

ROLE OF ARCHITECTURE IN NATION BUILDING: INDIA IN THE CONTEMPORARY

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Abstract: Architecture has played several roles in human history. In the modern world, it takes the role of shaping the histories and futures of the nation. Nation-building is understood as a temporal agenda for a nation to redefine itself for the years or decades to come. In that, architecture becomes an actor in leaving a foot-print of the same for long periods. Thus, through the lens of architecture, nation-building becomes the expression of creating histories among other histories.

Keywords: nation-building, decolonization, architectural statement, architectural paradigms, economic liberalization, evolution of nation

Introduction

For centuries, the expression of architecture was in the hands of monarchs. It may be said that architecture was rather monarchical. What it means is that all monumental and highly ornamental expression of the built environment was under the control of and aided by a singular power, the monarch, be it with palaces, religious precincts, public buildings, memorials, etc.

Fast forward to the age of capitalism starting in the seventeenth century and the Industrial Revolution that occurred in the mid-eighteenth century, the expression of architecture transitioned from the ornate Gothic style to that which was more suitable for the industrial era. The advent of steel revolutionized the way buildings were built and perceived. The Crystal Palace of 1851 (Figure1) by architect Joseph Paxton stood as a testament to this newly emerging era in the built environment. With glass and steel being the materials for construction, the transition was marked distinctively from the use of heavy masonry and expensive construction to that of light-weight and low-cost. Architecture, thus, was brought to the common man for its expression through the built environment from the state of being monarchical.

In the early twentieth century, the birth of the 'Bauhaus Movement' more clearly pronounced these ideas through its art, architecture, and design philosophy. With modernism, the English Arts and Crafts movement, and Constructivism as its core influences, "*the reigning principles were the unity of form and function, the idea that design is in service of the community, and a belief in the perfection and efficiency of geometry*" (Hoffman). It was through this school that the idea of mass production was propagated. Also, the act of architectural design and production from the time became accessible to all. Walter Gropius decided that "*the Bauhaus should generate designs for mass-production, designs that were simple, rational, and accessible to all people.*" (Hoffman).

Birth of nations

Towards the end of World War-II, the British empire had started to withdraw its power over the many territories that they had colonized. This process has been termed 'decolonization'. It is the "*the simultaneous dissolution of several intercontinental empires and the creation of nation-states throughout the global South within a short period of roughly three post-war decades (1945–75)*"; the disappearance of empire as a political form, and the end of racial hierarchy as a widely accepted political ideology and structuring principle of world order (Osterhammel). New nation-states were born as a consequence of this. Here, a nation is understood to be that large group of people inhabiting a particular territory with its government, language, traditions, culture, etc.

At this point, the nations across the world had fallen into either situation, one where the nations were torn apart as a consequence of their direct participation in the world wars, and the other wherein those that were decolonized after the wars. In the latter, the newly formed sovereign nations had to build themselves up politically from scratch while partly or completely inheriting the infrastructure left by the colonial rule. As with the former, the nations had to rebuild and recover from the wars that had damaged their infrastructure. In either case, the tools to produce modern architecture came to greater service. The demand for mass-production of the housing, retail, and industrial built environment was met by faster manufacturing and construction techniques.

Nation-building

Nation-building is a 'normative concept'. By that, we may understand that there is no singular universal denotation to the term instead the concept of it may refer to the varying norms of nations across the world, in their making. For instance, nation-building in decolonized nations may mean the attempts or efforts to define their territories and populations as a singular collective identity, regardless of its ethnic, religious, cultural, or other subsets. In another instance, it is external assistance provided to those failed nations for the development of its public and/or government infrastructure, economic assistance, and so on. Nation-building may also be encountered as exercising of military power by a nation of greater power to a nation under its institutional threat or several military threats posed by its neighbours. Hence, to understand and act on nation-building, it becomes necessary to look at nations through specific lenses of their historicity and present economic, political, institutional, or other dynamics of the nation under study (Stephenson).

A corollary to this is that the role of the built environment and that of architecture also varies accordingly.

Nation and Nation-building: India

As established previously, the concept of nation-building has a wide array of connotations. This essay will focus on what it means to India as a nation. Nation-building of India may be looked at through two distinct lenses across time. One that was forged by the newly decolonized sovereignty and the second when the nation joined the age of computers and the internet. In architectural expression, nation-building is investigated under modern, post-modern ideologies.

India was decolonized and declared itself an independent sovereign nation on August 15, 1947. With Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru as its first Prime Minister, there was a dire need to build the nation with his banner of "*Unity in Diversity*", addressing that all ethnic and social groups were to be identified under a larger collective called India. The decolonization left the Indian territory in shambles that there was a looming identity crisis concerning the built environment. There was a dilemma whether to adhere to its history or move away and forward with new ideas, images and techniques.

