Modernization as an Ideal in Housing

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ASIAN GAMES VILLAGE, RAJ REWAL
Principles of Modernism in Architecture

There are certain principles that define the modernist movement in architecture:

• Functional priority in designing
• Usage of modern material and construction technologies
• Redefining and Rethinking traditional systems of architecture
• Climatic sensitivity and considerations
• Uniformity and simplicity in design

In the realm of Housing, these principles translate into certain requirements for developing countries such as India:

• The need for affordability leads to dealing spatially and economically efficient typologies
• Provision of all basic facilities
• Standardization of built form expression
• Usage of modern technology to create vertically emphasized structures – Spatial Efficiency
Modernization of Indian Architecture

“The modern is a liberator which even allows a new way to re-examine basic values in tradition after a period of decadence, or fragmentation or foreign occupation”

– Curtis W (1987)

• Modern architecture in India derived its learnings from the principles of architects such as Le Corbusier and Louis Khan in the areas of Climate, Space, Urbanism and Habitation

• The attempt, post-colonization was to reconcile modern technology with indigenous methods

• Le Corbusier is often referred to as the father of Modern Architecture in India. One of his greatest contributions, Chandigarh, was described as “an antidote to the cramped quarters of old towns and an instrument for social change” by Jawaharlal Nehru

• Constant efforts were made by architects such as Joseph Allen Stein, Charles Correa, Raj Rewal and so on to integrate traditional values and techniques into modernist ideologies of architecture developed post industrialisation.
Modernization and Housing in India

• Charles Correa attempted to implement traditional techniques of sheltering roofs, sunken courts, outdoor rooms etc. into the organizational housing typologies developed by Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier in his luxury apartments in the Kanchenjunga block, Bombay (1973-1986).

• Urbanization is obviously the central problem in India, related as it is to the increasing population and the economic failure of the rural base to deal with sheer numbers

• People opt to build their own shelters, i.e. auto construct, continuing “peasant vernacular” and developing squatter slums

• Housing models—even very intelligent ones-designed by architects, usually end up far further up the housing market than intended. This leads many committed designers to realize that their function could be to bring expertise to an uncontrollable informal sector at the level of technical assistance
Reality of Housing In India

• Certain questions, with regard to Domestic Architecture in countries such as India arise:

1. How can natural resources like water and forest best be prolonged and allocated?
2. How big can cities get before they clog and die?
3. How can economic vitality be encouraged in the countryside so stemming the flow to the city?
4. How can massive indigenous skills be mobilized even in the horror of the urban slums?

• In Delhi, numerous Housing colonies were designed as close-knit aggregations, such as Raj Rewal’s Sheik Sarai Housing (1976) and The Asian Games Village (1982) as an attempt to combine modern housing principles with traditional techniques of architecture indigenous to the area of construction.
The Asian Games Village (1982)

- Achieved international recognition as a refined combination of modern housing principles and ideas derived from the *havelis* of such desert towns as Jaisalmer.
- Units combine into neat clusters of six which can be laid end to end as streets, or grouped to form squares.
- The sequences of half-enclosed precincts with planting are separated by gates formed from linked upper level terraces, in a manner which recalls traditional *mohallas* or neighborhoods.
- The amber grit finish with grooved incisions signals the standardized modern structural system while also echoing masonry.

With a mix of a street and squares, the architect recreates what he calls the ‘theatre of the street’, where public interaction can spill from their immediate spaces as neighbours into a community and works towards making them active participants and not just viewers.
Modernism and Affordable Housing

- As mentioned earlier, in India’s context, catering the lower income sectors was a vital necessity.

1. While many factors outside an architect's control interfere with the production of housing for ordinary incomes
2. Obsolete zoning ordinances
3. Over-conservative lenders
4. Play-it-safe developers

- The architect's share of the problem is rooted in an educational system that encourages unique solutions when obvious ones might do better (Gellner 2002)
High Rise Housing in the Indian Context

- The Rajiv Gandhi Avas Yojana proposed two primary innovations:

  1. Slums be re-developed in-situ (not more than 1km from original site)
  2. Housing projects be designed in consultation with slum dwellers

- Unfortunately, projects such as Sabarmati riverfront in Ahmedabad, Ejipura in Bangalore, and DDA’s high rise proposal in Govindpuri are flouting RAY guidelines and searching for quick fixes

- The 17 storey high rise relocation proposal by the DDA, to the Govindpuri slum residents, poses the following problems:

  1. The project hasn’t consulted with the slum dwellers regarding their needs
  2. High rise structures do not provide the sense of security that low rise compact slums do to women and children in the community
  3. High rise structures make the fish market accessibility (An important source of income for the dwellers) difficult for the slum dwellers
  4. The top floors of the building become uninhabitable for almost half the year without mechanized cooling (which is not an affordable option for the slum dwellers). Water supply will have to have additional mechanized support as well
  5. The high rise structure fails to achieve the existing settlement density whilst ensuring safe and comfortable living standards

- Should authorities such as DDA continue to make the same mistakes as the west, to ultimately move back to appreciating high density low height settlements?
Case Study: LIG Housing, Madipur, West Delhi

- The architects used lower densities (161 units/hectare) to provide courtyards.

- Each unit on a 20 sq.m. plot consists of a multipurpose room and toilet on the ground floor and a provision for expansion on the first floor, reflecting an ‘incremental housing’. Such an approach is adaptive to the needs of such income sectors, and the implementation of framed technology systems and compact simplistic design approaches facilitates this.

- The orthogonal shape of the courtyards meant that there were triangular areas left out along the edges of the site.
• The houses along the main roads expanded over the years to fill in the ‘gaps’ on the triangular edges of the site. Many also changed use into zones of retail and commercial activities.
• The ‘power-geometries’ of space and place produced by multi-sited and multi-scalar networks of gender relationships, practiced and realized through architecture, provided opportunities of transformation in women’s lives.
• The rigidity of modernist typologies and policies restrict the users, spatially and functionally. This drives them to expand and morph the designs.
• Hierarchy has become a prevalent consequence of modernism, where categorical division on the basis of affordability has become a norm in housing.
References:


- Hamdi N, 2010, the placemaker’s guide to building community, earthscan LTD.