

Seminar Report

Karavan Karachi: Heritage, Urban spaces, Identity



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Karavan Karachi is an ongoing series of festivals and events organised to celebrate the city's many historical buildings and cultural activities such as theatre, fashion and its cuisine. Starting in March this year, it included a Seminar held on 9th and 10th September at the grand colonial building of Frere Hall, the only public building with its own spacious grounds in Karachi which remains preserved as such among the many other disappearing parks and gardens of the city. This fine structure in Venetian - gothic style of Victorian period speaks well of the city's colonial past and its architectural heritage.

The morning session kicked off with the presentation of the Karavan Karachi participants. Unfortunately it was unnecessarily loaded with praises of the Organiser, and a seemingly ongoing video of the events, which badly needed some prudent editing.

Thank God for the visiting scholars, Dr Michael Jansen, Dr Hisako Koura's presentation and Kamil Khan's presence that the seminar focus was put on the main topic "Heritage, Urban spaces, Identity". Kamil Khan's serious concern on the issues added some decorum to the proceedings. This was also the opportunity to get to know him better as he was one of the few participants that one could have an intelligent discussion with. Pleasantly surprised to discover that he has a sense of humour and the old goat has some spark when he commented on a good looking Indian, and wondered how such a youthful architect has accomplished so much good work so soon in her life.

He holds his views on tradition and moral high ground with great intellectual vigour articulated these in the ensuing discussion. He chose to abandon his prepared presentation on Lahore, as he quietly informed, before climbing on the stage. He very politely but firmly rejected this partying and feast, and expressed his disappointment of the morning's presentation, as superficial, two dimensional, adding that it is only Dr Michael Jansen's views on the historical perspective of the urban space as a non- material existence of a city as much as its material aspect and Dr Hisako Koura's presentation of Renovation of Historical Urban spaces, that has restored his confidence in this seminar. He implored the gathering to rise above the superficial two-dimensional perception of

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issues in only time and space. There is the all-important third dimension, i.e. the hierarchy that defines a purpose in life and the direction to the creator. The spiritual element of our life demands that all actions should lead us to this direction and define the purpose of our life on this earth.

Dr Michael Jansen, an eminent scholar, had flown in from Almatu, Kazikstan. He is an architect as well as an archaeologist, based at Aachen University. He presented an overview of the festive use of urban spaces through out history. "Feast could be religious, profane, demonstrative, powerful, advertising, entertaining". The urban space in the city has been used not only for simple functions for traffic and access but for feast and rituals universally. The city itself as a material component of civilization has it's counter parts in the 'non material components'. These have been influencing each other permanently. A renewed concern for the public space is underway now to reclaim the streets and piazza's that have been lost to the car, car parks and advertising hoarding, and other unfriendly functions.

Dr Koura, an academic from Osaka University, illustrated her talk with slides of Kobe city. The renovation of historical urban centre has always been focused at the city centre in Japan. This is where cultural and social activities are accumulated and also the pressure to redevelop and for business to expand is most encountered. Kobe has an interesting history. The middle of the nineteenth century saw Japan opened itself to out side world and a large European community settled here. This area is till today is described as Foreigner's settlement, and located between the port and old Kobe town.

Brinda Somaya, certainly brightened up the proceedings by her elegance and charm, and not least the presentation of some professionally executed projects in Mumbai. She started by showing works of other architects before coming to her own projects, such generosity and inclusivity is worth noting for by other participants and organisers alike. She demonstrated that the clients have been persuaded to a holistic understanding of architecture. Her projects included reclaiming sidewalks and landscaping that made a positive improvement to the surrounding. Some of the projects were recycling of old buildings for new use. These are carefully carried out to retain the old townscape, and giving old structure new life.

The second day's proceedings were a very mixed bag. A young graphic designer, Saima Zaidi presented slides and questioned the tasteless and inane advertising hoarding and slogans that only add confusion ugliness to the city and leave the helpless citizen trying to find meanings or direction in the environment of divided city. There was a long and monotonous reading from Ayesha Noorani, looking for architecture or architectural meanings in the Sufi traditions of Lahore and it's crumbling chaotic complexes of mazars. Some humour from the journalist Asif Noorani, comparing life and language in his former home city of Bombay and the present residence in Karachi followed this. A journalist's subtly presented the uniqueness and similarities of the two cities.

It was left to Owais Hasin, the architect, to bring back the seminar to Society, Heritage and Conservation. He set out the criteria for architectural heritage and it's intrinsic value

in society. What and how and why it should be preserved. He focused on the importance of education, learning from the past, as there are many lessons one can learn from the past. He emphasised that "If we are to use the physical remains of the past as a fund of experience for the future, it is essential that we understand precisely what they have to tell us. How we can use this reservoir of knowledge beyond and above a reminder of an age of nostalgia."

It was thanks to Michael Jansen, who kept the seminar on a saner course and persuaded the organizers to pass a resolution as the end product, and achievement of the seminar. He suggested that an appeal to the President be sent to bring the conservation legislation in Pakistan in line with World Heritage organisations and ICOMOS rules and standards. A sumptuous dinner at the old colonial Sind Club in the evening well attended by the select gathering concluded this international seminar on Heritage, Urban spaces, Identity.