

Towards A Non-Oppressive Environment

Ar. Madhavi Desai, Ismet Khambatta.

In 1924 the Bombay School of Art introduced its first course in architecture. The graduating class had no women. Today, there are forty four schools/departments of architecture in the country and fifty percent of the students who graduate each year are women. It is time for a new discourse on the architectural profession in India.

A new generation of architects is gaining recognition, however, a review of the eminent personalities in the field, yields very few names of women architects. Though women are gradually gaining ground in the field, the fact is that today there are very few firms headed by women.¹ On the other hand, for the past decade, women have constituted 50% (or more) of the average intake of students to our schools of architecture. Approximately 1500 students enter these schools every year and almost as many graduate as architects.² This substantial change in the ratio of female to male students in the schools is not reflected in the profession "out there". This raises several questions: Have very few women actually graduated as architects in the last decade? Are they not good designers? Are they just "naturally" inclined towards designing houses and interiors only which is why they remain unnoticed? Do they lack professional commitment? Or is the profession unsuited for women? We believe that these issues are complex and deep rooted and call for a lot of searching on several fronts, one of them being architectural education.

Historically, the formalisation of education in architectural was an attempt to distinguish the profession from the other building trades, to improve the quality of buildings, and to raise the status of the profession by making the practitioner and the public aware of the higher "values" of architectural design. "Architects wanted to become recognised as experts with specialised knowledge, obtained through long study. They sought to infuse the profession with a theoretical base and the establish ethical principles of conduct."³ Schools of architecture, thus, actually instil in the student the attitudes and values of the profession as a whole (not the individual teacher) and define his/her role within the profession and with respect to society. This

is as true today as it was when the first courses in architecture were introduced at the Bombay school of art.

What we wish to examine in this short essay is that, looking at the brief history of architectural schools in India, and the fact that school curricula and teaching method were created with the purpose of producing a certain type of professional (at a time when sexual stereotypes and division of roles were more rigid), what are the kinds of changes required in these institutions if we want to move towards "a non-oppressive environment" for both men and women.

The School of Architecture

"The division (of the school) into ateliers (studios). . . The tradition of the older pupils helping the younger The teaching of design by practicing architects. . . . The beginning the study of design as soon as the student enters. . . (the school)."⁵ This characterisation of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris holds true (with minor differences) for most of our schools today. The Ecole was accepted as the model for the first schools of architecture to be set up in Britain (1870) and in the United States (1866).⁶ "While the Ecole exerted a strong control over the nature of the students work, it left him quite free to choose how and when to do it. . . the center of the students' world was the atelier or studio. . . ateliers were maintained independently by patrons (design professors) who were practicing architects. The patron usually came around in the evenings to give critiques, but otherwise the atelier was student-run according to time honoured traditions." Many schools at this time either did not admit women students or observed a quota system.

In India, the roots of architectural education go back to 1794 when a surveying school was set up in Madras. But it was only in 1924 that the Bombay School of Art (now called Sir J.J. School of Architecture) introduced courses in architecture and started issuing the draftsman's certificate. From this time to the late 1930's there were just two schools in India, the Bombay School of Art and Kala Bhavan Baroda. Most of our leading architects today, were graduates of these two schools.

At the time of independence, as the world focus shifted to the U.S.A. (being the major power in the aftermath of World War II), the urge to break with tradition (and British influence) made many turn to the U.S.A. for graduate studies. U.S. schools, at that time, were turning to 'modernism' under Gropius' influence at the Harvard school of design. These graduates returned to set up some of our own schools and to strongly influence architectural practice in the 1960's.

American schools had adapted elements of the Ecole system to fit in with the rapid expansion of their universities and to integrate it with the lecture and class system. "The goal of American schools was to produce, as the AIA committee on education put it, the gentleman of general culture with special architectural ability."⁸ Walter Gropius came to the Harvard School of design in 1937, until which time his work or that of the Bauhaus school had barely been heard of outside Germany. Gropius believed in the inter-dependence of all forms of creative work and the thrust of his educational program (as director of the Bauhaus) was to remove the academic distinction between the fine arts and the so-called applied arts. "..... students should be trained to work in teams also with students of related techniques- in order to learn methods of collaboration with others. This will prepare them for the vital task of becoming co-ordinators of the many individuals involved in the conception and execution of planning and building projects."⁹

Our schools today seem to have achieved a peculiar combination of the Beaux Arts and Bauhaus schools. What we want to question here are the implications of this system from a feminist view point in terms of, the social culture of the school, the method/s of teaching, particularly in their simulation of the professional world, and the curriculum content, insofar as it is an expression of the values of the profession.

