

(Rajkot)

For me, my journey in life as a human being has been of utmost importance. This journey has been a fascinating process with my architecture, painting, poetry, farming, my travels etc. as its by products. Whatever I do I tend to relate it to life as a whole... say, if I am designing, I ask – what more can my architecture do? Can it contribute towards a better life?

So today, in this presentation, I would like to share some personal life values, incidences and their relevance to my work. As the theme of this event is related to designing for the future, I feel that we need to be conscious of and design with the perennial human values that have always been with us and shall always be cherished in future too.

And in my journey, the immeasurable and the intangible dimensions have been of utmost importance. My intangible, feelings and values like honesty, friendship, empathy, compassion etc. are the ones that shape my life decisions, design concepts and all my tangible creations and happenings.

When I look back, I can honestly say that I never did anything for the sake of being different. What I did happened to be the natural, spontaneous consequence of my thinking and understanding of life. Still, people call ‘me’ ‘crazy’. All along, I have attempted to bridge this longest journey in my life – that between my head and my heart. I have unfolded and evolved out of these four dimensions of my life...

- Silence – solitude
- Feeling of Oneness with everything - empathy
- Compassion for everyone
- Simplicity – ‘sanyam’- restraint

Silence – I have always cherished those moments of silence and solitude when I can connect to my own self as well as with this universe... when I can ponder, re-examine my journey or just be still.

Even as a child of about 6-7 years, I remember how during family picnics etc, after some time of noisy enjoyment, I would slowly escape to a quieter place nearby and sit in silence ... almost like in meditation... crazy ??

After 5 hectic, busy semesters at CEPT, a feeling of restlessness crept in – I longed for that silence and solitude --- many unsettling questions about life, myself and my work, architecture—values -- lot of reading in western philosophy. Desire to take a drop in my arch. education to delve deeper into these inquiries. Parents not too happy – finally compromised on spending 2-3 months by myself during the vacations.

In vacations, --I did perspectives—made some money – then took off on travels –unknown places --to observe, meditate, introspect , re-examine myself, my journey---read, write , sketch and so on -- All on a shoestring budget of 10 to 15 rupees per day --slept in dorms, sometimes on rocks, beaches or park benches—sometimes in the natives' houses.

So much learning happened, but people thought I was slightly mad.

Then there was the Post graduation dilemma –

whether to do architecture or grow potatoes in kodi – later did not materialize. Money kept ready for my travel to u.s.a. to do m.arch at Harvard or m.i.t. - -cept exchange programs.

My understanding of arch. Edu. –needed more unlearning and unconditioning. More real projects in this context rather than hypothetical ones there. Thus asked for the money – house at g.b. on the mountain top to live and work in. lived 8 wonderful years there in disarming simplicity, with rs. 500 /month, as I had declined partnership in my father and brother's arch. firm.... I got my space and my silence ---learnt so much from living with nature and solitude and from my interaction with the villagers. I would spend 15 to 20 days/month over there. Working, wandering in the forests, sometimes just sitting quietly doing nothing on a tree deck at the edge of the cliff...then, rumours spread that I have become a hippy and that I live on a tree in the mountains. Six projects designed by me during this period appeared in Inside Outside in 1980 just before I was thirty.

These pauses have become a regular feature of my life ... through travels as well as through the many days I spent at my retreats – Till today, for the past 42 years, I have always had a retreat nestled in nature – at Nadhavade, Devgad and now on Andur lake, --- where I would

spend a few days by myself... working, wandering, growing plants, sitting quietly ... getting recharged, rejuvenated from that silence and solitude.

Our architectural profession allows us this beautiful option / freedom to work in this manner without being in our office all the time like a doctor or a lawyer.

Most of my designs and even this presentation were born here.

In this solitude, I even make my own music and dance alone to the tune of life ...

This silence has been more precious to me than all the money that I would have earned in the big city during those days.

Oneness – empathy - somehow, I have always had this feeling of being an integral part of this fascinating web of life - this feeling of oneness and fullness that I experience in life with nature and almost everything and everyone... in a world that is separated by countries, sects, faiths, ideologies, wars and what not.

Within this feeling, there seems to be a special rapport and communication that I have developed with trees. I touch them, hug them wave and talk to them.. this seems to be absolutely crazy for this society. Thus, you will find my favourite trees as an important and intrinsic part of my architecture –

I ask - can my designs help in bringing man closer to nature ?

Can trees/nature become an integral part of the family space – of our spatio temporal existence?

Can our spaces with the help of a wonderful tree companion calm the stressed nerves of the users?

Can a natural work space help in increasing the work efficiency ?

Can hospital spaces designed with nature help us to heal ?

Then there are the rocks ... at the lacones site, I stayed in physical contact with those huge rocks to feel their million year old vibrations and then finally design the building around them as my respectful homage to this ancient natural heritage...

Bathing under the waterfalls or floating on the lake water or sea waves truly refreshes me by washing off my fatigue... so much so that I say thank you to these waters after my bath or swim. Many a times, I have welcomed the first rains after very hot dry months by drenching myself in them on our house terrace or in the garden. Neighbours if they had seen me then, would have called me crazy.

Then there are the animals... I have a special language .. gibberish ..that I speaking with my dogs and cats.. they seem to understand... or just our eyes can communicate a lot. Even the wild animals seemed to accept me .. G.B. panther, the breakfast lizard, the monitor lizards living in my false ceiling, some snake neighbours and so on... birds queuing up for a bath – bird talk ...

One can connect with nature only when one has time and today we are suffering from the poverty of time. So I ask, can our architecture help in developing more relaxed, unhurried actions whereby, one can relish and connect with our surroundings ? ... zapurza stairs and toilets.

I shall read a few lines from my poem – empathy.....

