

Regional Conference and Council Meeting of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation of Architects (SAARCH)

Heritage Conservation and Architecture of Tourism: A Keynote

**“Temple Roofs Over Terrace Bars?
Calling for relevance in heritage-bound architectural creativity”**

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INTRODUCTION: CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AS A VECTOR OF CREATIVITY

Kathmandu valley makes a striking display of an architectural heritage of a magnificent past and the contemporary stance of the present development, at once; its medieval looking city core with glittering temples standing proud but engulfed in the contrasting new development all around. Admittedly, it has been less than a mutually supportive coexistence; the conservationists and the tourism lobby ranting at the loss of the traditional as the modern makes its inroads and the development lobby feeling stifled and stemmed by the past. On the outskirts of Kathmandu, we have the Boudda Stupa, a World Heritage Monument, that used to be one of the most striking and memorable of aerial sights that greeted one coming in to land at Tribhuvan Airport. Today, the architecture of development, undoubtedly led by tourism, in the area has been so massive and diverse that the same sight shows the Stupa as stifled and out of place! Not that the very many monasteries, restaurant and hotels, all serving tourism based on cultural heritage in one way or the other, that have cropped up around had intended to cast such architectural derision on the heritage; on the contrary, almost all of them claim to have been efforts at heritage-bound modern architecture to begin with.

Evidently, the architecture of present, particularly of the buildings associated with tourism and buildings around heritage sites, do seek to aesthetically relate to heritage but quite often with unsatisfactory results. Such mixed coexistence of the traditional with the contemporary is not a particular case of this heritage city; it is commonly observed in many other heritage towns of the region. From the standpoint of architecture, the existence of tension in the environment of aesthetics can be taken as a positive factor – for, tension leads to creativity and through creativity we may remove the unease itself. As the possibility of creating a mutually respectful and complimenting architectural environment obviously lies with the designers of the contemporary rather than with those involved in the conservation and preservation of the heritage, the responsibility of positive creativity must be put on the practicing architects.

Along with conventional conservation per se of the heritage monuments, heritage ambience of a city can be greatly enhanced if heritage-bound architectural creativity is sought in the design of the contemporary buildings, be they for tourism or other activities of the society. As a matter of fact, such an approach can be more meaningful from the perspective of the society simply because it uses its cultural knowledge as a vector for creativity. We may call this ‘dynamic conservation’ as it creates cultural continuity through transformations based on interpretation, elaboration and application of heritage values. As contemporary architecture gets better rooted in and related to heritage, it will

also offer opportunities for continuing local cultural identity – a charming prospect for the cultures caught in the net of globalization. The gain could well be to both the heritage and the contemporary architecture; most important, the gain will be most to the people, who inherited the heritage and for whom the contemporary is also to be designed to serve.

EXCELLENCE THROUGH ROOTING IN TIME, PLACE AND PEOPLE:

Architecture is a creative art and it creates spaces and buildings that, in essence, seek to make places for human purpose. The marvelous thing about our profession is that we design buildings, around and inside which we live: an object of art to live in, so to speak. Such objects and their juxtaposition make the settlement, a forum for us to live life in our own ways. It is this making of a place that makes architecture unique in relation to other arts. Uniquely, works of architecture, great or small, have always been culturally, socially and physically bound to the people, the place and the time. It is for such reasons only that a built 'heritage' becomes a matter of pride and identity for the associated people and place. And sometimes, when the human purpose transcends localism and becomes a one of humankind, the heritage takes on a mantle of a world heritage. While the SAARC region and its magnificent culture has yielded many World Heritage Sites and Monuments Zones in UNESCO inscription, we, in South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation of Architects (SAARCH), can be proud that most of the built heritage are works of architecture of the yore. Unfortunately, if we are to judge on how well are our contemporary architectural creations bound to the people, the place and the time culturally, socially or physically, we may have little to be proud of. If the architecture of heritage buildings give us a sense of identity and local appeal, our own contemporary architecture appear so excessively globalized that it has little to offer 'in heritage quality' to the future society. Clearly, architecture as practiced at present has not taken sufficient cognizance of its social and cultural responsibility. And if architecture is to remain in the forefront of making of a culture, the profession must shoulder this responsibility, gravely and surely. Just as the buildings and spaces in the cultures in heritage did, the architectural creations of the present must, while providing a setting to the contemporary culture, seek appropriate rooting in the place and the people through transformation of the heritage from the past into the future. The present is and must be made into a link between the yesterday and the tomorrow. Only thus will the present be able to assimilate the lessons of the past pleasurably and usefully as a responsibility towards the future. Architecture, as the most determinate of all arts and a definitive part of culture, is uniquely placed to do so concretely.

