AESTHETICS, IDEOLOGY AND THE "SLUM"

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ABSTRACT

As Amos Rapoport puts it "Architectural Theory and history have traditionally been concerned with the study of monuments. They have emphasized the work of men of genius, the unusual, the rare"[1] and the irony is that major parts of any Indian city are "usual". More than 50% of any city in India consists of informal settlements of which majority are slums. Only around 5% of the buildings if not less in India are designed by architects[2]. In this context the paper questions the decisive role of ideology in governing our aesthetic sensibilities that results in a general-high-modernist design pedagogy.

Approach in architectural pedagogy today has not moved much beyond the Beaux Art way of architecture studios. Much emphasis lay on the genius of the architect and, borrowed from Bauhaus, the extreme emphasis on originality. In this process, one of the crucial factors that remains un-discussed is the impact of 'ideology' which governs our aesthetic appreciation. E.g. before Paul Oliver's 'Shelter Sign & Symbol' or the MoMa exhibition of 1964, exploration of vernacular in mainstream architecture or an appreciation for the same was limited. This calls for an investigation onto the contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and its translation(s) in design pedagogy.

Informal settlements, where majority of urban India lives today, provides an extremely crucial ground for an academic engagement of architecture studios. Dense neighborhood, built to edge buildings and active streets, most of which are globally appreciated as signs of good neighborhood, but still the negation of these settlements on aesthetic grounds is of grave concern[3]. This paper explores with the help of two studios, on how this skewed notion of aesthetics can be contested. Towards an alternate understanding of architecture rather than uninformed criticism of engineering aspects of such neighborhoods; how moving out of the studio and steering away from the conventional notions of production leads to more conducive approach and critical thinking in design studios.

Keywords: Informal Settlement, Slum, Architectural Pedagogy, Ideology & Aesthetic Theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The understanding of the word "Slum" in contemporary discourse is almost always negative. Slum as per the UN definition of 2002 [4] identifies five points, 'inadequate' access to safe water, 'inadequate' access to sanitation and other infrastructure, 'poor' structural quality of housing, overcrowding and lastly the 'insecure' residential status. Thus similar to most other definitions, the UN definition as well, explains 'Slum' as something, which it is not, rather than what it is. This epistemological negation penetrates into the aesthetic appreciation of the slums as well. As architects, we either try to highlight the negative aspects and suggest 'innovative' solutions for the problem of slums, or we appreciate the innovation involved in the highly resource-constrained settlement. Which in essence is dealing with the symptom; the term 'symptom' used here is as discussed by Žižek with respect to the epistemological condition of possibility. "According to Lacan, it was none other than Karl Marx who invented the notion of symptom...there is a fundamental homology between the interpretive procedure of Marx and Freud - more precisely, between their analysis of commodity and of dreams. In both the cases the point is to avoid the properly fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form: the 'secret' to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form, but, on the contrary, the 'secret' of this form itself." [5] Thus if aesthetics as understood by the *Vaisnavic* thread of Indian philosophy as in "not a theory of beauty, but a formula for action"[6] then, architectural pedagogy need to reinvestigate the aesthetic notion of "slums" to unveil the 'secret' of the 'slum' itself, so as to prepare a conducive ground for architects (or architecture students to be precise) to act upon.

Slum or to use the relatively less negatively charged term Informal Settlement is where majority of urban India resides today, and also the sphere where architects have penetrated the least, and thus also the architectural pedagogy. The Beaux Art studio structure and the Bauhaus structuring of the architectural education system, still dominates the way architecture is taught in most institutions in India. Dealing with studio projects and problems, the Beaux Art studio model prepares a student to design monuments. This model is fundamentally based on the first step of identification of the 'problem' to work on. The 'problem' can be defined by the teacher or by the students themselves. The definition of the problem is the point where one tries to investigate the 'secret' behind the given issue, and this is the point when ideology plays its role, and the subject (i.e. the architect) remains unaware of it. "Definition of the problem is a highly personal view point which essentially is a historical construct"[2]. Similar is the case with idea of aesthetics in architecture; it is highly dependent on the theoretical discourses that it evolves. E.g. before Paul Oliver's 'Shelter Sign & Symbol' or the MoMa exhibition of 1964, exploration of vernacular in mainstream architecture or an appreciation for the same was limited. This calls for an investigation onto the contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and its translation(s) in architecture pedagogy.

