

URBAN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE AND GLOBALIZATION: ISSUES IN CONFLICT

Sub-Theme: Culture and Identity

ARCASIA FORUM 12 International Seminar *Globalization and Asian Architecture*
10-12 December, 2003, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract: Buildings and communities that evolved out of site, climate, history, culture, local materials and construction technology have a distinct character; and never fail to rejuvenate human mind. Unfortunately present trend in Bangladesh ignores the appeal of tradition. High urban mobility, speed of communication and information technology complicate notions of living and locality and contemporary corporate images and entertainment trend confuse tradition and modernity. Architecture defying physical and socio-cultural environment in almost all cities of Bangladesh is the order as many design professionals are replicating 'global' designs. 'International look' of institutional, business, commercial and recreational buildings catering to international market, is understandable. In residential developments where tradition continually limits and influence life and lifestyles international vocabulary seems out of context.

Urban dwellings with courtyards, long verandahs, shuttered doors, windows and ventilators, correct orientation, built and finished in local materials are increasingly becoming rare in 'designed' urban communities. Since partition, for a period of about 50 years, the urban residential built forms in Bangladesh presented in one way or the other climatic, cultural, social and/or post-colonial legacy. The last decade brought rapid change that generates energy intensive artificial environment that is un-sustainable and is symbolic of global commerce and product. The old traditional urban forms and norms are vanishing fast.

This discussion on 'urban residential architecture' apply firstly to single-family dwellings, flats and apartments born of local environment, characteristic of local order and sustainability; and secondly to the environment created thereof. It includes private houses, apartment complexes, and government and non-government housing estates in Dhaka. The present state of houses and apartments developed since partition in 1947 and independence of Bangladesh in 1971 are in discussion. The analysis is centered on forms, layouts, privacy, open and covered spaces, materials and technology, use of fittings and fixtures and elevation treatments. The discussion also explores the response of the built forms to socio-cultural and climatic aspects not only as units and residential community as well.

The paper assesses whether the changes in choice and thought are due to land and economic constraints or more an outcome of globalization. The paper seeks to answer how cultural diversity and tradition can carve a niche in the overwhelming influence of globalization?

Key Words: Tradition, Cultural diversity, Consumerism

THE PHENOMENON OF GLOBALIZATION AND ARCHITECTURE

From time immemorial ideas, concepts, philosophies, techniques have moved from one region to another and one generation to the next. On a different level and context globalization in almost all areas and fields, existed since the dawn of civilization. Colonization by big powers, in some degree also contributed to forceful globalization. The British Rule in the Indian subcontinent resulted in buildings of European origin. There was also the influence of styles that evolved during different periods of architecture. The styles such as 'International', 'Modern' and or 'Post-modern' too added to globalization of architecture. Some of these styles though propagated from a position of socio-economic strength, nevertheless had viable themes and thoughts. The built forms, the out come of different styles, were experimentations and reinterpretation of historic and traditional built forms in 'present day' idioms. The distinct character of historic and/or traditional architecture and communities, picturesque towns, and regional environment provide inspiration to architects even today. Over time change in architecture is inevitable, but change should be sensitive to the socio-cultural and physical context. Buildings and communities shaped by site, climate, history, local culture, available materials and construction technology give a distinct character and identity and never fails to draw human attention.

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh is the most cosmopolitan and urbanized city in the country. In Dhaka, presently, only a negligible minority ignores the appeal of 'tradition' in lifestyle, customs and religious belief. To the majority privacy, customs and religious beliefs are still important and will remain so even in the distant future.

In urban areas high mobility and speed, and information technology complicate notions of living and locality. Contemporary corporate images, entertainment trend and styles juxtapose lifestyles; confuse notions of living and community values. Insensitive use of new materials and technology is taking a toll on culture and tradition. Designers disparage context, climate, socio-cultural and traditional forces and introduce energy intensive superficial environment. These environments are mostly unsustainable and are symbolic of global power of trade, commerce and productivity. The trend infatuates most design professionals. There is a rising confusion on 'modernity'. Rampant use of foreign products of global free market is often mistaken for modernism. Institutional, business, commercial, recreational buildings of Bangladesh catering to international market taking on an 'international look', is understandable. The urban form of residential communities and the basic units of habitation – the home – with its socio-cultural dimensions, economic and cultural identity can not give way to product, trade and commerce oriented solutions. A house is not a home. Bangladesh has an age old history, a culture and tradition.

