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DESIGN AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE



In the 21st century, ‘developing’ countries like India are a unique study in demographic contrasts. At one end, there are the privileged elite and the growing middle class, aspiring to live and consume like their western counterparts. At the other, there is the oppressed proletariat surviving in the nooks and crannies of the city and the system, whose very running depends on them. Their numbers are constantly on the rise owing to large scale distress migration from villages to cities, sometimes in distress, otherwise in pursuit of the great urban utopia of better jobs, education and healthcare. This gives rise to huge disparities between the two classes that create problems of rising inequality, abject poverty and abysmal living conditions, things that they were trying to flee from the very outset.

The liberalization of the Indian economy and the advent of globalization in the early 90’s were heralded with messianic expectations at that time. It was meant to be a cure for ills that have plagued us for ages like caste and class discrimination, religious bigotry, deep rooted cultural misogyny and an unequal distribution of resources. Unfortunately, what followed was irresponsible capitalism, high consumption levels driven by limitless greed and a hitherto unseen level of disregard and insensitivity towards the less fortunate, planting seeds of further inequality and distrust. The gulf between the rich and the poor has deepened further. One just has to look outside one’s window to see the urban landscape teeming with plush gated condominiums and ‘illegal’ bastis, both jostling and fighting for the little available space and resources in the



← Intricate Neem wood roof trusses, Yakshi Learning Centre, Medak District, Telangana

↑ A local house in Medak district, Telangana



city. This is the harsh reality! Yet we have been conditioned since we were children to look the other way, to cross the street if an urchin or an unshaven beggar is on the same path as us and to conveniently stop asking questions.

Within this larger scheme of things, where does the spatial design community stand? Are we mere service providers to the ruling bourgeois, left to struggle and survive based on their idiosyncratic whims and fancies? Has our profession been reduced to being a mere pawn to the marauding juggernauts of globalization and free market capitalism? While studying design, we were always told that ours was a noble profession akin to medicine and law, established to enforce a balance to society, to give a voice to the voiceless and to provide solutions to the myriad problems that afflict our millions.

Unfortunately this moral ideal seems to have been forgotten somewhere in annals of recent history. These are some of the uncomfortable questions that this generation of designers and architects needs to answer to.

Over the past one and half years, I have practiced as an interdependent travelling architect, designing and building in different rural areas of the Indian subcontinent, while trying to address some of these pressing issues. Working with rural communities, indigenous materials, local techniques and skilled craftsmen, throws up its own set of unfathomable challenges and difficulties, ones that our modern design education does not equip us to handle. The lack of standardization in materials and techniques and the sheer scale of people's diversity and peculiarities can

- ↖↖ *Intermediary roof of neem wood beam and rafters*
- ↗↗ *A traditional neem wood roof truss*
- ↗↗ *Yakshi Learning Centre, Medak District, Telangana: Indigenous carpenters Santosh and Laxman signing a contract*
- ↗ *Yakshi Learning Centre before laying of the roof*

Yakshi Learning Centre, Medak District, Telangana

- ↗ *Carpenter Laxman enjoying building gable walls for roof*
- ↗ *Carpenter Santosh assembling the truss*

be daunting at most times. But here lies the latent opportunity for ingenious and inventive design solutions, which seek to galvanize the cause of indigenous people without diluting the classical duties and responsibilities of an architect.

When building in rural India, it is imperative that an architect dons the role of a facilitator of social connections, someone who starts a dialogue between the people and process involved in the production of architecture. The final built space is a mere by-product of these processes and thumb rules that govern indigenous architecture. These rules are generally inferences and observations based on time tested empirical data and are codified as oral knowledge passed down from one generation of indigenous builders to the next. Some of these do become obsolete over time and this calls

upon the judiciousness of the designer to decipher which ones to take forward and which to leave behind.

