

Can Architecture lend itself to a change in Consciousness?

Mona Doctor-Pingel

The following article is only a glimpse into this vast question in the context of Auroville. It poses certain questions and indicates some directions which may be used for further research. Special thanks to the Dreamcatchers Forum.

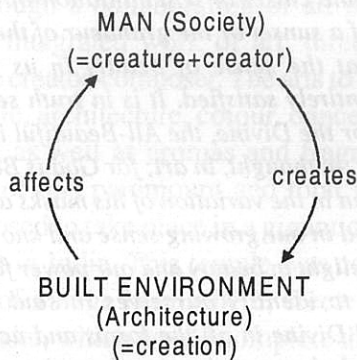
"Does modern architecture lead to "Civilisation sicknesses"? – this provocative question was the title my of master's thesis 10 years ago in Germany for a postgraduate course on Appropriate Technology and Extension Skills (ARTES).

Ten years down the line I can only say that the concerns raised in this work have deepened and become more visible and tenacious in the context of a fast growing "urban and developed" India.

But more interestingly, having lived and worked in Auroville, I am tempted to ask the same question from a different angle, as many architects here must do: "Are architects agents of change in a society?"

Mother has said somewhere : " A new house, a new consciousness."

What does this mean and how does it manifest?



The cycle of creator and creation – each one influences the other.

Architecture has always represented the society and the consciousness of its people. Whether it is in the sacred architecture of the Great Pyramid, the ancient Indian temples, the Pantheon, or the profane as in the hamlets of the Iberian peninsula, the pols and

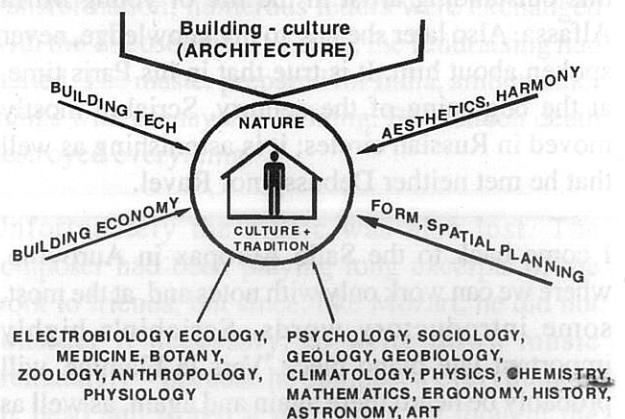
chawls of Indian cities, it has always reflected the ethos and the values inherent in the society that made them.

Inversely, it is often seen that those who had the vision and the means to manifest something of a higher quality, were able then to consciously or subconsciously affect the society towards a change. In Pondicherry and Auroville too we have 2 such examples - Golconde, the "Ashram dormitory" built and designed in 1930's and the Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir, which we all know too well. Those who have spent some time in these spaces will know what is meant. The consciousness one puts into the building process is bound to show in the end product. Even the work with the people who actually build it brick by brick, if it can be infused with a certain spirit by creating an atmosphere on the building site of a higher dimension, of discipline, quiet and concentrated work, it can tremendously influence the end result. The fact that the Matrimandir in those early years was built not by a large professional construction company but by individuals having a faith in what they were doing makes all the difference.

"Architecture, sculpture and painting, because they are the three great arts which appeal to the spirit through the eye, are therefore those too in which the sensible and the invisible meet with the strongest emphasis on themselves and yet the greatest necessity of each other."

Sri Aurobindo,

Foundations of Indian Culture, Pg 211



An integral approach to Architecture.

Architecture more so than sculpture and painting carries with it a great social responsibility, since its manifestation in physical matter is generally the most visible, more imposing and lasting in its impact.

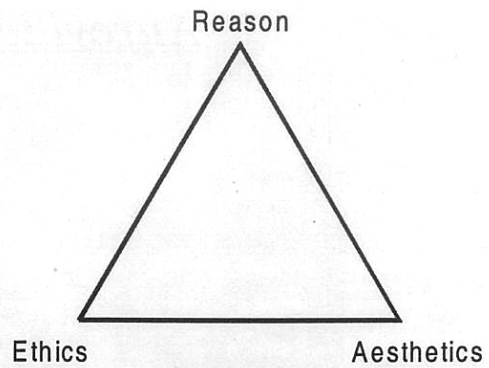
Today the term modern architecture has been expanded to include terms like appropriate, sustainable, ecological, green, building biology. The search for ecological consciousness and living in harmony with nature can be felt as worldwide movement today.

Whereas healthy foods and natural health cures are now well established, consumer power has yet to take make itself felt in the concept of a healthy home / built environment. At the most, it limits itself to energy saving building technologies, rainwater harvesting, wastewater recycling, traditional construction techniques. These are of course necessary components of a good design but are insufficient to address our aim of a change in the society and consciousness in an integral sense.

More and more sciences and scientists are now recognizing what the vedic sciences always knew: that the body is not so much an object but a process – a dynamic flowing process, which is in constant interchange with innumerable influences from the surroundings. The human body is a complex mechanism – each one of us a sensitive antenna and reacts definitively and differently to the external stimuli.

One needs therefore to view buildings as our third skin (after our own skin and our clothes) that fulfills essential living functions, and so affects our physical, mental and psychological health directly.

Sri Aurobindo in "The Human Cycle" mentions the 3 aspects – Reason-Ethics-Aesthetics – which have defined and formed different societies at different times in history. All these 3 aspects also reside in each one of us to a greater or lesser extent, since society is only an enlargement of the individual. Architecture too is only a reflection of the individual who creates it. It therefore follows that in our approach to Building Culture in Auroville we can take these 3 aspects as equal-aspects – each being as important as the other – when one of them is neglected or overrides, the end result is also lacking an integral approach.



Architects are often accused of being concerned only with the aesthetics – creating forms in the landscape, or there are those who succumb to the rationality of numbers and costs, and still others who as idealists with a puritanistic approach fail to bring any project to fruition. The challenge lies in finding a balance of all these aspects in each and every project.

In today's global thinking and communications age, team work is gaining a more important role. This encourages a multi-task and multi-disciplinary thinking. However in the context of Auroville it is to be remembered that a fruitful and meaningful teamwork can only emerge when the individual consciousness has been properly moulded.

Moreover, it is the process followed to achieve a certain result that is as important as the end product. If the process is flawed, egoistic or undermining, then the end product is bound to manifest it – if not in the visible then in the intangible and invisible realm.

If we see architecture as transfer of consciousness from one realm to another (spiritual to the physical), then it is an act of extreme responsibility. The process of creation is a bringing forth of our inner truth and that of all those involved in the project, if it is synergetic relationship.

True architecture is not the product of universities, institutions or international seminars. True architecture is the architecture of the soul.

The notion of "Building as a machine to live in" (which is what was propounded in the last century after the industrial revolution and which has influenced so many of us) has to be replaced by the notion of "Building as a temple to live and work in". But to manifest this one has to discover the temple within in order to build the temple without.