

While walking around with some friends in Dona Paula, our discussion veered to its architecture. We started comparing buildings, appreciating some but more often bemoaned the fact that for the most part they were loud, gaudy, and, at times, completely out of scale. Most of the buildings in Dona Paula are large single-family bungalows, with high compound walls and even bigger gates, intended to symbolize the wealth of the patron within. While one bungalow was trying to impress with over sized column and pediment, the other went overboard with decorative railings and ugly pergolas. As we moved along, we came across a series of contemporary row-houses marked by sleek lines of horizontal and vertical planes. For a change, my companions approved of the work. I remained skeptical, also evasive about the reason for my continued criticism. Nevertheless, I had a feeling that, given the context, my own work as an architect would not have been very different. Why then was I critical of the wealthy neighborhood of Dona Paula? Why did I find it sanitized, even sterile?

It was not long after that the reason for my cynicism in Dona Paula was made obvious through an architectural encounter on the outskirts of Goa Velha. Standing on the old highway was a small two storied, light yellow building with bright red column pilasters complimented by the red of its steeply sloping roofs; a narrow and linear building, modest in its aesthetics and ordinary in terms of its finishes. Yet it drew my attention because it seemed peculiarly slim and imposing. What made this architecture interesting was that the linearity of the building was a direct result of the shape of the plot on which it stood. The design of the steep sloping roof seemed to achieve historical reference to the Portuguese period architecture, an attempt which many famed architects fail.

At the risk of being unfair, let us agitate the frame of aesthetics in comparing the building in Goa-Velha to its wealthier counterparts in Dona Paula. What stands out is that apart from satisfying the basic requirement of achieving functional as much as constructional complexity, the building in Goa-Velha has also been able to articulate itself boldly. Its attempt at style is far more than mere cosmetics. This is worth appreciating because style is mostly synonymous with the rich. It is ironic that even if the rich present themselves as ordinary, it is deemed a matter of style. The building in Goa Velha, on the contrary, makes a valiant statement of style considering its restrained access to resources.



However, apart from architectural aesthetics, Dona Paula seems to be plagued by other fundamental issues. One of these is its collective urban design. Ideal neighborhoods are definitely not created by treating the development area like a large chocolate cake and dividing it into standard pieces of plots. The British architect and urban designer Leon Krier seems to have articulated a solution to ensure that the nature of sub-division does not lead to boring and repetitive built environment. In his development of Poundbury, in 1990's, an urban extension to the city of Dorchester in England, Krier achieved diversity by clubbing together plots of various sizes, shapes and orientation, to design new urban neighborhoods. The strategy was simple but effective. The variety of plot sizes ensures interesting non-standard building designs. Apart from variations in plan layouts, the dissimilarity of plot sizes also guarantees an assortment of buildings in terms of height and massing. This also ensures that architects have different design challenges in different plots.

However, in Dona Paula, each bungalow tries to achieve its "bungalowness", by expressing the myriad tastes of their bourgeois owners. The overall effect is unpleasant, that of urban kitsch. The non-implementation of urban design guidelines and the lack of diversity in plots make it difficult for the locality to come together as a neighborhood. One wonders whether this is in spite of Dona-Paula being a home to wealthy patrons, or because of it.

But on the other hand, although the row-houses in Dona-Paula provided a relief from the continuous change of architectural expression as seen in other parts, the problem is that they were all identical and therefore boring because it denied thematic variations in each plot. In a well-designed neighborhood the buildings can be similar but not the same. The learning, therefore, seem to be that in order to achieve a cohesive but interesting neighborhood, there is a need for common unity in the urban design of the area, while simultaneously allowing for eclecticism at the individual building level.

Rather than the vulgar display of money through individual projects, places like Dona Paula require visual coherence in their architecture. Until then it will remain sanitized, sterile and boring. Architecture in Dona Paula is evidence that money can't buy taste.

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