

The Mind of an Architect Activist

Amrut Deshpande

"Random Rubble: A Reader on the Vernacular" is a collection of the writings of R. L. Kumar, a self-taught architect who lived and worked in Bangalore. Kumar founded the Centre for Vernacular Architecture (CVA) in 2009, which propagated the vernacular style of architecture. He worked here till his tragic and untimely death in 2012.

Kumar's journey to the practice of architecture has not been by any means direct. He trained to be a Chartered Accountant, but went on to work for the CIEDS (Centre for Informal Education and Development Studies) Collective, and founded 'Shramik', a workers cooperative that sought jobs for people from the slums in the building trades. The CVA grew out of the humble repair jobs that Shramik took up when Kumar made the acquaintance of other architects from the Laurie Baker school of thought.

It is hardly surprising therefore that the author's views are unorthodox and thought provoking for anyone from the architectural mainstream. In fact his lack of formal architectural education has been a factor in his unconventional architectural practice and the same makes him well suited to write about and critique the profession.



Random Rubble: A Reader on the Vernacular (2015)

Author:
R. L. Kumar

Publisher:
Centre for Vernacular Architecture Trust
and Kalminchu Trust, Bangalore.

Pages:
153

Price:
INR 250

Tekton
Volume 2, Issue 2, September 2015
pp. 94 - 96

This compilation of essays, intended to be a Reader on the vernacular, covers issues well beyond the narrow meaning of the word vernacular as we normally understand. Kumar elaborates the scope by expanding on much wider issues. For example, language is presented as the first and most tragic casualty of colonisation. A comprehensive range of topics are covered with parallels, references and quotes from sources as varied as Anand Patwardhan, a contemporary documentary maker, to observations and notes from Alexander and his generals during their invasion of India from more than 2000 years ago. In fact the author counts amongst his Gurus as Paul Feyerabend, Ashis Nandi, T.G. Vaidyanathan, Ivan Illich, Jit Singh Oberoi and of course Gandhi.

The Reader is compiled and edited by Madhu Bhushan, Kalpana Chakravarti and Madhuri Rao, close associates of Kumar who knew him since his formative years and a foreword by Ashis Nandi. For the most part, the essays are brief, and have been correctly described in the introduction by Himanshu Burte as being in the spirit of a provocative and open-ended conversation.

Interestingly, the Reader begins with a reproduction of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's *"Hind Swaraj"* or Indian Home Rule. Kumar, in his own words viewed Hind Swaraj as a scathing critique of modernity, modern institutions, modern practices and modernity in general. The Reader also ends with an extract from *"The Second Dialogue on Knowledge"* by Paul Feyerabend, the physicist and philosopher who carried an internal critique of

science. Like Gandhi's Hind Swaraj, this extract is also in a question and answer format, a dialogue between two protagonists. Both texts have had a marked influence on Kumar's thinking and his work. Their placement in the Reader therefore provides a context in which to approach Kumar's own writings.

Kumar's eight essays in this Reader cover a diverse range and are interspersed with notes. The essays follow various structures, all of them exercises in presenting complex and often abstract ideas in remarkably lucid form. From a discussion on light, lamenting its relegation to a "service" in architectural teaching rather than a critical reflection on this powerful element of architecture, to a commentary on the nuanced transition of our policies from development to globalisation as a means employed to govern the resources of the world, one finds a wealth of insights. The author views imperialism as the domination of knowledge, not just resources. He also touches upon the idea of women as special kind of citizens, and its implication on "official" architecture and "official" planning. The seminal essay, *'What is Architecture'* is a straightforward exploration in the critical aspects, that for the writer, define architecture. What follows is an elaboration on scale, craft and regeneration. Another essay, *'Contemporary Contempt'*, evolves from seemingly ubiquitous images and words: for example, a dhaba on the Pune Bangalore Highway called the *"High Tech Ethnic Dhaba"*. Such amusing visuals are all too common in the Indian Kaleidoscope. To Kumar, the words are interpreted as comments on ethnicity as citizenship, obsolescence as technology and conservation as tradition. In an

essay on public spaces, Kumar calls them areas of “supervised freedom”, and explores where the limits of this freedom lie.

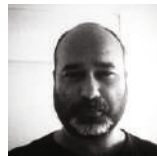
R. L. Kumar’s writing challenges conventionally held beliefs and preconceived notions, in an original and thought provoking manner. For example, cyberspace, long believed to be a powerful tool of decentralising democracy, is completely debunked by the author. To quote from the essay, ‘*Surviving the Modern Mind*’, “Cyberspace ensures powerful integration of common interest corporate entities, whether it is the national security institutions or transnational corporations”. In the same essay, the author goes on to observe that “All the smart cards in the world, all the coaxial cabling and digitization does not take us an inch closer to doing away with taxes, meters, sponsors, commercials, lawyers and litigation.”

One of the incongruous things in this Reader is inclusion of blurred and inexplicably cropped photographs that bear no annotation and don’t complement the text in any way. Their purpose remains unclear, and if the pictures are of Kumar’s built work, then, one is left with a sense of dissatisfaction as had they been carefully chosen and printed, the readers would have got a concrete expression of his thoughts.

