Vernacular Architecture And Its Reflection In Society

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Winston Churchill once said "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us" (Lounsbury, 2010). For long, architecture has been a medium of representing the culture, traditions and development of a community present in a certain geographical location. The best way of exploring examples of reflections of culture in building is looking at pieces of vernacular architecture throughout different regions in the world, be it the traditional bamboo houses of South East Asia or even the triple decker wood frame apartments in New England.

Culture as a concept represents the way of life of a human group, motivated by the urge to interpret its world and organize the means and methods of being accommodated in it. Culture is a major behaviour modifier. Buildings are generally perceived as products of social and cultural conditions. This probably explains why architecture is used to pursue cultural identity. The term culture in architecture can refer to "a way of life distinctive of a group, a arrangement of logic transmitted figuratively, and a way of dealing with the physical surrounding" (Rapoport, 1987). For example, the Romans used their buildings to express their power and prosperity. (A.K. Adebayo et al., 2013)

Even though, most scholars have agreed on the fact that vernacular architecture is the best way of describing cultural influences in the built environment, the meaning of the term "vernacular architecture" has been a subject of debate and interpretations. Bernard Rudofsky (1964) referred vernacular architecture as the non-pedigreed architecture or "architecture without architects". In a broad definition, vernacular architecture can be translated as an area of architecture that covers structures built by practical builders without any involvement of professional architects (Arboleda 2006). Paul Oliver (1997) defined vernacular architecture as a term extensively used to signify "indigenous, tribal, folk, peasant and traditional architecture."

Fathy (1976) believes vernacular construction is profoundly influenced by the lifestyle of its users, this is inclusive of the number of occupants and their concurrent spatial usage and interactions, meal preparations, and religious beliefs – these elements are taken into deliberation when designing holistically. In contrast, physical environments are directly impacted by cultural views of the region in terms of ornamentation and appearances (Winchip, 2011)

A research conducted by the famous author Paul Oliver represented vernacular architecture as one that encompassed people's dwellings and other constructions, relating to their respective environments and

resources usually built by the owners or the community using traditional techniques. ("Built to Meet Needs: Cultural Issues in Vernacular Architecture", Paul Oliver, 2006)

Hence, from the above discussion it can be well concluded that vernacular architecture can best define the impact culture has had on regional architectural forms and creations.

However, besides discussions of buildings reflecting culture one very important question to deliberate upon is: "Why does culture come into architecture?" The answer to this question is necessary for discovering the motive behind reflecting culture in architecture which will provide an easy conclusion.

All architecture represents the presence of a certain community and culture in the region it was built in. Architecture is an active component of culture which can be manipulated to create a system of settings within which human life takes place. It should be people-specific and should also represent the way of life of such people. (C. B. Chukwuali, 2005). Vernacular architecture is a perfect reflection of function.

An architectural responsive design is any purposeful physical expression of space, time, meaning and communication in such a way that their implications for any given culture are clearly understood. Making the place legible to the user and creating a traditional experience for using the space must be incorporated into each and every design.

The design process of vernacular architecture is tailored and developed according to human requirements and resources. Additionally, Gur (2000) perceives the architectural concept as an undertaking for shelter and safety, wherein aesthetics is not a precedent. The philosophy behind the humanistic approach of local materials and labor usage, is primarily due to the economic concerns. An added incentive to vernacular concepts of design include a cost effective approach in a socio economic sense since the materials in usage are local cutting down on transportation costs and also promoting self sufficiency along with development of homegrown knowledge and skillsets. (Correia et al., 2014)

However, besides cultural and functional influence, some researchers have also labelled climate as a major cause for traditional architecture.

According to Paul Oliver, the primal-natured architecture styles is a necessity due to the compatible and self adaptable climatic conditions of the region. While according to Ahmadi, the vernacular architecture was "earth dependant" and built in harmony with the surrounding weather as well as the living conditions of the occupants.
Accordiong to J.M. Igwe (2001) the design involved four things which included space, time, meaning and communication.

For identity in architecture to be meaningful, it must be approached from two levels of cultural existence:
(a) Culture core, or cultural imperatives or ethos which represent the critical elements of predominant values that give the culture its distinctive character. Failures are more catastrophic in this sense.
(b) Peripheral elements, which refer to cultural imperatives at the general level where changes can be accommodated with minimal or no consequences.
(R. Lewcock, 1978)
This is probably why C. Moore et al. (1979) concluded that what was important needed to be discovered and not assumed.

One other reason is the availability and usage of vernacular materials. Fernandes et al. (2014) classify vernacular architecture to be an embodiment of materials and resources local to the region; in which, locally

obtainable, environmentally friendly materials are utilized over industrially produced resources. Furthermore, religious diversities are created which are unique to a certain community when home grown materials are used in construction, also supporting the advancement in socio-economic conditions. "The design process of vernacular architecture is tailored and developed according to human requirements and resources."(Fernandes et. al, 2014)

Now, that the several questions such as "Why culture in architecture?", "How do Buildings arise out of a certain environment and materials?" have been answered I would like to consider an example of vernacular architecture from my birth place, India.

The Bhunga Houses, typical to the West-Indian states of Rajasthan and Gujarat are an excellent source of cultural reflections in architecture and how such designs complement the function of the local inhabitants.

The Bhunga Houses in Rajasthan and Kutch (India)

These circular walled buildings with thatched roofs are the perfect inhabitations built for the hot and remote regions of Kutch and Rajasthan. These buildings use materials typical to these desert regions such as clay, bamboo, and timber. On my visit to these huts, in 2020, I learned about how the mud and clay helped keep the houses cool, since the inhabitants were not privileged enough to buy air conditioners, thus facilitating architecture through personal preference. Furthermore, built of these buildings also protect the houses from sandstorms, which are common to this region, as well as earthquakes, which would otherwise leave a devastating impact. Furthermore, these houses are painted by the locals in the traditional art styles of the region, heightening the cultural impact of these structures.

Furthermore, it can be said that a study of traditional architecture reveals many climate-friendly design features, such as temperature control, enhanced natural ventilation, and protection from natural disasters. Kutch folk architecture is a socio-economic institution of cultural and favorable climatic conditions. Indigenous architectural practices are now encouraged for sustainable development. Despite the importance of ornamentation and form in cultural symbols and signs, indigenous architectural aesthetics are also a result of climate. Shapes, orientations, groups of people, building materials and colors, and construction and polishing techniques are always presented in aesthetic forms that interact and harmonize with nature.

However, as we progress in the future, it has come to realization that rapid urbanization has led to the commercialization of architecture. Certain cultures have undertaken to Western influences. The colonial townships in Nigeria marked remarkable departure from the spatial organization of the traditional city compounds of the nation. The designs produced might have been functional and suitable for western cultures, but they were inadequate for Nigerian cultural environment. The idea of cultural responsiveness does not have a universal acclaim as it was rejected by the modern movement. The modern movement emphasized universality on the basis of the existence of plurality of groups and subcultures.

Thus, this essay has discussed all the impacts which culture has had on architecture throughout the world and how vernacular architecture is so essential in representing the thoughts and beliefs of a community as well as the necessity of local architectural influence in maximizing function based on an individuals needs. Hence, it is instrumental that culture influences architecture.

"Mother Art is Architecture
Without an Architecture of our own we have no soul of our own civilization"
-Frank Lloyd Wright

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