

CATCH 22: 6th & 7th January 2007
A SHORT NOTE ON KEY DISCUSSION POINTS:

12 January 2007

From the discussions, the following points emerged which could form a basis for future action:

DEVELOPMENT OF AN AESTHETIC TRADITION: In the first set of discussions, held 22 years ago, the following major questions had emerged:

- a. What is the identity of Indian architecture?
- b. What kind of architecture is appropriate to the Indian condition?
- c. What does “modernity” mean in the Indian context?

In earlier times, an aesthetic tradition would develop, which was strongly rooted in culture and community, and such questions were dealt with in the context of such a tradition. In today’s contemporary and globalised world, there is no such reference. It is unlikely that a meeting of architects (such as Catch 22) would develop such a tradition during their deliberations. In fact, any such attempt would be counterproductive, as it is likely to get trapped in superficial issues such as style. As Alan Colquhoun remarked: “There is a difference between style arising out of an effort to create meaning, and style being seen as a predetermined solution by which meaning can be affixed.”

However, through a continuing discussion on concerns that individually preoccupy each one of us, a set of similar and shared concerns could develop. In the long term, this set of shared concerns (sustained by ongoing debate, deliberation and documentation) could develop into an aesthetic tradition.

DOCUMENTATION

One of the serious handicaps in India is lack of adequate documentation on our historical tradition of architecture. While the major famous monuments have some compiled information, there is very little available from which one can glean information on a wider sense of tradition.

The drawings that are produced every year for NASA, as entries for the Louis Kahn trophy, constitute a ready and valuable resource on documentation of traditional Indian architecture. But it

is a hitherto untapped resource. If this resource could be published, or widely disseminated in any form, it would contribute a great deal to awareness on our historical tradition.

It would be best if this effort is spearheaded by a neutral institution such as CoA or NIASA.

This would be the easiest point on which to quickly achieve tangible results.

EDUCATION COURSEWARE

On 7th January, we saw presentations that showed some interesting courseware and thinking on curriculum for the basic design courses for entering architecture students. It would be useful, if this thinking was pulled together into a common pool so that sharing and cross-fertilisation of ideas could occur. This would further the cause of education in general. We could start with the institutions that were represented in the Catch-22 discussions, and then widen the set of participants.

URBANISM

There is cause for serious concern regarding our urban environment. We continually see a major segment of the population without adequate shelter, increasing degradation of the urban environment, failing infrastructure, etc. Globalisation and the rising rate of urbanization worsen this crisis every day.

On the one hand we could say that the reason for this continuing catastrophe is a distortion in the political system, where power and corruption divert attention away from pressing developmental concerns towards self-serving agendas. This is undoubtedly true, and political mobilisation is required to develop resistance to this distortion.

But it is also possible that there is a more serious problem, where our conceptual tools are so limited that we do not even perceive the real problem. Our planning method is dominated by western models that do not even serve western needs, and are largely inappropriate to the characteristics of the Indian city.

How should we conceive and articulate the problem? Is this a situation that calls for professional expertise or participatory mobilisation? While these questions (and there are many more related questions) are complex and require input from other professions, brainstorming and action plans that come from architects could provide some useful direction.