

EDUCATION FOR AUTHENTICITY AND CULTURAL ROOTEDNESS

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ABSTRACT:

The biggest threat of modernity is homogenization of the human cultures. The visual experience of modern spaces all over the world is beginning to look alike- Architecture, artifacts, life style. About a century ago we had diverse cultures with distinct way of life and aesthetic sensibilities.

The real issue is to understand how culture is formed and how to retain cultural diversity.

Culture is the result of how aesthetic sensibilities of people get manifested in the things they make and how they live. But the aesthetic sensibilities were awakened naturally by engaging with their contexts.

In modern situation, education conditions and homogenizes the sensibility of people through various subjects like art, architecture, design etc. All over the world the same syllabus is taught!

So if aesthetic education is treated as awakening the sense by creating situations for connecting to the natural context of the learners lives, do have the potential for making the learner authentic and original. This authenticity will create rooted cultures and thus retaining diversity.

Key words:

Authenticity, homogenization, culture, diversity, de colonization, aesthetic awareness.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture has direct link with aesthetic sense, creativity and the respective ecology in which people live and connect. In fact beauty is the link that connects people to their environment. Cultural diversity has been the result of diverse aesthetic sensibilities developed in people as a result of living in diverse ecological conditions. This act of authentic living is itself an act of knowledge creation. The outer manifestations of any culture- architecture, craft, food, music, dance and ritual are imbued with the aesthetic sense of the people who belong to that culture.

Modern education not only kills creativity but also kills the cultural diversity and aesthetic sense. as it ignores the two most important aspects of knowledge creation, which is the biological process involved in making sense of the world and the need to connect with the space in which they live.

1. 1. REVISITING THE FUNDAMENTALS

To begin with it is important to revisit some basic issues that are being taken for granted like what is the purpose of beauty in human life? Just as what is the purpose of knowledge in life? It is also important to go deeper in to some of these basic issues like what is creativity, what is culture, how is it formed, what cognition is and what aesthetic sense is.

Before we go in to the above raised issues let us also look at what has been achieved by the teaching of art, architecture and design.

The visual experience of modern spaces all over the world is beginning to look alike- day today products, consumption pattern, life style, architecture, signage, hoardings, products, colour sense, food, eating style. All over the world western products, sensibilities are being brought in through commerce supported by miseducation.

What is culture then? How does culture gets transmitted? How is cultural diversity preserved?

About a century ago we had diverse cultures with distinct way of life and aesthetic sensibilities that created contextually rooted architecture and artifacts. The learning process that ensured this needs to be revisited as the present education has created total homogenization all over the world.

At two levels the design education was creating problems; one at the aesthetic level and the other at the process level. The real issue then is to understand how to retain the cultural diversity and help the learner to

retain their original, authentic sense of beauty.
 To understand this we need to revisit some basic issues.
 How do we cognize the world? Why human beings need aesthetic sense.
 Why and how did we had so much cultural diversity?

2. SCHOOLING THE WORLD

Design education cannot be seen in isolation to address the issue of homogenization of our minds, as right from the time the child is born homogenizing and conditioning is going on as its parents themselves are victims of modern education. The modern educational process has ensured the colonization and conditioning of our minds. The basic premises from which the modern education has taken roots has got the basics wrong.

Schools were set up based on the need to 'teach' children without taking in to consideration how children learn and what children learn naturally based on their biological propensities and processes. Adults thought they knew what to teach and how to teach and where to teach. Thus schools, teachers and pedagogy came in to being. Modern education reverses the learning process by putting 'knowledge' which is in fact result of a process of knowing, before the actual process itself takes place. This takes us in to verification mode rather than the natural process of discovering. Thus we are all the time engaged in verifying what we have been taught. Also knowledge as a product is stored in our brains thus on encountering the unknown one is involved in recollecting. This also prevents the formation of an attitude for spontaneity, exploration, openness, tentativeness and creativity. Creativity also then becomes application of methods.

Even a greater damage to 'knowledge' preceding 'knowing' is that reasoning mind gets developed with total elimination of intuition. Reasoning capacity can only deal with what is known.

Thus we have modern human beings who are homogenized, mechanized, cloned and fragmented. Pride makes us experts in self-deceit and keeps us from true self exploration.

Thus when students come to design schools they have already gone through 12 to 15 years of mind damaging and dehumanizing schooling. The so called good students go for medical and engineering studies and what design schools get are comparatively less damaged. Even then the foundation program has to be set up to undo the damages of schooling and making students as free as possible.

Even though steps are taken for bring back creativity the basic paradigm of design education remains rooted in the western world view. The courses responsible for creating design sense or aesthetic sense like

elements of design, composition, various courses related to colour, form etc are still based on Bauhaus and even today it is taught more or less in the same manner. Design method or design process is also taught as a method which the student has to follow in order to design products.

