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BE INDIAN, TRY INDIAN

THE SOAPBOX IS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR EACH OF OUR ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS TO EXPRESS THEIR OPINION ON AN IMPORTANT INDUSTRY ISSUE. THIS MONTH, MANIT RASTOGI SPEAKS ABOUT THE SEARCH FOR A LANGUAGE OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARCHITECTURE

Indian architecture is probably in its worst state of crisis today. There is a lot of debate on foreign architects – WTO, reciprocity agreements, company structures and unlimited liability, professional indemnity, intellectual property, fee structures, the role of the Council of Architecture under MHRD or MOUD, education, the practice-academia disconnect, capacity building, examination for licensing, certificate of practice, continuing professional development, etc.

Although these issues need to be addressed urgently, there is a larger issue: what is contemporary Indian architecture? What is Brand India's architecture? Is there a need to develop a discourse – a global discourse – on it? If yes, then what are Indian architects especially good at?

In my opinion, what we are (or were) good at for a very long time, is architecture that is not only highly sustainable but also adaptive, affordable, imageable, liveable, socially and culturally responsive and, above all, built with very limited resources. In a world on the brink of environmental collapse, this is a highly valuable skill. This is what we must focus on. How can we, then, employ our skills to create a model for the future based on the present?

Traditional Indian architecture in today's paradigm has always been green, as interventions have always been built within a localised context – usually in response to not having access to abundant resources of water and energy. This has been inherently different from the Western model, which is equipment-centric and responds to a completely different climatic condition. Post the oil boom of the 60s, with availability of cheap energy, there was an evolution of equipment-centric, hermetically sealed glass buildings that are disconnected from the environment.

This problem has been further compounded by Green rating systems which, by and large, tend to have lower environmental standards, presumably as a means of trying to address a larger audience. Although they aim to provide better environments, the methodology adopted by these systems is generally equipment-centric and highly prescriptive – leading to higher costs of construction. This results in limited application

by prescribed narrow definitions of human comfort levels.

Developments across India are now designed with a superimposed layer of sustainability or 'green'. However, there should be a conscious attempt to step away from this system and incorporate passive approaches to design, right from the conceptual and planning stages. Optimisation of all services is a pre-requisite to responsible architecture today. Unlike other nations, local resources, materials and methods of construction are still easily available to us. The most effective approach is to build with local materials in a manner that responds to the climatic needs of the region while remaining economically viable.

The idea of sustainability should now move on from to our cities as well. Problems of migration, traffic, pollution, water, electricity, sewage, public health, safety, governance and global warming prevail in most cities. There is a hidden opportunity here – one of establishing Green and sustainable networks as alternative sources of engagement in the city, for the common man. The aim should be to reclaim the derelict, the forgotten, the recyclable and the toxic by involving all stakeholders; thereby collapsing the boundaries of decades of non-systemic thinking, which has generated unsustainable urban growth.

New Delhi's Nullah project proposes to rehabilitate and rejuvenate 350km of contiguous natural drains into fresh water streams with walking and cycling tracks throughout the city. The 500-acre township we completed for Bengal Ambuja in Siliguri, is based around an intricate interconnected water network that sustainably harvests 3,000mm of rainfall a year without the use of storm-water drains. The idea is to move away from statistical methods to those that rely on multi-dimensional interconnected approaches.

At Morphogenesis, today, we have become architectural activists. Architecturally, we celebrate identity and diversity versus visual homogeneity. We think of our built spaces as *bazaars* – places of habitation and interaction. It is this all-inclusive nature of design, with a unique focus on passive and low-energy architecture, that we believe in as being the new emergent Indian architecture. **AS**

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