1. **Modern architecture in India:** The Prime Minister had a far vision for the newly born nation, more particularly to enforce a new aesthetic imagined for the development of its arts and architecture. Towards this vision, he invited Le Corbusier to plan and design the city of Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab. He designed the Legislative Assembly (Figure 2), the Secretariat (Figure 3) and the High Court of Chandigarh (Figure 4). They were envisioned and constructed as concrete behemoths. Chandigarh city and the three buildings became a symbol of the power of the New India (Ms. Sofia Sebastian). Meanwhile, this also symbolized the aesthetic response of the new nation to the loss of Lahore to Pakistan, after the partition (Khilnani). In the following years, Le Corbusier went on to design many projects commissioned by the Sarabhai family in Ahmedabad. This marked the beginning of the new era of modern architecture in the post-independent nation.

After independence, the nation was further sub-divided into several territories based on the regional language, culture and social fabrics, in the decades that followed. These smaller territories or states had their governments that mediated between the citizen and the national, the central government. This decentralization led to the necessity of more public, institutional and government buildings. Along with which, education being the primary focus of the new nation-building program, universities were also to be set up for higher education and research in science, technology and commerce. Many public sector industries were introduced or reinforced across the nation. For all of these were a symbol of massive nation-building and the vast India sub-continent became a fertile ground for architectural experimentation and expression. This played a vital role in the way it expressed these national bodies.

These decades saw the rise of many edifices across the nation, sufficing the necessities of the emerging built environment for nation-building, expressed by the strong languages of architects such as Charles Correa, B.V. Doshi, Raj Rewal, Achyut Kanvinde in their architectural character. The resulting expression was that which was bold and distinct in their form that exploited the greater potential of the concrete. This era also saw the amalgamation of brick and concrete. Few other architects explored into the brutalist and aggressive expression of architecture, as in The Permanent Exhibition Complex, Pragati Maidan (Figure 5), New Delhi, (1972) by Raj Rewal. Meanwhile, architects in southern India investigated in more regional building vocabulary and harmonizing with the local environment. This eventually led to the emergence of what has been the polar opposite of monumental buildings, the vernacular. The vernacular in architectural expression was heavily focussed on the domestic and the functional characteristics of the built environment rather than the public, the bold and the brutalist. (Ms. Sofia Sebastian) .

2. **Post-modern architecture in India:** If the manifestation of nation-building through architecture was modernist, expressing "*distinct and bold forms, volumes and shapes*" (Ms. Sofia Sebastian) in the early decades of the newly formed India, then towards the end of the twentieth century there was an emergence of post-modernism in

architectural expression. This was characterized by, as Jon Lang identifies, either appropriating the traditional forms in abstract or the resurgence of ornamentation as a paradigm shift from the modernist minimalism (Dr. Sanghamitra Basu). Notable works of architecture falling under this era are the ISKCON temple (Figure 6) in New Delhi, designed by Achyut Kanvinde, IIM Lucknow (Figure 7), designed by C P Kukreja, Belgian Embassy (Figure 8) in New Delhi by Satish Gujral.

The twentieth century wound up with liberalization of the economic plan in India. This opened the nation's economy to many foreign firms. Meanwhile, this helped many home-grown firms to participate in the global markets as well. The key actor in this was the ascent of information technologies and the associated functions that entered India as part of the global markets. Through foreign direct investments, foreign firms were now allowed to establish their dispersed operations in the nation. This meant that the central function of the firm would be headquartered at its home nation, while its "*highly specialized services- accounting, legal, public relations, programming, telecommunications, and other such services*" (Sassen) would be outsourced from other nations.

India, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, had become a fertile ground for outsourcing many specialized services to foreign firms. The first decade saw a huge upsurge in such service firms in India. With this, it meant that the working conditions and the built environment of the foreign firms were reflected, partially or wholly in the service firms in India.

With the proliferation of information technology and business firms, the concept of business and technology parks were introduced. These parks had several firms, residences, and retail development function within an area of a city. This means that the parks were now larger institution-like chunks in the city. As the nation moved into the second decade, the number of business and technology parks proposed across the nation continued to rise. A new form of architecture emerged from these environments that may be called 'corporate architecture', that which focussed on designing and constructing buildings, spaces and environments to meet the needs of the functions of the business and technology firms.

