

A DIFFICULT ANTACID

How does one approach plurality in design?

Two architectural firms from different cities and with different ideologies, collaborated on a project in Ahmedabad. I took pictures of the house and sent them to contemporaries and friends, (something that I seldom do,) to find out what they thought, to initiate a discussion, if there could be one. Some were even invited to see and experience the house. I found comments from fellow architects were hugely different from those who were not.

This set me thinking. Surely, there must be a common thread in what may be considered a good aesthetic? But, clearly there seems to be two factions: one which is the elitist, the designers and the other, that is the populist, the non designers.

The questions then, that sought to be answered, are not of function and costs, but that of the ethereal realm of aesthetics. What is a respectable aesthetic? With what parameters and yardsticks can this pulse be measured?

Most of us architects and designers are trained abroad, are fairly travelled and/or exposed extensively to media that trumpets the western aesthetic. Almost all of the known design magazines today, devote pages to 'foreign' projects. Like in all other thinking, here too, we are subjected to the popular belief that 'good' means "imported".

An acceptance that is essentially not ours, and which does not in any manner reflect our cultural needs; what we are conditioned to believe is incoherent, cluttered excessive and noisy?

Yet, pause to think. Are these not the very adjectives that would unabashedly describe us as a community, a culture, a race? India and its people?

The modernist movement, shunned the use of craft, as non obligatory and wastefully indulgent, and in doing so, rejected the intrinsic need of self worth that human beings derive from it. It emerged as a reaction to the oppressive indulgence of the church and its excessive misuse of wealth. Yet, in no way did it prophesy the banality of subtractive art.

Hence projects which exuberate a minimalist, 'less is more' doctrine without the rigour and pas-

sion and the fine intellect as was exhibited by the modernist masters, not only abuse all that which the movement stood for, but also the innate human schizophrenic psyche.

If, then a work comes along, that is multi-layered most of our brethren are unable to relate. This house, finds itself as outlawed, amongst the accepted aesthetic of the present times. The design, of this house, which is a clean simple box, sets out to defy all conventional norms of aesthetics which are imbued with a western philosophies, and sets itself in a time zone that many call 'dated'.

It takes the courtyard of a Kerala house, and bathes it with loads of sunlight, and surrounds it with intricately crafted wooden trellis work inspired from Gujarati and Parsi grill works. This is set amidst a cross ventilated axial compositions of simple rectilinear spaces, against the backdrop of a lush garden.

The house as most designers would think, needn't have more, and contrary to the common norm, is further filled with furniture and lighting, that is embellished with the same rigour and mixed with a contemporary simplicity, both in its material and styling.

The result has been perplexing for many. Filled with a multiplicity of narratives, many find this difficult to digest. Strangely yet, those who are untainted from the assaults of the conventional conditioning of designers, simply find it 'gorgeous'.

Who, then, do we follow?

Perhaps, one could use the betel nut, with its myriad of condiments, the Indian 'paan' which is a known antacid, as a case to prove the point. The notion of minimalism is clearly, contrived, and posed. The contexts it rejects are alive, clear and surround us.

Perhaps, the dictum, now, would be, 'more is more or less ok'!



SAMIRA RATHOD

Principal architect at Samira Rathod Design Associates, Mumbai, Samira celebrates design and considers every project an opportunity to critically test parameters. About herself, she says, "I am an architect and enjoy being one".



Photograph courtesy: SAMIRA RATHOD

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