
Regionalism as a Source of Inspiration for Architects

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When I commenced to put my thoughts in order, to be able to start writing my paper, which was to be titled, "Regionalism as a Source of Inspiration for Architects", I realised that the first operation to perform would be for me to understand precisely what I know "regionalism" to mean. On the surface, it seemed very clear. Do not look at lovely photographs in the latest issue of *Architectural Record* but look to the environment that you are part of and find clues in the building traditions of your own culture. Though such a change of attitude would have been laudable, the operation is not quite that simple as any such change in strategy would have to take into account the complexities and contradictions of such a regionalist approach in today's world.

When we talk of regionalism as a source of inspiration, we must make the distinction between regionalism as an ideology opposed to universalism, and regionalism as an objective analysis which focuses on specific demands on architecture

Regionalism as an ideology is gradually asserting itself among intellectuals of the Third World as well as a lot of Western thinkers thinking about the Third World. Brian Brace Taylor writes, "The culture of many Third World countries is, and has been becoming, more and more part of a universal culture. This has often transpired for the wrong reasons — imitation for the sake of imitation would be one since the economic, social and even political structures of these societies are different from the Western societies they have taken as a model. In some instances, countries newly independent from colonial rule pursued a philosophy of modernisation as a strategy towards cultural identity".

Although this may be true in some cases, there obviously are scores of other very valid reasons for modernisation such as economic survival in a world totally dominated by Western economies where one must modernise or starve. All the factors that can today allow an even moderately respectable existence for a nation, such as health, education, agricultural and industrial development, defence and communica-

tion, cannot be realised to any reasonable degree without relying on the tremendous technological achievement of the 20th century Western world. As the Third World nations, intent on carving a minimum niche for themselves on the map of the world, borrow more and more of the technology from Europe, Japan, and the Americans, certain cultural inroads are inevitable. Technology transfer will be possible only through a broad based infrastructure of communications, which is bound to lead to a few blue jeans in Kathmandu.

A lot of middle class Pakistani families rely on the motorcycle as their sole means of transport. It was not very uncommon to hear of a couple having hurt themselves because the ladies' "dupatta", a long, scarf-like garment which is an essential part of the typical Pakistani ladies' attire, got caught in the rear wheels of the motorcycle. This has resulted in ladies either avoiding the dupatta, or when on the motorcycle, tying it around their waists in a totally novel manner. This is a classic example of the adaptation or modification of a tradition to make it compatible or practicable with a technological development, instead of rejecting totally either the tradition or the technology.

Such examples are legion and I feel we should learn from them how people all over the Third World have reacted to and in almost all cases, absorbed and assimilated a cultural and societal exchange brought about by almost a century of change and transformation in exponentially greater proportions than mankind has seen in the past. This change and transformation will lead to major modifications in lifestyles, cultures, traditions and customs, and societies who do not prepare themselves for it will suffer the fate of obsolescence and decay. The aficionados of Indian classical music lament their dwindling audiences and blame the erosion of a cultural heritage to Western influence, yet choose to ignore the fact that in all the tea stalls and roadside cafes, as well as in trucks, buses, rickshaws and taxis, and in most homes throughout Pakistan and India, the music blaring out is, in most cases the popular music of today which

derives as much from informal folk music and western rock groups, as it does from the raags of Amir Khusro. The electronic synthesizer is now used a lot more than the sarod or tabla.

Why then, this hue and cry about reviving our cultural values and heritages? Have we really lost anything, or have we simply changed and modified what we had in order to retain it in a useable and practicable state? Our homes still have the private family area but this is now known as the TV and video lounge because that is their major function. Our windows are still oriented towards the breeze to suit our climate, but these are often made of steel or aluminium as wood is more expensive. We use aluminium blinds to keep the sun out of these windows as we cannot afford the old wooden screens now. There is no doubt, of course that the glass curtain wall, and then powerful airconditioning to overcome the heat gain, in a city like Karachi is not sensible, but the answer is not the Taj Mahal. The answer, in my humble opinion, is provided by the nowadays much maligned philosophy of the International Style. What I understand the International Style to be, is or was, a reaction to the Classic Revival and the Art Nouveau by introducing the rationalism of "form follows function" and "brutalism". The interpretation is in its name, "International Style". Unfortunately nowadays, too much has been said on the "Style" and too little appreciated of the "International".

