Multi-cultural Architecture

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In Britain today, especially in a place as ethnically diverse as Leicester, we often hear about the growing richness of multi-cultural food, dress, dance, popular and classical music, literature, theatre… Sometimes this means that different cultural traditions are being expressed, sometimes that cultural cross-fertilisation or fusion is taking place. In this article I would like to look at the idea of multi-cultural architecture, at what it might mean and at how it could be stimulated, and how it can revitalise architecture in general.

Cultural diversity in the architecture of this country is beginning to be noticed, particularly in relation to religious buildings. If its impact is less obvious than that of the other branches of culture that I have mentioned, one reason is that buildings are big and expensive, and require clients and planning permission. Another is that ethnic minorities are under-represented in the architectural profession. Apparently, two percent of RIBA members are from ethnic minority groups, compared with 7.6 percent among solicitors (Building Design, 5 April 2002). To redress this balance is important, for the sake of equal opportunities, to find untapped architectural talent, and to reflect different kinds of needs and aspirations among those who create our built environment.

It would be naïve to imagine that diversifying the ethnic mixture among architects will in itself create a new multi-cultural architecture. To begin with, many architects from ethnic minorities will, as they already do, become excellent practitioners in the 'mainstream' architecture of the day, and not see it as their mission to represent their communities of origin. Moreover, even if they wanted to do this, it cannot be assumed that they will know how to. An architect trained in the way that most of us have been trained is not a representative of a living tradition in the same way as someone practising a way of cooking or a kind of embroidery, or a way of walking or holding their head, or of relating to their family. All those things have generally been passed down through generations, whereas a fair proportion of an architect's knowledge of architecture is learnt at college. Nobody assumes that, say, an English architect will automatically design buildings that deeply reflect English culture, when for decades the predominant ideal or myth has been of a universal, cultureless, style less architecture. Yet it is imagined that an architect with origins somewhere else, particularly if these origins are beyond Europe, will somehow be a walking embodiment of their civilisation.

Even more so if they have not moved from their place of origin. It seems to be forgotten that the successive effects of colonialism, industrialisation, and global capitalism have long since killed off culturally rooted architecture the world over, except in the steadily diminishing vernacular traditions that manage very well without architects. Every 'non western' country in which 'western' architecture had begun to take over, has been trying for thirty years to reengage with traditions, to provide continuity to temper change, to express cultural identity.

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Success has been limited; and it would be silly to imagine that these issues have been managed any better in the West.

Any discussion of ‘multicultural architecture’ must therefore begin with the unsolved problem of ‘cultural architecture’. How can a culturally valid architecture be created?
Certain essential aspects relate to function – to the social use of space, customs, ways of living, rituals. Sociology and anthropology are useful here, as well, in the context of a multi-cultural society, as the involvement of diverse cultural groups in design and planning. However, it is other aspects of architecture, not separate but nevertheless distinct from these functional ones that I would like to focus on here. These are even more important in the *expression* of culture: the formal, spatial, aesthetic, symbolic aspects of architectural ‘languages’.

Clay shrines for multi-faith prayer room, Leicester Royal Infirmary, by LSA Year 1 students.

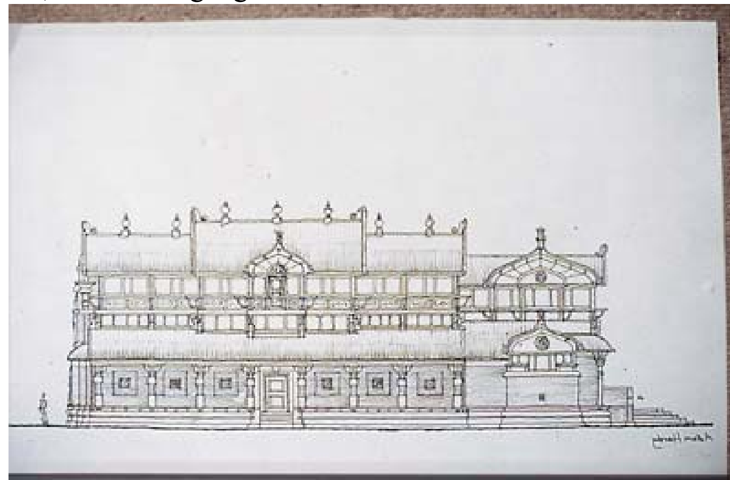
Traditional languages of architecture are coherent embodiments of their respective worldviews, and thus have a sacred character. If we accept that their cultural validity, or even their beauty as architectural systems, then hope is at hand in the fact that such languages can be learnt. To learn them requires time and effort, and recipe books are not generally available. The rules, or rather the principles – the definition of parts and the ways of putting them together, the way of conceiving space and form, and of conveying ideas – are best understood by close familiarity with buildings themselves. In fact, while any rounded knowledge of a culture requires a degree of exploration of as many of its branches as possible, the best way for an architect to understand and empathise with a culture is through its architecture. (Visual communication is often not appreciated in a predominantly verbal academic environment.) An excellent step towards mastery of an art form is to learn how to create highly structured forms, such as sonnets or sonatas or Doric temples, whether or not such forms, once learnt, are strictly followed.

