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Architect Apurva Bose Dutta,

ARCHITECTURE AND OPIUM

Ar Apurva Bose Dutta, from India traverses the sensitive relationship between Opium and Architecture by borrowing examples of Indian Architecture and its architects.

The word 'Opium' conjures up a lot of visuals – drugs, plants, Opium Trading, The Opium Wars, The Opium Night Club, The Opium Museum in China, The controversial Opium perfume - clearly 'Opium' through its myriad virtues and vices reflects a corroborated standing in today's world. It stands to see how Architecture, one of the most powerful weapons for making a statement in today's times derives a certain familiarity with Opium. Quoting English physician Thomas Sydenham's words, "Among the remedies which have pleased Almighty God to give to man to relieve his sufferings, none is so universal and so efficacious as opium". I would thus define the significant relation between opium and architecture in the sanctity both of them produce, on account of their healing powers, their ritual significance and their tranquilising properties. As architects we define spaces, materials, textures, elements that can produce a therapeutic effect - the therapy interpreted yet again in diverse ways in diverse contexts – it can be the stoic silence observed in a religious space, the amusing aura fashioned in a recreational building, the warmth created in a home, the thrust to work harder in a motivating workspace and the inspiration to study with much diligence in an institution. As architects who have to shoulder the responsibility to seek a world that doesn't exist, it is we who create such a world to provide their inhabitants with not a mere roof but a complete shelter. It is time to question also, that if Architecture's primary intent is to provide a healing touch, is the profession swaying from its very own conscientiousness? The profession is losing its sanctity by just making 'buildings', 'blocks', 'masses' rather than befitting itself with a prolific characterization and value.

Opium has been introduced in various eras in varied perspectives, much like Architecture that has had a historical significance attached to different periods in history. In every phase, they have left behind an impression/expression that has been carried forth. Today,

the onus of definitions that Architecture has to carry forward lies on us. Architecture is much like a non verbal sign of communication that converses with us through its silence. The silence that is its narrator, which doesn't need a physical entity that screams for attention. The silence it produces even when millions inhabit it, is what counts - much like the dominant rays of sun that affect us, even while remaining mute.

So while we talk about opium in Architecture, let's talk about the healing power of this profession which is in reality the actual aim of this vocation. Indian Architecture owes its evolution to a lot of religions in India. Thus, when one connotes Architecture to religion or vice versa, the premise of a therapeutic touch in the profession is automatically felt. Indian architecture formally arrived with Buddhism through Stupas, Monasteries, Cave Temples, Edifices - the Sanchi Stupa with its magnificent dome even today leaves visitors with an awe-struck tranquillity. Jain Architecture furthered it with its approach towards an expression of rich interiors in temples. The Khajuraho temples through their explicit carvings have nothing much left to conceal – a divine feeling is experienced as one sets feet in them. Whereas Architecture dictates the abode of God in a temple, open spaces in Masjids in Islamic Architecture are known to provide a direct gateway to God. The



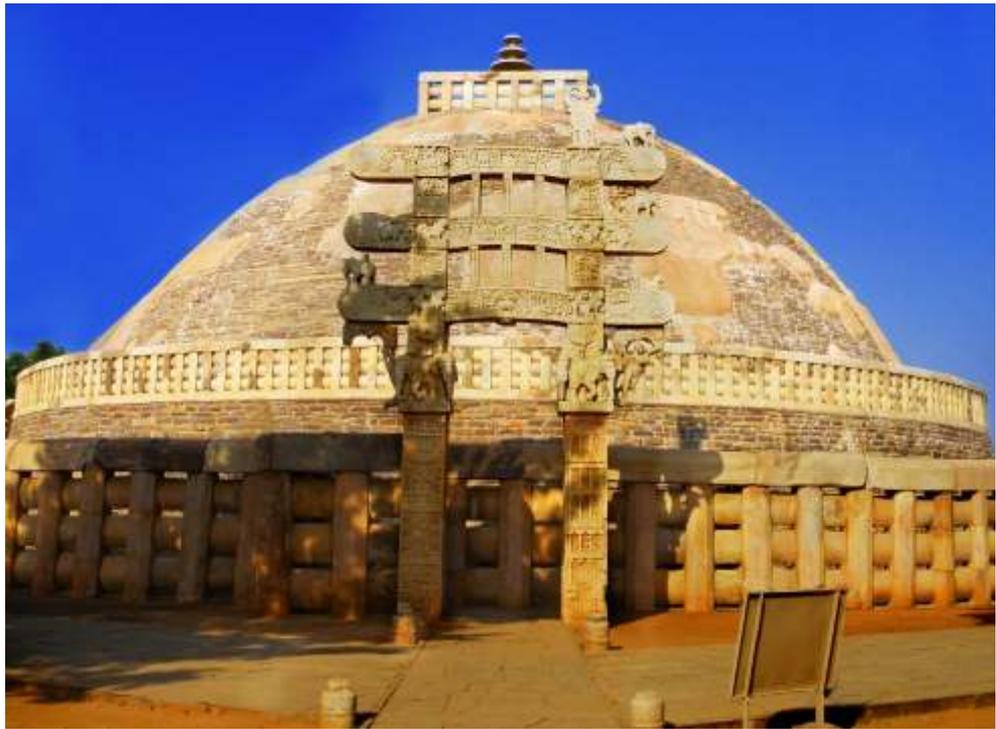
healing effect of love overpowers you as you stand in front of the Taj Mahal. No one can refute the peace of mind one achieves in the Mughal gardens with their pools, fountains and canals.