It was truly international since it was in essence only a philosophy, which said that form must follow function, and which took the art of architecture out of the hands of the 19th century aristocracy and brought the science of architecture into the mainstream of 20th century life by embracing, accepting and glorifying the powers of the machine. The protagonists of this movement simply proposed to use the best of the materials and structural systems that the technologies and industries could give them, and use them as they should be used, not merely to produce Parthenon clones. The embodiment of the International Style in the glass box of Mies Van der Rohe, glorified the freedom that the steel structure gave him. This philosophy is indeed universal, and need not be foreign to any part of the world, as long as it is the "International" that is stressed, and not the "Style". To me, this philosophy simply says use what materials and techniques are available to you in the manner they are meant to be used, and attempt to fulfil whatever function your building is meant to perform, and strive to react favourably with the climatic conditions of the area where it is located. How I combine these basic ingredients determines the level of my competence as an architect.

It may surprise a lot of us to realise that in just about every rural village from Morocco to Mongolia,

precisely these same principles are applied. The design of a house in Morocco is of course totally different from that in Mongolia. On a smaller scale, the house in a village on the plains of the Punjab is equally radically different from one in the Chittagong hill tracts, although Pakistan and Bangladesh are classified as belonging to the same region — but do they? When a region gets very large it loses its perceptual cohesiveness. This is, in my opinion, one reason why it is so difficult to come up with a valid and workable definition of Islamic Architecture. Different conceptions of what should constitute a valid region is part of the problem of regionalism which architects from Third World countries have to resolve. A search for common characteristics in a vast transcontinental region will inevitably lead to quite generalised conclusions whose design translations run the risk of appearing trite and superficial. How will we define "region", if we are to use regionalism as a source of inspiration in our architecture?

Regionalist strategies are best left to individual architects to develop themselves. The desire to develop a brief for a regionalist approach, based on cultural or political motivations, is elitist for by definition it will result in prescriptions and proscriptions. The pragmatic aspects of regionalism should be primary over the cultural ones, for in essence a regional architecture is the common sense response to regional factors.

An architect attempting to build buildings which respond to regional considerations will do best to think of the region in a contextual sense. Every architect when designing a building attempts to respond to the particularities of the site. Some, more sensitive to the way buildings affect the surrounding fabric, pay attention to contextual issues as well. What I propose is that the region should be seen simply as an extension of the context, the wider or widest context of the building. If this were the case, then buildings more at home on Wall Street could never ever be conceived of sitting on the Streets of Jeddah. Designs that are made using the ingredients that I mentioned earlier, and addressing the requirements of the particular locale and its inhabitants as directly and as faithfully as possible will be appropriate for that particular application.

All sets of ingredients having a similar character will produce an architecture having a similar character, and this will be as Regional as it will be International or vice-versa. How well the design responds to the dictates of those ingredients will mean the difference between good and bad architecture.

In the end, I would like to cite an example which amply demonstrates how regionalism or historic traditions, when imposed on a building for the 20th century, can result in a work where the historic and

traditional is drastically separate and distinct from the actually useful part of the design I refer to Henning Larson's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Although I confess it is a beautiful piece of work, a look at the plan reveals that roughly two-thirds of the area of the building is devoted to the "Street", courtyards, light wells and fountains, which give the building its traditional "feel", while the remainder of one third, or probably less, of the entire constructed area of the building is left over for the offices of the people who occupy the building.

Since Larson can by no means be termed a bad architect, perhaps all of us would be bound to come up with a solution similar to this if we were to use regional traditions and heritage as the chief overriding design criterion.