The Timeless way of Building

With apologies to
Christopher Alexander

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If we accept that the only worthwhile building is building that is architecture, the title borrowed from Christopher Alexander (CA) contains within it as astounding amount of wisdom which keeps unravelling greater depths the longer one contemplates on it. This phrase of CA is pregnant with such meaning that one is lead to speculate on the insights that may have ensued if the thinking of CA met on some fertile ground the wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy (AC) before the original thoughts of both were robbed of their, verility by the likes of us.

This paper limited as it is in its fertility seeks to obtain a synthesis of the thinking of these two savants in an attempt to explain the (time less) process of transforming the intangible qualitative requirements of a user (needs and spirations) into tangible Shelter for the Homeless.

The clue to CA's thinking lies in the precise wording of the enigmatic title of his celebrated book.[1] which we have borrowed for this Paper.

Why is the arch anti-methodologist focussing on a 'WAY"?, a process and therefore a method?. Is it possible that he was merely suggesting an attitude, a condition of mind, a state of preparedness that is a prerequisite to creating Shelter a one step way to building.? It is not concievable that CA saw the complex task of creating architecture as accomplishable by the mere adoption of an approach that he believed that good intentions may ensure good building as implied by writers like Robert Sommer[2] and Bruce Allsopp.[3] Rather it is possible that like Ananda Commaraswamy (AC), CA himself was underlining the predominant significance of the process, "the way it is done", in the creation of architectue,. IS CA ECHOEING AC'S DICTUM THAT "ART IS IN ITS MAKING"? Is it possible that CA is also trying to indicate that Art is present in the artifact to the extent it succeeds in manifesting the spirit with which it was made, the commitment with which the designer designs and the craftsman makes the artifact?

This is not as esoteric as it sounds. Consider how sympathetic we are towards somebody who tries hard though failing in this task; consider how enthralled we are with the battle between a bowler and batsman though neither may succeed; also consider how enraged we become with a good batsman, when he plays in a cavalierly careless fashion, even when he scores, and especially when he gets out; or consider the rage we go into when the careless maid drops a cup and the excuses we make the dutiful one does the same. THE ATTITUDE WE BRING IN TO THE WORK, THE COMMITMENT WITH WHICH WE DO SOMETHING (THE "MAKING" OR THE "WAY") OB VIOUSLY LEAVES ITS MARK ON THE PRODUCT AND AFFECTS OUR APPRECIATION OF IT. This phenomenan is familiar to those of us in architectural education. Quite often Design schemes which are marked excellent at a crit (where the scheme is presented with fervor by a student) have appeared embarassingly mediocre when viewed three months later.

The argument is not that comittment by itself renders a product excellent. RATHER THAT THE FIRST STEP IN COMMUNICATING WELL IS TO OBTAIN THE CONSUMERS' ATTENTION, TO DRAW HIM INTO ONE'S OWN WAVELENGTH, TO MAKE THE COMMUNICATOR BECOME ONE WITH THE RECIPIENT.

Consider the local "thovil ceremony", dance rituals of the primitive African tribes, the gyrations of an Elvis Presley, the passion of the crusader, the religious farnatic and the politician they all succeed, sometimes despite the inadequcy of the message they bear with the depth of their involvement in what they do, their sincerity.

Can one so sincere, so involved in others problems and aspirations?

Christopher Alexander discusses elsewhere[4] the need to become ego less to create architecture to make buildings communicate. Ananda Coomaraswamy[5] confirms this when he implies the need to transcend the boundaries of humanness and attain a degree of divinity to create. Bruce allsopp[3] hints at a similar sentiment when he pleads for a humane attitude.

THE 'WAY" IS ALL IMPORTANT. IT CANNOT BE A ONE STEP APPROACH. THE WAY TO DESIGN MUST, IF WE ARE TO PERFECT IT, LEARN IT AND IMPLEMENT IT, BE A SEQUENTIAL SERIES OF STEPS A PROCESS.

It must be a process which acknowledges the tendency of the mind to alternate between logic and inspiration, logical thinking and lateral thinking; it must exploit its ability to diverge and converge; it must make use of its ability to obtain insight; it must benefit from our understanding of the creative process and the nature of architecture; it must make use of our ability to think in pictures; it must acknowledge the nature of all creation, Forming and Shaping; above all it must synthesize all this and use them when, where it happens naturally. The way is simple and timeless complex when it is not understood and unfamiliar obvious when it is understood.

A Design Process should aim to involve a designer in his task and to take him small step after small, step, painlessly and without seeming to be doing it, from abstract Problems, through verbal solutions to three dimensional images of buildings from Analysis to Solutions and Imagery.

