

Recognising Diversity in Architecture: Teaching and learning in the context of Diversity

Sumita Sinha
Department of Architecture and Spatial Design
London Metropolitan University

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Introduction

This paper explores the notion of 'diversity' as it applies to architectural education, key challenges that need to be addressed to enable the discipline to engage seriously with student diversity, and ways of doing so.

Creative professionals, including architects, account for about 7% of UK workforce. It may surprise the reader to learn that diversity and equality are considered 'taboo' words in architectural education. That may be because most architects consider themselves to be liberal and creative and, therefore, above what is considered as 'political correctness'. However, statistics tell a different story. At present, there are only 17% women architects¹ while the percentage for Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) is too small to be a part of the statistics. Less than 8% of women own their practices and number of female professors or Heads of Schools can be counted in one hand. However, these figures do not bear any relationship with the student numbers from both female and BME backgrounds². Diversity in student body of UK is well represented in architecture. However expression of Architectural Diversity- both in the end products of graduates and buildings- is not.

The first woman was admitted to the Royal Institute of British architects (RIBA) in 1898 after a hotly debated council meeting where Ethel Charles, holder of its Silver Medal (1905) won by a margin of one vote. However it was only in the year 2000 that RIBA adopted an Equal Opportunities policy for its staff. It is not mandatory for members of RIBA to have equal opportunity policies at present. The statistics may seem perverse for a profession that is so dependent upon public patronage. Overall 51% of the UK population is female (London figure is 52%) while 7% of the population comes from a BME background. So while there is approximately one

¹ This is a rise from 8% female architects in 1999 when I became the Chair of Women in Architecture.

² We do not have any figures for disabled architects or those from different sexual orientation. Nevertheless they exist but not in great numbers.

architect per 2000 people in the UK, they are not reflective of the society in which they work. Consequently, it is not hard to understand why, often architects may be seen as isolated figures, far away from the lives of the general public- described as a middle class profession with mainly white and middle aged men³. This picture is very different from other professions that are associated with the public such as GP, accountancy and the law, which support a vibrant and diverse body of practitioners from all backgrounds.

The teaching of architecture: the student body

What do we mean by diversity in architecture ? Diversity in architectural education takes many forms- manifest in the student body, the course or syllabus , the way it is taught and the final design or building. This adds complexity and richness to the creation of architecture which is both a 'practical and scientific art'. This is unlike certain other professional courses where the output is standardized all over the world, say for example, medicine or engineering. Design is specific to the context and client and there are many variables such as aesthetics, environmental conditions, etc involved, thus making the architectural course extremely demanding and complex.

Among the UK home students, BME students are well represented on architecture courses, making up around 18% of all architecture undergraduates (compared to 16% of all undergraduates), and some communities, for example Chinese, are represented (at first degree level) above their representation in the population as a whole. There are 30% female students on architecture courses. However, as seen from the professional statistics given earlier, there is big drop out of both female⁴ and BME students. Courses also include mature students, especially in the Diploma, because a post Part II student may take time out to work to repay debts, gain experience, raise family or become a carer before commencing their studies again.

The RIBA encourages overseas students to apply to study at UK institutions. The revenue from overseas students is of prime economic importance to most Universities, especially to Schools of Architecture⁵. London in particular attracts a great diversity of students- both from home and abroad. In the School of Architecture in London Metropolitan University, where I teach, I have counted as much as 40% female students and 30% BME students in the undergraduate years and similar figures in the postgraduate (Diploma) years.

³ A survey carried out in 1994 by RIBA Journal reported that most people (74%) could not identify any architects or buildings designed by them.

⁴ *Why Women Leave Architecture*, RIBA commissioned research 2003.

⁵ According to a survey from the International Graduate Insight Group cited in *The Independent* (31.01.08), an anticipated rise in overseas students in the UK would mean international students bring with them higher fees- worth 60 billion pounds.

The teaching of architecture: the course

Architecture is considered as one of professional 'hard' courses where it is estimated that each student will spend more than 34 hours per week average in studies⁶. For someone to qualify as an architect, it will take more than seven years of studies and apprenticeship⁷. Further like medicine, the course is expensive with material outlays and study trips abroad. This is one of the reasons cited in the 2003 CABA study of Minority Ethnic students and Architecture, as to why BME architectural students tend to drop out of studies.⁸

The teaching of architecture remains extremely 'personalized', occurring on a one-to-one basis through tutorials, and 'crits', rather than anonymously marked essays or exams, as in other professions such as accountancy. Often the student will join one studio unit and stay there for one year under the guidance of a tutor who may have a personal view of design or architecture that will influence the student. Thus there is no scope for anonymous marking, although many think it can have a important impact on the results of a student⁹. Architectural teaching occurs primarily through the form of 'crits' where students pin up their work and invited critics take turn to make points and suggestions about the work. This could potentially become a very important source of ideas for the student, but research from Strathclyde University suggests that often crits turn into an arena where sexism and machoism prevails.¹⁰

