**March 28, 2025: Patan Museum Court**

**Kathmandu Institute Discussion**

**Topic “Architect in the Town - Seeking to craft a greater role in Urban Imaging”**

**Three Questions I am Trying to Answer Here are related to theory and practice of architecture**

**Question One: The Past How was the role of architect/architecture shaped/implemented to craft the Urban Image of the Malla period Towns?**

**Question Two: The Present What are we doing as professional architects today to completely lose the ability to give the town a harmonious cultural image?**

**Question Three: The Future How do we reverse the practice in future and get architects to lead in evolving a socio-cultural imaging of towns?**

**What’s architecture? We do not like to take any and all buildings as work of architecture – certain qualities in building help qualify it as Architecture. Norberg-Sultz showed us the Lincoln Cathedral, we might like to rather take the case of the humble PATI found in the Newar architectural ensemble. Its qualities and performance are as charming. Whatever, we need to think gravely as to what these qualities are – purpose in architecture has to go beyond those aimed at by Vitruvius ’s function, beauty and robustness. In art of architecture Beauty has come to be a difficult word to fathom – now we have even started to seek ‘deep beauty’ in architecture.**

**How do we do architecture? Of the many assessments, I like Venturi’s words – Architecture happens on the edges. Sometimes, we misunderstand the metaphor and think of architecture as making the outer form and envelope, even elevation and worse front elevation. We lose the objective.**

**What are the additional roles played by architects these days? Beyond B Arch, we expect our architects to further specialize also in Urban Planning, Urban Design, Heritage Conservation, Green Architecture-Energy, … Clearly architecture can have a purpose beyond the built edifice.**

**It is outside the building, on its edges and a little beyond, we find the town, the town’s space – the urban expression and this is image I want to look into to here today to find architecture and its contribution. How does architecture radiate an image unto the town? How can architecture project an image outside of itself? Aurelli’s thoughts on ‘absolute architecture’ could come in handy here.**

**Question One: The Past How was the role of architect/architecture shaped/implemented to craft the Urban Image of the Malla period Towns?**

Malla towns of Kathmandu Valley, particularly their capital towns, display a fantastic image of town, an unified outlook yet with a clear statement of socio-cultural-political hierarchy in its public spaces. We could look at the Durbar Square, the Market Square, the Neighborhood Square or even the living space of the extended family – the residential courtyard – amazing imagery of a vibrant urban living is in play all over. At least three characteristics illustrate themselves:

1. The anonymity of the Architect,
2. The unfailing use of a common vocabulary and language of architecture that appears developed with long practice and general acceptance
3. All buildings - even the smallest house or Pati proudly professing a partnership in creating that image of the town, Being a Part of the Whole, Not Trying to be Different but Aligning to the concept, the De if you please.

Lets contemplate a moment on **De, which is a socio-spatial concept – A bounded/ delimited/ whole – Universally understood, respected, and preserved.** A community – A civilizing/ civilized entity that celebrates living together in the open – value to living outdoors, outside, in between buildings – in the infra – in between space. This s**pace held and supported the civilizing infrastructure of society, culture, and politics** and helped develop the universality of social, cultural and political value in town. Along with this, the society’s total acceptance of and adherence to the vocabulary and language of architecture that appears to be behind the ICONIC optics and visual imagery of the town. The vocabulary appears detailed in the crafts level – as we see Silpashastra brought to bear on architecture.

How was this architectural harmony implemented and used to create distinct town imagery? How did the three capital towns create their distinctive image even in their central ‘national’ space of the Durbar Square? This not easy to answer, demanding deeper analytical and time series studies - but I can certainly say that we cannot explain its uniqueness just as a special case of ‘the east and eastern philosophy’ of Vastushastra. Malla towns appear to take Silpashastra as seriously or more. **Architecture appears driven by a high moral socio-cultural objective set through a certain interpretation of Vaastusastra and Silpasastra and bounded – to create a conscientious socio-cultural urban space** – it seems to have taken materials and methods of construction as fixed and given, taken functionalism effectively out of architecture by using similar MANDALA as a design template for all building types and left aesthetics innovation as a possibility under the function of craft and skill (and whatever knowledge component it included).

