

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE: AN INTRODUCTORY COURSE TO LEARN ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

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Abstract

"The object in view of both my predecessors in office and by myself has been rather to bring out the reasoning powers of individual students, so that they may understand the inner meaning of the old forms and their original function and may develop and modernize and gradually produce an architecture, Indian in character, but at the same time as suited to present day India as the old styles were to their own times and environment."
Claude Batley-1940: Lang, Desai, Desai, 1997 (p.143).

The article introduces teaching philosophy, content and method of Basic Design I and II for first year students of architecture at the Faculty of Architecture, Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT), Ahmedabad, India. It is framed within the Indian perspective of architectural education from the British colonial times. Commencing with important academic literature and biases of the initial colonial period, it quickly traces architectural education in CEPT, the sixteenth school of post-independent India, set up in 1962, discussing the foundation year teaching imparted. The school was Modernist and avant-garde. The author introduced these two courses against the back drop of the Universalist Modernist credo of architecture and education.

In the courses, the primary philosophy behind learning design emerges from heuristic method. The aim of the first course is seen as infusing interest in visual

world, development of manual skills and dexterity through the dictum of 'Look-feel-reason-out-evaluate' and 'observe-record-interpret-synthesize transform-express'. Due to the lack of architectural orientation in Indian schooling; the second course assumes vernacular architecture as a reasonable tool for a novice to understand the triangular relationship of society, architecture and physical context and its impact on design. The students are analytically exposed to the regional variety of architectures logically stemming from the geo-climatic forces, human and material resources and techniques that satisfy the socio-cultural needs and desires of a given people. Research analysis, large scale model making, simulation, actual size mockups and such engage the students in make-believe world of architectural learning in this course.

Keywords

Basic design, visual literacy, vernacular, heuristic learning, socio-cultural.

Introduction and Background

The aim of the article is to introduce the teaching philosophy, content and method of teaching/learning the two introductory courses named Basic Design I and II for first year students of architecture at the Faculty of

Architecture, Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology University, Ahmedabad within the perspective of architectural education in India starting from the British colonial times. The issue of whether architecture and architectural education should or should not be context based has been a debate that started way back in 1865 when Lockwood Kipling came from England as a professor of Architectural Sculpture to India and was astonished by the use of Greek and Greco-Roman plaster casts for teaching purpose in the art school.

The debate was embedded in the pan Indian socio-cultural context as well as indigenosity. In intent, in a similar vein, James Ferguson advocated the understanding of the principles of Indian traditional architecture. His *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* in 1887 was an important work towards this debate of architecture and context. *Jeypore Portfolio of Architectural Details* in 1890 by Swinton Jacob was not just a plain architectural or academic work but was a hinted manual of elements and details from bygone eras to be used in the 'modern' architecture of the Raj. In a sense, it was creating an alien ownership and authentication of the traditional Indian artisan's craftsmanship. The portfolio of over six hundred drawings in six volumes "...focused on the elements of the facades of buildings. The spatial character, organizing principles of spatial form and the nature of sequential experience of space were little considered." Indirectly speaking Fredrick Salmon Growse's work in *Bulandshahr* (1887-84) and his *Bulandshahr or sketches of an Indian District* (1884) were unique examples of architecture and architectural literature. In a sense it was similar to Jacob's attempt, however, different in the spirit. Growse allowed

and fostered the local craftsmanship with little intervention and created Indian imagery of British 'patronage'. (Lang, Desai, Desai p.70, 88, 89, 99,122, 131).

The Nationalist movement and the works or arguments of Anand Kentish Coomarswami, Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Kar, Annie Besant and later Malaviyas give us some idea about the debates. An early work, *Architecture of the Hindus* by Ram Raz was published in 1832 and had a clear stand explicit in the title of the publication. The radiating plan of Banaras Hindu University bring about yet another overtone to architectural interpretation of Vedic nature.. Art and architecture, concepts and form, building decoration, murals, sculpture, etc. got debated from the viewpoint of indigenous and the Swadeshi content and expression.

Genesis of Architectural Education

The educational institutes of early nineteenth century were oriented towards draftsmanship and construction. It was during the pre-independence period that the schools started modernizing. First, five year diploma in architecture was started at Sir J. J. school of Art in 1913 and it became first institution to be granted recognition outside Britain in 1920s. Sir Claude Batley headed the J. J. School in the mid 20s 30's and taught or mentored many important architects at J. J. School or in his/their office (Gregson, Batley and King) respectively. Batley's or his practice ranged from International style to Art Deco and that of forms interpretative of Indian concepts. This was in tune with his teaching. His portfolio is another example in comparison with that of Swinton Jacob's. As a teacher, Batley used to conduct measured drawing trips to places with

traditional acumen and included residential types in documentation. There were a few other teachers of high stretch but he epitomizes the era of modern architectural education in India.

