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The Ghost of Modernity

Architecture and Urbanism in the Era of Globalization

Presently, cities in India, witness major building booms in which, less and less concern has been shown for local variety and regional differences. Local stylistic orientations, building materials, methods of construction and other contextual issues are overlooked in the process. Instead, over-dependence and thoughtless repetitive usage of advanced building technology and new materials out of mass production system are the new signifiers of the time of the place (cities). A particular trend of architecture is born with a glorified identity of corporate architecture, essentially a subtype of global architecture (an architecture in the era of globalization). The shine and gloss of the glass and steel architecture to represent global identity, indeed, seem to be surviving and spreading like a virus through cloning and instantaneous copying.[1] As a result, we see more and more similar buildings in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and not surprisingly, in our own backyards of Gurgaon, Noida, Navi Mumbai or Bangalore. These empirical evidences initiate a debate between two opposing views: one, suggests a state of globality, in which there is so much integration (both economic and cultural) across national borders that the latter can practically be ignored; and the other, professes whether there is anything fundamentally new about the levels of cross-border integration that have achieved so far.

Here, while taking a position closer to the second view, one extends this debate to architecture and urbanism (in the era of globalization). The new condition of modernity in the globalization process, today,

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demands more 'specificity', rather than universality. The corresponding architecture, popularly projected as global architecture, does not conform to this condition of modernity and, in turn, does not offer anything new in its representation.

However, this position is based on the conceptual explorations of the conditions of modernity, (in terms of economic integration and technological orientation), the production process and the representation of architecture in the era of globalization; and in the due course, can be used for its (case-specific) empirical applications as logical extension. Here, modernity is considered as the condition of the present, a relationship with time and a reality of contemporary ways of dealing with the world.

Today, in the state of near globality, cities are gradually being comprehended through satellite photography and digital technology. Notions of global cities, meta-cities, world-city, therefore, find important mentions in discourses on architecture and urbanism. Connectivity (world wide)— of information, of market—places through economic integration, technological advan-

DLF Gateway Tower, National Highway 8, Gurgaon

cement in production and the communication system is the central point of these discourses. Cities are assumed and conceived as "multi-centered, multi-jurisdictional urban networks"[2] and not as blobs of urbanization. A change in the sense of hierarchy[3], a paradigm shift in the concept of region (therefore, regionalism) are claimed in the process. This view purports to the amalgamation of existing singularities into one large unified singularity. In the process, this so-called new notion of region offers least attention to specificity, and, therefore, demands a review whether this is the condition of modernity in the era of globalization.

Precise automation in production to achieve both quality and quantity, today, can make consumption possible for wider cross-section of people. This seems to help the cause of connectivity (or integration) of market places in terms of consumption. In the era of globalization, however, production has become more diversified in order to cater to the variety of demands of world-wide markets.

Depending on its location and the requirements of the users, these markets

Millennium Plaza, Gurgaon, Raman Sikka Associates

have specific demands. To an extent, flexibility and diversity, thus, overshadows the mass and scale as guiding notions.[4] Business strategies too, need to offer choices while meeting individualized (therefore, specific) demands of the consumer (for example, automobile and telecom sectors in India).

Of late, in economic discourses, quasi-integration is, referred to the condition, when economic integration has increased the process of globalization, yet, falls short of the theoretical extreme of total integration. Quasi-integration is argued to have a place for location-specific international business strategy (that is, the strategy for single business in multiple countries/locations), which lies in-between the domains of mainstream business strategy (that is, the strategy for single business in single country/location) and international corporate strategy (that is, the strategy for multiple business in multiple country/locations).[5]

In the key factors like, labour, capital and knowledge, specificity can also be observed in production system and in business strategy. Profit-maximizing firms cannot afford to overlook differences in the labour cost across various cross-border options. An established example is the shifting of garment production to poorer countries, because international trade in textiles and garments is driven by international differences in the labour cost that remain quite substantial even after adjusting for productivity differentials. In the context of capital, investments in real assets by MNCs, thus, gets affected by local financial possibilities. Knowledge, usually business/usage-specific, also tends to become location-specific, when analysis of various options in the workable business strategy is required, based on the location 'specificity' of the market in international business strategy. Therefore, at least, in relation to the integration of markets, location specificity seems to dominate knowledge related decision-making.[6]

A broader point, emerging from these observations, once again reveals the importance of the concept of specificity in the connectivity of market places through technological orientation and economy in the era of globalization. Also highlighted is the need for connecting distinct singularities instead of propagating for one large, unified singularity.

"The worst enemy of modern architecture is the idea of space solely in terms of its economic and technical exigencies indifferent to the ideas of site... Indeed, through the concept of the site and the principles of settlement, the environment becomes the essence of architectural production. From this vantage point new principles and methods can be seen in design. Principles and methods that give precedence to the siting in a specific area."- Gregotti pleads passionately.[7]

A few years back, a leading architectural journal of the West had an issue on the theme of 'portable architecture'. Will the portable architecture be like my television set, seen in every third house in my locality; or will it be like my car—wherever in the city it goes, inside space and ambience remain the same. This car was made in Korea,

Below DLF Tower, Gurgaon
Right First India Place, Gurgaon
Facing page above JMD Tower, Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road, Gurgaon
Facing page below Global Business Park, Mehrauli-Gurgaon Road, Gurgaon

driven in Delhi; nevertheless, its content is the same; the relationship it establishes with outside (contextual reference) is also the same—purpose is obviously singular. The main focus of portable architecture is on standardization — on product... then, who will import it and who will export? This reference seems relevant here because, the choice of the theme itself and subsequent notional discourses are on the same trajectory of the enterprise of modernity, as is global architecture.