The following appear to have been a part -

For all these centuries down history, we were **practicing architecture at the individual building level and at the same time as a town forming entity** able to provide a basis for the linkage or even be the linkage itself to the larger society, culture and politics of the town.

In Malla towns, unlike in its working component of architectural design, the geometry of **the Vastupurushamandala or just Mandala was given an ‘organic’ modification as per topography and river flow features.** This is important as it shows that the society was not dogmatic about the theory and philosophy associated with the original idea of Vastupurushamandala. Malla Period Vastushastra documents substantiate that the Guru was the final interpreter of the canons (Guru > Guru Bhaju > Gubhaju).

We know that we used Vastupurushamandala **as a unitary architecture and town making template** – the mandala – essentially a group of entities arrayed around a focus or center – the lines keeping the group together being the forces of society, culture and its power structure. **A civilizing space was always bounded by the concept of the periphery, each strategic pull having its own extents and peripheries.** While architecture provided the focus, the overlapping peripheries of societal, cultural and political elements made for interlinked spaces, often multinucleated and with some conceived order. If we take a deeper look at the **streets and squares and the neighborhoods and the periphery and boundary markers**, we can see that all the three strategic frames were meticulously networked over the bounded towns space.

When we take a closer look at the three towns, we find the residential architecture (major chunk of the town) is already a **mixed usage building** – mixing residence with shops and workshops (all the crafts practices), and its towns idea already exhibits the tole (community), it has sets of public buildings ranging from **Pati to Chapah to Sattal**, which present themselves as **social and cultural guideposts as they hem in the public spaces,** often marked by a religious building – a temple, a stupa or the innocuous spirits of benevolence (Ganesh, Bhimsen and Bhairav). **The public buildings and the space they rein in actually provide the social, cultural and political ties/infrastructure for the urban to have become the town.**

Too often the Mandala has been misread as religious template prescribed by the priests to project and pass on the beliefs of the system into perpetuity – I would not like to imagine that all of infrastructure of society, culture and politics are subsets pushed by an obsession for religious idealism. The belief system appears in the forefront only because it has survived and carried the three civilizing precepts of society/ community, culture (accrued and agreed knowledge and use) and the politics (management for creating and sharing public goods) together. These three precepts and the high moral socio-cultural objective set by the society appears to have driven the architecture and town to iconic excellence. A case in point for the inquisitive to enquire in depth could be the name NEPAL MANDALA itself – from De to SWANIGAH to Nepal Mandala – the concepting and re-concepting of bringing together of people and places abound.

But where was the architect and other bearers of architecture and how were they sharing the task of individual compositions and overall image? **Of course, the credit for the overall composition and resulting CIVILIZED ICONIC image of town and architecture was shared in anonymity! The achievement of universality and timelessness was, I think, made possible by the grace of anonymity.** Vastusashtra documents evidence that the practice of architecture shared among

Gubhaju/Sthapit – Site, Soil and orientation decisions

Dongol - Measurements/laying out of buildings

Carpenter/Wood carver – Building layout/coordination – authorized by Owner

Mason, Stone worker, Roof/Tile layer, etc -

**Question Two: The Present What are we doing as professional architects today to completely lose the ability to give the town a harmonious cultural image?**

**Neglecting the Great past and getting lost in CHAOTIC PRIMITIVE ICONISM**

Well, great past and a learning to offer both in terms of architecture and town. We chose to be oblivious to it and neglect. And, in less than a century since the great earthquake of 1934, which opened Nepal to Western inroads in all ways, we have more or less lost our millennia long traditions.

For the architectural and towns tradition, already under great stress with the self-inflicted superimposition of Post-Victorian Classicism brought by Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur, the thrust of technology led cement and steel based western modernism was too strong. We were so pushed into the abyss of urban CHAOS with a sprinkling of buildings which tried to fall in line with the PRIMITIVE INDIVIDUAL ‘ICONISM’ that came embedded in the Modern Architecture. This PRIMITIVE ICONISM was just the reverse of CIVILIZED ICONISM in practice before. While in the west itself, through Modern Architecture of the Masters that society was breaking from the shackles of their past of Baroque, Renaissance etc. to get to post-industrial simplicity/brutality, we lost our architecture and old towns to the whims of our elite, who fell for their classicism. Western Modernism, which thrives on disruptions and contrasts, has been a costly failed leap-frogging for Nepal Mandala, its architecture and towns, its knowledge, culture and heritage. New architecture in the new town? Both are yet to show up anywhere.