In 1960 there were 15 schools of architecture (1). Thus one can see that in India, from the mid-nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century, the triangular relationship of architecture, education and practice have had a direct and indirect bearing on the context and tradition. The debate has proven useful in examining the precedents and the antecedents, the architecture and the education, including formulating and modifying the curricula and the course content.

It was during the heyday of Brutalist modernist architecture in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad in particular and the International Style and Art Deco in India in general that the first Modernist School of Architecture was established by a small group of Modernist architects lead by Balkrishna Doshi in 1962 in Ahmedabad. Doshi was a student of Claude Batley. By mid-eighties, Post Modernist architecture had come into vogue and had faded, creating room for experiments in Deconstruction. During this period of about 25 years architecture in the above mentioned isms and styles got constructed in both the developed and the developing world. Today, some important modernists design with their original stance intact and others with a modified idiom in favor of one rationale or the other. Architectural education in India and also the architectural paradigms and pedagogy got refined to certain extent during the seventies.

The School of Architecture in Ahmedabad had a Bauhaus stance while following Modernism ala mode Brutalism. It was natural. Its proponents

were trained in the ateliers of the masters like Walter Gropius (Jitendra Mistry), Le Corbusier (Balkrishna Doshi), and Louis Kahn (late Anant Raje). All have taught at the School and the later two have headed the school. For all of them and others who taught, regionalism was a far-fetched narrative to be used in the modern Indian teaching till 1980s. In a sense they were hardcore modernists and did not want to water down their belief system in principle and practice. Thus, the agenda of modernist curriculum and the teaching came into practice. However, at the same time, another thing was happening. Students were going on measured-drawing trips and were appreciating, studying and recording traditional, classical, vernacular and folk architecture. To date, of the number of thesis written, at least 80% are in these genres. Like elsewhere in the world vernacular architecture was relegated to a non-subject and a supposed unnecessary hindrance to the agenda of Modernism in architecture.

Lacuna of Modernist Movement, An Argument

In India, tremendous complexity exists due to enormous social, cultural, geo-climatic and architectural variations in its regions which could not be fitted within the Modernist credo. Essentially speaking, the modernist premise had overlooked or deliberately denied social, cultural and regional aspects within its manifesto. Modernism was a universal suggestion, especially as it came to India in the fifties. It was to be seen as a tool to project the ideology of being modern irrespective of being in Europe, America, Africa, Asia or India. It was homogeneous and denied heterogeneity of cultures in the formation of

built environment. If one said that “the Modernist architecture failed” in many developing countries, Indian scene should be examined as an important one both for its success, failure and most importantly for its overall impact on the architecture of the country at large.

Author's Teaching Career

In 1986, a course on Regional Architecture was introduced by me and my architect wife at the School of Architecture, Ahmedabad. Later on this course was divided into two full courses, namely Colonial Architecture and Vernacular Architecture as part of the History stream. It was through these two new courses that a certain shift in the curriculum was intended. The awareness about the colonial (architectural) past and the wealth of traditional architecture needed a re-linking to complete the framework of architectural education that was becoming increasingly more western-oriented till the 1980s at least. At the same school, besides teaching design studios, the author introduced a course for the first year (undergraduate course) titled Basic Design in two parts (2).

Basic Design: General Introduction

The aim of the first two courses of Basic Design is to introduce the students to the world of design and architecture while emphasizing the role and issues related to creativity in art and sciences. In the Indian context, this introduction is crucial because in the pre-graduate high school education, the exposure to humanities in general and arts, crafts, creative processes and issues of dexterity in particular, are ill- imparted and least cultivated in favor of ‘rational sciences’. Thus the course intends to put forward

one of the ways of learning about design issues in a manner that would sensitize a student in the direction of creative exploration and lead him/her towards built environment. The exercises are formulated in order to achieve different objectives.

The objective of the course is first to generate an atmosphere of curiosity and a positive response amongst the students. It is also to make the students aware of the ‘self’ as a personality in context of childhood and the immediate past and how it has affected them unknowingly. It also attempts to bring out their concerns and values for architecture and to show them the enormity of built environments. Idea, concept, exploration, transformation, process, expression, simulation and such words are objectified through lectures and exercises.

The approach entails exposing the learner group to various processes that would enable them to express themselves by means they have not used much before. Thus, the skill of drawing, abstracting, making and simulating become their preoccupation as designers. Even at the risk of some individuals learning* less, group learning is encouraged in certain exercises. The word learning is emphasized by stating the fact that in most Indian languages there is no direct verb for teaching, rather, the verb for teaching is indirectly made from ‘learning’. In short, throughout the process of learning, it is stressed that the production of architecture is all encompassing and, therefore, a keen eye for the animate and inanimate should become one’s sole preoccupation. “How do you see what you see”, “Observe in order to ask good questions”, “Designed objects, people’s behavior, climate, ever changing aspects of nature, vernacular built forms, our daily environment, form an

immense source of learning for a designer”, etc. are some of the issues discussed with students in the process of teaching.