2. WHY STUDY THE INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS?

Sheer quantity cannot be the claim for the study of informal settlements, but when every 6th urban Indian lives in a slum[7], (wherein the term 'slum' here excludes other types of informal settlements) then the statistics bends high on looking at this issue. Apart from the statistical claims and relatively minuscule presence of architectural services, informal settlements also provide a breeding ground for new learning prospects. More than the positive aspects of this learning ground, it is of utmost importance that what kind of architects will get produced if we ignore to study a space which majority of Indians calls home. For the first time in the history of humanity, more than 50% of us humans are living in urban areas, and in global south this means

cities developing at a hitherto unimaginable pace and majority of this growth are in informal settlements.

The focus on 'informal' roughly started in the 70s with ILO country mission report on Kenya and writings of Keith Hart, which discussed about informal economy. But ever since, the discourse on informal is shifting. From informal as 'parasite' in the 1980s, to De Soto's [8] claim of looking at informality as a solution by bridging the gap between formal and informal, to the apocalyptical picturization by Mike Davis [9] and finally urban informality as a dominant normality in postcolonial worlding cities [10] by Ananya Roy et al.

Many studies are carried out and many more are being done in social sciences regarding the informal settlements. This thus is not only a claim for introduction of the study of informal settlements, but also to critically look at ways in which informal settlements can be studied in architecture studios. The goal will remain unachieved if we study for the purpose of 'improvement', which makes it a biased study. If we look at the projects that agencies take up in informal settlements, there is a clear ideological notion that these settlements need to be improved, and a speculative list of things ranges from drainage issues to sanitation to structural quality of buildings. Most of these observations are of engineering aspects, which have got minimal impact in terms of possibilities for an architecture studio. It is also interesting to see here that morphologically and typologically these settlements far exceeds the formally designed neighborhoods[11]. Most informal settlements have densities that are unimaginable to be replicated through the formal architectural design process, without regulation we get to see a mixed use neighborhood with walk-able streets, and to borrow from Jane Jacobs 'eyes on street'[12] that make the streets of informal settlement far more safer. In terms of social structure, when our cities are fragmented, informal settlements present a cohesive social fabric and integrated communities. These pointers are not aimed at romanticizing the informal settlement or the vernacular in a similar way as 'Architecture without Architects'[13] did, nor are they intended to portray informal settlements as a model that should be replicated *(though many of the architects and urbanists working in informal settlements will agree with that).* The claim here is that informal settlements should be seen as laboratories for architectural education. Not only because of its magnitude, but also because this less explored territory provides immense learning perspectives for architects and academicians alike.

The negative connotation among building professionals towards an informal settlement or similar morphological settings, can be attributed to the post 1857 social designs and planning drive in Indian cities by the then British Government. In a *haussmannisation* drive, most of the British cities saw a *Nai Sadak* and markers like the industrial *ghanta ghar* (clock tower), in a move to rationalize the organic nature because of which they were almost at the brink of defeat in 1857. Similarly, legislative and policy measures were taken like the Public Works Department's 'The Handbook on Town Planning' in 1876 or the declaration of Old Delhi as a slum [14]. Post independence revival of the idea of informal settlements by Doshi, Correa and others let to its link to the romanticized village life, the village inside the city. Trends seen in the informal settlements were seen as those of the villages and they (and many others) explored this theme in their works. Perhaps this could be the reason for villagers and pot-bearing women to appear in the renderings of *Aranya housing society* in Indore by Doshi or the *Artist Village* in Mumbai by Correa. With our more refined understanding today of the informal settlements, we can now claim that it is far from a village life, and also that it need to be a part of the contemporary architectural exploration.

3. DO WE KNOW WHAT TO KNOW?

Even though informal settlements are one of the main themes in many urban social studies; the crucial question is how do architects enter this space without the prejudice of action to improve it. Improvement prejudice is crucial because, once we start to have a studio that intend to improve the situation of a given informal settlement, then all the site visits by the students, might with high probability tend to end up in an exercise to identify the problems that need to be solved in the studio. This paper doesn't claim to give the answer(s) to this issue, but intends to present a case of two studios steered by the author, where students of architecture explored informal settlements. In this paper only the final assignments are discussed for both the studios, for details please visit the reference [15][16].

