

Architecture Then and Now

Some Thoughts

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This piece is a summary of previous writings on the subject which are available on www.arifhasan.org.

Clients then:

State
Elite

Isms then:

Modernism

Clients now:

State
Rich
Corporate sector
Developers
NGOs working with the poor
The poor themselves

Isms now:

Modernism
Post modernism and its various isms
Green architecture
Critical regionalism
Community architecture

After attending four years at an architecture school in the UK and an additional three years in architect offices in Europe, I returned to Pakistan in 1968 and established my private practice in Karachi. The architecture school I attended was conservative, to say the least. The masters of modernism were considered gods and architects were supposed to fashion a beautiful new world which was to determine how people were to live. I, too, believed in all this till I had to deal with the reality of Pakistan.

All the important architects working in Karachi at the time when I started to practice were also modernists. So, it was alright to bulldoze squatter colonies and old buildings and construct new modernist developments on their land, as Le Corbusier had proposed for his famous plan for Algiers. No architects protested the bulldozing but the bulldozed residents and those living in the old quarters where buildings were demolished, did protest, and often violently. The profession did not notice this.

At that time the architect really had only two clients: the elite and the state. The elite were refined, did not exhibit their wealth, were involved in city affairs and their children visited the local museums and zoos, both through their school and as a result of family outings. This was

because Karachi then had a colonial port culture and the elite were its custodians. Housing was the domain of the state which produced constructed “core” houses for its poor and for the lower level staff of state institutions. It also made grand low income housing schemes which were never fully implemented because of a lack of institutional capacity and financial viability. Reducing costs of construction was a passion with architects working on housing at that time. This, it was believed, could only be done through technical innovation and by using indigenous materials. I also spent many years doing this. Small islands of expensive success, around this belief, were created and glorified. However, because they were expensive and did not address the land issue, they could never be “scaled up”.

Today the practicing architect has many more clients than just the state and the elite. The state is still there, but is receding. The elite have been replaced by the rich. In addition, there is an expanding corporate sector, developers, NGOs serving the poor, and the poor themselves. All these groups have different requirements, different cultures and different world views. The rich have far more money than the elite did and they wish to flaunt it. The emergence of populist politics and its culture has replaced the colonial port city culture and marginalised them in the life of the city. So they live in gated ghettos surrounded by security systems and armed guards. Their ghettos contain all that they require for the education of their children, health facilities, entertainment, recreation and shopping. Meanwhile, developers serve the rapidly emerging middle classes. They are different from the developers of the 60s and 70s who were mostly engineers turned entrepreneurs. The majority of present day developers are a part of the messy real estate world and their investments, like themselves, are of dubious origin. The architecture they produce is dominating the city. It is architect signed but draftsman designed and copied from models in Singapore and Dubai. I call it the new vernacular and notice that even when architect designed, it is seldom better than the draftsman designed projects.

The state still builds education and health facilities and regional offices and housing for its staff. It follows the designs, rules and regulations of the past (with questionable modifications) even though the world has changed. It continues to survive on the ruins of a collapsed colonial empire. The corporate sector, meanwhile, has become a major investor in buildings of various types including those of health and education apart from its offices and showrooms. This architecture is far removed from the modernist tradition. It seeks to convey the image that the corporate enterprise has of itself. It seeks to impress and dominate the surrounding landscape. Elements of its architecture are borrowed in a big way for the civic architecture of the city and also for residences, not only in middle class and elite areas but also in the informal settlements. These elements are replacing the traditional elements and motifs that were earlier used.

Architects also work today for NGOs and CBOs who are engaged in providing housing or support for the upgrading of low income settlements. Much of this work is supported by funding from international agencies and/or NGOs. Such work is project related and has very little to do with policy issues. Architects plan and build for the poor but the existing sociology, economy and technology of the process through which housing is built in poor settlements is unknown to them and also untaught. As such, they design in their own image and do not help in improving the existing process and having a wider impact. This issue has surfaced in a big way in architects work in the earthquake and flood disaster zones. There are, of-course, a few notable exceptions to this.

There have been other changes too. When I began my practice, there was only one ism; modernism. Today, in addition to modernist revival, we have post-modernism and its various isms; green architecture; regionalism; and community architecture. Among all these isms, modernism is the only one that has a clear view on man, society, governance, housing, and

planning. The others have yet to develop this although in philosophic and conceptual terms, there is clarity. Regarding green architecture, there is much talk of conserving energy, yet architects keep producing glass cages and badly oriented buildings. Why? Again, there a few notable exceptions, very few!

Architectural education has not yet come to terms with the changes I have described above. It still lives in the past. It is not easy to come to terms. So many conflicting isms. So many clients with different cultures and adversarial demands. And then there is the politics of these cultures and demands, with a whole new vocabulary and terms such as “it is not the business of the state to do business”, world class city, direct foreign investment, investment friendly in infrastructure, event city, cities as engines of growth/socially responsive architecture, built environment, upgrading, regularisation etc. These and related terms are unknowingly determining the stylistic and functional aspects of the work of architects in our society and also societal values which feed into teaching concepts and methodologies.

In coming to terms with these changes, education has also to consider the changes that have taken place at the building site and in the construction industry. When I began practicing, the contractors building the residences I designed came from a strong building tradition. Most of them belonged to a *bradari* of masons and some of them could trace their lineage as masons back to seven generations. Their *bradari punchayats* were alive and well at that time but are only ceremonial in nature today. Their younger generation has for the first time in the last decade, gone into new professions. In addition to being contractors, they also knew how to work with their hands, something they had learnt through the *shagirdi* system. They venerated their teachers and called them *ustad*. They used many local terms which have now become obsolete, such as *naw* for plinth; *sitoun* for column and *dehrees* for the floor near the entrance door. The terminology used today is almost all English.

Materials of construction when I started practicing were all locally produced and there was very little variety available. This guaranteed a similarity in finishes, both internally and externally, for both high and middle-end residential and non-residential buildings. Today, thanks to neo-liberalism, imported materials are easily available and the cheaper ones are sometimes cheaper than their Pakistani equivalents. Also, a whole range of industrially produced imported building materials are available and extensively used. They differ from each other. Their use has increased the cost of construction and finishes although they have not necessarily helped in producing better designed and/or more technically sound buildings. They have also introduced a variety and often discordant surface finishes and issues of scale. However, they have made it easier for architects and developers to copy international designs out of magazines and from their visits to foreign countries.

The contractors I work with today have not come from a building tradition. They have never worked with their hands. They are investors and entrepreneurs. Some are engineers and/or architects, heading small construction firms. For larger projects a number of medium size companies created by enterprising engineers, sometimes backed by investors, have also emerged and are expanding. They seem to be replacing the smaller entities. In addition, their owners are training their children as architects and project managers. A new hereditary contracting system on a turn-key basis is emerging which will have a major impact on the way architectural designs are conceived, implemented, and projects are delivered. Meanwhile, the poor will continue to build as they have in the past, yet, borrowing elements and images from the changes taking place in the higher income areas of the city. And given the multiplicity of clients and isms, there will be more divisions, more disparity and a divided profession. I feel a serious discuss is needed.

