Landscape and architecture – A symbiotic relationship Ar. Shirish Beri

When any building designed by me is occupied, one of the test questions that I ask is “Has my design helped in bringing man closer to nature?” The answer is expressive of how far I have been successful in addressing one of my basic concerns in today’s life – that of modern man’s moving further away from nature.

Man can come closer to nature, when a symbiotic relationship happens between architecture and landscape. The world symbiotic has been used here to convey the interdependence of landscape and architecture on each other, where one’s quality of existence depends on the other’s quality of existence.

A good landscape enhances the beauty, the spatial quality and the meaning of architecture, just as good architecture enriches, defines, moulds and articulates the form of landscape.

Wherever we are, whatever we do, we need space to be. We have to live and function in space and time. Thus the quality of space that we occupy is of utmost concern to us. – Architecture lends form and quality to an earlier formless space. Generally speaking the exterior space or open space is designed by the landscape designer, just as the interior spaces are articulated and enhanced by the interior designer. Then there are the transitional spaces, which need great care in designing in order to establish a rapport, a continuity and harmony between landscape, architecture and interior design. While designing, a sensitive architect needs to comprehend this design potential of interior and landscape designers in making the entire space work as a unified whole.

In our climate, the outside and the semi outside spaces are ideal as highly functional, beautiful and low cost extensions. A sensitively landscaped architectural space transcends the anthropometric dimension, to lend an immeasurable dimension to the space. Here one feels an ‘elan’ – the high spirit of life, where one discovers one’s own heart beating in this spatial celebration.

Let us see how these various landscaping elements and spaces could be made an integral part of the design in its very initial conceptual stages. Landscaping, just like interior spaces, services etc. has to be given a serious thought in the preliminary stages of architectural design in order to create maximum design potential and possibilities for nurturing the above symbiotic relationship.

It is easier and more rewarding to develop a landscaped spatial linkage that has already been provided for in the design, than to try and impose a new one at a later stage – that may disturb the original architectural design.

This interdependence between architecture and landscape starts as soon as a site is chosen. The topography of the site, its character – rural / urban, its surrounding views, its existing trees and other features all help in the evolution of our architectural design concept.

Before putting anything on site, should we not ask the site what it would like to take? Or, while designing a building, should we not ask the design, what kind of surroundings it would be comfortable in? Thus, the site context with its landscape potential becomes an intrinsic part of our architectural design parameters from the very beginning.

Then as we come towards the entrance to the building, landscaping can do much to make it obscure or to make it conspicuous or enhance the scale or reduce it. Landscape does not end at this entrance threshold. It not only continues inside in the form of indoor plants, rocks etc., but takes the front seat again in the form of courtyards, spaces between buildings, the extension sit outs, verandahs and large windows that open out onto the outside landscaped spaces.

The courtyards not only function as lungs and light / ventilation wells, but they also lend a great psychological relief. More so if they are landscaped well. They also act as spaces for functional extensions.

Even more used than the courtyards are the semi open transitional spaces between the outside landscape and the inside rooms. These are covered verandahs, sitouts, passages, osris and spaces between wings or buildings. Articulating the edges and the main spaces of these transitional areas through landscape requires great skill and creativity.

The terraces too exhibit tremendous landscaping potential to become the much needed greens in a dry urban landscape.

The landscape potential could be exploited in the smallest of architectural details – a small niche, the ledges, the thresholds, the window sills, the parapets, balconies and so on.

If we are mindful about the landscape, our design vocabulary need not restrict itself to our limited plot and building materials. Can it not contain the landscape beyond, the changing colors of the sky, the responsive trees and the hills beyond?

In our designs, there needs to be minimum evident duality – minimum conflict between the natural element of chance and the human element of control. Such landscaping would reflect discipline in spontaneity and spontaneity in discipline. In some examples, the dividing line between landscaping and architecture is so thin that one wonders whether the house is in the garden or the garden is in the house.

In India, the diversity of plant material in terms of sizes, shapes, colors, textures available to us is fantastic. The use to which these trees and plants can be put to are many – such as for beauty, as focal points, as floor, as wall, as dust filter, as shade and insulation, as space defining elements, as supporting as structural members, as play, as food and drink and so on.

Water too has tremendous landscaping and design potential in terms of its audio- visual effects. – the variety of sounds it can produce (the roar, the splash, the gurgle, the mur-mur, the lapping, the trickle) and the diversity in its visual form (the calm stagnant, the flowing, the cascading, the crashing and splashing, the spurting fountain, the reflection) lend it a unique place in landscape design.

The scope of landscaping today has long left behind the common place notion of horticulture. It extends to hard surface pavings, walls, steps, outdoor furniture designs, platforms, gratings, outdoor signage and illumination designs etc. Designing of other street furniture like dust bins, lamp posts, telephone booths, kiosks also falls within the scope of the landscape designer.

This reminds me of various instances that show our lack of awareness to landscaping. We construct special ducts to hide drain pipes from outside and special efforts to hide water pipes and electrical conduits, but we fail to channelise our drainage pipes, chambers, electrical and A.C pipes, trenches in such a way that they do not become a nuisance to the landscape designer.

While planning a building, we fail to mark the exact location of good old trees, so that we can incorporate them in our design. We get these trees cut and natural slopes with good top soil bulldozed. Many buildings today have adopted the typical bye law architecture or builders' architecture leaving long narrow residual open spaces where nothing can grow comfortably – except the builders' drooping Ashoka trees.

In today's world of consumerism, commercialism and the fast buck mentality, we seem to be loosing our sensitivity towards nature, towards its beauty and its fantastic but delicate ecological balance. Our overall existence is becoming gross and blunt. I feel that even inanimate things like stone, brick, wood start breathing life and start communicating with us when put

together with feeling. If we are sensitive, a beautiful 'empathy' develops between us and the landscaped space.

Nature breathes life into architecture. It gives architecture its immediate context.
Nature in architecture rejuvenates our senses and becomes a stress reliever.
Nature helps recreate the bond between us and mother earth.

Could we develop the sensitivity of these poets who observe in these lines –

"A fallen flower
Returning to its branch?
A butterfly !"

"Trees show us the form of the wind
Waves give vital energy to the moon"

"The lotus
when it bloomed
made no noise".

Can we live and work with the profound understanding of the 19th century Red Indian chief?

"Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark wood, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.

We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

The air is precious to the red man for all things share the same breath.

What is man without the beasts and plants? If all the beasts and plants were gone, men would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to them, soon happens to men.

This we know, the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself".