

‘Architecture without Architects’

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... An honorable jury gives an International award of architecture to a duly nominated Architectural project claiming to have been designed and built by an N.G.O with help of local masons and craftsmen who were termed as ‘Barefoot Architects’ of The Project. However, the qualified and licensed architect who was appointed for the project and provided full design consultancy services does not find his contribution recognised in the project and his name not does figure in the list of awardees indicating a possible suppression of facts during the nomination itself. He brings the discrepancy to the notice of the award management. Subsequently, on further investigation, the Jury recognise the petition and rectify the list of awardees by including the architect’s name, mentioning his contribution and sending him a fresh citation. Against this decision the original awardees express their displeasure and threaten to return the award in protest! ...

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This incident above illustrates a rather peculiar behaviour noticeable among many non-architects towards architecture. Quite often, many ‘others’, who are not architects, seem to invade the architects’ ‘space’. At times these ‘others’, including even the client of a project, might tend to usurp credits due actually to the Architect, by some unusual means as it may appear in the present case. On another plane, it is seen that people from related disciplines like civil engineering or from the vocation of pure Art or Design, often tend to project themselves as architects. They do so at times even in spite of enjoying excellence in their own domain. Many other professions like Medicine or Law also do face such problems and it can be identified as a common sociological issue. Nevertheless, when it happens in the particular case of architecture it can be related to some problems of the discipline of architecture itself such as the poly-semantic nature of the term and also a rather loose and wide general definition of the discipline. It relates as well to the image of a creative superiority attached to the discipline, which may make others envious.

While the community of Professional architects in India would be seriously concerned about this event causing infringement upon their professional space and legal status, the international and institutional nature of the incidence inspires one to explore some wider historical conditions within which the event can be located. The underlying but obvious question here is ‘Who is an architect?’

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Like in its very process of evolution, Architecture, the classical humanistic discipline of the West and its Modern Universal successor, the creator of the figure of the Modern professional architect have encountered various internal and external criticisms in the 'late' or 'Post' modern times too. In this connection, it is interesting to recall how 'Non-pedigreed architecture' acquired a significant position in the architectural discourse in this time. Bernard Rudofsky coined this term during his exhibition entitled 'Architecture without Architects' at the MoMA in New York in 1964. Rudofsky stated: -

'The present exhibition is the vehicle of the idea that the philosophy and know-how of the *anonymous builders* (emphasis mine) presents the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration of Industrial Man' (Rudofsky as quoted by Nalbangtöglü, 2000).

In the same late or 'post' modern times, in the emerging global market, ethnic and regional cultures acquired new significance in economic and political terms; as if the older quest for 'understanding the other' since the early modern age and attempts at modernising 'them' were now redundant. The dominant western discourse extended 'tactical' space to accommodate 'celebrations' of ethnic and traditional cultures, often as they are. Modernisation, instead of becoming a universal egalitarian phenomenon, remained comparatively restricted to, and continued to refine itself at the metropolitan centres of power, while drawing resources as and when required from the global hinterland for its service. The distinction of that hinterland instead of blurring out keeps on getting further articulated under a more 'organised' process of historicisation of a different kind. The polarised condition of the colonial times only strengthened.

In architecture, something like 'Critical Regionalism's originally sincere attempt to advance a sensibly reformed modernist discourse of architecture across the world does not seem to remain in the forefront. Whereas, practices like 'Orientalism' ironically only continued and opened up newer, thriving academic markets in the west along with increasing 'Neo-Orientalist' tourism, (one may call it a condition of Post-Orientalism! now). And those developing nations, after their initial embrace of modern universalism in architecture and city planning started positively enjoying, rather than fully combating, this status of uni-polarisation for several quick gains out of it, for example benefits of lavish cultural tourism and endowments like 'World Heritage' recognition with accompanying funds.

In such environment arguments like the one in Rudofsky's statement would have added some necessary fuel to the fire of enthusiasm of the search and promotion for indigenous and 'vernacular' architecture in the ethnic societies particularly of the developing countries rather than recognising elementary achievements of industrialisation and modernisation in the non-western world. It is interesting to note that Indian institutions of Architecture those had began by practising and imparting education of universal modern architecture only in the 1950s, started shifting a large part of their interest to 'traditional' and 'vernacular' within a couple of decades, time.

The current role of the International award in question in determining the identity and thereby the fate of the modern profession of architecture in a developing country can be assessed in this context.

One may now take a look at small parts of the position statements of the award mentioned above in this connection. The second paragraph of the general introduction of the award says: -

“The selection process emphasises architecture that not only provides for people's physical, social, and economic needs, but that also stimulates and responds to their cultural and spiritual expectations. *Particular attention is given to building schemes that use local resources and appropriate technology in an innovative way, and to projects likely to inspire similar efforts elsewhere*” (emphasis mine)

And in the paragraph on selection of award recipients it says: -

“Since the success of a winning project may be the product of efforts by diverse individuals, groups, and organisations, the Master Jury apportions prizes among the contributors - architects, other design and construction professionals, craftsmen, clients, and institutions - whom it considers most responsible for the success of each project.

Which project or whom to consider for an award is naturally the prerogative of the organisation or individual offering the award. Yet, for this comment here, what is of significance is the nature of emphasis in the ascription for the qualification. Setting up almost a one to one correspondence the award appears to suggest that the qualified architect in her professional capacity may not be fully capable of addressing cultural and spiritual expectations of the people in an architectural project.

One may speculate why the very classification of eligibility, without disqualifying the qualified architect, makes additional room for non-architects to come into the fray for an award nominally for architecture. People who deceived the real architect would have conveniently banked upon this fact and played their cards by presenting the so called ‘Barefoot Architects’ as leading protagonists and succeeded in the first round.

But how could the honourable jury be deceived at all? And here is a more important issue. This incident indicates that there is a larger desire, that there is a prevailing mindset by which the award at first would have been immediately swayed by the presence of the ethnic elements in the project. It is that mindset which seeks to find virtue in ‘architecture without architects’, particularly in certain identified parts of the world, and prevents honorable judges from recognising any role of a qualified architect and prompts them to commit a small yet significant mistake as far as the community of professional architects is concerned.

At a time when global corporate firms are blocking the entry of the local professionals by outbidding them through global mega tenders, classified international awards like the one in

question ostensibly encouraging cultural specificity at present seem to further endanger local professionals by displacing them even from their existing positions; somewhat ironically.

How should the local community of architects react to this cultural issue, may remain an important question in near future in countries like India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. However, if this incident has a connection to the East- West debate, it also is a part of an even larger debate. There are direct attacks on the present profession of architecture in developed countries too as we can see from the news item that appeared in an English journal, as quoted here: -

“MP calls for protection of title to be scrapped
Robert Booth

The government is coming under fresh pressure to scrap the protection of the title "architect" in an escalation of a campaign to deregulate the profession and throw it open to designers and other construction professionals who are not registered with the Architects Registration Board.

Liberal Democrat MP for Newbury, David Rendel, formally asked ministers this week to consider removing the privilege, which only allows qualified architects to use the name in the course of business.

The move is part of a campaign being led by one of Rendel's constituents, Stan Green, who wants to see Arb disbanded. Green calls himself an architectural designer and claims he is one of 20,000 practising architecture in the UK, but not under the auspices of the Arb.

The campaigners cited John Warne's 1993 report to parliament, which advocated an end to registration altogether, although this was opposed by architects and eventually the government, which went on to establish the Arb in 1997. The campaigners want the government to revert to this recommendation.

The campaign flies in the face of thinking at the RIBA, where President Paul Hyett has said he wants to extend the protection of title to take in protection of the function of an architect in the same way that applies to doctors and lawyers.

Arb chief executive Robin Vaughan predicted ministers would ignore the proposal. "I do not know why he should want to stop consumers reaching out to a body of persons who adhere to a code of conduct," he said. "The people who need to decide are members of the profession and consumers and last time, both agreed that the Warne Report was harmful to the public."

Stan Green has said: "The Arb is not necessarily doing a good job for the consumer. It is quite useless and should be disbanded because it doesn't have any teeth."

The bid to win MPs' support is Green's second step in his campaign. In May he goaded the Arb to prosecute him for misuse of title after adopting the title "architect". The Arb has so far refused to rise to the bait, Green said." (Building Design, 2002: 4).

The larger question therefore is; is the prevailing definition of professional architecture becoming defunct in the present world order and therefore needs to be rejected or must the attacks be tackled with force? Does it indicate that the universal nature of a singular, abstract modern definition of architecture, almost a metonym of modernism itself, is under pressure in the contemporary world and needs to make way for an infinite number of interpretations to be utilised by powerful interest groups of various hues in a myriad different contexts: is it really going to be 'architecture without architects' every where?

References

Building Design (2002) June 14, pp. 4

Nalbangtoglu, G.B. (2000) '(Post) Colonial Encounters' in Tan Kok Meng (ed.), *Asian Architects Volume 2*, pp. 18-27. Singapore: Select Publishing.

For discussions among some Indian Architects see:

IN@AZ: http://www.architexturez.net/+e/cat_professional_practice.shtml

Indian Express: http://www.indian-express.com/full_story.php?content_id=5264

Aga Khan award citation: http://www.akdn.org/agency/akaa/eighthcycle/page_03txt.htm

Barefoot College: <http://www.barefootcollege.org/html/campus.htm>

The Week Magazine: <http://www.the-week.com/22apr14/events2.htm>

NDTV: <http://origin.ndtv.com/addons/printpage.asp?id=26685&callid=1>