The basis for the studio is the radical experimentation, because a 'designed' studio structure aimed at an outcome will impose the prejudices. "Pedagogical experiments played a crucial role in shaping architectural discourse and practice"[17][1], be it the experiments by Aldo Rossi at ETH Zurich or Politecnico di Milano in 1960s and 70s or the Unité pédagogique d'architecture Paris in late 1960s.

Keeping radical experimentation as the basis, in one of the studio experiments (to be referred as first studio hereafter), the issue started with the discussion on 'how do we know what to know?'[15]. How do we decide what to study? Because if we determine the aspects that need to be studied then we fall into the danger zone of imposing our prejudices of problem definition and visit the site with the preconceived notions of what an informal settlement is.

In the first studio (conducted at Sushant School of Art and Architecture, Gurgaon), as the final assignment, the students were asked to develop a project that need to be executed with the residents of the settlement under study. Thus a participatory project was the only constraint of the studio, thereby the notion that the students need to design something was taken off and the whole emphasis was on participation. The hypothesis here is that intuitive engagement with the residents of the settlement will lead to crucial learning process. Thus the role of architect here was understood as to produce knowledge. "Much of what we know of institutions, the distribution of power, social relations, cultural values, and everyday life is mediated by built environment. Thus to make architecture is to construct knowledge, to build vision"[18].

Students were divided into three groups and each group was assigned a site, one in Gurgaon and two in Delhi. The group conducted numerous site visits, not to identify issues, but to identify a project that can be executed with participation with the residents. During this course, the author picked up crucial issues and multiple perspectives were discussed in class. This prepared the groups to question not only what they see, but also what they believe(d). The idea of production of knowledge can be understood from the three participatory projects carried out by the students. The initial site visits by the students were documented, so as to analyze the learning outcomes after the final participatory process.

3.1 Chirag Dilli, Delhi

Chirag Dilli is an old walled settlement in south Delhi with its core being the Dargah of the 14th century Sufi saint Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehlavi. Due to the peripheral wall the settlement grew internally as is the case with many walled cities. Students got interested in the historical dimension of the settlement and the study of streets and open space network, which was a typical approach expected, but this changed, with the participatory project. Chirag Dilli is a diverse

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[1] Emphasis added

settlement, from people who own houses to migrant laborers in the economic scale, and from people with cows to white-collar jobs in terms of education and occupation scale. It turned out to be extremely difficult to work with all the communities simultaneously.

To tackle this situation, the students decided to work with the kids of the settlement, thereby taking a truncated sample, which is a good option for the given diversity. Another issue was the nature of the settlement. There were many quasi-legal activities in the settlement, which mounted up with the diversity, was making this settlement extremely insulated to work in a participatory manner. To work with the kids lead to an easy access to the community, and this turned out to be a lesson in participatory process initiation.

Figure 1: Students working with kids of Chirag Dilli

The students inspired from the historical significance of the place, but relatively isolated existence, decided to do a participatory artwork with the kids of the settlement. On the jury day the students went around the settlement like the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* collecting kids for the project. Students got art-supplies and soon the kids started action, from paintings to sculptures. Students assisted the kids in the creation and soon both started working together as can be seen in Figure 1.

It is now interesting to note that on the contrary to the believes of the students who perceived this settlement as historically charged, most of the kids working on the project were inspired by their daily lives (or fantasies), but least by the presence of the historical monument. The Dargah, which was a monument for the outsiders, (i.e. students) was so much a part of their lives that they didn't feel its presence. This was an important learning because a usual studio would have resulted in focusing the historical nature of the site. Secondly an intuitive learning was that the conversation starter in a closed community is via the kids of the settlement.

As soon as the kids started with the project, their parents were also on the streets and started interacting with the students, which was not happening to that extent throughout the course of the studio. A usual study plan would have resulted in the study of the Dargah and the related open space network. In this experiment the students didn't decide what to look for, not were the residents pointing out things that the students should know, but a mutual production of knowledge through co-working and understanding. This reinforces the experience of the author who interacted with the residents of similar settlements. When the author was representing an NGO, the interaction was mainly focused on problems of the settlement as the residents expected to get it resolved. Contrastingly when the author did a similar exercise as an independent researcher, to study social networks, the residents were quite proud of their settlement and discussed the great life in there. This difference in the observation, because of role of the observer is negated through the experiments discussed here.

