

Architecture as Contemplative Building

BY ARCHITECT
VIDURA SRI NAMMUNI

A group of architects visiting Nuwara Eliya recently was heard to comment loudly on the fate that has befallen this once scenic place. Some voices were also heard to express the view that as much as politicians, the professionals - architects themselves - should take the bulk of the blame for not taking adequate precautions despite existing as an organised profession for over 40 years.

Flat topped buildings that may be elegant by themselves but which seem to cut off the mountain range abruptly the disorder in the clustering of the building which thus fail to complement the subtlety of the natural order the fragmented and the haphazard lay of the man made environment, which, by its spread detracts from the serenity of the natural order of this mountain enclave: are definitely the handiwork of the local architectural community if not by deed at least by omission.

The moral of the above criticism is not to take to task the local architectural community to which the writer himself belongs, but to underline the fact that there is more to building than making them elegant and functional that N' Eliya will not be saved simply by placing beautiful buildings in it. First Year at architecture students very quickly learn that beautiful and having activity spaces located in the right places do not, by themselves, make a building a piece of architecture. They learn that buildings that afford views alone fail to do this tickling and thus fail to become architecture. They learn that buildings have to do more to become architecture and thus acquire the power to sustain specific persona demanded by places like N' Eliya.

The distraction afforded by the sustained tom foolery in the play 'Sergeant Nallathamby' would certainly be therapeutic and therefore psychologically beneficial. But 'Maname' and indeed many of Prof. Saratchandra's dramas go several steps beyond bringing distraction and vacuous laughter to a harried

community. It makes them think, creates an occasion for the wheels of the mind to turn, to ponder on deeper issues of humanity of issues concerning themselves. When his drama allows distraction and laughter. It is as a prelude to an entry to the deeper, more serious, and to the intelligent human animal, an exhilarating contemplative mode.

Geoffrey Bawa and Saratchandra

Much of Geoffrey Bawa's work has similarities with the work of Saratchandra in drama. The underplaying of many of the spaces in his hotels, somewhat perplexing given the overt purpose of "jolly making", gives us a clue to the mood his hotel architecture seeks to create, just below the surface motive of pandering to the pleasures of the flesh. The spares use of colour the almost total absence of surface ornamentation, empty corridors and courtyards, the general feeling of desolation underneath a thin

vener of jollity, marks an architecture that is true to its highest purpose. Indeed, the hotel architecture of Geoffrey Bawa should give us hope that we can use the medium of architecture, to give back to this industry its original lofty purpose - that of giving the overseas visitor an experience of the 'mystique of the east'

and to the local visitor an aim further on, to contemplate on his life. It is time that the community, as well as those within the architectural profession realised and accepted this higher role of architecture - the role of going beyond craft, to art. There are now enough craftsmen within and without the profession to allow the architect to concentrate on doing the job his profession was meant to do - to transform Building into architecture. If educational institutions do not educate for this and if the professional institutions do not ensure this, then they have forfeited the right to be in control of these two important spheres and the community, with the government as its

A thought
for Vesak

instrument, will have to and will step in and ensure compliance. we cannot afford not to. The sounds we make must become music, the movements we make, dance, and in the same vein, buildings and built environment we must become architecture if the current world is to survive the burgeoning globalisation, let alone evolve into higher levels of human form.

Is the above wishful thinking? Fanciful theorising?, a lot of hot air? One of the projects handled by the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects, in collaboration with the Rotary Club of Colombo, a 25 unit housing project at Mirihana, to resettle displaced canal bank dwellers, stands as a unique experiment in achieving close to what was discussed above. A Post Graduate researcher conducting a feed back study after 5 years, considers the remarkable upward improvement of social norms, the strong sense of community pride in themselves and their living environ meant etc. clearly attributable to the architecture provided through a combination of a bold concept of balanced community making through heterogeneous neighbourhood development of creating a house unit and lay out

the resident could live upto, thus engineering behaviour modification. Similar efforts are being made currently, by the post graduate students of architecture at Moratuwa University where housing schemes are being evolved to sustain all levels of the community, reversing the current divisive trend. Another project is to evolve a fourth generation of Sri Lankan hotels which serve both the local and foreign visitor and cater to a more Sri Lankan enjoyment of leisure. Both attempts require the creation of an atmosphere conducive to contemplation and the achievement of a state of mind loftier than that obtains today in these institutions. Moratuwa students are slowly but surely acquiring the necessary skills so that the future Sri Lankan architecture could be true to its definition.

The Message of Vesak

The message of Vesak is to turn to contemplation even in the midst of sadness or exultation, and all arts, including architecture, need to play a part. Architecture as the mother of all arts, at least as the form of art which consumes the greatest amount of resources, needs to help Man do this.