

## **Education for Professional Trusteeship**

*Paper prepared for the Interaction Session organised by the School of Planning & Architecture, New Delhi and A+D Magazine : "Should Architectural Education be Market Driven?"*

Today's theme for discussion, one may suppose, is chosen for its topicality. It signals a paradigm shift in the environment of architectural practice, and consequently, the conduct of architectural education. The leading edge of this shift is the gradual process of 'liberalisation' of the economy. This implies that the role of the state as the chief patron of architecture would decline and an increasing share of architectural work would shift into the hands of the entrepreneur and the business corporation. With this is the attendant shift of "culture", since profitability and competitive economy, as against "servicing a need at affordable prices", becomes the dominant determinant for providing built space. The logic of profitability, especially in a country with wide disparities of income, drives professional activity towards servicing the wealthy, whose larger disposable incomes are looking for opportunities of expression. The packaged sale of life-style – in food, clothing, houses, the work place, entertainment and travel is evident, and has caught the fancy of our young professionals-to-be, as much as many of our "have been" professionals too!

At another level, there is the march of globalisation. This lays another layer of fresh cream on an already rich cake. The MNCs come with their own bag and baggage and demands service in their own way. "It must be world class", they insist. The international professional practice follows close at their heels, to whisk away the cream and leave the crumbs for local labour to enjoy.

In this larger process the free-market takes over increasingly from the State – and the classical logic of market makes new demands on professional services. Where choice is available, proficiency and reliability, with the bottom line of economy, will become subject to competition. And yet contractual accountability, as the clients become business savvy, will be real. Architectural services, would inevitably come under much disciplinary pressure. The market will demand higher standards of competence and efficiency. In this sense, we should agree that, to be "market driven" would be beneficial.

Architectural education, as it is generally structured the world over today, has been, for historical reasons, a creature of the profession of architecture. It grew out of the architect's atelier. The core activity of architectural education has therefore been the Design Studio where we learn how to design built space. And it is in the service of this activity that the various disciplines of theoretical and practical knowledge are gathered. (The realisation that architecture is a distinct academic discipline in its own right, which extends beyond "learning to design", is now being recognised widely, but has still not taken hold). The mind set has been, and indeed our Council of Architecture is structured in this way, that architectural education will be conducted primarily in the service of the needs and purposes of the profession of architects.

This completes the circuit connecting liberalisation and globalisation through architectural services to architectural education.

It is self-evident then, as many have been tempted to argue, that architectural education had better adjust itself to the new realities of the market. Our graduates must be employable in the new order and only then can they earn a living comparable to their envied friends in Information Technology & Management.

So far so good, but I cannot accept this position without qualification.

In the scenario that I have pictured, I see, from my admittedly conservative stand-point, a diminution of the status of the professional. The idea of profession here is tending to get confused with that of business. To be professional, in popular parlance, is to be business-like. Even if good business ethic can mean professionalism it still falls short of the full import of professional responsibility. I also see the new market facade obscuring the real and greater tasks that must be confronted by the profession of architecture and planning - the enormous tasks of sustainable design for the urban explosion in all parts of the country.

Profession entails the responsibility of trusteeship. The introductory declaration in the constitution of every single professional organisation – regional, national and international, waxes eloquent about professional commitment to “welfare of society and human kind at large”. The professional is held in trust by society to advise and guide development in ways that protect and promote its long-term and broader well being. Beyond the immediate responsibility for health and safety it enjoins the responsibility towards the normative values of equity and dignity, and in today’s context, the responsibility toward the environmentally conscious utilisation of material resource. This overarching responsibility subsumes the service to a client or the contractual responsibilities of business. And this significant difference between the culture of profession and the culture of business can hardly be overemphasised. I am reminded again today of one of my gurus – Joseph Stein – who was quite clear, that if there has been a persistent deterioration in the quality of our built-environment, “we professionals” cannot be absolved of our share of the responsibility for “we are supposed to know”. Surely, this kind of professional conscience can hardly be market-driven, but on the contrary, it questions the market itself and seeks to educate its behaviour.

Just as the market man’s reality-bite can confuse profession with business, it does not distinguish between education and training. This is where the purpose of education begins to converge with the role of profession. Education is more than training. The task of education is to give us the critical faculties and a knowledge base that would enable us to construct meaningful lives. Of course, we can each choose our different life-project, but we would want to understand its place and its value in the greater scheme of life in the world. This means that architectural education must understand and evaluate the purposes of architecture and architectural practice.

It is only at school that one affords the luxury of an objective distance as well as freedom for speculative thought, away from the fetters and pragmatism of practice. This is the place to learn to ask fundamental questions. Looking at the world that we have inherited, three issues, in my opinion, confront both the architectural profession and architectural education alike. They are, as I mentioned earlier,

- Environment
- Equity.
- Dignity.