3.2 Anna Nagar, Delhi

Anna Nagar is a slum, next to the WHO building in Delhi. Anna Nagar is relatively smaller compared to Chirag Dilli and is situated next to an open drain. Unlike Chirag Dilli the residents

of Anna Nagar were quite open to the students, which can be attributed to a relatively lesser diversity in comparison. After studying the settlement the students realized that there are no open space for the youth. These lead to a series of interactions, where the youth identified the issue of lack of open space and the students did take consideration of this issue.

The typical approach expected here would have been that of creation of usable open space, but since the brief was to do a participatory project, students decided to make a community driven video documentary. Students collected few digital cameras and gave them to the youth of the settlement and asked them to shoot one Sunday in their life (Ref. Figure 2). This came out because of the curiosity, wherein if there are no usable open spaces, then where do the youth spend time.

This got to light the different nuanced aspects of open spaces and their usage as seen by the youth. Community spaces like the cycle repair shop in the settlement, the water sprout on the main municipal line, to the train tracks close by. This video documentation by the youth of the settlement themselves revealed immense potentials of the existing open/community spaces which the students being outsiders couldn't see. The idea of a social space was completely different from the way perceived by the students.

Figure 2: Youth of Annna Nagar capturing their Sunday

The way different communities perceive basic necessities like open space is dependent on very high number of variables, which is difficult to tackle in an undergraduate architecture studio, thus this experiment gave students a broad idea about this diversity with a single experiment.

3.3 Nathupur, Gurgaon

Nathupur is a village in Gurgaon, which got engulfed in the development of the city. Cyber city, the much-advertised core of Gurgaon was built on the land bought from the villagers. The villagers saw the builders making humungous profits from their land, and thus decided to not sell

their lands any further. This ethos was decided due to the strong decision making structure of the village, with the *sarpanch(s)*, the unofficial head(s). When the students started their work, this structure was evident in the way the village developed over time. The bigger houses of the politically powerful people occupied the central part of the village and towards the periphery by smaller houses. This also presented a strong network of hierarchical streets and commercial activities in them as well.

Typically in a studio this structure would have become the basis for a design intervention. The students took this thread and started interviewing people about their future. To this they found an immense global aspirational undertone e.g. a person with a grocery shop didn't want a bigger shop in the future but wanted a beauty parlor instead. This aspirational undertone (or overtone) leads the students to juxtapose the past and the present and develop a project.

Nathupur being a village has a considerable number of buffaloes. So the students took this as past, and the glamour of beauty pageants of the globalized world and juxtaposed both. They decided to conduct a fashion show for the buffaloes.

As the buffaloes were taken care of by the women of the community, they decided to approach the women. Initially the women agreed, but as the day for the event came closer, they refused to take part in the event. As a mitigation plan, the students went ahead and started talking to the men, who were rarely seen taking care of the buffaloes. Nonetheless the event happened and the men were enthusiastic in bringing their buffaloes to the ground in the settlement itself, for the planned fashion show as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Fashion Show for Buffaloes at Nathupur Village

This experiment opened up crucial social learning and pointed out the gendered spaces in a community, which from outside looks quite not so. There are shops run by women, there are women on the streets, thus the notion of the gendered space was quite difficult to understand but

for the experiment. Even the question of gendered spaces did not come in the discussions as the students never felt it as anything that is crucial enough.

This experiment lead to the understanding that women were allowed to work in the domestic sphere only, although there was no restriction on their movement outside the domestic sphere, but due to the social structure, women were not comfortable in taking risks at the public domain. On the contrary the study of the settlement did not reveal this fact, due to the presence of both men and women in the public domain.

4. DESIGNING

Even though the first studio explains the learning objectives as outcomes of radical experimentation and the collective production of knowledge, the next task remains on how to link the first studio with a conducive ground, for production of a design. The next exercise to be discussed was a joint studio between Sushant School of Art & Architecture, Gurgaon, and School of Architecture & Built Environment, Deakin University Australia (to be referred as second studio hereafter)[2].

Even when equipped with nuanced understanding, the training in architecture leads the students to identify the problems that can be solved in innovative manner. Innovative solutions for a problem clearly will derail the line of thought as discussed with the first studio. The second studio starts with two interlinked hypothesis that were given to the students from the beginning to of the studio itself. The first hypothesis was, 'one cannot solve all the problems' and the second linked hypothesis was 'whatever one does, some problem or the other get solved'. These hypotheses puts the students in a dual dilemma situation where the firstly they were released of the burden to solve problems or to prioritize problems, but on the other hand if anything can be done, then there is no clear direction on what needs to be done. Based on the hypotheses the students were supposed to come up with their own program which they will articulate in a built environment.