The Social Culture of the School :

Typically the department of architecture or the school is a very close small group of students and faculty. The long hours of work, study travel trips, etc., tend to isolate

students from all other forms of social interaction outside the school. The studio system in which much of the learning is done through helping senior students with their project further aggravates the situation. The lack of overt discrimination and the closeness as well as informality between students (and sometimes with teachers) gives women students a false sense of 'equality', of not being any different from the others, and a sense that the professional world will be like an extension of the studio.

The student of architecture is encouraged to work late nights, and the most loved teacher is the one who comes in at night for crits and arranges project submissions for Sunday night instead of Friday afternoon. The explicit message that goes out to the student is that there is the need to make a total commitment, in order to be a 'successful' architect. This is unfortunate for both men and women students, but particularly difficult to accept for the women, to whom the choice between a family and profession is presented as either or. Many women professionals realise too late that it need not be so.

The studio teacher is the model of the "professional" architect in the eyes of the student. The teaching of design' has traditionally been a male bastion and the woman studio teacher (when one does encounter her) tends to be a hard task master. As a role model she is still seen as the exceptional woman and in some way also represents all the social repressiveness that the women students want no part of. Typically, "Talk over the drawing boards (with the studio teacher) includes a hidden curriculum on how to behave as an architect, with anecdotes about the eccentricities of well-known practitioners or their cavalier attitude to clients A 'prima donna architect' (usually male) who convinces the client that it is a privilege to have secured his services and who feels free to subordinate the clients requirements to his own flights of fancy".¹⁰ Situations such as these serve in very subtle ways to mould the students' image of themselves as professionals - an image which for the woman student is alien and a difficult one to cultivate.

"A scarcity of female role models is constantly identified as a major obstacle to a constructive learning environment for women in standard design education Thus a demonstration that women can achieve fall standing in the profession becomes an important teaching objective in itself".¹¹ It is therefore important to change the male persona' of the architect in the classroom, to get over the 'Howard Roark' hangover, so that all women who choose to take up architecture can attempt to have a socially significant career that also allows for personal growth and creative development.

Teaching Method :

One of the hallmarks of the Beaux-Arts School was that the student advanced through the course on the basis of points collected by winning competitions. The Bauhaus, on the other hand emphasised "team work", a knowledge of all the crafts, and a problem solving approach to design.

The studio as it is conducted today emphasises egocentricity and competitiveness as opposed to a group effort or group learning. The student is expected to stand before a "jury" (usually practicing architects) and justify his or her decisions for the proposed design in the face of questions and criticism which more often than not puts the student of the defensive. To the woman student this is in sharp contrast to the norms of behaviour (being self effacing, submissive) she has internalised while growing up.

In evaluating the project a lot of emphasis is placed on the "statement" that the designer has tried to make, the "clarity" of the concept, the "strength" of forms etc. at the cost of an attention to detail, attention to the feeling of the place or greater attention to the actual needs of the users and interaction with them. At the risk of reinforcing another stereotype, we quote Karen Frank: ".....writings from recent feminist literature in psychoanalysis, psychology, philosophy and philosophy of science suggest seven qualities that characterise feminine or feminist ways of knowing and analysing: 1) an underlying connectedness to others, to objects of knowledge and to the world, and a sensitivity to the connectedness of

categories; 2) a desire for inclusiveness and a desire to overcome opposing dualities; 3) a responsibility to respond to the needs of others represented by an "ethic of care"; 4) an acknowledgement of the value of everyday life and experience; 5) an acceptance of subjectivity as a strategy for knowing, and of feelings as part of knowing; 6) an acceptance and desire for complexity; and 7) an acceptance of change and desire for flexibility."¹² The Bauhaus attitude of team work if really understood would be to the advantage of all the students, allowing each one to develop in the direction of his/her own strengths.

