By AMITA KANEKAR

Z Axis 2016: Of Architectural Heritage and Contexts

‘Everything is our heritage’, was one of the memorable statements made at Z Axis 2016, the second conference on architecture organised last month by the Charles Correa Foundation (CCF) in Goa. It was said by Chinese architect Yung Ho Chang, while speaking about how he looked for inspiration to ancient China, Soviet-era China, Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh, Modernist Germany, and all buildings anywhere. At a time when attempts are on to force people in Goa and India into nationalist straitjackets of what is ‘our’ culture, diet, language, history, etc, it was refreshing to hear an argument for global heritage, even if only from the limited realm of architectural practice.

And it is limited. Architecture may include all buildings, but the practice of architecture, or what architects (are expected to) do, touches only a small fraction of them. According to Bangladeshi architect Marina Tabassum, winner of this year’s Aga Khan Award and another speaker at Z Axis 2016, as many as 90% of buildings are built without architects.

Even so, thinking about architectural practice is useful. Because the apparently tiny 10% comprises the big projects, the public ones, the expensive ones, and almost all the problematic, wasteful, and destructive ones. We architects desperately need to look critically at what we’re doing, if not stop doing it. The annual conference begun by the CCF in 2015 is thus a very welcome event.

Like most such events, the two editions so far have been uneven, in content as well as diversity, with almost no women speakers in 2015, and non-upper caste and local (Goan) speakers noticeable by their absence both times.

The 2015 conference, on the state of the city and titled *Great City… Terrible Place*, still set a high standard thanks to stellar presentations by two architects: Kunlé Adeyemi and Santiago Cirugeda. Nigerian Adeyemi’s firm NLÉ (At Home) works with local communities to develop projects like the award-winning Floating School of Makoko, part of a settlement once

condemned as a slum. Spanish ‘guerrilla architect’ Cirugeda went further, challenging practically everything architects normally stand for. His architectural firm, Recetas Urbanas (Urban Recipes), is famous for reclaiming public spaces for communities in Seville, with low-cost and self-build projects in which the architect plays the role of facilitator, not for design or technical issues – those are handled by the community – but to deal with the law, politics, and bureaucracy. Architecture is obsessed with beauty, said Cirugeda, when the really important things should be people and social function.

It was an electrifying presentation, especially for a conservative patron-driven profession like architecture. The discomfort in the student-filled auditorium was palpable, giving the lie to the idea that students love revolutionaries.

There was nothing quite as exciting at the 2016 conference, *Buildings as Ideas,* intended as a tribute to the late Charles Correa. At the outset, Rahul Mehrotra spoke of how Correa ‘reached into history to tradition’ as the context of Indian architecture. Some of the other presentations also touched upon context, in the realm of form, materials, landscape, as well as tradition. Too many however remained with beautiful-buildings-in-beautiful-settings, with far too many of the vacation homes, art galleries, and monuments that have given architects such a bad name.

Architecture is really a pathetic profession, admitted Chang at one point. ‘We don’t really contribute much, when we could do much more.’ One practise that seemed to buck the trend was that of Hunnarshala Foundation in Kutch, described (in absentia) by its founder, Sandeep Virmani. Hunnarshala’s focus is community-driven projects that are sustainable and make the most of traditional knowledge. One of its aims has been to revive and modernise traditional techniques of building, and train people, often villagers, in them. Some of their students have built successful careers in building techniques and even worked abroad. It has also been trying this—i.e. applying modern science to traditional community knowledge—in water-harvesting, animal husbandry, and other areas.

Hunnarshala thus stood out as a different kind of architectural practice, working with non-elite communities and their need of better shelter and jobs. Its focus on tradition, however,

raises questions. How does the strengthening of a village's traditions affect its normally casteist, patriarchal, and parochial culture? Was it better for marginalised castes and women when traditions were strong, or weak?

Some of these concerns were illustrated in another presentation, also connected to Hunnarshala, by Bombay architect Sameep Padora. It included varied urban projects, a village temple, and a community centre for Dalit Buddhist workers in a factory, the last in collaboration with Hunnarshala. The temple was presented as an exercise in form, ignoring its role of institutionalising caste, while the community centre had a floor made of – guess what? – cowdung. This extremely fragile, rough, and smelly flooring, once traditional for the village poor, was chosen because of the tight budget, said the architect. However, he added, it connects the users to the building since they have to redo it themselves every fifteen days.

But would he or Hunnarshala ever offer this 'connection' to the users of their other projects? Then why here? Could it be because of the social location of these users as so-called 'low' castes? Or the fact that, in caste society, cow dung and cow urine are traditional ways of purifying space supposedly polluted by the 'low'?

Some answers were to be had from South African architect Ilze Wolff, who spoke of buildings as *bad* ideas. Her focus was the Apartheid-era Modernist architecture of an old factory building in Capetown. Pointing out how discrimination based on race, gender and class could be 'read' in the architecture, in the separate spaces, differing sizes of space, and differing qualities of space, Wolff too spoke of the importance of context in architecture, but what she meant was the social context, of race and gender.

In South Asia, the social context is caste. Charles Correa had spoken of how all Indian architecture is connected, whether vernacular, Modernist or monumental. One important connect is this context of caste. It is visible all over the place, but especially readable in traditional building and settlement types. This is probably why elites here, architects included, feel so attached to the latter. Our heritage might be the whole world, but what we hold on to reveals our own social location.

(First published in *O Heraldo*, dt: 10 October, 2016)

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