The above fact can be seen in the Medak district of Telangana where traditional houses are built with a mud technique called cob and wall-to-wall spans are not more than 9 feet in length. This economical span was derived after centuries of building with pitched neem wood roofs topped with hollow interlocking clay tiles. Every house follows this basic rule regardless of caste, creed or religion. While designing the Yakshi Learning Centre here, it was imperative to imbibe and study these characteristics of the traditional built fabric beforehand which required a few months of research and analysis prior the design stage.



↑ *Yakshi Learning Centre post roof*



↑ *A local Kangra house, Himachal Pradesh*



Earth Guest House, Kangra, Himachal Pradesh

↙ *Assembling the intermediary floor*

↓ *Underside of the final roof showing bamboo rafters and split bamboo above it*



↑ *Bamboo rafters over pine wood beam. Guest house rooms span not more than 9 feet.*

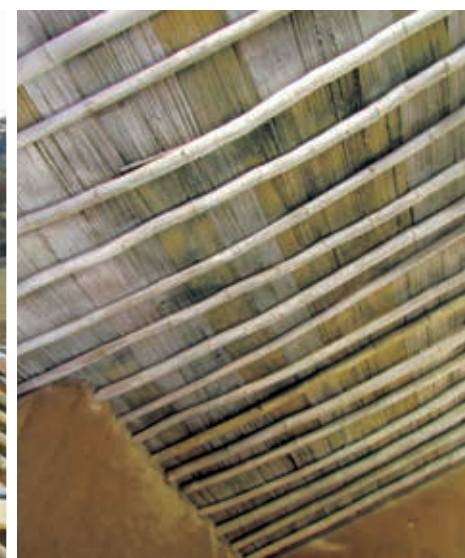
↗ *Carpenter Roshan Lal and team getting ready for final roof*

All rooms were planned with similar proportions and spans and if bigger spaces were needed, load bearing walls or wooden pillars were incorporated into the design to support rooftrusses. When it finally came to roofing, the beaming smiles on the faces of our indigenous carpenters Santosh and Laxman said it all. They were able to begin roofing of the space without much deliberation as they were comfortable with these spans. The design had a human scale which they could relate to. Although we came from different backgrounds of class, language, etc., the act of building was our common language and the roof their expression of it. They were invested in the building process and had become equal stake holders in it. They considered it their own.

A similar pattern can be seen in the Kangra Valley of Himachal Pradesh.

Traditional houses here are usually ground plus one in height and made adobe or sun dried mud brick with a wall to wall span of around 9-10 feet. Primary wooden sleepers of cheer or Pine measuring 10 inch by 5 inch in cross section are used in conjunction with *baans* or bamboo rafters. This is again an economical span derived after years of trial and error and is deemed to work best based on the size and quality of wood. Longer spans and larger sections can be made but one might have to switch to an ecologically damaging deodar wood which takes more time to re grow than a pine wood tree. This would also be more economically expensive as well.

While designing the Earth Guest House here, it made most sense to follow this simple logic after living in and experiencing the local houses. Guest rooms were planned to have a span of 9 feet. In



case more space was needed, the room was extended longitudinally along the shorter span by adding an additional 10 foot long pine wood sleeper after every 5 feet centre to centre. This enabled the local Himachali skilled carpenter team of Meher Chand, Omprakash, Gagan and Roshan Lal to expertly lay the intermediary floor as this is what they do in their own houses. Small modern additions like an intermediary ferro-cement layer were incorporated but it was the gesture of working on something that was their own which gave them a sense of dignity and pride in their skill and knowledge.

Too often these days, modern designers go into foreign lands and enforce upon the local populace ideas that are alien to them with scant regard for their indigenous knowledge and skill. They seek to inform and enforce rather than learn and collaborate. Gone are the days

of the megalomaniac designer silently working away in his studio to produce sleek objects for mass consumption in landscapes and contexts that he does not care to understand. The time has come for a more participatory, pluralistic and inclusive mode of practice, one that takes all stake holders of the building process forward together to form intangible lasting relationships and bonds, bonds that will continue to foster good will and gratitude among the local community for times to come.