CULTURES IN CONTINUITY: SAVING RELEVANCE ENDLESSLY

Does heritage exist beyond the monument, the area or the city so designated? If heritage is a value, it should reside more on the minds of the people, who value it, rather than in the monument, area or the city so designated. Indeed, the heritage quality of a building is a joint expression of itself and the state of our thoughts. A heritage building should remind one of a qualitative aspect of life, of achievement, or of other values and excite the onlooker into a drama of thought in which the onlooker and the looked upon play an equal part. Therefore, heritage may be related to a past but it would be heritage only if it appeals to the value and state of mind of the contemporary man.

The phrase 'cultural heritage' often makes a culture sound like something from very far into the past and separated from the present by a span of neutral time: as something torn apart from the present such as the pyramids and associated Egyptian culture. But all cultures are not cut off in time and quite a few, like some of our very own in the SAARC region, have been called living cultures precisely for such reason. Although external societies, visitors and tourists may observe a culture as a 'still object' of curiosity, for the society inheriting and practicing that culture, it is not an object to be seen in isolation but a part of living and life in the society itself. Thus culture does not remain a culture in heritage but becomes a way of living - very much of a contemporary entity - with a past but not of the past.

Clearly, we should be talking about cultures in continuity as distinct from cultures in heritage. When we think of cultures in continuity, we are also quite clear that it is continuing to be a culture at present and will continue into the future with appropriate transformations. And this is not newly discovered idea - cultures have always been constantly in development - always changing and transforming moment by moment - an endless process of shedding of irrelevance and absorption of newer thoughts. As cultures come in contact with others or meet newer challenges in life, a transformation takes place and its relevance is saved endlessly.

Therefore approaches for the conservation of cultures in continuity must aim to save relevance to parent society continuously and endlessly. In such a process of assimilation of new into the old, both would get transformed and its relevance would be saved if we consider the change from the perspective of the culture in question, from inside and only from inside. In architecture, this could set into motion a process of culture-bound creativity, whose worth would be judged from within the society and in terms of its cultural etiquettes and rules of behavior.

CULTURE AS AN OBJECT: ROOT OF THE PROBLEM?

If transformation is the key to creativity as well as saving relevance, then we should explore why current approaches inhibit appropriate transformation from happening. One key reason for the loss of relevance could be found in the approach itself - instead of aiming for the renewal of the old, our current design efforts seem to be philosophically bound to making new look like olden! To seek answers as to why such a philosophy has taken hold, here, we could begin by looking at the linkage of tourism with heritage and heritage conservation.

Since time far into the history of man's development, heritage sites 'have always been magnets of travel'. Although culture is a way of living of a particular society, in cultural tourism, the guest discovers and enjoys it as an object/ a commodity separated from the host and gives an economically definable 'alternative use' for the culture of his fellow brethren. For many countries, like Nepal, the role of cultural tourism in the national economy has become so significant that culture has become important much more as an economic resource than as a way of living or as a source of national identity. Since tourism tends to make an object of the 'culture', something to be viewed, savored and enjoyed but not to be lived, we have to be constantly on guard to see that the use of the 'living culture' as subject of living in the parent society is not lost. That we have not

really been careful, and the above concerns are for real, is evident in the majority of the expressions of the architecture of tourism itself. It would appear that attempts to conserve the heritage through building controls or development plans applied to places of cultural importance, or through contemporary creativity in architecture of hotels and restaurants and other tourism service buildings, are ruled more by the dynamics of tourists' choices, not much different from development of other cultural products as commodities for their consumption rather than by objectives of creating continuity and transformation of culture as an input of meaning to the way of living for the inheritor society in question.

