THE WRITE STUFF

DOCUMENTING YOUR PROJECTS IS ONE THING; WRITING WITH FLAIR AND OBJECTIVITY ABOUT THEM IS ANOTHER. APURVA BOSE DUTTA RECOUNTS WHY SHE MADE THE MOVE FROM ARCHITECTURE TO ARCHITECTURAL JOURNALISM AND EXPLAINS WHY INDIA NEEDS TO PICK UP THE PACE IN TERMS OF ARCHITECTURAL WRITING

When I plunged into architectural journalism in 2005, all I had with me was a passion for the field, an architectural degree and the knowledge that my elective of architectural journalism at the undergraduate level had given me. There were no role models and no external motivation, but just a few pointers from my faculty, some advice from my seniors and a lot of internet research. Yet I decided to tread on this path, working with Architecture+Design (A+D) and Indian Architect & Builder (IAB).

A quote by Maya Lin says: “Architecture is like a mythical fantasy. It has to be experienced. It can’t be described. We can draw it up and we can make models of it, but it can only be experienced as a complete whole.”

I have to somehow disagree with her because, for me, architectural journalism allows an individual to experience any building sitting in any part of the world. It’s a way of making the world shrink and a way of exposing to the world aspects about architecture which lie veiled from the untutored eye.

My initial years in writing made me feel that only India had turned a real blind eye to the profession. But in response to an article I wrote online about the subject, I received a gamut of emails from the UK, Florida, Australia, South Africa, Pakistan, Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada.

These were not only from students, but practising architects, real estate consultants and conservationists, whose hearts lie with writing, who don’t find themselves enjoying designing and are petrified of pursuing an obscure field called ‘architectural journalism’. Replying to them is not only a way of offering guidance, but gives me fulfilment at the realisation that I can help those passing a phase I went through.

There are people who want to propel this intrinsic talent, but the swarm of students opting for MBA, medicine, engineering has pushed architectural journalism to the background. There are a host of questions to answer – the major one being: how, after studying architecture for five years, can one take such a detour?

My answer would be: our degree definitely doesn’t go to waste. The way we would look at a building is different from how a non-architect would. And you never know when something that you learnt in your college days will enhance your writing.

I must add here that I take great offence at being called a journalist, since it negates my ‘architectural’ background. I interviewed architect Jasbir Sawhney for an international magazine this year. Looking at the questions, he asked me if I was an architect, since he felt my questions couldn’t have been framed by a mere journalist. I took it as a compliment.

My alma mater, Chandigarh College of Architecture (CCA) was the only college in India which offered an elective in the subject and, sadly, that too has been scrapped now. It’s surprising how some well-known architects are still unaware of the existence of a subject called architectural journalism. However, my interaction has also extended to architects who have encouraged me and understood the need for this profession in India.

What I find utterly lacking is the number of architectural magazines here. But what adds to the scope of architectural journalists is that a lot of interior and construction magazines need architects to write about projects architecturally too. Also, the new trend of online blogosphere does serve as a medium for the existence of a subject called architectural journalism, though it may not be very lucrative.

I find it amazing that in a country like India where architecture is progressing rapidly, there aren’t more magazines to showcase architecture. That some magazines carry projects simply due to the influence of the architect’s name, even if the project is forgettable, is also a frustrating truth of our sector.

A lot of magazines restrict themselves to talking about just the facts of any building. An architectural journalist should be able to look at the pros and cons and talk about them with the depth of an insider.
Yes, I do agree that we should refrain from saying anything negative about the interiors of a house, because that is the user’s choice. Maybe in that case the task of the architectural journalist is reduced to exposing facts about buildings to everyone, so that they could further debate on it.

And there are those magazines today which concentrate more on pictures than text, which I again feel is an offence to our profession.

Abroad, too, though the profession might be in a better state than it is in India, it is still lagging. Reports have shown that there has been a 30% drop in the number of architectural magazines in the US. However, a number of architectural websites have contributed to the field. Architectural magazines in the Middle East are rare, but they are again compensated by real estate magazines that focus on architecture and urban development. There are not significant architectural magazines in Egypt.

I happened to attend a counselling held by the British Council about their institutes. It came to me as a surprise that there was not even one institute offering anything remotely connected to architectural journalism. To top it, there was even faculty from the institutes who confused it with plain architecture or plain journalism.

It is also a fact that architectural journalism in developing countries is far behind that in developed countries; and if we talk about architectural criticism, then India doesn’t even practise it. Awareness here is lacking.

To pursue freelancing, one needs an enterprising and disciplined nature and a good network. One must keep abreast of the recent architectural happenings through books, magazines, the internet, conferences and symposiums. It is very easy to feel stagnated or jaded in this field if you are just sitting and waiting for projects to come your way. You definitely need to take an unrestrained initiative. A good architectural piece should not only be a conglomeration of the facts about a building or an architect, but more so an experience of the user – and the experience could stem from various elements of architecture: the form, the materials, the design concept or the key planning.

My foray into architectural journalism might not have spanned a lot of years, but whatever I have gained has been very precious creatively. Looking through buildings, talking to architects, speaking to architectural stalwarts has augmented my passion for this aberrant field. Architect Sangeet Sharma in his book ‘Architecture, Life and Me’ writes: “Buildings must have a silent narrator. They must hold your hand and take you along the journey while narrating all those violent flashes of the heart that made the architecture of that building come alive. I do not build to exemplify the philosophy of my life and I am not on the path to prove myself; I am here to please myself. I leave a silent narrator on my buildings so that he does the talking, and works as a mute guide. While I, the architect, will slowly be shunted into oblivion... until the user of the space is compelled to inquire about its architect, the endeavour is incomplete.”

As an architectural journalist I believe it is this silent narration that we have to pick up and write about, it’s we who can actually design this narrative further.

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Note: Bangalore-based Apurva Bose Dutta is an architectural journalist. After graduating in Architecture in 2005, she went on to do a diploma in Freelance Journalism from Stonebridge College, UK. Her other article can be read on www.fivefootway.com/2008/08/04/are-you-cut-out-to-be-an-architectural-journalist. Currently, she freelances for various national and international architectural and interior publications. She is the recipient of the “A3 Award in Architectural Journalism” instituted by the A3 Foundation for the year 2009-2010. She can be contacted at apurvabose@yahoo.com

The Chandigarh College of Architecture, which offered an elective in Architectural Journalism when the writer was a student there.