Of course, there has to be critical awareness of the pitfalls of historicism: of the fantasy nature of exoticism, the sterility of some revivalism, of the ideological uses of historical styles by nationalisms and imperialisms, of the absurdity of post modern semiotic regionalism of the Chinese-roof-on-the-skyscraper variety. There has to be awareness of the phenomenon of architecture in fancy dress, of the Georgian house with Gothic frills. But, paradoxically, I think that critical awareness must not be allowed to inhibit creativity, and that fear of ignorance and of bad taste could stifle the blossoming of multi-cultural

architecture. Remember that reinterpretations, even misinterpretations, have often had wonderful results. In the 18th century an exoticist misunderstanding of Chinese gardens helped to form English landscape tradition. Brighton is better off with its pavilion, Kew Gardens with their pagoda, and Leicester with that ghastly temple in Narborough Road. Better vulgar creativity than correct timidity, and an explosion of ignorant pastiche and pink post modern pagodas, on student's drawing boards and in the streets, would be a vibrant stimulus of imaginations.

But you can do better. Go to the pure and most authentic roots of world traditions. Find how to unlock their inner principles of form and space and ornament and imagery and symbolism. Examine, draw and contemplate the forms until they have become internalised – until this kind of architecture flows spontaneously through your soul and mind and fingers. Then only are you ready to transform, and give the spirit that past forms embody new life in the conditions of today.

You may well have noticed that, apart from the first sentence, the preceding paragraph is written entirely in decasyllabic blank verse. It just happens not to be written out in lines: with a bit of sensitivity you will be able to find where to put the breaks. I wrote it in prose and then tweaked it. This isn't difficult to do – the English language falls naturally into such rhythms. But still, it couldn't be tweaked without a conscious awareness of the form. Someone like, say, Vikram Seth could do this much better than I can. He isn't English, but so what? Well, at least I can design Hindu temples: I'm not Indian, but so what? The point is that the culture is carried in the tradition, which transcends the individual, and is not the exclusive property of a race or a nation. Some aspects of culture are quasi-inherited, while others can be learnt, such as language or artistic forms.



Study by Adam Hardy for tower of Sri Venkateswara Temple, Oldbury.

The point, of course, is that the world's cultural heritage belongs to all of us. Things that appear alien can become part of you if you make the effort. To grasp the architecture of cultures that are distant, historically or geographically, is to begin to understand those cultures. To try to do this is not a marginal or minority matter, but a necessity for a rounded architectural education, opening the mind to a whole range of different understandings of space and form, of imagery and symbol, of the use of light and dark.
In the exploration of multi-cultural architecture, the Leicester School of Architecture can lead the way. It is well placed in the context of Leicester, with the diverse backgrounds of its students, in its relationship with other design disciplines in the Faculty of Art and Design,

and its close connection with PRASADA. PRASADA is now the largest centre for the art, architecture and material culture of South Asia in any British university. Its staff and postgraduate students are engaged in serious research in the fields of South Asian painting, sculpture, textiles and dress, South Asian religious studies, Hindi literature and aesthetics, as well as architecture and architectural history. At the same time PRASADA carries out live architectural design projects, and is the only institute in its field concerned with making the connections between historical study and creative practice. There could be no better foundation for multi-cultural architecture.

But we have not yet fully answered the question of what multi-cultural architecture is, or can be, beyond defining it, in one sense, as the expression of the cultural heritage of particular groups, and concluding that potentially everybody's heritage is potentially everybody else's. Already, on this basis, the environment as a whole can be rich, varied and multi-cultural by containing buildings that, individually, embody different traditions. Beyond this, it must be possible to create buildings that, individually, are multi-cultural. Within an individual work of architecture there are two broad ways in which cultural fusion can be realised: by mixing two or more ingredients in such a way that the result has distinct bits (or, more subtly, distinct characteristics) of each, or by achieving a synthesis.

Mughal pavilion in Small Heath Park, Birmingham, by PRASADA, for the BBC's 'Charlie's Garden Army

There are few recipes for how to do the mixing, but history provides the best lessons, as usual. The examples range through those 16th-century French churches that clothe a Gothic skeleton with Classical flesh, to 18th century Chinese-style mosques in Malacca. My own favourite examples of architectural hybridising gymnastics are where, from time to time between the 7th to14th centuries, the Nagara and Dravida 'languages' of Indian temple architecture were deliberately combined. These languages, each comprising both a range of formal elements and a number of different ways of putting these together, allow many kinds of combination and permutation. One way of making a hybrid between the two is put together a mixture of elements from both the languages. A more subtle way is to use

elements entirely from one of the languages, but to put them together following an organising principle belonging to the other language.

Rather than using specific forms or structures, another approach to multi-cultural fusion would be to try to create spaces, motifs and imagery reminiscent of different architectural traditions, not unambiguously identifiable, but evocative in different ways to different people. In any case, the very idea of mixing up different architectures will cause shudders among purists, fearing transgression of formal or stylistic unity. But the experiment is worthwhile. All kinds of jumble will be thrown up along the way, most of it strange, but more interesting and meaningful than a bland neutrality trying not to offend anybody. Eventually it should lead to new kinds of unity.

Finally, two things need to be pointed out. Firstly, culture is by definition collective, and a deeper cultural or multi-cultural meaning can be achieved collaboratively than individually. Secondly, even if an architect can invent multi-cultural forms, it is difficult to escape from the uni-cultural nature of the process by which buildings are made in the industrialised world. Therefore, both to subvert the monopoly of industrialised building, and to unleash collaborative creativity, architects must set up frameworks (organisational ones, and sometimes physical ones) for the participation of communities, not only in the planning of buildings, but also, along with artists, in their making and their adornment.