

The crisis of identity in modern architecture

The sixth Annual Sessions and the Annual Conference of Architecture will be held at the BMICH in February 2006 on the theme International Identity in National Architecture. This article is the first of a series of articles related to this theme to serve as a preamble to this event.

Dr. Ranjith Dayaratne

For most ordinary people, tasks of architecture do not often go beyond the construction of spaces sheltered against the climatic adversities; through a building that has a visually 'appealing' appearance. For architects however, the issues may be a bit more complex. Because they have learnt that architecture through its articulation of spaces produces what they call 'spatial experiences', architects may attempt to also create 'exciting' and 'captivating' spatial experiences through space. More over, they are also concerned about, privacy, territoriality, and functional efficiency of the spaces, traditions and craftsmanship of construction and social implications and environmental sustainability of the practices adopted in building. Architects are also often motivated by popular architectural fashions of the day, philosophies of art, and personal self-centered fascinations and obsessions. However, even for most architects, identity - the exhibition of the collective personality of its owners and occupiers or a community per se is hardly an issue to be dealt with through either design or construction of buildings.

To put it another way, identity is almost always 'taken-for-granted' in the real world of architectural practice. It is only rarely an architect will have to discuss issues of identity with his paying client demanding that a building should express identity, except perhaps in buildings to house corporate establishments. In contrast, architecture students and academics often stumble upon the issue in every sphere of architecture from housing to urban design if and when they are examined from a social point of view.

Identity thus belongs to the academic realm, although its manifestations are real and exist in the real world underlying the practice of architecture. However, when both the public and architects talk about the 'appearance' of their buildings to see 'whether a building looks good' or assess their contextual compatibilities, they are in essence dealing with identity at a personal and local level while the wider ramifications of appearance is once again taken for granted. For something that is hardly understood or taken care of sufficiently is the fact that, through architecture and building, we also construct our culture and concrete history and fashion the world at large.

Identity is a question of expressing values, specificities, and similarities of patterns of existence, while also establishing the differences in order to affirm this uniqueness. In fact, not only should there be a difference but this difference has to be proud worthy. It manifests at individual, group, community and national levels and derives culture and contributes to self-esteem at personal and group relationships and bondages at community and national levels. Thus the presence or loss of identity is an issue of serious consequences, for at individual levels, it leads to loss of self-esteem and self-confidence and at community and national levels it may prompt social disintegration and degeneration. Architecture like all other cultural forms is naturally invested with the capacity to express identity and if it seems to be willing to such an endeavour,

then it is indeed a matter for serious concern.

Traditionally, the 'appearance' of buildings was an outcome of a myriad of processes that were directly hinged to the societies in which the buildings were constructed. Architecture was in essence of the people and for the people who both made and inhabited the spaces and their ensemble. The buildings, their

forms, arrangements, use of materials and imagery were inevitably a natural manifestation of the social and societal existence of their makers and thus gave expression to the society at both individual and community levels. Since the traditional communities had 'shared' values and shared images of what they made and their forms and practices evolved slowly through a process of acceptance and refinement of the 'good' and rejection of the 'not so good', and also because the communities were geographically confined and evolved largely in isolation, there developed unique cultures together with unique building practices. Architecture like most other cultural artefacts gave expression to this cultural existence and thus the identity was naturally invested in the buildings representing the nature of their makers and inhabitants.

Today however, this is no more the case. Modernism, a way of life that evolved with the discovery of the machine and industrialization processes that followed has changed everything in life from eating habits to dress, and from cooking to building practices. The contemporary world is thus caught up in the process of what is often called 'globalisation' meaning the transformation of all societies through powers of the dominant cultures of the recent western civilizations. It is partly because the West has excelled in the art of making machines, and at the same time has an uncompromising 'conquering mind set'. Modern science has universalised our thinking and international languages have made it possible for ideas and values to be exchanged freely. Cross-national travelling has transported beliefs and practices across borders and electronic communications have connected people across all known boundaries enabling a swift movement of ideas and practices. As a result, cultural differences are being diluted and community and national identities are being shattered. Indeed there is an emergence of subdued nations but a powerful 'international community' who seem to impinge upon even every day lives of ordinary people in all corners of the world in both direct and indirect ways. There is no doubt however that the cultures, practices, norms, ideologies and philosophies of this international community have been founded almost entirely upon those of the recent western civilizations whose presence emerges vividly expressed through both material and non material productions involved in their existence.

