

ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION IN INDIA: WOMEN STUDENTS, CULTURE AND PEDAGOGY[†]

By Madhavi Desai

In this edition, Madhavi Desai writes about the issue of gender in architectural education, in an attempt to decipher the growing proportions of girl students in the school as against very few practices led by women while trying to understand the dynamics of a learning atmosphere.

Education is the corner stone of any discipline, including architecture, where it primarily combines intellectual rigor and practical skills. It is also a place where the students learn to think deeply about the interconnectedness of the culture, the built environment, technology and the world of ideas. The most significant and unique aspect of architectural education is that it is potentially infinite in its scope and subject matter. The discipline of architecture is deeply embedded in the cultural world and the culture of an institute is closely connected to its teaching ideology and pedagogy. "Architectural education, although obviously intended as vocational training, is also intended as a form of socialisation aimed at producing a very specific type of person. All forms of education transmit knowledge and skills. All forms of education also socialise students into some sort of ethos or culture. These two functions are inseparable."ⁱⁱ Institutional practices such as organisation of curriculum, the relationship between theory and practice and administrative set-up enable or constrain particular forms of knowledge.

Women architects have been participating in the field in increasing numbers as designers (and as teachers/researchers) in contemporary times. However, even today, there are very few large practices where women are the sole principals. In the past 25 years, many women architects have opted to establish successful partnerships with their architect husbands or male/female partners.ⁱⁱⁱ Some women work in governmental and municipal organisations. Many of them devise alternative models to mainstream practice or diversify into non-traditional roles. However, they are much less visible in terms of leadership, academic success and excellence in practice. "The absence of women from the profession of architecture remains, despite various theories, very difficult to explain and very slow to change. It demarcates a failure the profession has become adept at turning a blind eye to... If we consider architecture a cultural construct, both vessel and residue, we can but wonder what this symptomatic absence suggests about our culture and the orders that govern the production of its architecture. One thing

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[†] The 1974 batch of students at CEPT, Ahmedabad (Photo courtesy Anjali Yagnik).

is clear however... The absence of women points to a profound gender-related crisis at the base of architecture".^{iv} This statement is universally applicable, in varying degrees, including to the situation in India as women professionals continue to face hurdles at various stages due to their gender in glaring contrast to other design fields such as media, fashion, graphics and textiles. Many women graduates give up the idea of working for someone or independently practice after a while. Many others branch out in related fields. As a result, women in architecture have not yet developed a critical mass in practice.

This is ironic because their intake has been steadily increasing – from two/four women students in the 1940s – in the 280 odd colleges of architecture for the past 25 years. The key question is: Can anything be done at the level of education? The popular opinion of this situation is that processes in architectural education are bias-free and give equal opportunity to all for success. However, it has been observed that – "... the socio-educational context of the university [or college], in which skills, knowledge and attitudes towards the practice develop, plays a strong role in restricting the potential of many women in this field."^v Since this fact has not been recognised at the local, regional or the national levels in India, almost no attention has been paid to it in the discourses or corrective approaches. The women students' percentage of admission ranges from 50 per cent to 80 per cent today. In spite of this fact, the number of women in professional practice drops substantially to about 15 per cent to 17 per cent.^{vi} In the West, for example, the RIBA, AIA and other organisations had already begun to address these issues many years back. This essay, then, attempts to unearth some of the hidden aspects of gender that have traditionally been overlooked as non-issues, while initiating a constructive discussion towards the processes that are beneficial for both – men and women.

Ground Reality for Women in Architecture

Extreme forms of violence such as dowry deaths, domestic abuses and foeticide are visible forms of discrimination towards women. In addition, there are invisible, often subtle, forms of conditioning, imbalances and inequalities as a whole in the society. They moderate the connection



↑ The student intake in 2006 at R V School of Architecture, Bengaluru, (Photo courtesy Nancy Jaiswal).

between gender and the built environment. This invisibility is, perhaps the reason why gender is ignored in almost all colleges of architecture – in theory and design courses, even though feminism has been one of the foremost movements of the twentieth century and it has affected all disciplines to some or other extent. The barriers include perceptions and experiences in a patriarchal society, the dichotomy between the professional and feminine self-image and dealing with predominantly male clients, consultants, colleagues, contractors as well as construction workers.