While a detailed critique of Kumar’s thoughts and writings is well beyond the scope of this review, I would definitely recommend this Reader to anyone who professes to be a thinking architect. Students of architecture today have access to vast realms of data, yet many choose to remain completely ignorant of the wider issues that shape our society. This is in marked contrast to the angst and ferment

prevalent in architecture schools of yore, where the notion of being an architect was incomplete without becoming an activist. For the contemporary students of architecture, this book is an essential reading: A glimpse of the wider discussions that for some reason, practicing and teaching architects have withdrawn from. ■

Amrut Deshpande



Amrut Deshpande practices and teaches Architecture in Navi Mumbai, and is a visiting faculty at the Pillai College of Architecture. He has in the past worked at the COSTFORD (The Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development), where he worked under Shri Laurie Baker.

His practice has focused on the adaptation and propagation of Laurie Baker techniques of construction in projects located all over Maharashtra, while respecting the site-specific vernacular. He also practices landscape design, won an award in a competition and published papers.

✉ amrut19756@gmail.com

BOOK REVIEW

Green is Common Sense

Hema Mulchandani

The Green Building movement has acquired a large following in India and has gained talismanic status in the popular imagination. The buzz word in the construction industry today is 'Green'. Statistics suggest that 'green building movement' is gaining momentum and could account for 20% of all construction by the year 2030 in the country. A green building is described as one which uses less water, optimises energy usage, conserves natural resources, creates less waste, provides healthier spaces etc. There are tangible benefits such as- energy savings in the range of 20-30 %, reduction of waste by 30-50 %. In addition, intangible benefits such as enhanced air quality, excellent day lighting, health and wellbeing of occupants are to be considered. Of course there would be an additional cost of green technology- quite substantial many a times, but the payback period promised is said to be of 3 - 4 years.

But who is to determine what 'Green' is? How green are the projects certified by an external green rating agency? What about the laymen and their involvement in all this? Do they understand the technological jargon related to this subject? In his book *Green is Red*, Anil Laul, the Delhi based architect and urban planner takes a contrarian view and asks to go green with the *common sense* approach. He presents for the



GREEN IS RED (2013)

Author:
Prof. Anil Laul

Publisher:
Academy for Sustainable Habitat Research and Action (ASHRA)

Pages:
294

Tekton
Volume 2, Issue 2, September 2015
pp. 97 - 99

students and professionals an opportunity to understand simple living and sensible, appropriate technology as characterizing Green. He says, "Green is not a fashion statement, it is merely the logical and common sensical way to go and common sense, though rare it is said, should require no approval from specialised agencies."

Architect Anil Laul is the founder of Anangpur Building Centre and Academy for Sustainable Habitat Research and Action (ASHRA). He takes issues with the way green building concepts are promoted in our country, arguing instead for sensitivity to the needs of the poor and for use of traditional methods and materials while thinking about dwellings and buildings. In this book, Laul describes his own journey to 'common sense' (his education and professional experience). He narrates how he became 'Carpenter Laul', the 'Dome Laul' and then the 'Canninblaul'.

The book contains a total of twenty chapters, unfolding Architect Laul's ideas and concepts about sustainable design and relies on examples of his own work, particularly that of his own house. The book is filled with many photographs and drawings and witty thought provoking quotes. The first two introductory chapters: "Why Green is Red" and "Green is Common Sense" talk about the very purpose of writing this book. In these, he discusses the reverse of green marketing and ratings system and lay emphasis on the re-rationalisation of material and technologies. The next three chapters focus on the use of technology in sustainable buildings. According to Laul, technology is worth only if it is less expensive, more economical and more beautiful. In yet

another chapter, "A Broken Civilization", Laul explains why we have lost faith in urban policies and lack direction. "The Witches Cauldron" and "Urban Red Herrings" inform and focus on the appropriate choice of land, which is an important aspect of a sustainable design as also drinking water issues in developing countries and solutions. Laul discusses appropriate design of roads and drainage system, suitable plot proportions, comparison of square plot vs. rectangular plot etc. He critiques the use of British standards in brick sizes, describing how brick size and techniques varied in traditional Indian buildings.

A section of the book is dedicated to Laul's own house which he built on a quarried land of 6,000 square feet area. He has used construction materials that were available nearby and worked with the elements of nature. The different phases of construction, functions, placement of rooms, various design elements, services, water treatment, waste disposal, materials, finishes, furniture- every aspect is described in detail with photographs. In this house, Laul demonstrates reduction in the construction costs by using alternative methods of construction, using local and indigenous building materials, local man power, energy savers, environment-friendly options and other effective measures. He has built his own house as an exemplar of the response towards the environment and economic efficiency. The book concludes with a chapter called, "Local Agenda 21", highlighting fourteen points towards sustainable development.

This book makes future professionals aware of the practices in the areas of appropriate

building technologies and sustainable planning strategies. It makes the readers realise the value of the natural principles and to take a step towards cost-efficient, environmentally sustainable and aesthetically pleasing architecture in its own traditional sense. He drives home the point that anyone can go green with a common sense approach! ■

Hema Mulchandani



Hema Mulchandani is an architect and assistant professor at MES Pillai College of Architecture, Navi Mumbai. She holds a master's degree with specialisation in building energy efficiency from the CEPT University, Ahmedabad. Previously she has interned with CARBSE, Ahmedabad, where she worked on a project titled "Daylight performance evaluation of laser cut panel in deep plan offices-a case of Indian cities".

She has keen research interest in energy efficiency and daylight simulations, climate analysis and facade optimisation of buildings.

✉ hema@mes.ac.in