Basic Design I

Main aim of this course is to learn Visual Literacy for visual communication and to introduce Built Environment. It aims to develop skill sets, observational aptitude and recognition of the basic forces that shape architecture. I tend to treat the learning group’s rudimentary as well as thus far unexpressed thoughts, ideas, impressions and naive or awkward ways of drawing and making things as an asset for the creative exploration of their world-the manipulated and built human environment. Thus, group dynamics on the one hand is used to shape the ‘person’ in context of others whereas personal and subjective expression on the other hand are used in order to comprehend the self and ‘reality’ before becoming subservient to abstraction. In

the process, I give importance to visual literacy and the art of abstraction therein but stay away from treating abstraction as the only and prime mode to understand and express design thought. ‘Look-feel-reason out-evaluate’ and ‘observe-record-interpret-synthesize transform-express’ are used as quasi-formulae to provide a framework to the exercises and studies. The primary philosophy behind learning design emerges from heuristic method.

The ideas related to graphics, environment and architecture are clearly explained as separate entities while showing their interrelationship. We look at the idea of man-made environment with an emphasis on places and objects therein. Inquiry into the logic behind objects that we use or come across along with people and environmental factors discussed in general, provide for sufficient clues as to where the scope for the study lies. Place



Figures 1 and 2: Words, feelings, ideas and expression through the medium of clay. (Source: Author).



Figure 3: Alphabet, graphic development and metamorphosis of ideas. (Source: Author).

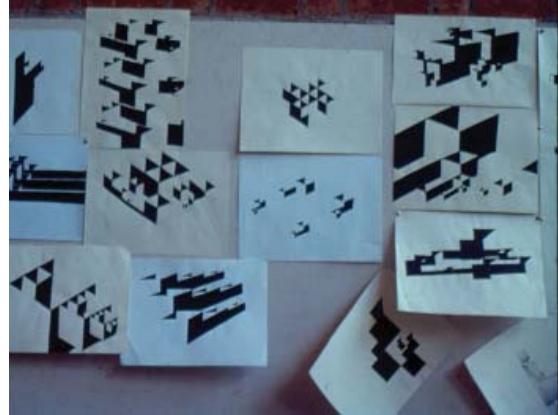


Figure 4: An exercise to understand the notions of container, periphery, play of volumes and spatial relationship. (Source: Author).

and activity rather than space; sequence, arrangement and organization rather than form and structure; guessing dimensions and sizes, measuring space with hands and feet, rather than with a tool; guessing the number of people or vastness rather than accurate areas; mapping rather than photography and drawing plans and 'do-it-your-way' and 'go wrong' rather than 'come-up-with-correct-image-at-first-shot', etc. are relied upon for the ultimate understanding of the wider context of human environment in the first course of Basic Design. Observation, memory, recording, participation in live situations, participatory object making, live simulation and such make up for the bulk of exercises in which internalizing as well as expressing information as a group and as an individual happen simultaneously.

Self and environment assessment, evaluation of mundane objects to learn the criteria and

parameters for their design, doodles to patterns, exploration of geometric shapes, recoding school campus by pacing only (without using measuring devices), recording a Sunday flea market, a week on the railway station (measured drawing all types of compartments, bogies and paraphernalia structures and stalls on the platform) and such are the exercises in Basic Design I. Thus the learning happens through recording, sketching, drawing, drafting, model making and life size installations. Without dwelling further on part one of Basic Design, now, about teaching of Basic Design II as a course that focuses on Vernacular architecture.

Basic Design II

Origins of this model of teaching are in the one day visit to the class of Professor Frederic Aubry of Federal Institute of Technology at Lausanne in the early 1990's. I have modified the method