It seems to me that it is this view of culture as an object for enjoyment of the visitor, and a similar message tourism seems to transmit onto the host itself, that is at the root of the process of loss of the legitimate use of culture as a way of living of the visited society. It seems to break the emotional, symbolic and spiritual link of tangible cultural expressions within the host society too, contributing to their use in delinked fashion. This approach, in architecture, considers visual expressions as ends by themselves and forgets that they are actually results of use of other criteria of hidden aesthetics, as it were, such as symbolism and philosophy of placing, sequencing, proportioning and expressing though understandable and socially relevant motifs. Such an approach seems to be behind the piecemeal transfer of elements, materials or forms unto new buildings- a paste-up job with a quality of creativity that may be even less than skin deep. We can see several examples of cultural creative bankruptcy in the use of *Dachi-apa* skin over concrete or concrete relief works aping carved windows or even replicated temple roofs over terrace bars, if we take a short walk in the city core area. The same approach, when taken to extreme ends, also creates architecture of such aggrandized scales and décor that they exude a posture of challenge towards the heritage rather than themselves being a humble transformation in harmony.

WHOSE PERCEPTION TO GO BY?

While we are at it, it should be noted that understanding of what is characteristic of the heritage and perception of what's and how's of transformation/ application into contemporary architecture itself vary within the host society as well as outside of it. The perception of the lay people seem to differ as per their own social placing and status; the perception of the intellectuals also seem to vary depending upon their philosophical upbringing and exposure. It is also interesting to note that whereas the general lay attitude is more favorable towards adaptation and change, the elite in the society seems to go for rather nostalgic 'authentic copy' paste-up approach. Architect's perceptions too seem to vary mostly by the level of exposure and experimentation with liberal modern aesthetics and philosophy as well as purposeful observations and study of heritage and its traditional literature. If we are to take lead in the creative architectural transformations bound to heritage, we will have to understand the heritage itself as much as the changes desired by the society and make up our own minds in a socially and culturally responsible way.

PRESERVATION OR FROZEN CREATIVITY

The most common tool used by conservationists to influence and direct architectural creativity and extract designs and building actions 'compatible' to the built cultural heritage is 'building code for protection of historic areas'. In Kathmandu valley, the idea

of heritage monuments zone and their conservation and protection through building code was floated as early as 1964 and they have been in 'implementation' for almost twenty five years now; yet any visitor to the Durbar Squares will see how poorly such codes have failed both to protect the heritage and to cause creative response. The codes themselves do not aim for development in aesthetic continuity; rather they try to force architects to replicate elements in the outer fabric of the heritage- forms, materials and finish- into the outer fabric of the new/replacement building. It fails because it sees a cultural heritage as a collection of static elements frozen in time and attempts to kill the dynamism of the cultural process. The codes tend to be detailed more to stop changes rather than to encourage transformation through developmental response. The profession has been finding much of such building codes stifling. Even the people living in the heritage areas feel exasperated by this approach to conservation; heritage conservation should not be used to suffocate the contemporary man in a historical soup. It should rather seek to bring about appropriate contextual response and expression of contemporary value bound in a sensitive way to the heritage. If such is the case of Nepal, the story has not been too different in other countries of SAARC too. As a matter of fact, in order to preserve private property listed as heritage, even more extreme measures aimed at bringing a full stop to change such as Transfer of Development Rights (TDR), are being contemplated for application in some SAARC countries like India.

CREATIVITY IN BUILDINGS FOR TOURISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

If we look around for buildings where the traditional architecture/culture-bound creativity is at play, we will see such attempts mostly in two types of buildings. They are more profuse in buildings associated with tourism, such as hotels, resorts, restaurants or other tourist-service; less frequently, designers of buildings of national importance also seem to feel the need to incorporate use of heritage elements and forms fairly directly to create a visual ceremony, as it were. The two sets of building tell the story of the dual role society has assigned for its heritage, one, as an object of tourist interest, and two, as a subject of national identity.

When heritage is adapted into design of tourism service buildings, it would make economic and commercial sense for it to add to the overall purpose of the building itself, which is to provide for the need of the tourists; aesthetically, it plays to the gallery of tourists! And what is that the tourists seek out of culture and why is it that his field of interest is always culture other than of that of his own contemporary society? At the bottom of it all, cultural tourism has to provide an escape to the tourist from the boredom of his own contemporary culture and routine. And this escape, tourists seek through 'encounter' with past eras. This is not to say that tourists come to live the life of past eras, rather they seek to experience it as an onlooker. It is for such reasons that the past is often pasted into the interior and exterior of the architecture of tourism. It has very rarely been able to provide an outlet for creativity as the design objective is set from the tourists' perspective, which would be happier with as close a replica of the image of the past as possible. Often, the show is a put on, a staged authenticity, as it were. Obviously, this process has little to offer by way of transformation to the host culture. As a matter of fact, it is more likely sending wrong messages into the host culture itself about what is precious in their culture.