What, then, are the hidden barriers for women? First of all, there is the equality myth. Without gender sensitivity, the built environment is commonly treated as a neutral background. Most men and women designers strongly believe in the neutrality of the profession and the self. Choosing to describe and view themselves as gender neutral, the women prefer to call themselves 'architects' and not 'women' architects. In an attempt to be 'mainstream', most of them stay away from 'women's issues' for fear of being labelled as feminists or not being accepted as a 'true' professional.^{vii} This makes us take the situation for granted, adding to the marginalisation of the subject and its solutions. By contrast, in the USA for instance, by accepting the fact that there is direct/indirect discrimination towards women professionals, much has been achieved. "In the West, affirmative action has been entrenched for close to three

decades now. Gender equity and diversity at the workplace are embedded in systems and hiring processes in a mostly unobtrusive and constructive way."^{viii} This is a major intervention and is something that we can learn from.

Generally, there is low visibility of women in the profession and the academia. Most famous and celebrated architects that students study and see in publications are male. There are relatively few women in high positions such as heads of departments of architecture or principals in firms. It is not often that women find representation in national architectural competition juries, in lecture series, as inauguration guests, on interview panels or on college inspection visits except as tokens. This results in a more masculine perspective and a vicious circle that is hard to break. Central bodies like the Council of Architecture (COA) or the Indian Institute of Architects (IIA) also have very few women on their boards or in a position of leadership.^{ix} This, in turn, affects media coverage (print, television, and internet) and the overall perception of the society. With long working hours and relative low pay scale, women architects find it difficult to balance work/life. All these factors combine to undermine the confidence of the woman, ultimately affecting her performance in practice.

Unfortunately, though during the course of their education, because of the generally liberal atmosphere of colleges, women students anticipate no difficulty



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in combining a professional career with women's traditional family roles, this generally comes as a shock to the female graduates as they struggle after marriage and motherhood while their male counterparts' careers go soaring ahead. In spite of this, most women architects view this situation as a personal issue/choice or a 'social problem' but not as a part of the larger context.^x If gender awareness is there, it may benefit their career development in the long run.

The Women Students and Societal Perceptions

When India gained independence from colonial rule, the general view was that women's top priority was to look after the household as well as children and then participate in the outer world.^{xi} In fact, it remains the same to some extent even today. "Though higher education is socially accepted and taken for granted among the upper and middle strata in urban India, it is also viewed more as an investment in the daughters' distant future rather than as an immediate goal."^{xii} The discipline of architecture is also affected by this attitude in the society.

The architectural course is increasingly perceived as a 'feminine' profession with the assumption that girls will be able to work from the office and also handle the home front.^{xiii} Both men and women graduates face difficulties in the real world. "The student-turned-architect invariably feels let down as he steps into the portals of professional work after five years of study. His contact with senior professionals makes him feel helpless and despondent to start with. With encouragement, more hard work, commitment to self and profession,

things begin to look up but results are still inadequately rewarding financially. A look at student-architects' counterparts' financial and professional performance in other compatible fields heightens the inadequacy of the training after longer years of academic programme."^{xiv} At the same time, women students have restrictions imposed on them due to their social conditioning and strict family conventions. They often face an identity and cultural crisis, because of the disparity between the social freedom they experience in the 'liberated' architecture college environment and the realities of the outside world. This, at times, gets difficult when the student has to find a balance in her new dual existence.

In addition, many parents in the Indian society, consciously or unconsciously, perceive the aims of higher education for women include finding a suitable match, being socially supportive to the husband, bringing up children appropriately and perhaps participating in economic activities if needed. Although this attitude has been changing in the last few decades, in most communities it has still not come to mean that women can become predominantly career/business oriented. In the past twenty years or so, a preference for 'professional' brides has been increasing in the society. The decision of working or developing a career is often left blank for the future; in other words, it depends on the attitude of the husband and the in-laws.

Conduct of Design Studio

Studio teaching is central to the pedagogy of architectural education and generally takes up maximum hours in a curriculum. It remains at the core of an architectural course all over the world. Men traditionally dominate the

teaching of design, as a result "...the culture of the studio in most of the architectural schools is decidedly masculine, rewarding competitiveness rather than collaboration, and emphasising the design of singular object – buildings rather than the potential context of buildings. This is anachronistic, since environmental design practice is almost invariably about collaboration and context."^{xv} The above quote stresses that design is not a solo activity but a collective process. Projects are rather large and complex in a globalising world and are often beyond the capacity of a single student, however talented. A team design project in advanced years will give a more realistic idea of how contemporary architecture is built. Collaboration which is the least nurtured skill in design education can be countered by emphasising group learning to diffuse the overwhelming competitive ethos of the studio. Then learning will shift away from self expression (read ego) and romantic individualism. "Rather than augmenting students' feelings of inadequacy as designers, schools should reform the authoritarianism of studio pedagogy and broaden their view of the profession. The architects would feel less need for gurus, and those they turned to would be more responsible and humane."^{xvi} In practice, many other disciplines are involved such as social sciences, business and urban design which seem to be largely absent in terms of integration with the studio.

