

What is Architecture?

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All the pillars of the Parthenon are identical, while no two facets of the Indian temple are the same; every convolution of every scroll is different. No two canopies in the whole building are alike and every part exhibits a joyous exuberance of fancy, scorning every mechanical restraint. All that is wild in human faith and warm in human feeling is found portrayed on these walls, but of pure intellect, there is little.

J.Fergusson,
A History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, 1897

Architecture, medicine and agriculture provide us with a ringside view of the politics of knowledge in our times. Unable to shake off the long shadow of the past and unable to deliver the promise of modern universality, they endlessly reproduce the classical differences between theory and practice, science and technology, mind and body: And ultimately between profession and practice. In most of the world outside the modern west, the idea of an Architect as a service professional is confined to a handful of cities and particularly in the government and commercial sectors. Most Indians, even till today consult a ‘*thatchan*’, ‘*kothanar*’, ‘*maistry*’, ‘*achari*’ or ‘*stapathi*’ (colloquial names for architectural craft persons) when building a home / office / workplace / cattle shed / temple. The other tradition of modern scientific Architecture, produced at the university, legislated by governments and pressed into the service of various ‘Public Engineering Departments’ or the service of urban middle classes, is in my view, not complementary but antagonistic to the older colloquial tradition. This antagonism can be understood in the context of three ideas.

The Idea of Scale:

It was Lewis Mumford who coined the phrase “human scale”. In this, Mumford was referring to the fact that measurement is fundamentally a human act, anchored to human experience of body and space. The arms which measure a yard of stone, the fist which determines the space between rows of rice, the spanning palm which measures the width of the foundation of a building, are excellent examples. The urban industrial world, which transformed land into “real estate” also, transformed space into a function of scarcity. It redefined land. Land was no longer where *agriculture was practiced*, it became a resource for agribusiness; a forest was no longer a *dwelling*

for entire communities, it became a site of “scientific forestry” to produce measurable timber. Land was not any longer defined by its location in nature but by its location in the economy. It is a commodity connected to electrical power grids, sewage and water pipe lines, road networks and address registries. It represented a model of life removed from the basic life sustaining activities of agriculture and craft. It is the management, distribution, utilization and surveillance of this space that modern architecture is preoccupied with.

To appreciate the implication this has for the “scale” of buildings, compare the Rashtrapathi Bhavan, (the Presidential Palace of the Indian Republic) the official residence of a “developing” nation's President, with the official residence of the Viceroy of the British Empire which before Indian independence, presided over today's Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Burma. The Viceroy's erstwhile residence is today the modest office of the Vice Chancellor of the University of Delhi! Mumford's Human scale was indeed a modest one. It is only scale coupled with the “prestige” of a national state that can produce monumental residences, symbols of power and authority that surpasses all such previous symbolism (Vale Laurence). No wonder then, that the symbol of the doctrine of National Security, must express itself with the dubious distinction of being the world's largest building the Pentagon. With 30 kilometers of corridor space alone and a work force of 30000 people, the Pentagon building is the symbol of the American endeavour for national security and “global peace”!

This practice of monumentality, of buildings as symbols of power and authority is a secular one. It is vastly different from the drive to build the great Pyramids of Egypt or a Taj Mahal. To understand this difference one must remember Adam Smith's well-known formulation of human desire. It was Smith who first articulated the connection between individual human desire and national wealth in post enlightenment societies. It is only the modified human desire to be gratified by another's envy, wrote Smith, can be an engine to economic expansion and growth (Nicholas Xenos). Vale Laurence has brought to our attention the significance of monumental buildings like the Lincoln Memorial, Parliament houses of National Republics and residences of Presidents and other Heads of National States. They are symbols of a notion of power and authority that is distinctly modern and derived, I would add, from a secular theory of democratic republicanism. A theory which privileges an abstract “people” (We the People blah, blah, blah, reads the Indian Constitution) with symbolic and purely formal power, while the sovereign power of the *ancient regime* is retained in its symbolic form. It is not an accident that the English Prime Minister's house, the seat of real power, is an understated # 10, Downing street, least it smack of

the “feudal past” denying the ‘democratic revolution”, while the Queen's residence is a Buckingham palace; in the legitimate home of democratic republicanism, the USA, which has done away with the distinction between formal and real heads of state, the American Chief Executive's residence is an ambiguous “White House” at # 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

In this sense national/public buildings are not only secular ones but also carry specific messages. They are designed not to please the Gods or to honor the dead; they are designed to create and govern the new subjectivity of citizenship in nation states. They are supposed to inspire awe and remind the state's subjects of the canons of democratic revolutions.