The Bahai temple in the national capital of India -Delhi, one of the marvels of post independence achieves its meditative power simply by the space created out of a mere 'lotus'. Various additions post independence emulated this 'power of space' further through their candid conversations that they made with the visitors - while it was a railway terminal like the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, or the Gateway of India symbolizing the city, the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata, Lutyen's Rashtrapati Bhavan in New Delhi and Chennai's Victoria Memorial

Hall. Was it the material, the form, the colour, the texture that defined these spaces – that is hard to specify because conclusively it was the intangible aura generated by these buildings that touched everyone – maybe validating the fact that good architecture has to be felt, not touched. This also invites deliberation on whether even today these cities majorly remain to be known by these above said structures or a newer contemporary building can be accorded the same significance.

Yet, India is proud to have had path breakers who have left a strong architectural legacy behind. Laurie Baker's exposed brick and jaalis capitalised on the warmth of a structure. Achyut Kanvinde gave a healing touch to his buildings by ensuring that people's need was given more priority over the daunting intentions of designers. In more modern times, a certain exuberance is felt as you walk through the Kala Academy in Goa by Charles Correa– the visual imagery and the surface treatment leaving you almost meditated. For many it is not only about the completed building possessing a healing touch; architects like Christopher Benninger admit that 'It is through creation and through the realization of his works that he reaches nirvana'; thus making even the entire process of conceiving a building spiritual.

Architecture comes to heal its people in different modes – through elements like verandahs, jaalis (the intricacies in the works of Laurie Baker/ Brinda Somaya), through an entire city in concrete (Le Corbusier's Chandigarh or Dominic Dube/Gurjit Singh Matharoo's works), through the restraint in simple spatial diagrams (Sanjay Mohe's designs), through clean transitions between outdoors and indoors (Sandeep Khosla's spaces), through open spaces (the recent Mumbai esplanade project - a pertinent example), an innovative landscape design making the association with nature more fruitful (Aniket Bhagwat's inventive landscaping), through elements of light (the Pyramid valley in Bengaluru – world's largest meditational



pyramid), by celebrating the purity of Indian Architecture (Parul and Nimish Patel's craft) ,elements that directly relate to a culture (Bimal Patel's works that are borne out of India-Islamic architectural heritage), an endearing modernist language (Nisha - Soumitro Ghosh's architecture), the passion to preserve the urban heritage (Rahul Mehrotra thought-provoking works), core sustainability (Anupama Kundoo),a contextual comfortable haven (Gerard da Cunha's approach), a tradition-inspired space (Shahrukh Mistry's designs) and through a beautiful juxtaposition of materials (Samira Rathod's works).

In my interactions with architects, I have also come to realise that the biggest healer through Architecture are the architects themselves. You will find most of them - the best known in business, thoroughly grounded and in the profession for passion more than materialistic needs. They might do different kind of Architecture but their similar down-to-earth nature binds them in a much therapeutic thread.

Like most countries, India is looking forward to develop this healing power of Architecture, further. The country possesses a number of architects who are sympathetic to the identity and vocabulary of Indian Architecture; who don't follow global trends just to be with the times; who are careful that India should preserve its 'regional context' and not become and look like any other city of the world. Our culture remains our richest possession which should dictate the architecture.

Opium produces exhilaration, excitement, or euphoria – a state where we dream yet are rooted in reality. Opium at the same time can produce nausea, confusion and a state of deliberations. We pledge for an architecture in India that masquerades as Opium with its virtues intact - and not become like the opium that causes confusion of the culture, deliberations of the context to its people it is made for.