What ails us?

Notes about landscape design in India.

In 2004, after spending eighteen years practicing landscape design, the office published a small booklet where I asked Shaheer, Kishore Pradhan, and my students then to pen a few words about landscape architecture.

Shaheer talked about the gap between symbolic landscapes and the reality of what is landscape, and lamented that the gap seemed unbridgeable and asked if we were going in the right direction.

Kishore Pradhan was confident that the landscape architect now was a top class professional in India, comparable with the best in the world.

The students were cautious. They say that the profession was gaining ground, and that a select few were leading the way.

At the end of the booklet I had written an essay, in which I had written that we were on the edge of being able to forge a great profession, and that this was an historical chance and then had gone on to ask “A future can be forged; are we worthy of it?”

It’s been six years since. Not a great deal of time, but enough to introspect and feel the direction of the winds.

Shaheer’s lament and fear is proven. Kishore’s enthusiasm is touching, but can be tempered. And if I asked students today, they would say exactly the same thing.

My real fear is that if I had printed this booklet in say 1994, all the reactions, including mine would have been the same. And if I had printed it in 1984, perhaps they would not have been too different.

If anything, it seems clear to me, that in landscape design the more we move, the less we progress.

Only the blinkered or the supremely confident would deny that we seem to lack intellectual leadership, our education as a system, is at best creaky and at worst, nonexistent, and we do not have enough examples to build our canons on.

What ails us!

First of all we have to dispel some notions;

a. Is there paucity of work? On the contrary there is too much work on offer in the country. All kinds, from master-planning, to landscape design, to some amount of regional landscape work.

b. Are we not getting paid well? Its relative- but I don’t think that’s a problem. Landscape Architects by and large are getting paid more or less what they feel they can charge. If they charge what seems less, it’s often because they are not confident of their work, or are unable to raise internal bars.

c. Do architects shun the landscape architects involvement? Hardly- if anything architects in the country are continuously on the look out to find landscape
architects they can collaborate with. I could actually run an information service, given the number of queries I get through the year asking me to suggest names.

So then what ails us?

a. Landscape as a profession changed its gears at a time when there were few professionals in the country; and frankly I think the speed of change caught the professionals napping. Think of it a bit as a driver used to riding a slow lazy horse cart, which morphed into a power packed speed car. The driver stayed in a seat, and just the mere touching of the buttons, and wheel, sped the car in a frenetic pace, but it went without direction and the driver for sure had no control. He was and is just happy being in the seat!

It was a lazy profession in the 1970s and early 80s. Offices got away with poor process, no documentation, no intellectual content. The economic liberalization and the opened economy changed our world. It caught most offices napping and I suspect many offices, are happy if no one notices that.

b. We have never dealt with education well. Barring 4-5 teachers of landscape design in the country, over the last 38 years, we have not in the country had inspirational, well read, caring teachers. This itself is terrible; what is even more terrible, is that when things are so much in short supply, one clings on to what one has; and I mean, really cling. So the community of students clung on to what they had- which is not as bad as it may seem, but their growth was limited to the extent of vision these few, over the four decades could lend. We just need and needed dozens of better teachers.

So are things going to change?

Well, it’s polite to say that they will. But they can’t. Unless enough people admit and agree that we are in trouble. As they say in the armed forces, you cannot defeat the enemy, till you define it.

To define it, one needs to take a good hard look at what we are doing in the classrooms and in the field and, well, just be honest- and not fear talking about it in public, or discussing it when we get a chance and really articulating the problems.

If we do that then there is hope.

The next step then would be to do the following:

a. Strengthen education. Make it available online. Make a pool of people in the country who are interested and are good, and make them mentors- virtual mentors who can express their thoughts and reach out to the students. The present schools will find this difficult given their structures- so it will need to be another initiative. The less it has to do with an organization, the better it may be.

b. Admit that we have a long way to go- but agree on 40 projects that the country has done post 1950s, which are tangible; where drawings are available. Sites can be seen; and are typologically diverse. Take these forty and dissect them. Study them. Learn from them. When you learn anatomy, you dissect a frog, so that you can learn about the human body. So these projects don’t have to be wonderful- but lessons can be learnt,

c. Look out for young firms, and look out for work. Make sure that it’s honest, has ethical standards, has process, and thought. And if it does, celebrate it, and tell as many as you can.
d. And finally talk. Tell as many people as you can about the wonder of the profession. And help ignite as many fires as you can.

Does not sound much does it? Well, there ain't much to work with any ways. So one works with what one has; and moves from there.

Any other ideas?

Aniket Bhagwat

April 2010.


Notes about Architecture in India.

When I sent out the last mail, a friend immediately remarked that the note could be well true for architecture also.

And perhaps interior design.

While the prescription may seem universal, the ailment in architecture is specific.

To repeat what I have said often, but quickly here.

Architecture in India has shown different preoccupations almost every decade since the Independence.

The urge to recreate a new nation, which rose from the ashes like the phoenix, found its expression beginning with Corbusier's work in Chandigarh in the 1950s.

This was seen and continues to be seen by a small, but vocal minority, as a bugle call to use as an expression, to define modern India.

Modernism, as that practiced by an artist, or one suffused by the "excesses" or art nouveau and Victorian ornamentation, soon in this country became an almost faithful copy of the masters, and then an empty soulless rendering of the idea.

While this idea had the intelligentsia in raptures, ideas of socialist India, and the need for equitable space soon became imperative. Social housing, Sites and services, were the expressions.