Despite the diverse body of students and nature of the course, the tutors are mainly white, older middle class men. In a recent meeting of 89 RIBA III examiners, I counted only 2.8% female and 0.25% BME tutors.¹¹ There are only four female Heads of School in the 45 schools of architecture in the UK. Female professors in architecture are likewise four. This year, finally, the President elect of RIBA is a woman. Although the current President of RIBA is of Indian origin, there are no Heads of School or professors from BME origin. Thus there has been, and still is, a lack of role models for aspiring female or BME students, as been pointed out in recent research.¹²

⁶ National Union of Students survey quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, 25th November 2008. Soft courses are Media studies, journalism etc where students may spend less than 24 hours per week in study.

⁷ Architecture course consists of generally speaking 3 years (RIBA Part I) +year out+ two years diploma (RIBA Part II) + year out + RIBA III exams. There are variations, for example in Scotland, the course is Four years and then year out, then Diploma, then RIBA III. There is an undergraduate part, RIBA I, and a postgraduate, often called Diploma or RIBA II, after which there is professional studies or RIBA III. These three phases are interspersed with work experience periods.

⁸ This also impacts on the working classes- architecture remains for and by the well-off and middle classes.

⁹ The teaching of Architecture, Strathclyde University research paper, 1998.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ RIBA III examiners meeting, RIBA, November 2008.

¹² *Why Women leave Architecture* 2003, RIBA & CABA study of BME students, 2003.

Many schools of architecture now have studio units that work abroad and engage with students abroad. A new area is that of social and cultural engagement within the built environment, along with shelter re-construction and disaster management in areas of natural and man made disasters. Thus a great variety of cultural influences are part of an architecture student's life. However, whether these influences are accepted and used is another matter. According to many BME tutors and architects¹³, even overseas students coming to the UK are taught that Western designs are more progressive than the ones offered by the vernacular traditions of their own countries. This has an effect of not only diminishing the cultural input of these experiences¹⁴, but also means that these students, upon their return, tend to design in the Western style. Evidence of this is often seen in the portfolios of overseas post Part I and II students who have worked in architectural offices.

Colonial history and architectural heritage is not taught at Schools. Vernacular architecture from other countries is not part of the main architectural discourse, apart from a few architecture Schools such as De Montfort, DPU (based at Bartlett School of Architecture), Oxford Brookes and London Metropolitan. It is felt by BME tutors that the syllabus and the teaching still remains too 'euro-centric'. *"I find that architectural teaching in the UK is stuck in the past. It is kind of strange, I look around- I see there are students from all backgrounds, not just white, and then I look at what they are studying and the language being used- it could be from the 1940s"*- says Lesley Lokko, architect, teacher, author and cultural commentator¹⁵.

The subtle dismissal of non-Western designs or context has been something I have personally observed during teaching. I teach on a module called 'Architecture of Rapid Change and Scarce Resources' where we often focus on work on squatter settlements in places such as India. At one of our 'crits' (in February 2008), one of the invited critics, looking at the work done by students in India, asked- "So what are you going to do when you work in the real world?" He then went on to define the real world as being London, Vienna, and other places in Europe.

Although most people appreciate the work of our students as being worthy, there is often a sharp intake of breathe, followed a silence, as critics do not know how to assess such work. In my opinion and experience, there are sometimes more oblique ways of dismissing any rigorous cultural examination. This takes place in the following ways- comparing it to a western context, asking students to study a

¹³ From the discussion following the presentation of "If we were pandas" a paper by Elsie Ouwsu, architect at the CABE offices, 2003.

¹⁴ Balkrishna Doshi, 1997, Contemporary Architecture and City Form

¹⁵ Lesley Lokko, quoted by architect Ann De Graft Johnson at an international conference- Inspire2Aspire, 2008. In a similar vein, Doris Salcedo, a Columbian artist, says: 'Modernity is seen as an exclusively European event in which self-cultivation of the human mind through exercise of reason and the study of classics had as its main purpose the creation of a homogenous, rational and beautiful society...in this narration, colonial and imperial history has been disregarded, marginalised or simply obliterated" (from exhibition catalogue, Tate Modern, April 2008).

western architect whose work has no relevance to the design brief, not examining 'non Western' examples of architecture or providing 'fashionable' solutions such as the use of skewed lines in design, flat lintols instead of arches, etc.

Diversity in Architectural Design- ways forward

Diversity in architecture can come from not only the people in it but also from the influences on the end product. Western music, food, art and fashion have benefited greatly from being influenced by non-Western elements. This 'fusion' has resulted in these fields being more in tune with the general public.