The FIRST STEP IS TO ANALYSE THE OBJECTIVES OF THE COMMISSION—Say a Commission to build Housing. The objectives may be political, social, financial and environmental. The aspirations, the needs, the problems that seek resolution are many. But the more a designer attempts to understand the full spectrum of these aspirations, the wider he throws the rest, the clearer he sees a hierachy in these needs/aspirations. Unless a designer sees this, trains himself to see this, he will not become a problem solver, will not put himself in a situation to obtain insight but will remain a complainer, a wailer, rushing about mesmerised by the many facets of the problem. A GOOD PROBLEM SOLVER, A CREATIVE DESIGNER WILL QUICKLY BRING HIS PERSONAL BIASES INTO OPERATION, TRUST HIS INSTINCTS WHICH ARE WELL INFORMED AND FOCUSSES ON A MAJOR PROBLEM WHICH IS AT THE SAME TIME SOLVABLE AND CONTAINS WITHIN IT AN ARCHITECTURAL COMPONENT.

THE SECOND STEP THUS IS TO ANALYSE THE MAJOR PROBLEM. Where the instincts are well developed and the mind has diverged adequately the designer will identify this as being crucial to the very existence of the community concerned. This occurs through a pursuit of cause and effect analysis with the mind alternating between logic and lateral thinking until the root problem clears itself and looms large in the designers mind. The path to divinity has begun, the desingner is becoming ego-less, insight occurs.

For instance, in a low income community the overwhelming need might be to retain (and enhance) their sense of community their oneness and therefore the willingness to help each other since they cannot survive as individuals in a competitive society. This is easily and automatically accomplished when all of them are in object poverty. The problem if any might be resentment. But as soon as they are offered their condition, as the offer of good permanent housing does, the yearing for individuality, personal development and its assertion takes over. The problem shifts, order breaksdown, the unity of the Community shatters and the community collapses. Other problems become less important.

What is important for a designer is not that he has come to this conclusion but how he arrived at it, with what degree of conviction, ferver he holds on to this conclusion. The intensity of Analysis in this step, the degree of involvement created and the process of convergence that is commenced will take him to the THIRD STEP OF THE PROCESS–DEFINITION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL PROBLEM. Here the users problem is transformed into the architects problem, the architectural component is weaned away from the complex socio economic and political aspects. The architect identifies that part he can solve; analysis of the user and the problem stops; the architectural process commences.

[For instance, sociologist may advise that disorder chaos could ensue, a feeling of equality sets in, the old dominance order has broken down. The need might be to impose a new order. The problem is how one may do it without causing resentment.]

The FOURTH STEP FOLLOWS THE THIRD IN QUICK SUCCESSION. FORMULATION OF THE PRIMARY DESIGN OBJECTIVE IS DEFINED AS THE FRAME OF MIND THAT NEEDS TO BE CREATED AND THE CORRESPONDING MODES OF BEHAVIOUR TO BE GENERATED.

Convergence continues. The mind now seeks solutions and strategies instead of pursuing problems cold logic gives way to inspiration, intuition. The Design Process eases from Analysis to Synthesis.

For instance, we might find that the strategy to solve the Architectural Problem of imposing a physical order without causing resentment might be by creating a feeling of inequality, of a sense of social stratification, and a heightened sense of terri toriality for the different groups. How do we create this? The mind quickly flips over to the second part of the Fourth Step the mode of behaviour one needs to generate. The strategy might be to make them see what actually exist. Perhaps the physical order may exaggerate the existing social hierarchy and make the user linger in the open spaces of the complex, be observant rather than rushing through it, uncomprehending.

The Fourth Step marks the begining of Synthesis and the faculty of insight replacing laborious working out. Exhileration sets in. How are behaviour petterns generated? The architects tools are the spaces he creates and the envelope he gives them more precisely the ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY; THE CONCEPT; HE DESIERS FOR HIS ARCHITECTURE. THIS IS THE FIFTH STEP. This is still in the abstract the intangible, overriding quality one must experience to behave in the above manner. The mind works quickly now. The concept is the overriding quality of the environment which must carry and bind together many local variations. The mind is still in convergence. The single Quality that will evoke IMAGERY THE SIXTH STEP. The abstract Concept is rationalised to acknowledge the constraints of site, climate, finances etc. and Imagery of the FORM of the 'building" is evoted. INSIGHT in the three dimension; forceful, precise to the extent convergence has been deep and acute. The form is created the primary expression, the basic geometry of the composition, even roof type, material and landscape strategy, The core spaces and the approach to them, built to unbuilt relationship and the overall colour scheme.

For instance, the Concept might be a rather precise, ordered environment formal rather than informal, keen, active environment rather than sleppy restful one, One might therefore visualize a stratified graped and spreadout arrangement rather than an individual spread or a tightly knit arrangement. The treatment may be seen as infair" rather than equal and fair" with monotony within groups balanced by variety between groups the groups separated by open spaces and joined by a leaf like road suystem.

End of divinity. The form needs to respond and acknowledge the other forces around it. A well concieved Image will allow this and indeed will have their begining in its FORM, SHAPING HAS BEGUN THE FINAL STEP. The form is checked against other determinants. The FORM which gave itself a clear Primary Expression is given other expressions, so that it is the truth of its existence. THE FORM IS GIVEN SHAPE. THE HOMELESS IS SHELTERED IN ARCHITECTURE.

References:

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