The teaching of design by practicing architects, while advantageous because it imparts a 'real life' education, is also a drawback because it perpetuates the conservative attitudes of the profession. Students are not even exposed to certain issues (for example, feminism, user participation and post-occupancy evaluations in design) largely because they would undermine current 'professional' practices. A good balance of practitioners and full-time academicians would help create a more healthy academic environment.

Curriculum content :

Design is taught through the solving of design 'problems' from the first semester. Problems are kept simple and therefore not 'realistic'. As the complexity of the design project increases, the student is also expected to deal with aesthetic theory and the 'principles' of design studios there is an implicit dismissal of 'housing' as too lowly for professional consideration. In general there exists a preference of theory over practicality, of theoretician over the user.

Studio is emphasised at the cost of a more solid grounding in the humanities, social science and technical subjects. Often, the realities of practice and construction are ignored as being mundane. The neglect of technical subjects is disadvantageous to all students, but more so to women who are already perceived as incapable of understanding technical subjects or details. In reality, skills others than design are important to the survival of architectural firms. There is still the tendency in the profession to create "stars" - the master

designers. Schools can reduce the importance of the "star system" by broadening the students' view of the profession to show value in its other aspects.¹²

Courses in history which thus far seemed to begin and end with Greece and Rome, and have now shifted focus to the Indus Valley, need to further broaden their scope to study non-patriarchal societies, their settlement patterns, house forms, and artefacts.¹⁴

Women's tending to the needs of home and family is a universal, social phenomenon. This is particularly evident in the social set-up in the Indian context where male/female roles are clearly identified and traditional responsibilities specifically delineated. All professional women would, therefore experience a personal role conflict to varying extents. In the field of architecture, the conflict seems a little more pronounced and it is extremely difficult for women to fit in the professional mold because of the existing culture of professionalism.

All the qualities that the woman (and the world) considered to belong to her femininity seem inappropriate to her professional role as an architect. When it comes to real life, the profession is generally considered unsuited for a 'lady' because of the demanding hours, laborious supervision and the travelling involved, the necessity of dealing with 'low-class' workers, the awkwardness of climbing scaffoldings, and the corrupt and abrasive business practices. These facts take a toll on women because they continue to bear greater responsibilities in the home as compared to their male colleagues. Therefore, "the most shocking realization for a young woman, who was considered a 'brilliant' designer in academia is that the designation is much more difficult to receive in an office".¹⁴

A majority of women who lack a feminist awareness tend to feel that their failure to achieve is their own fault. In the later years, it gets more difficult for the woman architect to combine the professional role with that of being a wife and a mother compared to the male architect who is a husband and a father.

We believe that the strength of self-image is critically important to successful

performance and development of confidence, therefore, female role models are vital in Schools of Architecture to act as mentors for female students. Though women students comprise fifty percent of the student body in our schools, woman faculty amount to ten percent or less. When faced with this fact, the reactions usually are: "women don't apply" or "do you want reservations for women?" Instead of taking such a simplistic view, we need to examine the question in historical perspective and try to break the vicious circle that keeps women out of academia.

Ideally, speaking, female students and graduates should have access to a counseling cell which prepares them for the reality of the field. It should help women in architecture to identify qualities and concerns in themselves which are often suppressed in academia or profession. There is also a need to impart a 'rear' practical training to students, with an emphasis on working on the site and input of 'nuts-and-bolts' courses, exposure to the professional world including interaction with the users. Electives could include courses that give a gender perspective and design as well as research could begin to emphasize women and the built environment.

In the long run, it will not be enough just to have more female faculty teaching design studio and other subjects. More women need to be at the head of institutions in order to have the power to affect policy to work on curriculums and admission standards and to bring about wide-ranging changes. The focus of study should also shift from the individual building to the city as a process, to community oriented design, to the need to deal with human relationships of men, women and children - in short to a broader set of intellectual and social concerns.