In my teaching I help students understand and express diversity in different ways:

1. Inspire2Aspire International conference- I organized this conference in March 2008, examing diversity in architectural teaching and practice. Over two days, speakers presented examples of diverse methods of teaching and learning, along with climatically and culturally appropriate architecture. I hope there will be a series of such events encouraging students to look at architectural design from diverse points of view.
2. Through the introduction to non- Western models of design and inventions. In my lectures, I use examples, situations, illustrations come from all sources. In a lecture on sanitation, I may discuss the Chinese invention of toilet paper, use of the flushing toilet in ancient middle eastern cultures and the first ever planned urban sewage systems of India and Pakistan. This is in marked contrast to a colleague giving an impression that urban sanitation was a Western invention by contrasting a squatter settlement in Africa with a bathroom in the UK. Kenneth Frampton, architectural commentator talks about learning from each other- *"It is one of the ironies of the interrelationship between the so-called First and Third Worlds that Indian architects categorically demonstrated very comparable alternate land settlement patterns that could with minor adaptation have been employed equally effectively in both worlds. It is also significant and yet an understandably ironic fact that this remarkable production has also been largely ignored by the Western world".*¹⁶
3. Examining positive examples of cultural fusions and influences in design, such the Brighton Pavilion, or the 'bungalow', drawn from the vernacular domestic architctecture of Bengal. In our design work in squatter settlements in India, I use specific environmental, cultural and environmental references- not just Western context- during teaching. Balkrishna Doshi, the eminent Indian architect, writes-

"The realization that International models of architecture, were not suitable, given varying resources, climatic conditions, values, lifestyles and lifestyles, has

¹⁶ Balkrishna Doshi (1997) Contemporary Architecture and City Form: the South Asian Paradigm.

given rise to healthy debate in recent times. This has also encouraged all societies to look into their own heritage to understand the architectural and planning practices which have evolved over centuries of adaptation and in some cases, even adoption”¹⁷.

4. A wide variety of external critics are invited to take part in design crits. These include not only architects and academics but also non- architects and in particular situations, the stakeholders. For example, in 2008 we tackled a design project in Uxbridge Road and Shepherds Bush, itself called the most diverse street in London. For the critics, we had the Chair of the Market Traders, local stakeholders, Chair of another market in London- and others, including architects. These critics were able to contribute a wide variety of knowledge and experience, thus adding a dose of reality and diversity to the design process.
5. Various other teaching methods that involve student centred learning are used. We have used Peer assessment extensively where other students are invited to crit other students. Given that our students come from such different backgrounds, it has become a very useful exercise to take into account different cultural backgrounds and the wider ‘experiential’ learning of each student.

Conclusion

By acknowledging that creative design springs from diverse bodies of knowledge found in all cultures, sexes and ages, we are able to have a richer architecture for it. The influences of women, children, older people in our built environment need to be acknowledged and respected. We also need to realize that a lot of what is called ‘primitive’ and backward could be actually more sustainable and appropriate. Using my experiences as a mother, Indian and immigrant have become useful tools in understanding with compassion the universality of our lives while acknowledging the diversity of our actions. Professor AnnaLee Saxenian has coined the term, ‘brain circulation’ as opposed to ‘brain drain’¹⁸. She talks of the experience of immigrant workers (or students- my addition) returning and bringing with them new skills to revitalize their home nations. Whether they are overseas or home students, ‘brain

¹⁷ Doshi, B.V. (1985) Cultural Continuum and Regional Identity in Architecture, *Regionalism in Architecture, Proceedings of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture Regional Seminar, Exploring Architecture in Islamic Culture 2*, Dhaka, Singapore, Concept Media Pte Ltd., p.87 - available at <http://archnet.org/library/pubdownloader/pdf/2810/doc/DPC0288.pdf>.

¹⁸ A. Saxenian (2005) ‘From Brain Drain to Brain Circulation: Transnational Communities and Regional Upgrading in India and China’, available at <http://people.ischool.berkeley.edu/~anno/Papers/scid-2005.pdf>

circulation' is a notion that could apply to the time an architecture student spends at a School of Architecture, infusing their own cultural experiences into the learning process and returning their places of work to use their creative skills there.

Biographical note

Sumita Sinha is a practising architect and academic who has worked in India, France, Spain and the UK. She is a Civic Trust assessor and sits on a number of panels advising on education, design and sustainability. Sumita teaches architecture and technology at universities in the UK and abroad, and is a Science, Engineering and Technology ambassador for schools and businesses in the UK. She is also a member of the RIBA validation Panel and RIBA Part III examiner. Sumita is the founder of Architects For Change, the Equality Forum for British Architects and past Chair of Women In Architecture. Her published works include those in the fields of design, work practices and community planning. Sumita's awards include the UIA:UNESCO International award, Marley Environmental Initiatives award, and National Training award. Sumita received Women In Business award in 2002 and Ford Diversity award in 2004. In 2003, her portrait was included in an exhibition about 28 women who had made difference to the life and culture of Britain. Sumita received the 2008 Atkins Inspire award for Architecture.