*Why do 'I' feel satiated
when the plants
are watered after a long dry spell?*

*What makes 'me' bubble within
at the sight of
a babbling, frothing stream or waterfall?*

*Why does a feeling of weightlessness
engulf 'me'
at the sight of that bird's lovely flight?*

*Why is it
that 'I' feel balanced and harmonious within
in a well designed space?*

Allow the peace of nature to flow into you. If you let the breeze blow its freshness into you and the storm its energy, your cares will fall away like autumn leaves.... John Muir

Compassion - I remember as a small kid, whenever a poor person would come asking for help, my parents would ask me to go inside to another room. If I stayed there to listen to that person's sad story I would have tears in my eyes and would get after my parents to help him. Till today, I have always felt sad at the injustice and inequity in our society.

So on my 60th birthday, I went away on a 10 days retreat to ponder and decide on my future course of action. One of the outcomes of this retreat was to address this issue of inequity at my small individual level. I created a special fund and put most of my savings in it. This money was to be used for the poor, needy and under privileged people.... It was called “Humane equity and dignity fund “

When there is true compassion and caring, our attitudes and lifestyle becomes naturally sustainable. We do not feel like hurting the earth also.

We were living in a large ancestral house in a prime area of the city. I decided to sell this property to my brother’s family and shift to the city’s outskirts into a new small eco friendly, self sufficient house from recycled materials. The tidy amount received from this sale was deposited in h.e.d. fund to enhance its reach towards the needy people’s education, health and the environment issues. This was considered crazy even by my wife and daughter.

This fund has managed to put a smile on so many needy faces.

Laya slides

Even in my designs, I strive to create open, inclusive vulnerable and equitable spaces rather than closed, exclusive, invulnerable spaces.

I ask –

Could my architecture act as a catalyst in bringing people closer to each other ?

Can our designs invest in the dignity of the places and the people we serve ?

Can our buildings create better environments for formal and informal learning?

Can the quality of my spaces here in this drug de-addiction centre be therapeutic through their natural ambience, their transparency and interactive quality? Can they help in healing the addict ?

Thus, nowadays I feel kind of guilty and uncomfortable in designing large super luxurious villas; so I don’t.?

When the power of love overcomes the love of power, the world will know peace.....

Jmi Hendrix

Simplicity – ‘sanyama’ – restraint - voluntary simplicity is a natural outcome of this feeling of oneness and fullness in life. Though I can afford great consumption and luxury, I choose the simple and frugal. This to me is the true tenet of a sustainable life style.

It starts with the choices that we make in our lives .. right from cosmetics,
Clothes 4 pairs of jeans – two shelves in a small cupboard..

Two unstitched pieces of cloth – for one year.

Food ... simple single dish at night... experiments with boiled , raw, baked and cooked food
cars.. smaller energy efficient cars when I can afford more than one bmws.

our house ... made from recycled old materials with multi functional spaces.

Even my daily choice of using the stairs instead of the lift to reach my office on the 6th floor
matters to me.

Today, my living and working in non air conditioned spaces by choice is also thought of as
abnormal. I did not have a t.v. for the first 25 years since t.v. came to India.

Always refused to go on foreign trips sponsored by manufacturers and dealers.

Can my work help in shifting of our emphasis from saleability to sanctity ? ... from vulgar
overconsumption to beautiful simplicity ? ...from glossy wrappings to inner content? ...And
finally from the measurable to the immeasurable ?

Instead of working for attributed green ratings, can we work with truly green, sustainable
attitudes ?

In a country like ours, where mechanical systems are expensive as well as difficult to maintain,
why can't my buildings breathe naturally and reduce their environmental footprint?

Can we build with locally sourced or with completely recycled, discarded materials to reduce
the embodied energy ?

All this seems crazy in today's world of greed, over consumption, comparison and one
upmanship.

I have found that a simple life brings about a lot of freedom and joy....

... freedom to refuse 3 out of 5 jobs that come to me., freedom to choose my clients, to
wander, to leave office to keep an appointment with my friend – the big banyan tree and so
on.

Now, all these values usher in a holistic life with truly sustainable values and attitudes of
compassion and caring concern for all; attitudes that foster maximum well being with
minimal consumption... values that do not need any green certification tag.... well, none of my
buildings have this certification.

Now, all these important values which guide and shape my life are immeasurable and intangible in nature. Thus I completely agree with Einstein when he says “not everything that can be counted in life, really counts !” In a world obsessed with the measurable profits and losses. This sentence sends goose bumps on my body.

So , in a society that is suffering from the fatty degeneration of its conscience, where our single minded pursuit of money is impoverishing our mind, shrivelling our imagination and desiccating our heart, don't you think that we need unified, natural, simple spaces that heal and improve the quality of our lives?

My architecture seeks joy, a sense of wonder and a special spatial beauty by befriending the simple, the mundane and the ordinary. I have started realizing the full meaning of what Samuel Mockbee says – “as architects our goodness is more important than our greatness and our compassion more eventful than our passion.”

My works are not designed to create iconic, grand, exhibitionist, sculptural forms that attract the eye, but to create more humane, socially relevant, more natural and sustainable spaces that nurture the human spirit.

To end my presentation, I shall sing extracts from one of my favourite songs for you. Please bear me as I am not at all blessed with great singing abilities...

how many roads must a man walk down,
before you can call him a man ?
yes n how many times must cannon balls fly
before they are forever banned ?

the answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind;
the answer is blowing in the wind

yes n how many times can a man turn his head,
pretending he just doesn't see ?
yes n how many ears must one man have,
before he can hear people cry ?

the answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind;

the answer is blowing in the wind.

i sincerely hope and wish that your generation
will try to unravel these answers that are blowing in this wind
and work towards making this world a better place to live in