Notes

1 There are a few well known firms headed by husband-wife teams. The few firms that are headed by a woman architect or an all woman partnership seem to limit their work to projects traditionally accepted as the domain of women designers (residential and interior design projects). These projects are less often in the limelight than larger institutions and public works. It goes without saying

that this is a generalization, and there are exceptions to this rule. Most women in the field lead a marginal professional existence. "Women were marginal and insecure, not only because of their class, but also because of prejudice in the professions and in the political arena. Their sympathies with other "outsiders" do reflect a desire to compensate for a power imbalance which they seldom acknowledged, together with a desire not to overrun the system that had found some place for them as individuals". Gwendolyn Wright, "On the Fringe of the Profession: Women in American Architecture" in *The Architect: Chapters in the History of the Profession*, ed. Spiro Kostof, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1977, pg. 305. Wright speaks of women at the end of the 19th century in the west, but this is so applicable to us today.

- 2 The Women Architects' Forum, Ahmedabad is conducting a survey for this data, but the forms are still coming in. The glaring fact is that there are no women in the National Council of Architecture.
- 3 Joan Draper, "The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Architectural Profession in the United States: The Case of John Galen Howard", in, *The Architect*, Op. Cit., pg. 214.
- 4 The essay is written from a feminist perspective. Women professionals in India shy away from the term feminism/feminist for a variety of reasons. They would like to believe (as we all would) that the entire debate is peculiarly western in the issues it raises (it does not affect us), our problems, if any, arise out of our own particular situations and we must deal with them individually. This attitude has only served to maintain the status quo, in which, it is still only the "exceptional" women who can succeed in her profession usually as a result of very advantageous circumstances or at the cost of all else.

We have not been able to trace many published works that deal specifically with architectural education in India. The observations here are based on the authors' own experiences as students and later as practitioners and teachers of architecture.

- 5 As quoted by Joseph Esherick, in "Architectural Education in the Thirties and Seventies : A Personal View" in *The Architect* (Op.cit). pg.243.
- 6 See, Joan Draper, Op. Cit., and John Wilton-Ely, "The Rise of the Professional Architect in England", in *The Architect* Op. cit.
- 7 From the Pennsylvania Bulletin, School of Fine Arts Announcement 1934-1934 : "Women Students in Fine Arts, having completed the equivalent of the first two years of the five year course in architecture, may enter the course in architecture upon successfully passing the examinations to the upper school, the number of women admitted may not exceed ten percent of the total enrollment in each class", as quoted by Esherick, Joseph in "Architectural Education in the Thirties and Seventies : A Personal View" in *The Architect*, Op.cit., pg.239.
- 8 Joan Draper, Op. Cit., pg. 217.
- 9 Michael Bernard Boyle, *Architectural Practice in America, 1865-1965 - Ideal and Reality*, in *The Architect*, Op.Cit., pg.323.
- 10 Jane Darke, "Women Architects and Feminism", *Making Space*, ed. Matrix, Pluto Press, London & Sydney, 1984.
- 11 Anne Vytlačil, "The Studio Experience", *Architecture : A Place for Women*, Ed., Ellen Perry Berkeley, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington and London, 1989, pg.265.
- 12 Karen Franck, "A Feminist Approach to Architecture", in *Architecture*, Op. cit. pg. 203.
- 13 Denise Scott Brown says "The Guru, as architectural father figure, is subject to intense hate and love, either way, the relationship is personal, it can only be a one-to one affair I suspect, too, that for the male architect the guru must be male. There can be no mom and pop gurus in architecture". "Room at the top", *Architecture*, Op. Cit. pg.241.
- 14 Mini Lobell, "The Buried Treasure", *The Architecture*, Op. Cit. pg. 141. "Most architecture schools, as well as art and architecture history texts, ignore the huge body of archeological data that has become available in the last forty years. Perpetuating the nineteenth-century assumption that history begins with the "high" civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece, they convey the impression that nothing worth mentioning was built by the cultures that preceded the male dominated, hierarchical, warlike states of the ancient world."
- 15 Susane Torre as quoted in, Heidi Landecker, "Why Aren't More Women Teaching Architecture", *Architecture : Incorporating Architecture Technology*, October, 1991, pg. 25.
- 16 See, Heidi Landecker, *ibid*.