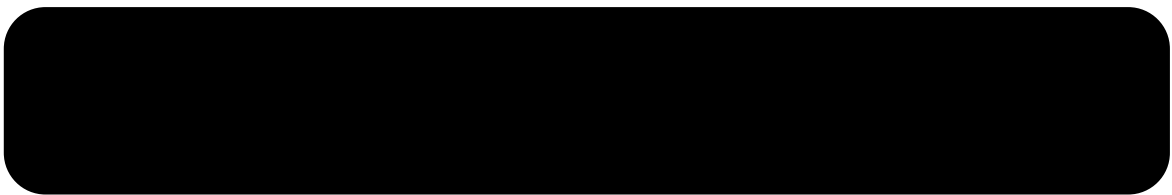




On a recent visit to the *Konkan Bamboo and Cane Development Centre* (KONBAC) at Kudal, I came to know that there has been a drastic change in strategy to promote bamboo as construction material. Rather than endorsing bamboo as an affordable material for the poor, especially to build cost-effective houses, it is now being popularised as a material that satisfies the upwardly mobile elites' fad of sustainability. Although the desire to replace unsustainable materials is laudable, the question is whether these projects, using bamboo, are truly as sustainable as they claim to be? Moreover, there also arises an issue of appropriation of material culture, especially of the poor in tribal areas by the dominant elites.


One of the strongest criticisms of the appropriation of the architecture of the poor has been made by the sociologist Anthony King, who writes that the rich often appropriate the architecture of farmer's cottages (farmhouses) for their vacation homes (which are usually their second or third home). These elites, King observes, only absorb the aesthetics of a farmer's house and not their lifestyle. The problem of the cultural appropriation of marginalized cultures without assimilation of the marginalized population seems to be prevalent everywhere. Raising the issues of cultural appropriation of hairstyles is a recent video titled *Don't Cash Crop on My Cornrows* by Amandla Stenberg. There are many similarities between hairstyle and architecture. Both are about identity, and clearly about style. In so many ways, hairstyles are, in fact, a form of architecture. Stenberg's major criticism is that white Americans love black culture more than they love the black people. The video demonstrates how hip-hop and pop have been appropriated from African American culture especially in terms of hairdos such as pleats, cornrows and so forth, while continuing with the racist hatred towards black people. These hairdos, as Stenberg notes, are ways in which black hair is kept from knotting. Stenberg laments that while these hairdos are stereotypical of the community, when white Americans adopts them, they turn into high fashion. This is a similar way in which vernacular architecture gets appropriated when architect claim them as 'contemporary-vernacular style'. While the rich appropriate the poor farmer's cottages to model their vacation-homes, these houses are always fitted with appliances and systems (air-conditioning etc.) needed for the comfort of upmarket modern living, which the vacationers cannot do without. Additionally there is also a failure to acknowledge the role of vernacular people, the ones who have championed the use of sustainable materials and forms in the first place.



Guadua Bamboo Timarai Beach Resort in Costa Rica by Ing. Alejandro Restrepo.

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In his book, *The System of Objects*, Jean Baudrillard argues that a suburbanite who aspires to move up into a higher class usually does so by buying antiques – symbols of old social position brought with new money. Essentially, he argues that the upwardly mobile class signal their social standing through material signs such as antique furniture, works of art, and so forth. Today, it is materials like bamboo that are being pressed into the service of



consumption, because they give the image of sustainability. Using bamboo is fast becoming fashionable as appearing sustainable can symbolize that one has truly arrived in the elite world. Bauldrillard further discusses that every object has two functions – to be put to use and to be possessed. While a plastic chair in a living room can be put to use, it never seem to be dearly possessed, whereas the antique *voltaire*, may at times not even be used but is dearly possessed as an object. The argument for the bamboo is similar. The rich use it in an attempt to possess it as an object rather than utilising it functionally. It seems that the dominant cultures intermittently stoop to peripheral ones in order to appropriate from them, without the guilt of further marginalizing them. The violence is doubled as the poor are made to believe that there is legitimacy in the marginalized culture only when there is a sanction of it by the dominant ones.

The use of bamboo as ‘sustainable’ material in the construction of elite houses is also problematic because of the cost and distance of procuring it, as it is usually not locally available. Holistic sustainability has to factor in the ecological implication of transporting materials, plus the carbon footprint of the air-travel that the ‘designer’ architect would spend on travelling to the site. Moreover, even if sustainable material is used for the building of a second or third home, then the very idea of sustainability is defeated because sustainability has to be about satisfying only the primary needs of living and not about luxury.

It is not that architects and clients should completely ignore bamboo as a sustainable building material. In fact, organization like KONBAC have resorted to the marketing of bamboo to elites because there is no culture of building in bamboo in our society. Today, bamboo should not be a material of choice but that of convenience and compulsion. What is then required is a system of making bamboo easily available by creating a network of bamboo farmers, as KONBAC claims to have done. It is also important that the government create bamboo forests in close proximity to urban areas so that its transport from the source to the site is sustainable. Building in bamboo should not be about style but that of real ecological and social responsibility.

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No Bamboo Banawing!