The discussion on 'urban residential architecture' apply firstly to single-family dwellings, flats and apartments born of local environment, characteristic of local order and sustainability; and secondly the environment created thereof. This includes private houses, apartment complexes, government, and non-government housing estates in Dhaka. The present state of houses and apartments developed since partition in 1947 and independence of Bangladesh in 1971 is the subject of discussion. The analysis centers on forms, layouts, privacy, open and covered spaces, materials and technology used, use of fittings and fixtures and elevation treatments. The paper explores the response of the built forms to socio-cultural and climatic aspects as units and also as residential community.

DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN DHAKA -- FROM 1947 TO 1997

For about 50 years after partition in 1947, the urban residential built forms of Bangladesh reflected the climatic, cultural, social and post-colonial legacy. In the early years there were no professional architects; engineers and draftsmen mostly designed buildings. A set plan -- residences with long verandahs mostly on the north and south was the paradigm. Even flats had similar layouts. Aesthetically they were not exceptional and often lacked variety but the units were comfortable. They served the function of a Bengali family and suited the Bengali customs and privacy. A few of these were quite distinct in form and flavor and perfectly harmonized with the site and setting. They matched the lifestyle and aspirations of the users. Some of these houses had courtyards, shuttered doors, windows and an intimate relation between the indoor and outdoors. The ornamentations reflected influence of Colonial, Islamic as well as Hindu architecture. Some of these traditional urban forms that still exist are unfortunately vanishing fast. In the vacuum of locally trained

architects, a few foreign trained local architects and few expatriate architects also designed functional, distinct in form and reassuring houses. Some of these houses are good examples of a synthesis of traditional vernacular and modernity.

After the start of an architecture school in 1961 in Bangladesh consciousness grew as architects started to design. In the initial period private houses designed by architects in generous lot sizes were mostly single or at most double storied. They had gardens in front and vegetable/kitchen gardens at the back. Most of the houses had wide verandahs, shuttered doors and windows, and ventilators allowing ample light and air. As the population pressure increased and demand for residential accommodation intensified more stories were added. Public housing was mostly four or five storey walk-ups and had adequate light and air. Most of all they were functional, building materials were used logically and suited the aspirations of the users.

After independence in 1971 and around the 80's architect-designed multistory residential buildings began to emerge. Apartment living became an economic necessity and gained acceptance. Apartments with courtyards were also built. Functional and attractive buildings, built of locally made bricks exposed or plastered, captured people's attention. Respecting lifestyle, experimentations with window openings, local technology and local material gave rise to reasonably economic, functional and in some instances unabashedly modern architecture. There were homogeneity and at times even mediocrity but nonetheless were acceptably good architecture.

Very high urban land price and low economic growth created tremendous housing shortages. Numbers of single storey dwelling began to shrink to give way to high-rise apartment buildings. Urban dwellings with courtyards, verandahs, shuttered doors, windows and ventilators, correct orientation, finished in local materials were on the way out in urban communities. For about 50 years (1947-1997) residential architecture, in layouts and treatments, of almost constancy are now under going rapid changes in many aspects.

CURRENT PRACTICES

Presently, there is a relative increase in residential building development. Property development has become good business in Dhaka attracting many developers. Home and apartment ownership has also increased. This presents an opportunity for architects to explore local house forms and building materials, and match local climate, customs and users' aspirations and perceptions. Disappointingly there is little attempt in this direction and some architects have been designing buildings and housing estates that do not even meet the functional needs.

More often than not the entry foyers are devoid of natural light, are too small with several doors. The windows with sliding panels apparently give the semblance of width but actually inhibit air movement. The bathrooms sometimes have odd sized bathtubs placed arbitrarily and are seldom used. Spaces meant in between floors for community activities are nothing but a few large rooms with no verandah or terraces. At the ground level the open spaces are hardly enough to easily maneuver vehicles. The new residential buildings generate energy intensive superficial interiors and unfriendly exteriors. They are unsustainable, consume too much energy, require high maintenance and are the symbols of global commerce and consumerism.

On the onset of 21st century, there is an increasing urgency to provide 'critical vocabulary'¹ (Graber, 1990) to stop the flow of badly designed houses. The design professionals have to rethink the value and vocabulary of architecture especially of house forms in reference to context, tradition and culture. Today instead of belief in 'context' and 'tradition', contrary tendencies are in evidence in architecture in Bangladesh.

The context, functionalism, lifestyle, custom, materials and techniques are variables that relate directly to tradition in architecture. These variables are also the outcome of the physical and socio cultural environment of a region. Unfortunately in South Asia countries that are known for their traditions and where designing is considered a ritual (Brennan, 2003), current urban design and architectural practices defy the physical and socio-cultural environment.

