

a Modern Traditionalist

INTERVIEW WITH PROF. RAVINDRA BHAN

NUPUR PROTHI KHANNA



Photos: grafini

Here was an opportunity to sit across and discuss about the profession with one who gave up a flourishing career with Prof. Ian McHarg in USA, spanning seven years, to initiate the Department of Landscape Architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi in 1972. For Landscape Architect Ravindra Bhan, what followed were fulfilling years of imparting education and pursuing a successful practice involving projects such as the Architecture and Landscape Development of Mughal Sheraton, Agra; Landscape Development of Rabindra Sarovar, Kolkata; Shakti Sthal (Memorial to Late PM Indira Gandhi); Development of Ayodhya ghats; Urban Design, Site Development and Architecture for Andrews Ganj Housing, HUDCO, New Delhi to name a few.



Prof. Ian McHarg, a doyen of Landscape Architecture who authored 'Design with Nature' that revolutionized the approach to landscape design, is with us no more. Having interacted with Ian McHarg as a student at the University of Pennsylvania and subsequently having worked with him,

we ask Prof. Ravindra Bhan:

What influence did the involvement with Prof. Ian Mc Harg have on your design philosophy?

RB: Having worked with Prof. McHarg and with the practical experience acquired over the past many years, I have realised that Landscape Architecture is a holistic profession and it needs to concern itself with basic environmental issues. Landscape Architecture requires an in depth understanding of a place with its environment in totality. One has to know or learn how to derive the context, to be able to perceive what the site has to offer. Then, of course, the other challenge has been to develop it in accordance with the client's design brief. The large-scale urban and regional development projects in our country usually fall in the domain of government organisations with little or no contribution of private practitioners. Hence the opportunities to apply the design philosophy of effectively developing an ecological vocabulary for a project and seeing it through in its execution have been few and far between.

While setting up the Department of Landscape Architecture, at the initial stage itself, the course was visualized to move beyond mere aesthetic aspects of landscape to develop an understanding of the underlying design criteria and solutions through related environmental parameters. The studio projects were envisaged to incorporate practical environmental issues ranging from water harvesting to the development along the riverfronts. Issues of variation in local and regional soil conditions, vegetation types, microclimate etc. were addressed with an aim towards guiding the students to develop distinct design vocabularies for each project.

Large scale urban projects being developed by the government organisations at the city and state levels are not of the professional standards, as observed in the public landscapes the world over, inspite of most of these departments involving their in-house architecture and landscape architecture expertise. Why have professionals not been able to make an impact on the urban development in our country?

RB: Large scale urban or regional projects in our country, as I mentioned earlier, are usually in the domain of government planners and engineers. First of all, there is hardly any representation of our profession in government departments. Moreover, the architects and landscape architects, employed in these organisations, are usually fresh graduates with little or no practical experience. Hence, they are unable to comprehend and

interpret site characteristics into a design vocabulary thus overlooking the complexities of the project. This often results in oversimplified, non-specific solutions, unrelated to the site. Also the decision making power usually lies in the hands of engineers who may give more emphasis to a problem solving approach incurring least economic costs and thereby ignoring important environmental issues.

The situation may be improved by ensuring the participation of competent design professionals at the stage of decision making itself, especially for large development schemes.

What, in your view, are the transformations required to be adopted, at this juncture, in our architectural education system, to ensure an acceptable standard of professionalism that may be comparable the world over?

RB: Miracles don't happen in the design schools. Though it is imperative that the faculty needs to be dedicated and competent as design professionals which may often not be the case. This obviously reflects in the quality of work of the students graduating from these institutions. Also three semesters of landscape education, in my view, is too short a period to be able to educate a student towards the nuances of landscape design. In my opinion, the course needs to extend up to at least two years, beyond which a period of practical training of at least a year needs to be made imperative. With the absence of an institute of landscape architects as well as no formal license being a prerequisite to practice, it would be difficult to ensure a compulsory period of training under competent landscape professionals. What may be required at this juncture is to launch a course of landscape architecture at undergraduate level, as is the case in many countries abroad. This would contribute, to a large extent, towards improving the quality of the professionals in the field.

And lastly, do you perceive landscape to have come of age in India?

RB: Landscape as is perceived in our country even today evolves from the British concept that comprised mainly of uninterrupted stretches of lawn. Whereas lawns in England require minimal maintenance as they are most suited to the climate there and hence an answer to many a landscape architects dilemmas, their use in

the Indian climate seems out of context. Lawns in most parts of our country require high maintenance and thus do not offer the most judicious solution (*well illustrated in Prof. Bhan's own front garden consisting of grass jointed paving, an array of hardy ground covers and a small self sustaining lotus pond with fishes - a ready canvas of his art.*)

Over the last twenty five years the change in perception of landscape and what it can do, in my view, has been minimal, especially if I were to cite the case of residential developments, a basic need of society. Public housing has little or no semblance of site planning especially in government owned or developed colonies in most parts of the country, though the situation in some parts of cities like Pune and Bangalore may be considered to be better.

Having been on the advisory committee of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission for years ever since its inception, I have been observing that, though it has been mandatory for the projects being submitted to include a landscape plan, planting plan, basic landscape details of the boundary wall etc., very few of these plans have any semblance of landscape. Even most architects seem to incorporate landscape more for a cosmetic effect. The situation has worsened due to lack of the basic infrastructural facilities, for instance, fool proof survey methods, indifferent and uneducated contractors. Unless there develops a respect towards the natural and physical environment of a site, the situation can hardly be expected to improve. This has to change as also the apathy of those in power towards the urban environment as is the case with the flyovers emerging all over our city. These issues have been dealt with sensitively in other parts of the world.

For example, in Malaysia, hydroponic techniques have been used to cover these structures with plant material to keep them green.

A recent trend emerging in our country is inviting foreign consultants for a whole range of landscape projects. In my view, these consultants, working with their Indian counterparts, will bring about the awakening in our profession and related trades along with the desired professionalism in the projects and their management, as is observed in other countries around the world.

Nupur Prothi Khanna is a practicing landscape architect. She also contributes as visiting faculty at the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Physical Planning, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi.
> e-mail : prothi@ndb.vsnl.net.in