When we come to our ‘modern’ days (and this is not used here to do anything with ‘modern architecture’, as that fad had all but ended in the west when we started borrowing from it) – western ideas in architecture dominate us and actually whole idea of progress/change for the better is based on western thoughts. If we take Giedion’s three space concepts of western architecture as it progressed e.g. (1) Architecture as Sculpture, (2) sculpture with an interior space and (3) Architectural complex with interior space plus exterior space; we find the last development, the 3rd Concept, to be most poised to make architecture a tool of town making – it was precisely through such architectural approach to public buildings that the traditional Nepali architecture molded the quality and quantity of the exterior space thereby weaving the social, cultural or political and or all guides and ties to the town. **As Nepali architecture came to contemporary times, it seems to relish more as a sculpture with closed spaces for limited communities, the 2nd Concept dominating – it seems to have become an object of exhibition – some finding aesthetic pleasure when the cognitions matched. Needless to say, such an individualist architecture focused in its own aesthetics has virtually killed architecture’s possibility and need to form space pervasive externality and extents.** This seriously decreased architecture’s ability to provide for and support the intangible urban infrastructure of the society, culture and polity. I would say, in contemporary valley architecture, sadly, **momentary individualism (architecture aesthetics /style that dies with the death of the so called successful architects) has come to replace timelessness and universality as a measure of architecture.** Architecture has lost/ about to lose its social and cultural values – it is no longer heritage making too.

Socially, the western ideal of indoor living has pervaded our **urban life style also – this has significantly reduced our urge towards communal living**, which contributed so much towards the use and making of urban spaces. **I think today’s problem lies in the architecture profession limiting its role to a building** – mostly addressing what happens inside it and what look and form it takes as a matter of individual sculptural/artistic consideration and failing to find or objectively play a role for architecture in imaging the town and providing a strategic frame for the play of society, culture and politics in the space outside, in the urban space and in the town as a whole – an entity for civilized living.

In the architecture profession taking the professional triangle of Consultant-Client-Contractor gospel has narrowed our focus literally to the other two parties and often more on just the Client – we design simply to respond to his ‘problem’ and give a professional solution – adequate ‘technical’ – design and construction – solution. This has limited architectural design conversation to the context of the site, client and ‘regulatory measures of the town as applicable to the site’. In a limited context of adjoining neighbors, urban movement, services and environmental easement (air, sun, water) are brought in the picture by the bye-laws/zoning laws etc. if in place. **In recent decades, deteriorating environment and global warming issues have made architecture design go beyond the form and function approach to architecture to consider climate, energy and waste issues as legitimate determinants of architecture.** These departures are still to make dents in architectural practice in Nepal and only a few client-consultant cases are seen in practice – architecture as a responsible tool of actionable reduction of the negative consequences of present life on earth’s health is yet to be. Still, the professional architect throughout the world have used rational of energy and material saving (green architecture/rating etc.) to justify the change as benefitting the individual client. However, **this does widen the role of architecture from fulfilling a clients program to one aimed at the larger health of earth and humanity.** Even as these changes get architecture diffused from the client and site centric focus of profession into the realm of the **physical health of earth concerns**, contemporary architecture STILL seems put retaining its course away from any urge to socio-cultural creativity at the neighborhood, urban space and the town.

Is there a need for architecture to take a lead in creating a socio-cultural identity at the scale of the town? Yes, of course, that is the third question of the day

**Question Three: The Future How do we reverse the practice in future and get architects to lead in evolving a socio-cultural imaging of towns?**

**What’s the Way back to Leadership of Architecture in the Making of the Town?**

Can architecture be an urban cultural activity? Architecture as the most concrete of all arts is no doubt culture forming as it has demonstrated ability to mold human usage and social behavior as we live inside outside and around the artistic creation/sculpture or building. Keeping architecture as a matter of visual optics and worrying about how it shows off to the neighborhood streets or the world at large is extremely myopic and is a result of seeking individual stamp of visual creativity as a hallmark of success in architectural design – primitive iconic architecture is garish individualism. Branded aesthetics (architect/client identity seeking) can only make a city queer!

