers, product designers etc.

who are all critical agents of change working through complex, interdependent systems of delivery. But first I need to justify the claim that the designer assumes a “critical” position in systems of delivery.

Designer as a Critical Agent of Change

The designer as we know her today is a product of an industrial ideology. The industrial system seeks to predetermine a product through abstract and descriptive tools of design before the system undertakes its production. The designer

The designer is the selector and assembler of all that flows toward her from up-stream, including all the manufactured building materials and components. The professional role here is in exercising choice and discretion to protect and promote the greater good.

stands mid-stream in the total process that converts natural or raw material into the built environment. She uses and assembles available resources intelligently and imaginatively to meet our needs and aspirations and to offer new possibilities for our collective well-being. The designer is the selector and assembler of all that flows toward her from up-stream, including all the manufactured building materials and components. The professional role here is in exercising choice and discretion to protect and promote the greater good. Looking upstream as a discriminating selector, the designer creates the demand for appropriate products upstream and engages in the development of products and materials. In putting out the designed built environment for production or implementation the designer commends values and tastes, to promote sustainable ways of living. Looking

downstream the designer passes on, implicitly, the wisdom of her professional knowledge, encoded with symbols and expressed with aesthetic language of her designs, with a sense of responsibility she holds in trust for society. She engages actively with her constituency to share her knowledge and to build consensus.

This is a tall order by all means. But to not acknowledge this order, which is placed at the

Looking downstream the designer passes on, implicitly, the wisdom of her professional knowledge, encoded with symbols and expressed with aesthetic language of her designs, with a sense of responsibility she holds in trust for society.

door of the “profession”, would, at best, be to retreat into the hermitage of sanyasins practicing exquisite or “extreme” artistry, and at worst, fall into the habits of self-promoting trades and guilds. Of course, in this age of the ascendant free market and consumerist cultures, all of this is hotly contested territory.

Framework for Discussion

The framework for discussion that I propose consists of three broad themes: Environmental Responsibility, Equity and Cultural Identity. I believe that these constitute the most critical challenges to our developmental aspirations and the design professions need to understand how their work as designers and their professional conduct impinges on each of them. I also believe that each act of design affects and catalyzes the general direction of change leading to the cumulative impact of collective tendencies.

Environmental Responsibility

We know now that, as we urbanize and adopt more consumptive lifestyles, our built environment will soon be incurring 30 to 35% of the greenhouse gas emissions that are hurtling us towards Climate Change. Another 30% will be caused by transportation. This number does not take into account the explosion of emissions that is caused by the construction boom. In this current decade in which the community of nations has the task of arresting climate change, in our part of the world, the energy consumed in the making of buildings and building materials – embodied energy, will be a greater contributor to GHG emissions. Materials such as steel, glass, aluminium and cement contribute 60% to 70% of embodied energy in business-as-usual urban buildings. A load bearing fly-ash block masonry of four storey structural system entails half the embodied energy per unit area of built space compared to a ten storey RCC frame structural system. The taller you go, the greater

Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done in finding low energy solutions in building typologies and structural systems. And innovation toward a new materiality of low process energy materials, while critically examining materials like steel and aluminium must be undertaken.

the requirement for steel and high strength concrete to resist wind and earthquake forces. The irony is that simpler low rise-high density solutions are more affordable and simpler to build and maintain. Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done in finding low energy solutions in building typologies and structural systems. And innovation toward a new

materiality of low process energy materials, while critically examining materials like steel and aluminium must be undertaken.

Recent research shows that 10 to 15% of the energy expenditure of multi-storey flats is on account of lifts and pumps. The peak demand for electricity would double when every middle class home has an air conditioner. There is a great deal that can be done through careful climate-conscious design and the integration of cooling systems into buildings to minimize the use of air conditioning - which is by far the most energy profligate technology to be employed in buildings today.

Increasing concentrations of populations with limited financial means call for low-cost technologies for safe drinking water supply, treatment of wastes and turning waste into assets.

The pressing issue of Climate Change requires innovations in materiality, structural systems and urban building typologies. And the pressures of

Building construction and the making of city infrastructure are the main engines of the urban economy in this phase of urban growth. The culture of construction has the potential of becoming an income distributive mechanism.

population concentrations call for decentralized environmental technologies that are affordable.

Equity

The processes of urban growth and urban development or regeneration are an opportunity for distribution of wealth and promoting equity. Spatial equity with access to affordable homes, and affirmative action

to provide advantage of location to the poorer sections of society for gainful inclusion in the urban economy is to be engineered and instituted. The story of Dharavi is a hopeful vanguard for the political economy of professional trusteeship.

Building construction and the making of city infrastructure are the main engines of the urban economy in this phase of urban growth. The culture of construction has the potential of becoming an income distributive mechanism. We have seen that developmental investment in highly mechanized industries does not employ those who are displaced in the name of development. It becomes an income concentrating process rather than a distributive one. The challenge for designers of building systems is to innovate modes of production that raise efficiency, productivity and quality, to meet the quantitative challenge of rapid urbanization; that are within reach of the small and medium scale enterprise; that become means of distributing income and gaining competence with knowledge. We hark back to Schumacher and remember Laurie Baker, but we need to change gear to meet the quantitative challenge.

Cultural Identity

Sociologists tell us that in all hierarchical societies those of us who are relatively weak and relatively poor will aspire to the symbols of wealth and power displayed by those they look up to for their greater wealth and power. This is posited as a natural law. Values and tastes are transmitted and absorbed without critical examination. In the political economy of cultural trade the law holds across continents. Our admiration of the flash and gesture of the “signature design” is symptomatic

of this phenomenon. The unexamined replication of the glass clad sky scraper is its proof. In this process, societies surrender their initiative of the cultural imagination; they become inauthentic and lose their self-esteem which they then prop vicariously with appropriated symbols. A truly progressive culture of urbanity and a progressive culture of building will retain the initiative of its cultural imagination even as it learns from the world at large. We recall Rabindranath Tagore. This aspect of the built environment –

In this process, societies surrender their initiative of the cultural imagination; they become inauthentic and lose their self-esteem which they then prop vicariously with appropriated symbols. A truly progressive culture of urbanity and a progressive culture of building will retain the initiative of its cultural imagination even as it learns from the world at large.

the expression of values through the creation of symbols and signs from within one's being – is very much the province of the designer as artist-philosopher. Both when she is a protégé of an indulgent patron with an elevated public presence, and when she struggles in the service of those with small means. In today's context of a swift and far-reaching change, it is the most important face of trusteeship. The wealth of imaginative interplay of creative traditions and the nuanced aesthetic learnings inherited through history grow and transform assuredly from within. It is then that they retain the initiative of their cultural imagination and build a confident culture. ■

Note:

A version of this essay was previously published in A+D magazine.