Most colleges do not encourage direct participation with users which leaves a gap in the students' training. More experiences such as dealing with clients (even mock clients) and consultants, use of role playing techniques, involving non-architects as user representatives and learning to converse

about architecture with all manner of people, are worth looking into to bring in the much-needed realism in the classroom, at least once or twice during the entire course. The element of reality will also help bring in some idea of cost and budget restrictions. Integration of lecture courses with the studios will avoid the traditional rivalry between the two where the student will be able to see building design as a composite whole as in real world situation.^{xvii} With easy availability of cameras and videos, they can be far more immersed in live situations. Practice incorporates non-built elements such as the mode of organising an office, the tone of human relationship with clients, contractors and colleagues as well as participation in the building construction process. These and other shortcomings in education affect all graduates but more so to the women professionals due to the complex social and professional context they have to face.

The jury system has been endlessly debated and its options explored. A discussion is beyond the scope of this essay but it should be pointed out that the disadvantages of the system often at times affect the woman student more. I personally prefer the 'circular' format, which promotes cross learning and encourages students to participate fully. In addition, on juries, women should be consciously invited to genuinely include a balanced view point through different experiences and voices.

However, most of all, the studio teaching is silent especially when it comes to focusing on gender. It is often addressed marginally, if at all, by broadly being included in the 'social' or 'cultural' realm. It is an established fact that spatial arrangements of buildings reflect and reinforce existing gender, race and class relations because space is socially constructed and the appropriation of space is a political act.^{xviii} Design teaching should also acknowledge the importance of feminist analysis by looking into the gendered use of space, including occasional projects such as a women's health centre, a hostel, a crèche or a nursery.

Theory Courses and Practical Training

Theory is a fundamentally important part of architectural education, as it provides a discursive platform for the underlying ideology and basic knowledge of the discipline. "Architecture is inclusive of

allied and applied aspects of humanities, aesthetics, built environment techniques and skills, technology and engineering sciences and allied management systems. While utilising relevant information and knowledge from these disciplines, it goes beyond them to be a unique and holistic discipline of architecture."^{xix} Humanities, social and building sciences and structure courses that are meant to complement the designing process, end up being treated as ancillary, with limited integration. However, architecture is also about understanding people and dealing with complex interpersonal relationships at all stages in the practice. The assimilation of the various related courses with the design curriculum would help to create more holistic studios. This would help to ensure a greater interest, elevating them from merely secondary subjects to being more complementary to the design studios as helpful tools.

For example, exercises of how to evaluate structure through site visits and case study analysis could be useful to give clarity of concepts rather than mechanical exercises of doing structural calculations. The stress should be on qualitative and logical understanding of the intuitive behaviour of structures. In the same manner, site visits for construction courses; particularly during the working drawings stage will go a long way. Courses such as building construction and professional practice can include hands-on experiences and site supervision exercises. Students could be introduced to interact with actual site contractors, site engineers and labour. There could be small do-it-yourself projects or intensive teaching

modules that stress on the construction process, market, materials knowledge and management. Most institutions also fail to approach architecture as a business (versus simply as a design and building activity).^{xx}

Four to four and a half months' practical training is not adequate for most of the students. The training semester needs to be better structured and guided. Voluntary summer vacation apprenticeship could be encouraged. On the other hand, the professional practice course should be made more realistic to include the nitty-gritty such as Floor Space Index and selling logistics in the market. Minimum three years of work experience should be strictly required before one is given license to practice that will help in developing professional confidence. These efforts may be able to deal with complaints such as this: "As a result of the emphasis on design, students graduate with considerable mastery of this area, but often without much know-how in building technology and construction... More disturbing is that this concentration on design skill leads to immense frustration among young architects. There are just not those many opportunities to do design work in the average firm. Several studies have shown that only 10 per cent of an architecture firm's time is spent on this function in the building process."^{xxi} In short, we require proactive methods.

Faculty and Role Models/Mentors

The relative absence of role models and mentors is one of the crucial reasons why female students do not easily make



↑ The social equality on campus, CEPT, Ahmedabad (Photo courtesy FAAA archives).