The influence of Modernism upon architecture has been enormous, although it has not transformed the building practices of a vast majority of poor and rural inhabitants of the earth. While modernism has evolved through post-modernism, to what is often talked about as 'post; post-modernism', all different forms of modernism, traditional communities still exist with less isolation than before and perhaps also little less guided by traditions. Most certainly however, traditional building practices continue to provide shelter to the millions of rural poor whose lives have not been touched by the so-called modern architecture at all.

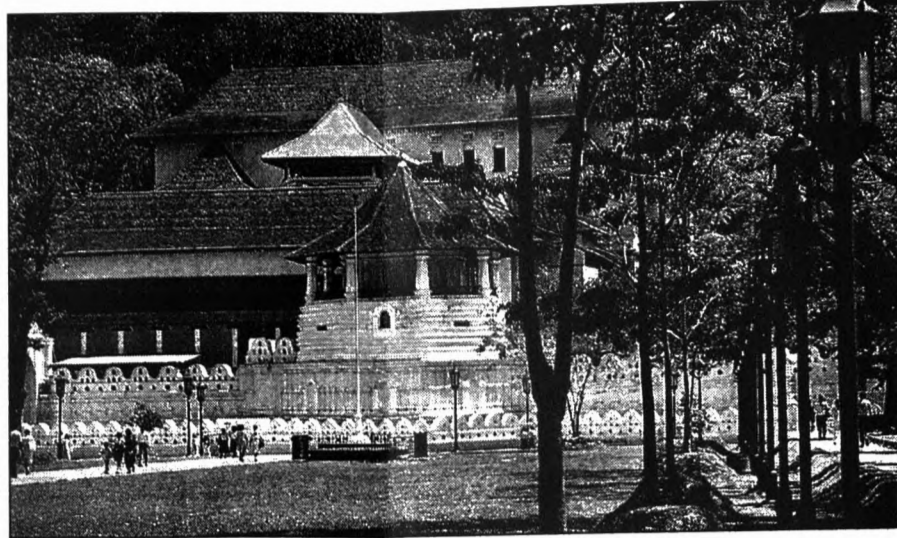
Modern architecture is founded on a number of key ideas

at the centre of which lies the idea of 'space'; an 'undefined expanse of emptiness' that is to be defined through boundaries either constructed or indicated. As a non-material fluidity, space surrounds all beings, to be conquered, to be possessed and to be transformed. Architecture, the art

of 'making space', it is believed should create boundaries to be experienced from this unbounded space by means of rooms and systems of rooms for the excitement and joy of sheer fascination that can be created through space; the buildings. This is in sharp contrast to 'Vastu' 'Feng Shui' or 'geomancy' and other traditional principles that guided pre-modern architectural practices. In fact in modernism, space is seen as a homogeneous entity, undifferentiated and therefore having no characteristics or identities inherent in itself. It is only when space is defined and characterized, that it may acquire significant representational characteristics of one community or another: expression of identity.

The materials employed to define these spaces however are not as innocent as space is. Materials themselves have associational identity orientations, coupled with technologies that have the ability to articulate them even further. Thus, mud signifies the poor, polished granite, the rich and so on. Materials do not only express class identities, but other specificities between regions, religions, ideologies etc, on the basis of how those materials have been fashioned and given shape. Forms and shapes are associated with time or periods of histories, people, movements in ideas and thoughts and indeed political ideologies.