The problem of adaptive creativity is compounded by the way we have chosen to see grandeur of culture in just the peak built heritage of the past. Even within such heritages, we seek representation through the highest of achievements. It is usual for both cultures in heritage and cultures in continuity to be religion heavy and peak architectural expressions tend to be centered on the sacred. Even when as a matter of living, religion may not have played as great a role then as the heritage buildings of religious nature would have us believe, large number of buildings erected in honor of sacredness and social power tend to survive for a longer period because of the use of better skill, materials and technology of that time. The symbolic nature of such buildings and the service oriented nature of the tourism support buildings often clash leading to criticism of adaptations. Indeed, transformation of ideas, forms and features from sacred buildings into buildings of other functions often bring to focus issues too sensitive from religious perspective and tend to get criticized from the purists and conservatives in the society as violations of the sensitive and the sacred. It is often likened as the architectural equivalent of the cultural performance of sacred dances, which is seen more as a profanity rather than a sensitive creativity. They are not only 'artificial and synthetic' to look at; they could also be culturally unethical as it could have serious consequences the sacredness of a culture itself.

When we consider the buildings of national importance, another set of buildings where reflections and adaptation of heritage forms, elements and finishes have been observed to some extent, its criticism and problems have not been as severely plied on puritanical and sanctity grounds as they have been to heritage bound architectural attempts on tourism service buildings. It would appear that the social acceptance of use and adaptation of ideas and basis drawn from sacred and sanctified buildings onto buildings of national importance even when it may house as mundane a function as government office is higher than when they are used in commercial or tourism service buildings. May be it is the perceived and presumed sanctity of purpose rather than the sanctity of use per se that is behind the acceptance. If creativity is applied with such intent while using the elements from sacred buildings in the case of tourism support buildings too, it should be able to earn respectful stance from the host society. However, using ideas and elements from heritage buildings of other than sacred nature appears a safer and surer way of creative transformations that will bring easy social acceptance. However, the need to maintain the sanctity of elements of cultural identity, whether of national, regional or local standing, must be emphasized, for, in that sanctity lies the potential of identity; it's commercial caricature or other forms of distasteful expressions will harm and kill the basis of identity itself.

HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND CULTURE-BOUND ARCHITECTURAL CREATIVITY:

It would seem natural that conservation of cultures in continuity will have to be differently approached from the conservation of cultures in heritage. Its concern could not just be limited to conservation of elements or sites at the peak. One major objective departure would be the development of responsiveness of conservation action in making it culturally relevant to the present, the society and to the place. Indeed, if the traditional approach to conservation of cultures in heritage may be characterized as an attempt 'to keep it as much as of the past', the approach conservation of cultures in continuity could be 'to transform it as much into the future'. Indeed, a conservation approach that

dynamically links the current way of living with the 'heritage' would be true to 'living cultures'. This would instill cultural meaning in conservation for the inheritor.

For the design professionals, the first move towards this conservation/ transformation of heritages in continuity or culture-bound architectural creativity could be made by first rejecting conditions and parameters based on the view of culture as a commodity/object seen or used from outside and replacing them with new parameters constructed from within. As we reject the externalist stance and approach the design from within the stance of the subject, a creative transformation of the heritage may be possible. This way, the architecture that results would be a meaningful medium for living for the inheritor. Its contemporary relevance will accrue through its emotional and philosophical grounding within the society. That should be a more important objective of design than ensuring a close physical and visual relation with the heritage building. While, as a building, it can only stand in space and, as much as within, around and outside which also we live, the architect should do well to remember the fact that the building is an object of visual experience too. Even then, the principles of aesthetics should be grounded on the society in question.

CONCLUSION

Only buildings belonging to dead cultures are frozen in time. Cultures in continuity or living cultures have to change and transform themselves. From the architectural design and creativity perspective, we may be talking about transformation rather than conservation of living cultures, although as it is the spirit of the heritage that is to go through transformation, a part of the past will always be conserved. The decisions on what needs to be preserved, which others to be conserved and how the rest are to be transformed should be taken from within the society and in its own terms and not from the eyes of the tourist or an external onlooker. Successful culture-bound creativity should be able to establish a balanced give and take of ideas between the new and the old. As much as through the conservation of cultures in heritage, transformation of cultures in continuity should provide a respectable and culturally worthwhile symbolic approach to create local/national identity.