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No more casual architecture

Professional responsibilities in post-war architecture-II

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Sri Lanka Institute of Architects dedicated their latest continuous professional development programme to discuss the professional responsibilities in the reconstruction of the post-war regions. We have had similar forums to discuss not only the post-war architecture but also post-Tsunami reconstruction in Sri Lanka. In those forums we have discussed the issues related to physical resurrection of the regions and infrastructure development. It sometimes appears as if we did enjoy the destruction because it brought us new work! Just like a politician who would use the war situations to capture and cling onto power, we seem to be using the situation to casually design too-grand architecture that is not sustainable within those simple socio-cultural contexts in which they are built, but certainly would bring us a handsome fee. Have we become like undertakers, praying for more deaths? We seem to have forgotten to discuss our failures as responsible professionals in avoiding the war or ways and means of avoiding the future wars.

The intriguing question, what might the architect as the reformer of the built environment contributes to inhibit wars, pursued us to write the following passages. The responsibility of architect with relation to war certainly is no more and no less than that of any other professional. The question however forces one to consider the broader issues of the role of the reformer of the built environment that will certainly shape the living patterns of the next generations. Nobody challenges the relationship between architecture and society, and the architect could play a significant in preventing any social unrest.

The relationship between the architect and the society is such that we are naturally called the midwife of the history. The architects are seen not as god-like creatures creating their designs from a vacuum so much as technicians who are helping to ease the physical world ideas whose time has come. Vitruvius, Michelangelo, and even our own Geoffrey Bawa are seen reflecting rather than creating the spirit of the age. Diversity of their work attests to much more than mere buildings. Yet, it is hard to see how we as designers can make any special contribution to inhibiting war. When we prepare the working drawings for a nuclear shelter or specify designer taps and toilet bowls at the expense of public funds, we are not simply playing the roles as midwives: but facilitating the inevitable. We the second oldest profession seem to be following the orders of our pay master just like the guards of the Nazi concentration camps did. Should we continue to act like this?

The midwife analogy altogether seems too complacent. The conjunction of the two ancient occupations offers us another analogy: architecture has been a whore more than a midwife of the history. If the client asks the architect to build the God or even the Third Reich- if the fee is right- the architect does just that. The reformer of the built environment becomes a mere desire-fulfiller. Non-sustainable structures that are built all over the island attest to the analogy of the whore, fulfilling the desires of the politician or the funding agents. Sometimes, in order to collect a fee the architect may have convinced the client or the client may have invaded the decision making



A war torn town

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sphere and architect just kept quite as the fee was correct. Architecture is definitely the mostly invaded profession: all clients considering themselves as better designers than their architects: All housewives believing that they could design houses better than their archi-

itects. Playing such a role is demeaning, trivial, or counter-productive: less clear is its potential for danger and even for the encouragement of friction between communities thus pushing them to wars. Rather, could the architect be the healer, the peacemaker, or the agent of social resurrection? We shall believe yes, we can!

Some wars are the results of one person's, or one small group's hunger for power and domination. Many other wars are instigated by those who feel oppressed: they are crying for rectify a perceived injustice. In the case of the Gulf War, while Saddam certainly had complex and cynical objectives, many Iraqi soldiers also appear to have been motivated by genuine feelings of jealousy and resentment. It was the same case with the attacks on the World Trade Centre. Again, Pirhakaran is a no lesser evil than Saddam and his men no lesser misled than those Iraqis! Silly reasons such as the university entrance criteria are often given as example of ethnic discrimination. Our point is did not such cynical regimes have the luxury to hire the best architects in the world? Why could not those creative minds become healers and avoid the war situation that was inevitable at the time they delivered the babies?

In the past, a simple villager may have been to an extent unaware of his or her relative poverty because he was unaware of the world around him. With increased communication and education the disparities between nations have become obvious to all. So too has the offence to natural justice which these differences represents. When the superficial reasons for the Gulf War have been largely forgotten, the image of a wealthy Northern super-power pulverising a proud Third World nation will still remain vivid. Further seeds of resentment towards the haves will have been sown in the minds of the have-nots. More recently, we have attempted at reasoning out the attacks on New York's twin towers as a reaction of humiliating Muslims. Could we justify the scale? Its conti-

nuity was reflected in many places such as Europe, Far East, etc. Feeling of resentment is not confined to international relations. The wanton damage inflicted on Kuwaiti's luxury hotels and the homes of the wealthy was reminiscent of the London Poll Tax riot in which Porsche cars and expensive restaurants were single out for furious destruction. Such acts may have been criminal but so too was the conspicuous and pointless consumptions which provoked them. Architects seem to have become the master of the conspicuous consumption, badly aggravated by the individualistic consumer society. In practice, many of us spend the bulk of our time in mundane tasks, but in the eyes of many, the display of status and individuality through the exercise of obvious expense virtually defines the role of the architect. The marble floor, the bronze railings, imported bathrooms are the props with which history's whore flatters the ego of the client, who has seen trendy buildings on television.

The privileges of the powerful are exercised in many ways. Some of their benefits are largely hidden from public view, such as discrete health care and private education. In supposedly advanced societies, wealth and power are largely expressed through primitive material symbols. The power of the headman may once have been measured by the size of the bone through his nose, today it is indicated by the size and finish of his desk. In terms of architecture, it appears to be determined by the number and types roofs. The visual codes which determine status vary widely across history and between cultures. In a cultural diversity like Sri Lanka, this is quite visible. The study of vernacular domestic architecture reveals an immense variety of solutions, priorities, and tastes. The traditional Swiss farm house had a pit next to the front door in which was stored animal dung.

Part II Tomorrow