



GARDEN AMIDST THE CONCRETE...

Vina Verghese Biswas
VSPB ASSOCIATES

Vina Verghese Biswas, a practising Landscape Architect, is a visiting faculty member at School of Planning & Architecture and Partner, VSPB Associates, Architects Urban Designers and Landscape Architects, New Delhi.



For the last few years, I have spent several months in the second year Architectural Design Studio with young, budding architects, scrutinising their designs of a contemporary house, as it unfolded. The challenges, they faced, in shaping internal and external spaces have been manifold: firstly, to present a novel idea; secondly, to give thought to the overall form and identity of the house while satisfying the functional requirements, and finally, to plan and design spaces in a way that, on one hand, the relationship between the house and garden becomes 'seamless' and on the other, differentiated spaces for different uses with physical/visual linkages between them are created through sensitive landscaping. Although the young minds were initially bogged down by all these mandates, they could resolve most of the issues over time. Yet, their struggle to engage the landscape with the building block was, perhaps, the most persistent.

The Indian house, as we all know, has diverse forms varying from the typical traditional *haveli*, with habitable rooms around a central court, to the colonial bungalow with lofty verandahs and a front portico overlooking large lawns. In this transformation of the built-open relationship, the gardens, too, have seen significant changes in character and functional use. While the central courtyard was extensively used as a private family space in the former layout, the lawns around the English bungalow formed the heart of the garden and served as an important part of the social and functional aspects of the house. The courtyard in today's urban house has evolved into a space, protected from the elements and with a controlled microclimate, and has come to be known as the Atrium, the more popular and grand usage of which can be seen in contemporary commercial buildings.

In the present urban context, the outdoors or open spaces are essentially restricted to mandatory setbacks and internal courts, which, in turn, have been decreasing over the years, due to changing bye-laws, to facilitate greater ground coverage. Yet, there are many who would rather build more than the permissible limits and grab as much (built) space as possible rather than have the luxury of open-to-sky greens. Hence, we have learnt to relate to any open spaces, in the concrete jungle around us, as nature. Today, the private developers, too, are marketing their multi-storied housing projects, with the focus on large, open greens having several recreational and sporting facilities, in order to reach out to a larger section of city dwellers. And for the elite, farmhouse estates / beach houses and other holiday retreats are now the in-thing.

As a result of the growing metropolis, terrace/rooftop gardens, also termed as 'sky-gardens', are also gaining more significance as an outdoor green space. In the current scenario, where minimal garden space is available at the ground level, the 'sky-garden' provides a large, open-to-sky, sit-out space that allows unhindered breeze in the hot, humid weather and plentiful sun during the harsh winters. With the rising need for functional space, vertical greening is another recent phenomenon that not only allows maximum usage of available surfaces for greenery, but also drapes large undesired wall surfaces with plants of varying hues, thus enabling the house to merge with the surrounding landscape.

In this regard, our firm's most fulfilling experience in practice has been in designing a house, built on a 500 sq. yard plot in an artists' colony in Ayanagar, for Ms. Sanghamitra Bose, a writer and social worker. The Ayanagar project gave us a rare opportunity to experiment with the interplay of internal and external spaces differently. The house was conceived as a hybrid block, where the built wraps around the open, and a central landscaped court forms the heart of the house. As described by the client, "Most of the rooms hug the central court and because of the large glass panes in the rooms I get the feeling of the garden flowing through the house. It is wonderful to wake up and see the flowers in the garden and the little birds hopping on the trees. The absence of doors in the common living spaces adds to the sense of spaciousness."

The landscape, unlike the built form, is dynamic. It changes by the hour as the sun moves across the garden. It changes by the day as flowers bloom and wilt away. It transforms itself with the season as leaves change colour and flowers, sometimes, develop into fruit. It changes through the years as plants grow, expand, and reproduce. These diurnal and seasonal variations can be sensitively planned in order to enhance the beauty of the house, and this forms part of the challenge and joy of residential landscape design.