In terms of production of architecture, thus, this notion is subservient to the 'productization' of architectural artifacts, similar to the post-industrial condition (as seen in modern architecture). But in the condition of modernity of global integration, architectural production can be, guided by the diversity of inputs from various sources, leading to the flexibility of production. The production of an architectural artifact may now happen in parts at different locations, depending on the availability of materials and knowledge/skill/techniques of handling those materials, and that underlines the 'specificity' once again. Also, the basic design issues may still remain specific to the aspects of physical domain (like, energy and

environment), in which the artifact is going to sit. While addressing the design issues, technological options (whether high-tech or otherwise) need to be specific to the place. Gregotti's criticism of modern architecture may be found relevant in this regard, when, the ongoing usage of technology in the making of architecture today (especially in Indian scenario) is observed as rampant generalization, irrespective of the core design issues. This universalization of higher technology is mainly used for popular representation of modernity rather than the production of architecture in this condition of modernity.

Increased access to communication, the information processing and media have enhanced the global connectivity and networking. This condition of global integration has apparently imparted similarity, rather than distinctions, in architectural artifacts. Cities started resembling each other — and their architecture, by default, has conveniently adopted universal physical appearance. There is an apparent acceptance of this architecture and resultant urbanism, as an outcome of the universality of modernity as the core of global, cultural experience.

Immediate, popular aesthetic references have been inferred from the use of higher technology with the help of materials, like glass and steel. This type of architecture is being popularly projected as the newborn baby of the technological temperament, which modern individual claims to possess. Modern technological temperament, today, involves along with a usual optimism of achieving a better future with real pre-occupation of what is new. Here technology is presumed as magic, anonymous and completely devoid of any sort of human associations. However in reality, this so called hi-tech of glass and steel is merely the slickness of shine and gloss, and not very much sophisticated than that of Late-Modern architecture of the seventies and early eighties like Piano and Rogers' Pompidou Centre, Paris (1972-77) or Philip Johnson's Pennzoil Place towers (1974-75).[8]

In the hands of mediocre followers, a large number of architectural works in India in the nineties, could not even achieve anything higher refinement in technology than the twenties (for example, several corporate buildings in Gurgaon). To a large extent, production methods, but not the technology transfer, are supplied to the Indian counterparts—thanks to the phase-wise strategic economic reforms. Cloning and instantaneous copying and not the indigenous adaptation of technology and materials, therefore, are conveniently utilized only for mass consumption of architecture.

The paradigm of the ongoing globalized version of architecture is to (re)present a 'new' (impossible) city, a fantasy, which confronts with the existent (real) city. The notion is a way of (re)construction of a utopia, that is, to remove a sense of place to (re)place with another. The dominant aspiration is obviously to change the skyline of the city, to make individuated signature, most of the time, by completely creating a void (social, cultural and aesthetic) in the process of building our cities. As a result, specificity of architecture and urbanism has been ignored. Each architectural artifact, then, begins to grow out of its self-potential, assumes arbitrary forms and negates meaning. Architecture thus, is reduced to fashion. In corporate architecture, today, we see a revivalist attitude towards the similar formalistic stance. This is the abstraction and subsequent representation of an outstanding face that aspires to stand out, but very rarely achieves it. In this condition, global architecture takes the "nihilistic face of post-modernism," which "in reality, represents a late-modern outlook."[9] This approach suffers from the crisis of reference, both ethically and aesthetically, in which individual buildings have ironically emerged as an average part of the mediocre, simplistic whole.

Over the last few years, under pertinent endeavours from the environmental lobby, industrial employment in Indian cities has been observed slowing down due to shifting of larger units outside the municipal limits of big cities. The multinationals, which have come up so far, also, have high capital intensity and offer low employment potential. Scarcity of land in the preferred locations within the city is now pushing these multinationals out to the periphery.[10] In order to attract these Indian and foreign business houses, local bodies are making instant decisions regarding land use, FAR and other development guidelines, which, in most cases, exemplify sheer lack of vision and conception about the future of our cities.

In this era of globalization, when economic integration is inevitable in the future, will the pattern of development in our cities and resultant architecture be left to market forces alone? What will be our concerns central to the profession and academics at this juncture? Compromised solutions in architecture and urban design through trial and error method should be jettisoned. When the human face of the city is seen losing its ground to the populist marketing face; we are certainly in for a booby trap. Are our architecture and urban design gurus prepared for this? ✚

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6. Ibid, refer for detail discussions on these factors along with empirical examples.

7. Vittorio Gregotti in his address to the New York architectural League, 1983, quoted by Frampton, Kenneth: 'A Critical history of Modern Architecture', Thames and Hudson, London, 1992. pp 329.

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