¹ Practical experience at Smt Manoramabai Mundle College of Architecture, Nagpur
(Photo courtesy Prof Ujwala Chakradeo).

successful strides into the profession. Their power and the resultant generation of aspirations cannot be emphasised enough.^{xxii} Jobs in colleges of architecture are more secure, that are less vulnerable to market forces than architectural practice. This fact often draws architects to join as teachers. Women, in addition, are keen to join since it helps them balance home and work relatively easily. Therefore, in the past few decades more and more women can be found in the architectural academia, as opposed to the dwindling numbers in practice. However, women faculty are more often than not marginalised or not given crucial subjects to teach. "We found in our interviews that many women, even if they teach in studio on a reasonably regular basis, are seen as peripheral because their primary responsibility is in a non-studio area... [They got] course assignments that effectively denied them both advanced studio assignment and leadership roles."^{xxiii} Hiring more women as core faculty as well as increased involvement of women who are active in practice are obvious first steps. The visible presence and direct interaction of students with female architects may give them a tremendous sense of possibilities which would go a long way in bridging the gender disparity in both teaching and practice.

Research Activity

Unfortunately, so far, educational institutions in India have not become

primary generators of research as there is no rigorous policy or awareness of its value. It is neither a compulsory requirement for faculty promotion nor is there adequate funding available. In fact, "Teaching, research or academic pursuits draw negative response and respect among architecture professionals, and interestingly, even among the academics. The full time employed teachers in most cases consider teaching as additional activity to their private professional work. Practice for teachers need qualitative as well as quantitative norms."^{xxiv} The absence of research is reflected in lack of theoretical development on gender. Ignorance of these issues in practice gets reflected in design. This is compounded by the fact that gender is not acknowledged in built environment history and in related contemporary publications. This lacuna has to be addressed.

Conclusions

The profession of architecture is changing in a positive way; it is much more collaborative, pluralistic and inclusive. New modes of practices are emerging where an individual has a much more networked role in the design process. Simultaneously, women are also increasing as primary clients and patrons as their money/social power rises in different fields. The following are my suggestions for how women students can be better prepared for the discipline:

*Create a network of women in architecture, to reach out to other women students and professionals who are struggling to achieve success in the profession and make efforts at mentoring juniors.

*Organise regular seminars on gender, profession and society related topics and plan on more conscious exposure of women in architecture through guest lectures and exhibition of works.

*Design leadership opportunities for women students as well as look into encouragement to them through scholarships, travel grants and financial aid.

*Till there is a greater balance in power, we may consider tools similar to affirmative action to enforce professional empowerment of the women in architecture.

This essay questions the current boundaries and traditional framework of architectural education in India, stressing on rethinking and paradigm changes. It urges the revamping of institutional premises/ frameworks and repositioning of the curriculum while critically looking into the issues mentioned above. There is a need for a new intellectual-academic sensibility and a pedagogical shift in viewing the role of women as creators and consumers of space. The suggestions given here are neither all encompassing nor targeting only the women students.^{xxv} Given the fact that there will be a large number of women entering the profession in the present century, they need to become a part of serious discourse within the discipline. The young generation, in particular, is more determined than ever to make a dent on the professional scene. The question at this moment is no longer about 'equality' but of recognising the 'differences' and going beyond male/female duality. Both male and female students can be made more sensitive by a proactive approach. Thus, the challenge is to make sustained efforts that lead to a learning environment that empowers the woman architect along with their male counterparts and make the discipline more democratic as well as diversified in the true sense. ■