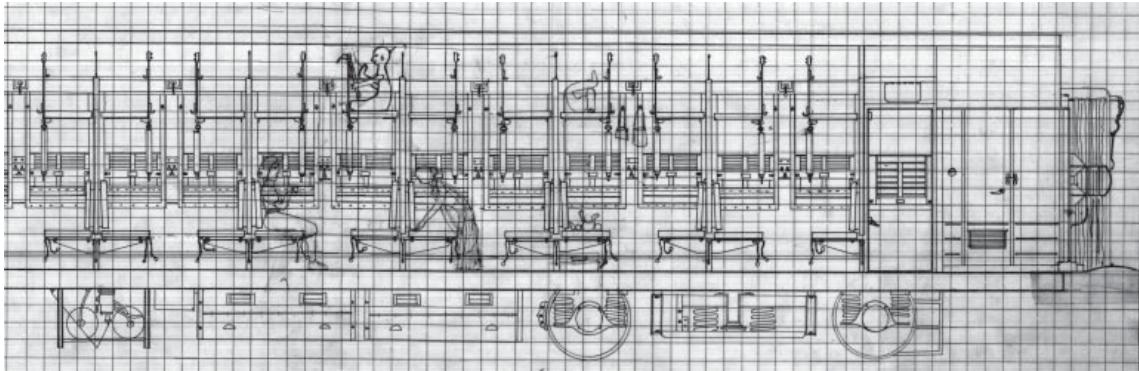


Figure 5: A week on the railway station, accurately measuring all types of compartments and paraphernalia structures. (Source: Author).



Figures 6 & 7: Small and large tripods are made as models. (Source: Author).



Figure 8: A Japanese agrarian semiotic structure constructed to be designed and built in different locations of the campus burnt as apart of the ceremony. (Source: Author).



Figure 9: Variety of tents designed by the students, to be constructed in different locations of the campus. (Source: Author).



Figure 10: A house example from north India. (Source: Author).



Figure 11: A house example from south India. (Source: Author).

substantially to suite the Indian learning processes. I believe that building design and 'architectural space making' should not be

expected from the students in the first year. Rather than this, ideas regarding shelter and place making should be explored. This belief



Figure 12: An Ethiopian House.



Figure 13: Ise Shrine in Japan.



Figure 14: Models (1:10 scale) of a wooden temple and salutation pavilion, Kerala.



Figure 15: Models (1:20 scale) of a Chinese gate structure.

forms the basis of my attitude to teaching Basic Design II. Consequently, vernacular architecture is assumed to have an enormous potential in exploring preliminary architectural design. Culture, simple space making with behavioral meaningfulness, appropriateness in terms of materials, techniques and climatic response, anthropological nuances, etc. become available in a singular package in vernacular examples. Here the society and culture are seen as the prime modifiers of a satisfactory living environment. Thus, learning basics of design happens through vernacular, folk and traditional architecture in general. The central question is- 'how does one modify the modern of/for a place?' The intention is to design with an awareness of forging the local modern, informed by the positive nuances of the vernacular architecture that has awarded continuity to places for life to happen- the home and the settlement.

While doing so, it is made amply clear that the course does not advocate designing in

vernacular ways, however, it does advocate learning from the vernacular to modify the modern idiom as would be practiced in different situations and regions of the country. It is clear that we learn and build for the times we live in, its materials, techniques, and circumstances and for the people for whom we build.

Having clarified the premise and after having given feedback on the vernacular and folk architecture, groups are formed and the students are asked to go to the library to select suitable examples from all over the world. Discussion is held on the examples brought in the class and about twelve examples are selected while developing a focus on the Asian and the African examples. A discussion on typology is emphasized and the aims of the exercise are elaborated.

The relationship of society, culture, settlement and architecture in the context of regional types is explained. Impact and shaping of community-specific plan organization within the

said relationship is seen as the basis of forging the selected examples. Climate, materials, craftsmanship are put forward as the important modifiers of the plan and the form. The role of local craftsmanship, oral tradition, generational handing over of craft and issues of articulation as a matter of production system of the vernacular architecture are made apparent. Tectonics is explained as a way in which, materially speaking, how a building comes together. It is pointed out as to how, within certain examples, disaster response has been a prime modifier of a given type. Correlation of sustainability architectural attributes and the scale of the settlements are discussed.

A group of three students then develops two to three A3 size sheets each on the comprehensive understanding of the selected example which is discussed in class forum. A comparative understanding of all the examples helps in driving the logic and reasoning of regionalism. Geo-climatic, socio-cultural, materiality and technique, details and system aspects are spelt out in these sheets.

200-scale models of the ground floor are made for all the examples. 50- and 20-scale detailed or part models respectively are made as per the complexity and repetitive nature of selected examples. The idea of materials in real situation and those used in the making of the models are brought into discussion. This triggers off a nuanced understanding of tectonics. When the models and the A3 plates are ready, a comparative discussion about all the previously discussed issues becomes lively and fruitful. As a part of the original method, and as a matter of application of the learning, a small problem of one building of about 150 Sq. Mts. is given to all

the group members to be designed individually. In this exercise, while attempting the problem individually, each student is allowed to import one material from outside! Thus, the entire experience is brought to a full circle.

Notes

1. The number of colleges of architecture increased over a period (1889-1, 1940-1, 1950-8, 1960-15, 1970-17, 1980-36, 1990-91, 2010-152).
2. It replaced the courses that were titled Workshop I and II which had their roots in carpentry.

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