India in the contemporary

From the above three cases, we may understand that the concept of nation-building is temporal. On the curve of the nation's progress, nation-building occurs in various phases and multiple stages that follow different agenda. What nation-building meant at the dawn of independence did not necessarily mean the same towards the end of the twentieth century nor does it in the twenty-first century. To critique or to assume the role of architecture in nation-building today necessarily follows understanding contemporary India and the image of the nation it portrays to its citizens and the world.

The larger unifying narrative of India emerges from its smaller constituent narratives that continuously unfold as many layers. The prominent of these layers may be categorized as, namely a civic nation (one that is based in a common identity and the idea of citizenship under nationality), an ethnic nation (one that is based in its race, ethnic and social identities) (Stephenson), and a global nation (one that is based in its participation in the global economy; a part of the whole).

Each of the layers expresses its functional and material nature through the physical, that is to say through the built environment. This physicality is an imprint of the presence of the categorical nations on the geographical fabric. The existence of these physical entities or the built environment is stretched in time, in that they continue to be functional members to the ever-generative populations of the nation. From this, we may understand that every categorical nation has developed an inherent, distinct from the other, language to its built environment. Corollary to this, the architectural expression to each has emerged from this.

Role of architecture in nation-building in the contemporary

Nation-building is phasic and hence, temporal, but the built environment that emerges from it lasts for longer periods. Architecture, thus, becomes an expression of the histories of nation-building. The role of architecture becomes precisely this, at the level of nation-building, anchor points laid along with the progress of a nation. It exists at the threshold of the past and the future; its ability to carry forward and showcase the inherent past while governing and guiding the futurity of the nation. It informs of the decisions made for the earlier phases of nation-building schemes while acting as a base for making decisions for the coming phases of the nation-building.

In the contemporary, the architecture may take a role of transcending the layers of civic, ethnic and the global nation, in becoming an agent of unity. Given, the static and rigid nature of the built environment, architecture emerges not merely from this but also from the connotations attached to it. These connotations then must necessarily be embedded in the nation-building narrative, that which acknowledges the co-existence of the categorical nations.

The nation-building phase in the contemporary becomes a history of the futures of the nation. The architecture emerging from this becomes that tangible history left behind as a foot-print of the decisions made at this time. When architectural expression reflects the intelligible and progressive aspects of the nation's past, it holds the power to project the same to its futures. From this, it may be said that architecture might possess an inherent power to pivot a nation's progress, to that end it may also be seen as a power to drive nation-building. As much as architecture becomes an effect on the causal nature of nation-building, the vice versa seems plausible as well. That is, nation-building as an effect to the causal nature of architecture and that both architecture and the nation are in continuous negotiations with one another.

India as a nation was built on the Nehruvian idea of "*Unity in diversity*". This has served and will continue to serve as the foundation for the phases of nation-building that occur thereafter. The idea of diversity may not necessarily be associated with that of the post-independence era. The categorical nations have become a form of diversity on their own. As India progresses, the idea of diversity will continue to be redefined and reconsidered from multiple perspectives. Thus, the idea of diversity grows to become more and more complex. Architecture on the other hand maybe an actor in acknowledging the diversities emerging in the histories and may also pivot in transcending India towards unifying them.

Conclusion

A nation's progress is continuously shuttling between its histories and the futures. Architecture becomes a tool to express and embed this progress in the form of the built environment. This architecture emerges from the indefinite phases of nation-building that occurs in a continuous process as the nation evolves.

India, as a nation was built on the Nehruvian vision of "*unity in diversity*". The many phases of nation-building will reflect and move forwards with this as an underlying principle. In the contemporary, the diversity may be looked at as the three categories of nation, the civic, the ethnic and the global. Nation-building in the contemporary may mean transcending and unifying the categorical nations and acknowledging their co-existence.

Architecture plays a critical actor in the process of nation-building. It serves as a historical foot-print as well as projecting the contemporary, as histories, to the futures.



Figure 1: The Crystal Palace

Image source: blog.inoxstyle.com/en/crystal-palace/



Figure 2: The Legislative Assembly, Chandigarh

Image source: www.dezeen.com/2016/08/07/



Figure 3: The Secretariat, Chandigarh

Image Source:

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretariat_Building,_Chandigarh



Figure 4: The High Court, Chandigarh

Image Source:

in.pinterest.com/pin/236509417910181769/



Figure 5: The Permanent Exhibition Complex, New Delhi

Image source: indianexpress.com/article/delhi/



Figure 6: ISKCON Temple, New Delhi

Image source: myoksha.com/iskcon-temple-delhi/



Figure 7: IIM Lucknow

Image source:

mbapundit.com/2012/09/12/



Figure 8: The Belgian Embassy, New Delhi

Image source:

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