Madhavi Desai

- i. This article draws from an unpublished paper I presented at a seminar in CEPT University in July, 2012 titled, "Architectural Education at the Faculty of Architecture, CEPT University: Women Students, Culture and Pedagogy".
- ii. Evens, Garry, *Struggle in the Studio: A Bourdivin Look at Architectural Pedagogy*, *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984), Vol 49, No 2 (Nov, 1995), p 105
- iii. The partnerships work in different ways. At times, women handle independent projects on their own while sharing the office infrastructure, at other times, in a more flexible arrangement, both partners work together, the male architect often handling more of the site/travel interactions. The partnership mode of practice has its own advantages as well as disadvantages.
- iv. Hughes, Francesca in the Introduction, Hughes, Francesca (Ed) (1996) *The Architect: Reconstructing Her Practice*, MIT, PX-XI
- v. Ahrentzen, Sherry and Anthony, Kathryn, *Sex, Stars and Studios: A Look at Educational Practices in Architecture*, *Journal of Architectural Education*, September: 1993.
- vi. The percentage cited is largely based on the Royal Institute of British Architects' (RIBA) research in 2003 into the dropout rate of women from architectural practice. See: <http://www.architecture.com/files/ribaprofessionalservices/education/discussionpapers/whywomenleavearchitecture.pdf>. This is the first research of its kind in the UK. Carried out by the University of the West of England on behalf of the RIBA, the report found that a combination of factors, including poor employment practice, difficulties in maintaining skills and professional networks during career breaks and paternalistic attitudes, cause women to leave the profession (RIBA Website). 11 per cent of the total persons involved in the profession of architecture are women according to the website of the American Institute of Architects. Unfortunately there is no such study in India and all my efforts to get statistics from the relevant organisations have failed so far.
- vii. Desai, Madhavi (Ed), *Gender and the Built Environment in India*, Zubaan, New Delhi: 2007, p 16
- viii. Ramdorai, Sujatha, *Windows in the Ceiling: How to Create an Enabling Environment for Women in Science*, *the Indian Express*, January 6, 2012.
- ix. Out of the total architects registered with the COA, 27 per cent are females. Women form 6.6 per cent of the members in the (governing) Council and 6.25 per cent of the members of All India Board of Architecture and Town Planning Education of All India Council of Technical Education. As per the *Handbook of Professional Documents (2002)*, Council of Architecture, New Delhi, p xxi
- x. Desai, Madhavi (Ed), *op cit*.
- xi. When I was in the undergraduate programme in architecture in the late sixties/early seventies, the norm for girls was a degree in arts and then marriage after graduation, most becoming homemakers. The preferred qualification now is a professional or management degree but developing a career is not necessarily a path to be followed.
- xii. Chanana, Karuna, *Subject Choices and Gender: Women in Higher Education in India*, in Khullar, Mala (Ed) "Writing the Women's Movement: A Reader", Zubaan, New Delhi: 2005
- xiii. Based on responses to my questionnaires of women students in architecture.
- xiv. Chaudhary, Prem Kumar, *Education of Architecture Students*, in 'Workshop on Status and Future of Architectural Education in India', IIA, NEW Delhi: 1998
- xv. Jennifer Wolch in Kullack, Tanja, (Ed.), *A Woman's Profession*, jovis Verlag GmbH, Berlin: 2011, P. 186
- xvi. Dennis Scott Brown, *ibid*, p 132
- xvii. Groat, Linda, *Reconceptualising Architectural Education: The Necessity for a Culturalist Paradigm*, *Architecture and Culture Symposium, Canada*.
- xviii. Weisman, Leslie, *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago: 1994, p 2
- xix. Quoted from the unpublished report of The Board for Development of Post Graduate/Advanced Studies/Research in Architecture and Allied Fields of Studies, The Council of Architecture, New Delhi: 2005
- xx. Mazumdar, Sanjoy, *Becoming an Architect in the Third World: A Study of Educational Cultural Values in IASTE Working Paper Series, Vol XXXII, 1-36:1991*.
- xxi. Gutman, Robert, *Redesigning Architecture Schools*, *Architecture*, August 1996
- xxii. One respondent pointed out that she longed to, but never found, role models because she needed them to have achieved a mental and physical balance in their personal and professional lives as she had been constantly struggling with. She failed because she never came to know about the family side of any of the women in the field, either in India or abroad.
- xxiii. Linda N Groat and Sherry B Ahrentzen, *Voices for Change in Architectural Education: Seven Facets of Transformation from the Perspectives of Faculty Women*, *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984), Vol 50, No 4 (May 1997), pp 277 and 279
- xxiv. Quoted from the unpublished report of The Board for Development of Post Graduate/Advanced Studies/Research in Architecture and Allied Fields of Studies, *Op Cit*.
- xxv. Crucial issues like protection from sexual harassment, physical safety of women students and support such as a crèche for women faculty are beyond the scope of this paper but cannot be ignored by the educational institutions.

This column invites eminent academicians, ethical teachers, teaching architects, institution builders and design educationists to comment on architectural education (and design education as an extension) in the context of India.

Concerned architects / academicians / educationists / teachers and students are invited to write to us / call us / email us for further discussion. Your deliberations / observations / critique / counter-arguments and agreements will be deeply valued. We must create a meaningful community of like-minded people to negotiate our future as professionals and responsible citizens of a globalising India. We must hold ourselves responsible for the quality of architectural and design thought in the coming decades.

Please send your feedback / comments to iabedt@jasubhai.com. IA&B believes that this issue is of prime (and unprecedented) importance at the moment for the future of architecture in India.