

The Problem of Subjectivity of Perception in the Formulation of Architectural Concepts

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If one cares to consider impartially cases of dispute arising between two or more parties in the modern world, he may come to the conclusion that, in most cases, each party involved is convinced that he had understood and interpreted the circumstances of the case correctly while other parties had not. This is true for disputes at personal level as well as major conflicts at international level.

In assessing architectural design schemes or buildings, too, we frequently come across the case where the assessor is sure that he has understood the problem well enough but nevertheless is not appreciative of the architect's solutions. Obviously the architect himself has considered and re-considered the problem before arriving at the solution. Likewise, the users of the building, too, will be divided on the question whether the building answers their need or not. Now, why should such a fate await a well-thought-out architectural solution ?

The present writer is of the opinion that one reason for this type of misunderstanding is the subjectivity of perception of individual human beings. Almost conclusive proof of this occurrence is given in a book written by M. D. Vernon called "Psychology of Perception" (Penguin Books, 1965). There he describes some simple but fascinating experiments in the course of proving his point.

In the light of this, what should the architects do to make sure that their buildings are accepted by all alike. It is not desirable to just leave it to chance alone or to console oneself that all cannot be pleased at the same time. The following article, more or less in a point form, is an attempt to arrive at a general architectural philosophy an architect may adopt in his effort to overcome the inherent shortcomings in his perceptions.

We shall begin from Perception itself.

Perception is a process learned in the earliest years of childhood through trial and error methods, i.e. touching, going around objects, association with things giving pleasure or displeasure, etc. Thus all perception is subjective: all things are perceived in a way one has learnt and not necessarily as they really are (assuming that things exist in reality).

It follows, that all concepts conceived through perceptions perceived through the senses (eye, ear,) etc. are also subjective. Apparent uniformity of concepts (thus conceived) by different individuals is not indicative of any objectivity in the concept so shared - but rather, the result of the conceivers having brought up under more or less similar conditions, same locality, same social strata etc.

If we are to elaborate, all concepts perceived through the above means, i.e. seeing through the (biased) eye, hearing through the (biased) ears, etc. are subjective. The degree of uniformity of opinion on a given issue of a people, is only a measure of the strength of their tradition.

If so, is it possible to have unbiased ideas or concepts ?

A step towards making it possible is to eliminate the element in our system of perception which makes it biased. The realisation that perception is biased, ability to understand the particular "biases" one is susceptible to, and learning to de-bias perception would clear the passage of perception and thus make unbiased concept possible, if it is possible at all.

But is it ?

We have only made the passage free of bias. All our efforts would be frustrated if our central computer, the organ with which we process the information, the mind, the intellect, or whatever "IT" is, is working in a way we have learned, and not in a way independent of any conditioning process of the outside world.

In the former case, where "IT" is only a learned process, nothing may be known to anybody; knowing is simply possible. In the latter case, though, we have a supreme goal to reach. Obviously we may know only when we reach the goal. It follows that, in the former case, we can never know even whether we can or can not know !

It is clear that further speculation on the question is futile. What we can say at this stage of our task of "clearing the passage of perception" is that we can not know until we reach the supreme goal. But what are the practical implications of this, as applied to the late 20th century conditions, especially in the field of architecture ?

In our approach to a given architectural problem, we are initially faced with the task of forming a concept, concept of the general solution. This we formulate using the biased information we have collected throughout our life. Therefore all architectural concepts thus conceived are biased and reflect the architect's personality: i.e. the sum of all the experiences (all kinds of perceptions including those produced by his mental activities) he has received; all new experiences filtered through all previous experiences.

This is obviously a sorry state of affairs: in fact, if not for tradition, (customs, opinions and beliefs handed down) which helps the making of stereotypes, the whole civilization would be in a more chaotic condition than it is now: nay, it could not even exist since no one will be able to "understand" anyone else.

Thus we see that although an architect may project his personality through his design, there may be others who can interpret the concept favourably and give it a high rating. We may note here that there can be only interpretations and not understandings because the latter is an impossibility under these circumstances

If only we could de - bias our perceptions, then we could formulate unbiased concepts. Obviously, such concepts are not applicable to only one section of the civilization, but to the whole of it; since they are nearer the Truth.

But no architect, in fact no body, is expected to cleanse his system of perception: rather, the contrary. The more strongly one is biased towards or against something, the stronger-willed he is regarded to be. In the case of an architect such strong will help him to have a "Style of his own". However much he tries to justify his style as being logically arrived at, the fact remains that beneath that style lie countless experiences and prejudices peculiar to that particular person. Therefore, in real terms, the style is arbitrary.

The practical problem before us now is to find out the best approach to architectural design concepts, given that,

- (a) the architect is not free of bias,
- (b) the style of such architect is arbitrary; i.e. it can be interpreted by different individuals in quite different ways depending solely on the experiences & prejudices of the interpreter.

The importance of this exercise should be apparent when it is realized that the freedom to exercise individual styles granted by Professional Charters may compromise the freedom of the rest, the non-professionals, who are at the receiving end. Unrestrained freedom to Professionals to apply their will (or style) may even lead to the destruction of the civilization.

Then, what should the architect, as a person invested with responsibility, do to ensure that his concepts, which determine the form of his designs and consequently re-act on the civilization, are not (at least) destructive ?

The answer is not very hard to find. If destructive effects arise because concepts are arbitrary and thus not universally applicable, and if that is the result of biased perceptions, then there are two attitudes the architect may adopt.

- (a) Ideally, he can de-bias his systems of perception, and realize the TRUTH: then he cannot have UNTRUE concepts. this is difficult.
- (b) He can refuse to rely on biased perceptions to form concepts he hopes to use. He can adopt a general attitude of unlimited kindness to others, especially the users.

In the latter case, though he has not realized the TRUTH, still he is not asserting his individuality (at any cost). He would, in fact,, be helping others (in the same plight as he himself is) to bear the weight of this illusory world. (for is not one's world formed only of perceptions?)

This is more or less identical to the outlook on life early Sinhala artists had as evidenced in their literature, music (Jana-gi) etc. Even today, we can observe traces of this compassionate attitude in some aspects of life of unsophisticated villagers.