If we take architecture as an art (Lalitkala) in balance between beauty, strength and function – functionality of space is given quite a consideration by the profession (through its client-centered discourses), technology and material coming together to support the strength part (quite strong in modern days as manufacturing and engineering dominate building activity); **its only aesthetics that is left to go on changing in time, unfortunately architects have taken as their tool for marking their individual presence – that is what is causing the failure of architecture in contemporary times.**

Chaos rules the roast in Contemporary architecture as the balance is lost and materialistic technological thinking makes architecture into one-point perspective – which loves and demonstrates its own focus. It sounds like a domination of science but architecture is practiced more like arts – its aesthetics abstracted at individual architects level as primitive iconism! With every building seeking to project a dominant image, not only the physical image of the town becomes visually chaotic, they also cease to exude even a call for social, cultural, and political harmony. Only Civilizing Iconism bred on the physical, social, cultural and political harmony and objectivity holds potential to for evolving architecture as a tool of imaging the town. Contemporary architecture has much to unlearn and learn to carve out such a imaging role.

1. Discarding individualist aesthetics will end the primitive Iconism in architecture and move architectural aesthetics towards the universal – we would need to rediscover cognitive systems of the lay people and not the elite – appeal to the larger cultural sense of the people. The latter exercise is long time consuming.
2. Architecture cannot remain client-site centric alone, nor can it escape its urban socio-cultural function in the name of seeking health for earth by taking up the physical ecology, environment and energy concerns (as in Green architecture). To make architecture as one with more than just a function of physical imagery and physical environment (surfaces, mass, volume etc and energy, ecology and environment) we have to work on the social, cultural and the political objectivity at the edges of space, (i.e. where the inside and the outside or site and the city or private owner and the public users, meet). The architects project based design process needs to consider architecture’s socio-cultural-political responsibilities (town’s requirement) and give it as much importance as to client’s requirements. Despite the difficultly of making the clients pay for the imaging of town, architects can take this lead as their socio-cultural responsibility.
3. How can we motivate the private to go for public good and make them accept the town’s requirement? Just as we have at present byelaws to accommodate the neighbor’s rights, we need to expand them out considerably to include **social, cultural and political demands of the town.**
4. Along with designing for the function as wished by the client, architects need to try facilitating socio-cultural activities of the small adjoining community and also a larger community as per the political force of the project. By so doing, the possibility of socio-cultural content in exterior space is increased – architecture of inviting spaces not delimited/enclosed or even prohibitive spaces. Creating borderlessness at the design edges should be the initial act of breaking from site centric approaches. We need to look deeply into what we in architecture studio term “requirements” of a project and develop design processes that promote the economic well being of the client while appealing the client to his responsibility as a social-cultural being, a towns person.
5. We just have to remember that we live in the age of specialization as a profession – But we should not make architecture as specializing in individualist aesthetics -aesthetics should be treated as a matter of universal definition – timelessness in appeal should be the noble objective of architectural aesthetics – it needs to respond to basic human cognition of beauty and allowing perceptions in socio-cultural joy (beyond the visual). Architecture need to be reformed as heritage forming again
6. As we get further awashed in western culture, which is a functionalist material and technology driven civilization, architecture too will be lead by these three prongs. Somewhere in there – we will have to push a sense of universal and timeless aesthetics – physical as well as social, cultural and political. Here.
7. Of the presently developing architecture making processes – the parametric design appears appealing as a carrier of a user chosen characteristics, agreed set of vocabulary and language of architecture that may enable towns to emerge with a image. Using parameters framed on social, cultural and political threads as controls and outcomes measures, architecture could be able to create a sense of socio-cultural network of spaces and invite socio-cultural activities on its outside and edges.
8. But we should not make architecture as specializing in individualist aesthetics. Instead architectural aesthetics should seek universality and timelessness in appeal – it needs to respond to basic human cognition of beauty and allowing perceptions in socio-cultural joy (beyond just the visual).
9. We can venture into experiments in these directions.