¹ .. a search for spaces that are meaningful and the way in which they establish quality and authenticity within certain cultures.

In Bangladesh professionals do discuss new paradigms of sustainability, enablement, participation, capacity building and empowerment but unfortunately they seldom practice them. Houses are designed and built without consideration for natural light and ventilation. Most spaces often have provision for air conditioning. Of a sample of 12 recently designed apartment buildings this is the case in seven. In a home totally dependent on artificial lighting and mechanical devices, the concepts of sustainability and enabling factors ring hollow. Perhaps it is much easier and less time consuming to provide spaces for air conditioning and plug points for lights than designing for context, site, natural environment and orientation. Such practices enslave people and communities making them dependent on global products.

Shrinking sizes of verandahs/balconies mark the designs of houses and apartments in the last decade. The have shrunk to such an extent that two to three persons can barely stand side by side; not to mention accommodating family activities such as having tea, preparing fruits or vegetables, washing and drying clothes, so common and consistent with the climate and lifestyle. From some apartments it is hard to even get a glimpse of the sky. On the plea of space constraint 'bay windows' of varying configurations and sizes sometimes substitute verandah or balcony, but they hardly provide the comfort and feeling balcony offers in a tropical country. These rather irrelevant innovations cannot be the result of economy or a false notion of "architectural style". They are a result of copying images without assessing the substance and spirit behind them. They seem to suit the craze to be uncommon, 'Western' or modern through the use of foreign elements or products. We must not ignore that the best in Modernism can be profoundly rooted in tradition (Curtis, 1985). Residences are a place to relax, a place where social and cultural activities have an informal scale. Residential spaces cannot be 'showpieces' of borrowed images, electronic and mechanical gadgets and devices.

One fifth of the buildings in Dhanmondi residential area are now six storey apartments (Hashem, 2001). Living in even more than six-storey high apartments is an acceptable norm in urban areas of Bangladesh. Concept of privacy has become less stringent than before -- an indication of users giving way to urban constraints. The vast majority still wants verandahs and is ready to make trade-off this with other priorities such as an extra room.

At present there are no limits to the number of units per floor or number of units per apartment. The lure of excessive profit leads developers and land owners to compel architects, especially the younger ones, to design as many units as possible reducing scope of natural lighting and ventilation. Rajdhani Unnayan Katripakha (RAJUK) has some guidelines in planning residential areas but in most cases they are flaunted. The Bangladesh National Building Code formulated in 1993 is not enforced even after 10 years of its adoption. Necessary building codes, rules and regulations and qualitative indicators must be formulated and effectively enforced.

INTERNATIONAL, MODERN AND POST-MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND GLOBALIZATION – THE CONFUSION

'International Style', 'Modern' and 'Post-Modern' architecture are themes, ideas and beliefs that influenced the design professionals at different points of time. Often they discarded the old and advocated new philosophies and vocabularies. International style ignored local influences, vernacular forms and materials. Modern architecture saw ornamentation as a crime and emphasized functional efficiency. Postmodernism advocates eclecticism and rummaging history in integrating of classical moulds, styles and ornamentation with bare surfaces of modernism. These styles brought changes and dynamics in architecture, renewed and transformed history and culture, and gave different meanings to built forms.

Long before the 'Marxist' ideas were taken to be 'scientific' and 'small is beautiful' gained significance, Mahatma Gandhi advocated 'localism'. Gandhi's thoughts were not utopian rather were practical and had a morale. The Gandhian idea had many dimensions; it emphasized local production as required locally, highlighted protection of environmental qualities.....and many more. Where biological rhythms of growth of human beings coincide with rhythms of natural growth, there cannot be a choice between natural-local environment and an artificial alien one. The beauty of human culture and nature lies in their plurality and diversity. The onslaught of globalization promotes 'uniformity'. This is an unwelcome trend for architecture, for culture, for human civilization.

Globalization, for third world countries, is unequal competition of products and pressure for quick solutions. Present inclination is to go for things different than what exist, without any basis or reference to any style or history or tradition. Covering building facades in tiles or concrete columns wrapped in stainless steel sheets

are definitely not 'local'. They speak neither of internationalism nor of postmodernism and modern architecture. There are standardized readymade doors to buy and fix. These are more of a consumer items than building materials. They reflect that the 'free global' markets are flooded with materials and products; which is utterly detrimental to local materials, products and crafts. The free market of globalization is reducing the logical use of local building and finish materials. The craze for new 'foreign-materials' is resulting in a consumer oriented mentality of the providers as well as the users. Local building and finish materials, especially from small entrepreneurs cannot compete with mass products of multinational companies. Architects due to economic and time constraints at times by choice take refuge of such products. Present globalization brings in foreign goods without philosophical exchange of thoughts. Promotion of free trade and commerce present an unequal competition for the developing world, the flow of ideas and thoughts is in a single direction; from the developed to the developing. The opportunity for developing world in a free global system is limited; be it in product development or intellectual inputs. In such a situation the third world architecture would lose its identity and become banal and faceless. Bangladesh, with an ancient history, is already facing the brunt of exposure to advanced communication technology, and consumerism over which it has little control.