If “keeping up with the Jones's” was the way to creating a nation's wealth, it wasn't always a matter of access to better technology. That such spectacles designed to inspire awe were also technological marvels is only half the story. Technology did not create the mimetic desire to display wealth; it only made it possible, perhaps even justified it. Hitler's plans for a presidential palace of the Reich where visiting dignitaries would walk a distance longer than the French King's court at Versailles, is a good case in point. It is also here that scale loses its human reference point, its location in the natural world and becomes purely a function of technology and mimetic desire. Lastly there is another crucial dimension to scale, that of surveillance. Prisons, schools, hospitals, which employ what Michel Foucault has called technologies of surveillance, owe their architectural inspiration to Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. This project of total visibility and total surveillance is also a consequence of the loss of a human scale.

The Idea of Craft:

The work of Laurie Baker, an English architect who has made India his home (Gautam Bhatia) and Hassan Fathy, an Egyptian architect credited with reviving the art of building Nubian Vaults, an ancient technique dating back to Pharonic times, illuminate the idea of Architecture as a craft. They emphasize the use of locally available building materials and following time tested building designs, which are climatically and culturally attuned. Baker also insists that the practice of an architect not be divorced from that of a builder. Architecture as a craft means its theory and its practice are indivisible.

The difference between industrial labour and craft activity is of crucial importance here. The enclosure of the commons, the depopulation of the countryside, the *factory police* of Germany and many other forms of dislocation and social engineering went into the making of what we

know today as the industrial working class in Europe. But one precondition for the creation of the working classes anywhere in the world was what Ivan Illich has called the “war against subsistence”. Craft was a victim of this war, which we also know today as “development” or “modernization”. Most people outside the metropolises in India rely on the knowledge of the local building craftsmen who belong to a tradition which is informed by traditional geometry, astronomy, weather science, soil science, arithmetic and accounting. Theoretical modern science might find these knowledges wanting but they serve the purpose of their customers admirably. Like other crafts, this knowledge is taught through practice; there is plenty of innovation, experimentation and professional communication. In the modern sector however, this craft nature of architecture is lost because of the industrialisation of the raw materials of architecture.

The Idea of Regeneration:

Regeneration presupposes a kind of postindustrial need to connect with processes of nature. It is misleading to talk of regeneration with regard to societies that are not dislocated from nature as fundamentally as industrial societies are. However I use the word to talk about what we perceive as imperatives which go into the making of something we broadly understand as human. Humans, despite computers and cars, power grids and roads, kevlar and teflon, still eat bread, drink water, grow grain, build homes and wear silk and cotton. But here is the rub: these products of nature (grain, milk, water, mud, thatch, silk and cotton for instance) in the postindustrial sectors of all societies, are less accessible/affordable to those who are its primary producers. Cotton growers/weavers dressed in cheap synthetic clothes, potters storing water in pots made of recycled plastic, masons living in concrete boxes, farmers unable to afford the price of grain and reduced access to milk and meat, are the symbols/symptoms of a dislocation which marxoid categories of alienation do not adequately capture. At stake here is not just the hostile relationship between producer and product, but a deeper redundancy of basic life giving activities.





In India, like in many other parts of the world, the New Year would mean a time to clean and lime render one's home, marriages would mean a time to extend and alter, and changing seasons would determine the order of repairing and changing worn elements of a building. Regeneration here is nothing but the endless cycle of life in nature's environment. But when all environments become “built” environment, regeneration appears as a newly discovered lifestyle. Technophiles, who sing arias about the smart homes of tomorrow connected to WAP technologies with their auto-managed lighting, temperature and security systems, automated “work-

performing” cybernetic systems and maintenance-proof architecture, forget that regeneration is re-entering postindustrial culture in a new way while vernacular homes have regeneration “built” into them.

The basic elements of a modern building like cement, steel, glass, ceramic, plastic, synthetic fiber are not connected to nature in the same way mud, brick, lime, thatch, timber and grass are. The industrial elements are what we know as waste, insofar as they aren't, to use a trendy word, biodegradable. They also produce undisposible waste in their very production. In this search to be permanent and “maintenance-free”, architecture has lost its capacity to be regenerative and therefore ecologically sensitive.

Fergusson must, perhaps, be allowed the last word on this tradition of architecture. The “pure intellect” of which he found so little in the architecture of Belur and Halebid, the famous 11th century temples of South India, is, I suspect recognition of what a culture of rationality can do to human faith and feeling. The search for perfection, permanence and immortality in architecture must look, to him, like a Faustian contract with technology, threatening to rob architecture of its very soul.

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