That modernism as expressed in India was not going to find great favor was apparent. It had no introspection, and by and large was rather hollow. That it was held in great favor was because blinded by the brilliance, of the great masters, and so enthralled by the urbanity of the west, both the proponents and the academics, breathlessly forgot that
they needed to develop their own yardstick, and more importantly adapt the lessons for a complex cultural cauldron that was and is India.

This undoubtedly must have sat heavily on many a conscience, and the need to find our cultural identity, occupied us for another decade. The return to the vernacular, and then cosmic ways of building became for some time a short-lived diversion.

As is the ways of a large and boisterous nation, the country on the other hand was gleefully welcoming its version of Internationalism, and this is what dots our urbanscapes today, in countless variations of steel, and glass of the color that sullies the Indian sky.

Two observations deserve some merit here:

a. There was never a serious and a concentrated attempt to develop architecture that the people of this nation could take universal pride in.

b. This problem was compounded by teachers who were either blinded, or limited, or uncaring, and were and are happy to not develop a relevant yardstick for design in India. One that is linked with the ideas of economics, climate, craft, aesthetic compulsions, technology and dignity of labour.

Resultantly, we did not find our national son; A theme, a tune that we all collectively took pride in. That each one of us, identified with, and wished to hum along with.

The outfall was clear.

Poverty of design thought here, drove even more architects to look at distant shores for inspiration, and to find semantics that they could imbibe and recreate.

There was, and is however, a small but feisty lot of designers, who design with unfettered joy, picking influences sometimes like a beach bum scouring the sands, and sometimes like a priest picking flowers for prayer. This work does not fall easily in any category, in any yardstick, and hence is uncomfortable to view, impossible to analyze; and hence is often dismissed as being esoteric or indulgent.

If anything ails us, this does the most.

Our inability to look at new semantics and our continuing inability to develop our own measures of work.

It continues to surprise me that architectural schools have no textbooks on modern/contemporary Indian architecture to use. That no one has written it, is surprising, that no one seems to miss it, is shocking.

Business schools use contemporary Indian houses as case studies to learn from. Talk to any Indian contemporary artist- and he seems excited and genuinely interested in the work of his contemporaries and his immediate predecessors. The greatly influential Hindi film industry also does the same; As does the ever intoxicating game of cricket.
It is only in the architecture of India, that we talk with glazed dreamy eyes, of designers who have never set a foot in the country, no student has or will ever experience and was work emanating from a very different reality.

Or, we will in excited voices talk about an architecture that is now crumbling, and was never for the common man anyways.

This ails us: Our ability to find value in self; To find respect (not empty swagger or arrogance) in what we do as a community, is a continuing source of worry.

Ten odd years back, I used to play a game. I used to ask my colleagues, to name five contemporary buildings that they were truly inspired by, in the country- and was saddened that most could not go beyond two names.

Today, I am saddened, even more. Because those works are there, that thought is there, those minds are there- and we don’t seem to have the mind and the eyes to seek them.

This blindness, ails us.

Aniket Bhagwat

April 2010


Notes about Interior Design in India

Rarely has one seen a profession so vibrant, so fuelled by large money, with so many practitioners, and a seemingly robust professional body, and yet completely bereft of any academic or intellectual pursuit.

Interior design in India, is at this cross roads.

In the 1960s, Interior Design was practiced by self-styled professionals. These were often ladies belonging to the elite echelons of society- who had, what was seen as good taste, a lot of daring and the ability to assemble spaces.

These folks for a long time represented the zenith of the profession.

Architects in large metropolises like Mumbai in particular, found early on, that the lack of architectural commissions was going to be a fact of life- and soon started undertaking interiors. For many years they were ashamed of doing so, and did it with some disdain and embarrassment- claiming often that they did this, only till such time that they got some architectural works.

Their heart was never in it. And in most cases today, still not in it.

The absence of any design discourse in the interior design, in the 70s, and early 80s, did not much help their cause.
Most schools of interior design were short term courses, often running in institutions with no design background, sometimes being seen as part of a “home science” discipline.

When the first credible interior design school got established, it got dominated by architects, who in turn, oddly despite teaching there, treated the discipline with disdain, and often recommending that it should be merged with architecture, since it was no more than an extension of it.

Embarrassment amongst the professional, and confusion amongst the academia, seemed to be a recurring phenomenon. This was and continues to be its ailment.

It is perhaps symptomatic, that those people who continue to do well, in the trade are still self-styled designers, coming from other disciplines. There are of course exceptions, and I make this observation, only to articulate my point.

Unburdened by architectural and as such any academic rhetoric, and dogmas, they seem to be happy to chant their own home spun beliefs. This freedom, serves them well. However their lack of a structured academic inquiry does not enrich the profession much.

Students growing in this atmosphere are equally confused. Those coming from institutions that treat the trade as one of emulation, and assembling articles, go ahead with great confidence, whilst making poorer the intellectual content of the profession- whilst those coming from strong academic environments are disillusioned by the atmosphere of confusion and often move on to other linked disciplines.

It does seem clear to an outsider that the profession needs to define itself, claim an intellectual space, and forcefully articulate it. Oddly this is up for grabs- and no proponent or any institution is making an attempt to claim it.

This despite the tremendous scope it offers in the country.

Till it defines itself, the profession is and will remain a patient.

Aniket Bhagwat

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