The second studio was based on the settlement called Lal Kuan in Delhi which was settled by the erstwhile quarry workers from different parts of North India. Even though quarrying was banned in the area by a High Court ruling, the hazards of prolonged exposure to silica was quite evident and well covered by the media. This tended to be the direction of thought by the students to produce a vision for settlement, but the hypothesis contradicted such developments early enough. If anything can be done, and some of the problems will be solved, and not all the problems can be solved in any case, then why to look at health issue? This line of thought kept jumping from health to livelihood to economic status and many similar issues of the settlement. In all the cases the dual hypothesis didn't let the students proceed. In one of the discussion one of the students completely disillusioned by the hypotheses posed a hypothetical question – 'What problem get solved if we build a wall in the middle of the road perpendicular to it?' This question was tested on the actual plan of the settlement and the student soon realized that a wall in the middle of the road will convert that road into a parking lot if in the periphery, or a playground if in the interior parts of the settlement. Such role-playing did convince the students to religiously pursue their projects and by keeping the hypotheses in mind.

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[2] Both the first studio[15] and the second studio[16] were conducted independently with different sets of students by the author. The comparison and conclusions drawn here are to be seen as parallel learning experiences towards development of an argument in favor of studying informal settlements.

This constant questioning of the intent of the students lead to visions for the settlement, which in a usual setup was very difficult to achieve as they are centered with the core issues of the settlement.

Also such processes leads to a wider connect between the studio and other theory subjects that are taught in the school. One of the students came up with the link that if we look at the History of Architecture, expositions (referring to the International Expositions and the advent of modern/international architecture) lead to major architectural innovations and movements. Close to the site is where the Suraj Kund Mela happens every year, which drives a large number of domestic and international tourists. As many of the people living on site were linked to construction industry, a program for architectural innovation center was proposed to support the Suraj Kund Mela. This program based on similar processes as described above lead to a multiple site intervention. Here the author doesn't intend to defend the validity of the proposal, but of the process. In usual cases, settlements like Lal Kuan leads to programs like craft center and livelihood related activities, as a sort of philanthropic glasses, which the architecture students tends to wear. The dual hypotheses constraint as experienced, leaves the student to take bold steps for visionary rethinking. The projects were utopian, but this radical shift is necessary to get out of the vicious cycle of improvement intents in the informal settlements. "Utopia is therefore nothing other than 'a structural vision of the totality that is and is becoming,' the transcendence of the pure 'datum, a system of orientation intent upon breaking the relationships of the existing order' in order to recover them at a higher and different level."[19]

5. CONCLUSION

If architecture is a cultural, intellectual and conceptual enterprise as Eisenman would argue, then we need to constantly experiment for the evolution of architecture pedagogy. Post independence, Doshi's CEPT experiment was probably the most radical, but in the post liberalized India, we need to rediscover not only what theory has been arguing in the realm of 'What is architecture?' but also on 'what is an architect?'[20]. There is a sudden increase in number of schools and proportionately in the number of graduates. Apart from the large number of students studying architecture in the country today, another interesting fact is that, most of them grew up in the post-liberalized India. This juxtaposed with the new pattern of living exhibited, we surely need to rethink pedagogy for our times.

The examples discussed here just intend to build a case for the validity of the process and informal settlements as a ground for productive architectural exploration. On the other hand the process described is taken as an example of, on how to deal with the ideology and aesthetics for an architectural studio to enter the realm of informal settlements. These examples and learning are suggestive of the fact that we now need to take informal settlements as conducive grounds for the study of architecture. Further exploration is indeed intended on new and more radical methodologies for the progress of architectural pedagogy.

> *"Architectural Theory and history have traditionally been concerned with the study of monuments. They have emphasized the work of men of genius, the unusual, the rare. .... The physical environment of man, especially the built environment, has not been, and still is not, controlled by the designer. This environment is the result of vernacular (or folk, or popular) architecture, and it has been largely ignored in architectural history and theory.....In addition, the high style buildings usually must be seen in relation to, and in the context of, the vernacular matrix, and are in fact incomprehensible outside that context, especially as it existed at the time they were designed and built"*[1]

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