The pressing question is what does architecture seek from Globalization? Is it a quick fix? Is it merely a transfer of distant design on local context? Is it technological and conceptual responses to unequal competitions? Is it sharing of ideas and thoughts? The fact is that there is little sharing or exchange of ideas but too much proliferation of material goods. The end result is gimmicks and thoughtless emulation and very poor copies of even poorer models. It is 'consumerism' all the way.

Economic, political and colonial issues are related to contemporary phenomenon of globalization. Architecture is increasingly following the same path. Economic and political mode rather than socio cultural aspects drives it. When economic logic of international business services, clients with transnational operation and cosmopolitan sensibility are in rise; such outcome is inevitable. Even firms at the bottom of World Architecture 300 League table have international projects on their books (Paul Knox, 2003) to design in cultures and contexts other than their own. It does not matter whether these firms have professionals with profound knowledge and deep understanding of different context. That is not a criterion at all. In most cases 'briefcase professionals' travel from place to place and provide 'quick solutions'. They do not even have time to consider that 'particular cultures have particular architectural needs' (O'Reilly, 1999). Such practice will result in "production" of built environment defying physical and socio-cultural environment especially in third world cities.

This trend at least must not be allowed in residential developments where life and living are constantly bound by age-old norms. Commercialization, standardization and/or sanitization of commercial, institutional, recreational and industrial architecture will certainly affect society but ignorance of local convention and constraints in residential architecture is detrimental to a decent mental growth. In residential communities there cannot not be a question of either for or against globalization; for all times to come tradition must influence change and growth.

NOSTALGIA AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

In Bangladesh vast majority of urban population are first generation urbanites. For education, employment or for a better life people flock to urban areas, yet they have a deep longing for the ambience of the natural rural environment. They value traditional lifestyle, habits and customs; look at the past for resemblance. Privacy, natural light and ventilation are precious to them. They look for these qualities in the urban context as well. Incorporation of these elements would give rise to a definite house form with a hierarchy of spaces. Bringing proper functionalism in house form is obviously contextual and environment friendly. It is this functionalism, look, finish and maintenance factors that create a 'good' architecture. At this point, it would perhaps be wise to differentiate between 'beautiful' and 'good'. The values of 'good' sure have greater aesthetic and functionalism content while judging architecture.

It must not be overlooked that globalization alone did not bring in changes; industrialization and urbanization also played a role. Business, industrial and political leaders are at the cutting edge of globalization and are managing their practices with a subtle inter play of modernity. The academic institutions and professionals are facing the challenges of integrity. Often practitioners are under pressure of being in a global society regardless of where the built form will be. Wealthy people of Bangladesh, at times, feel that they are very much outside the global 'comfort zone'. These clients develop a strong urge to bring

this 'comfort zone' of other parts of the world into their homes. May be herein lies the opportunity for architects to bring traditional comfort instead of borrowed ones. This may be achieved by:

- Expanding intellectual horizon.
- Creating strong base for critical thinking and local ideas and concepts.
- Monitoring work within an analytical framework.

Private developers, public agencies and clients constantly thwart architects in the pretext that they will never be able to sell the units; the buildings cannot be built within cost limit or they will not get high rent. What is built is not better environment but one that is indifferent and hostile. In the absence of registered code for architects to protect their rights architects are vulnerable against these 'difficult' groups.

It goes without saying that creation of a 'good' architecture is time consuming, requires skill and imagination. On the other hand for 'stunt', any material can be applied at any place. Context, appropriateness, function, climatic as well as economic considerations are lost to the immature impulses. Some architects even downgrade functionalism. They perceive of local culture as being backward, irrational, superstitious and obstinate. Injudicious use of glass brick partitions or just a single band of it in a plastered wall is neither functional, aesthetically necessary nor an emotional necessity. In a hot humid climate of Bangladesh rather than bathtubs, showers are more appropriate and useful. It is common knowledge that even when there are bathtubs the use of showers is much more frequent. While arguing for change and flexibility these architects underrate the value of performance and permanence. If we are to look at the comfort of users, economy of the client then it is ethical to suggest alternatives. Off course, where the client thinks that materials reflect status little can be done. Besides globalization social class division and economic stratification also contribute to this situation in Bangladesh. All over the world 'brief case professionals' have increased to satisfy the quick fixes of certain class. It is time to discourage professionals who try to give instant solutions or work out of whims. A single work of such architects can pollute the whole environment.