### **Environment**

We now know that the degradation of the natural environment and the potential disastrous effects of global warming are in a very large measure a function of the construction and operation of our built environment. Half of the green-house gases leading to global warming are produced by buildings – the manufacturing processes of highly processed building materials and the production of energy for building air-conditioning and other services. And about 25% is contributed by transportation. So architecture and urbanism are centrally implicated. What are we doing about it?

Are we going to wait for legislation to force our hand and then raise our hands in resignation because we don't know how – like the CNG story of Delhi? And who will take the lead in establishing guidelines and norms – the professional and educational institutions – or the babus of our overburdened ministries?

With accelerating urbanisation and rising standards of living, the problem will grow exponentially. This requires a fundamental re-think on building technologies and an absolute rejection of imported “images” of ‘hi-tech’ architecture. We may have to invent new solutions – we have to exercise our imagination and build a new knowledge base. The market here is of no help – the market instead is to be educated and made aware. This is the responsibility of the architectural profession and not of school children only.

### **Equity**

Turning to the question of equity – it is really heartening to note that over the past two decades the standard curriculum for architectural schools in India has accepted the understanding of vernacular traditions, alternative technologies, and design for the needs of rural and urban people, as essential. What is established beyond doubt is the validity and benefit of architectural skills and know-how – for the greater part of society. It is from this base that a growing number of younger professionals are charting out innovative careers. They are responding to a need and fashioning their own market.

To make architectural professional skills available for the majority, is a task of governance, and work for our professional bodies in this regard is cut out. The NGOs and the many initiatives of HUDCO and other development agencies come to mind. They need to be strengthened and expanded. The enormous and inevitable growth of urban

habitation calls for design of institutional and financial structures where architectural skills of a high caliber are made more widely available, and incorporated into the process of urbanisation.

### **Dignity**

The final issue of dignity is elusive and relatively abstract, but it is not the less important for being so.

In a society that is hierarchical and a society that is fast moving toward consumerism, the aspirations of each social stratum are determined by the perceived behaviour of the more wealthy and the more powerful. This is a sociological fact. It occurs involuntarily, and this is precisely what the marketeers and advertisers of every kind of product cynically exploit. Following this logic the architectural models too are handed down right from Manhattan to the shoe shop at Ghitorni, through the agency of the architect and the interior designer. Through such agency the “innocent” though uneducated designer, working in the service of the market, insidiously fosters a culture of pretence, a culture without its inner confidence – a culture of lost dignity.

The architecture of the rich will become the model for the aspirations of the not so rich. So, if one were to apply the Gandhian maxim, and I know it sounds strangely Indecorous, – can one evaluate the ‘latest’ building in town by asking – what lessons does it provide for the majority, that they should emulate for their own well-being and for their own advantage? The method implied by this question is that of harnessing knowledge as it develops across the world, but consciously defining the terms for its application, in order to foster a culture of a new, contemporary, dignity.

Do we not sing praises of the great masters – including our indigenous and adopted ones – Bawa, Stein, Baker. We see them as masters of incisive thought, inspired imagination, and above all, responsible action. For me they are role models of professional conduct. They transcend the notion of market and reach out in gift and service to society and, perhaps, match up to my Gandhian maxim.

The exploration of the critical value of dignity is best conducted by recognising architecture as a cultural product of the processes through which our built environment is made – it can be understood variously and interactively through material and technological culture, its sociological and economic systems, behavioural and environmental sciences, philosophy, and belief systems. It is only when you recognize the breadth and complexity of architecture as a field of knowledge in itself, that you can give it creative impetus. It is through this deep search that you can learn to evaluate its fundamental purpose in its social and cultural context. But this is not the place to propose or discuss the details of structure and content for architectural courses. That comes after the debate on whether education should be “market driven”, has given us some clear direction.

## **Conclusion:**

What I have discussed above, calls for a broader definition of “market”. In addition to acknowledging the push of “demand”, the term “market” must include the pull of “need” - “need” as an objective beneficent value; “need” as latent demand for which market mechanisms must be created, and also “need” as the potential of new possibilities.

Rather than succumb to some lack of self-confidence, which seems to underlie the question of whether architectural education should be market-driven, let us, instead, work on the premise that architectural education must be an engine of research into the potential of architecture, and a laboratory for its future promise.

Would it not be a sad day when and if products of our architecture schools were reduced, or should I say elevated, to the status of that celebrated symbol of the market-driven good life – the fashion model - trained to flaunt his outrageous “fit-outs” (sic) of ‘high’ design on the ramps of Dubai, Shanghai or Mumbai, to the conditioned applause of his “global” consumers?

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