

Born of this land

Little known and even less understood vernacular architecture (VA) is concerned with traditional architectural practices that are cost effective, ecologically sensible and culturally relevant.

*In a freewheeling conversation with **R. L. Kumar**, Principal Architect, Centre for Vernacular Architecture and Aga Khan Award nominee, **Ashwin Venkatesh** explores the many dimensions of this school of architecture.*

Most people tend to confuse the term vernacular architecture with sustainable architecture. How are they different?

Vernacular architectural traditions have been around for a much longer time than the apology termed as sustainable architecture. Since Gro Brundtland's call for "sustainable development" we have been swamped by all kinds of 'sustainable concepts'. I believe sustainable development is an oxymoron and sustainable architecture is an ill conceived plea for a good life that continues to be wedded to economic growth. Sustainable architecture which should be a '*sustained*' criticism of economic growth ends up being a promotion for new technologies that are less electricity dependent than the 20th century growth trajectories.

On the contrary, I would choose to define Vernacular Architecture as a commitment to the use of *least industrially processed materials*. Vernacular architecture is concerned with the process of building dwellings while sustainable architecture would make no distinction between dwellings, garages and habitats. Sustainability assumes that industrial growth is necessary for life to go on, but vernacular thought processes do not allow the industrial way of living to interfere with life.

This philosophy seems to challenge accepted convention. Historically, has it been difficult to see it gain ground in our country?

Sadly, history has seen the erosion of VA in our country. Laurie Baker was among the first to inspire a tribe of Indian Architects to join this school. The first attacks on vernacular architecture kicked off with the Colonial administration setting up the Public Works Department (PWD), which introduced new perspectives, measurements, and relations in architectural practice. VA knows no idea of a standard brick. The size of the brick was dependent on its ultimate use and varied from region to region. The British PWD introduces standardized building materials and techniques so that they can be measured for accounting and costing purposes. This system takes root in cities and government projects, faithfully continued by free India. However, over the years, major draws in favour of cost-effectiveness, climatic and socio cultural sensitivity of these projects has ensured that it still has its takers.

There are bound to be a large number of myths associated with structures built in vernacular style. What are the most common ones?

The most common myth is that they are short-lived and demand disproportionate 'maintenance' efforts. Whereas the truth is that VA practices are time tested and require no more maintenance than what

simple tools and technologies require. In fact modern architecture is more maintenance intensive as it is connected to large impersonal and technical chains of production distribution and consumption.

What are the predominant design elements employed in vernacular architecture?

The most predominant 'design' element is cultural and regional specificity. Remember neither culture nor region are stable categories. I would prefer to, for the purpose of this conversation define the 'design' element, in a different way and insist that VA is not bothered by 'visual architecture' and in this it is much more closer to its utilitarian cousins by emphasizing a 'content' filled design articulating the needs of culture and climate than a formal one. Take a look at any of our projects, you would find an abundance of classical proportions. We constantly strive to bridge the gaping divide between modern needs and past traditions.

What governs the choice of materials that most of these projects use?

VA promotes the use of locally available materials, traditional building techniques, and culturally and climatically relevant building design. Most of our structures are made with exposed brick, laterite, stone or mud.

At the 20,000 sft Pupil Tree Academy at Bellary, we chose granite since it is predominantly mined around that area. Whether it's the exposed brick and random rubble that is packed into the wall, filler slabs, brick dome, thatched and mud packed roof, unpolished plaster or mud plaster finishes, we wanted to revive the local ways of building, which if phased out, would have resulted in a tragic loss of heritage.

What about various environment related factors?

The word environment is a strange ironic word. Its root meaning is "to surround with hostile intent". In most sectors of governance and policy planning, environment takes precedence over people. Forests over tribals, fish over fishermen, land over farmers. I would hesitate to associate environment with VA.

However, I will point towards the work of culture where less intensive industrial societies make far less demands on natural resources and are therefore far more 'environment friendly' than highly industrialized societies. One of the definitive innovations of the industrial world is the 'clock'. Again in less industrial societies different activities were defined by different time cycles. Building activity is related to the climate and agriculture. The construction of a building starts with the making of the bricks in summer, mining rocks before the rains, completing the foundation before the rains to allow for adequate compaction, construction Labor is organised around harvests. We are an agricultural society and what suits us is a notion of *time* built, measured and lived around agricultural activities. I call these life giving activities. VA is sensitive to this.

Courtesy:

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