Now may be is the time to ascertain the validity of two opposing stances:

- i. Advocacy of historical continuity, cultural diversity and preservation of geographical identity symbolized by a particular vocabulary.
- ii. Promotion of new forms using foreign technologies and materials in responses to changing functional needs and sensibilities.

Every city and its buildings should possess a unique sense of architectural expression and identity. Unfortunately contemporary corporate images are carried to residential developments. At times from façade treatments it is not easy to acknowledge a residential building from an office building. In few cases use of venetian blinds also add to the feeling. Residential neighborhood character is also not visible in many of them. Besides economy beliefs in aesthetics of excess, lack of alternative imaginations and most of all tendencies to copy others have given rise to the deteriorating situation. Cause and effects of the loss of traditional house-forms and the prevailing design trend in residential built forms have not yet been adequately investigated. On the other hand the planning and design fields while studying the 'traditional urban architecture and community' more often than not highlight quantitative requirements of community facilities or some phenomenal features of individual built forms. Bangladesh National Building Code prepared in 1993 though seems effective in many ways contains mostly numerical and quantitative indicators. Qualitative aspects and value judgments are not dealt with, which is essential in providing direction of growth, in promoting an identity and most of all in retaining a character in development. The concluding section of 'Habitat Bill of Rights' a document presented by the Government of Iran to the UN Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat) held in Vancouver, Canada, 1976 has about 10 items that are discussed in qualitative term.

PRIME THOUGHTS

Architectural design is a creative endeavor, influenced by established philosophies, biological and natural rhythms, environmental considerations, economic debates, and even political slogans. Architects often borrow ideas from nature and/ or other built forms. They have the freedom to choose from different building materials, building forms and elements. Still architects must not overlook that with every choice there must be rationality and to some extent value judgment attached.

Genuine local as well as international partnership in architectural designs, no doubt, can play a positive role in global development. No trend should go unchallenged. Global 'explosion of knowledge', initiated by advanced societies have increased capacity to establish, manufacture, re-assemble store and retrieve different types of knowledge. Unfortunately there is very little progress on cultural studies, cultural identities and their underlying issues and prospects on architecture (Salama, 1999). The catch-phrase of Rene Dubos, 1982 'think globally and act locally' should be the dictum in present day architecture education and profession. Concomitantly the design pursuit has to follow certain norms, must respect the context and tradition without stifling creativity and private sentiment.

Strong historical continuity and deep-rooted cultural identity can absorb, adapt and modify external influences. It is essential to get away from considering design of house forms as commercial products. A search for a particular architectural vocabulary that incorporates local materials, techniques, art, sculptures, murals and other artifacts must be on. It is important that design professionals secure consensus of users and or their representatives in reaching some common bases of 'traditional features'. 'Good' private houses designed by architects are only a small fraction of total residential buildings still 'it is here that the ideas of domesticity can be recast, the importance of cultural memory tested, the value of tradition questioned' (Jones, 1990). These houses may operate as signifiers in society. Critical analysis and evaluation of their scale, variety and complexity might help determine 'traditional features'. Creation of National Archives of traditional buildings should be a fruitful step.

A survey of architecture education in the Muslim world conducted in 1992 by the Aga Khan Trust for culture acknowledges the pressure on architectural schools in the developing world especially in the current surge of globalization. It establishes that to develop regionally appropriate responses to the need for good architecture there is a need for quality education and quality resources. Architectural knowledge must have a wide range. The knowledge must be reconstituted within the historical and development framework of the culture and heritage in question. The architect and the architectural teaching profession must comprehend the range and the way architectural knowledge is applied and interact with tradition, local identity and community. Salama's article on 'Incorporating Knowledge about Cultural Diversity into Architectural Pedagogy' provides useful tips to resist the rush of globalization.

CONCLUSION

There is no scope of bypassing culture in residential architecture. 'Recourse to the past to cure ills of the present' may be attempted. Architects and clients both should listen to each others explanations and suggestions. The academic institutions and professionals are facing tremendous challenges to integrity in the almost unstoppable surge of globalization. A consolidated effort by all, educational and professional institutes of architecture, clients, users and most of all individual educationist and design professionals, is required to find a niche in the present surge of Globalization in Urban residential architecture of Bangladesh.

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