One of the most significant ways in which modernism has influenced architecture is through materials and construction technologies employed for making buildings. Through the machines, 'mass-production' has transformed the ways in which materials are prepared for constructions along with pre-constructing parts of buildings. Unlike in the traditional communities where each one had to be turned out by hand and thus being different from each other, mass production has enabled the making of identical things in as many numbers as one wants. Homogeneity has set in with same materials in same shapes and colours and appearances being now available sometimes even at lower costs in any place on earth. To this practice of making identical building components such as doors, windows, and all parts of buildings, architects have joined with the production of 'type plans' that are 'models' of units of buildings that can be repeated over and over in housing. More over, new methods of constructions have also minimized any individual craftsman's touch if not eradicated that entirely. On the whole, these forces of modernism in the 20th century obscured local regional and ethnic differences that had naturally manifested in architecture and had given it different characteristics of identities. Indeed, with the economy of construction and the speed and convenience of building becoming the major concerns of architectural practices, it became an undeniable nightmare that buildings across the globe began to look alike with an alarming absence of being able to identify one house from the next or one building from another. This is particularly so in large-scale housing projects



so abundant in the west and now proliferating across the world. In fact, modernism is believed to have created an acute sense of place-less-ness in many developed cities of the world.

Although post-modernism in architecture was a reaction against such place-less-ness, and re-discovered the ideas of place, home, culture, identity, authenticity and difference, very little of these have actually percolated into the practices of architecture particularly in the developing world. Architecture as a practice of 'enabling places' through spaces and homes through houses have been little understood. While Heideggerian Phenomenology points out that it is through the act of building Man 'dwells' and that 'dwelling' and being are spatially grounded through architecture, Norberg Schultz shows that the primary function of architecture is to 'orient' and 'identify'. In fact, through the creation of unique and identifiable place experiences grounded in culture, Architecture tells us where we are and who we are. Architectural spaces and forms thus have an inescapable responsibility to perform this fundamental role while providing for function and use among other things.

Unfortunately, despite the many positive contributions to the human civilisation, globalisation and modernity have transformed the very tissue of place experience. In the modern world, local/global tensions infuse all places. Loss of specificity of local places and loss of identity have given the experience of place a phantasmagoric character wherein the global and local and the familiar and the strange have become inextricably intertwined.

By now, opposite reactions have already set in although, the powers set in motion through modern architecture have not subsided. High rises dotting the cities across the world increasingly look similar and show hardly any responses to local climate, history, culture or peoples needs; specificities of places. The building materials with which we make even the most rudimentary huts are becoming the same across the world; steel, aluminium, zinc alum etc. Architectural education shows no signs of either local or national focus, while the architectural design productions are often dictated more by the techniques of production rather than by commitment to ideologies based on culture or context. More over, international communities, migrants, tourists, funding agencies, developers, and even foreign architects are persuasive actors in the architectural market place. No doubt, many architects, clients and people in general also aspire to be 'international'; a nomadic sense of being that is believed to be at the core of the new form of society unfolding. It is their powers that determine the nature of architecture emerging particularly in cities. Despite exemplary works of many architects who have re-invented the local architectural approaches to address the needs of the modern world, many buildings therefore continue to be built with little social and cultural relevance, lack lo-

cal identity and are often 'out of place'.

This crisis of identity in modern architecture has been long debated and has been often studied and written about. Yet it remains unresolved and continues to aggravate with almost every new building being built while exceptions do exist perhaps pointing the way. Fortunately, it is not an issue that can be easily dispensed with as some would wish and remains to haunt architecture until it is appropriately addressed through both theory and practice. The next annual sessions of the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects is unquestionably an opportune moment to raise the issues of how to re-assert our own identity in the modern developments which are being increasingly dictated by modernisms, international community and many other forces of globalisation.

The writer, a Fellow of the Sri Lanka Institute of Architects, is an Asst. Professor of Architecture at the University of Bahrain. He is currently a Visiting Research Scholar at the University of Melbourne, Australia.