2. 1. CASE OF ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

Architectural education has been even more damaging as the number of culturally uprooted architects being churned out is much larger and they have homogenized almost all modern cities and towns. Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, is the only city in India that has a distinct architectural character. That is because in Srinagar architects have not had opportunity to practice architecture. Even though the designer has to function in local contexts the design education is out of their real context. Contextually rooted aesthetic sense is what once created the diverse cultures around the globe. The present architecture of Srinagar also points to the fact that 'un trained' people have the ability to respond to modern needs with in their cultural frame work, most often unconsciously.

May the conscious and sensitive designers role is to step out and allow this to happen.

2. 2. DESIGN EDUCATION- INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONING OF AESTHETIC SENSE

It was during my study at NID (National Institute of Design), India, a premier design Institute, that I began to explore certain fundamental questions regarding beauty, aesthetic sense, spontaneity, creativity, culture etc.

At NID, the dichotomy was that the process of learning design is completely and clearly west oriented. After a period of conflict, the three years I spent at the institute became an intense period of self-exploration . What came sharply into focus and was exemplified in the 'education system' at the institute was the direct relationship that existed between colonized minds, cultural and spiritual alienation and formal schooling/education.

If ones sense of beauty is conditioned and colonized then what is the meaning of culture and what is left to be called as ones own?

Education has been the most powerful tool to condition and colonize the people as it has completely overturned the worldview of the so-called educated people of the world all over. It just replaced religious superstition to scientific superstition. It turned us into believers of a different kind. It turned us from active creators and inventors of

knowledge to passive believers of text and experts. We no longer use our senses and feelings and experience to know the world.

This is true of all educational institutions in this country. All aspects of our being are subjected to this false conditioning. At the level of information all we learn is about the west. At emotional level we feel inferior to the west and become imitators and our aesthetic sense is also transformed as we learn the western aesthetic sense. At the same time all true qualities of a learner is also destroyed by the schooling process. One learns to compete, lie, to cheat, to project one self etc.

Thus as a student of design what I questioned is how do I become true representative of my culture. And that led to asking what is culture? What is the connection between aesthetic sense and culture, cognition and culture?

3. REVERSING THE LEARNING PROCESS

3. 1. LEARNING FROM THE NON LITETARES

In confronting this predicament, which I then considered was essentially a personal quest, I decided to spend time with the rural tribal communities. Having escaped 'education' and 'development' I gathered that they would still be original and authentic people who are holding on to the culture and worldview which sustained them for centuries.

3. 2. ATTEMPTS IN DE-CONDITIONING

I began working very closely with many artisan communities within the country. I started with the Ao-tribe of Mokukchung district of Nagaland and later with many artisan communities in Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Tamilnadu. I experimented with diverse crafts like Pottery, Brass, Kantha, Embroidery, Bamboo, Stone, Horn etc. I settled down finally in Aruvacode, a colony of potters in Kerala where almost all my work in the last decade has been done.

My journey into the world of the rural artisan communities was not with the intention of 'developing' them or educating them. I went to them to regain that which I had lost in the process of getting educated. I went to learn from them. My strong feelings were that having escaped 'education' and 'development' they were still original and authentic and were holding on to a culture and world-view, which had sustained them for centuries.

While these interactions helped me distill myself in many ways, they also made me understand the umpteen hurdles that confront the artisans. From lack of availability of raw materials to the lack of demand for their

products, there is a pattern to the problems faced by the artisans. These remain discernible problems and need direct solutions. Some problems or should I say consequences, are insidious in nature and spring from interventions that come in the guise of "helping" 'them' out.

3. 3. THE DO NOTHING METHOD

From 1993 I have been living in Aruvacode, a potters village in Kerala, learning/ imbibing the being-ness of non literate people and at the same time trying to revitalize the dying tradition of pottery. A fundamental premise of the interventions at Aruvacode is the cultural, aesthetic and creative superiority of the trainees, compared to the 'developed' mainstream of Indian society.

The basic attempt therefore at the training programmes is to help the individuals regain the wisdom and confidence, which lies embedded within their own communities and culture.

During the first training conducted in 1993, it was very difficult to convince the women about their abilities. The hang over of my NID days did not help matters either. Initially when training methods were introduced with a group of women, we began with drawing straight lines, circles, etc. in free hand and moved on to exploring clay and making objects giving free vent to their imagination. We then sat together and started improvising on the designs to make them functional. In 1995 again there was a formal 6 months 'training' programme. This time most of the trainees were of the younger lot - 13,14,15 year olds. While the method was the same- freehand drawing, colours, clay work etc. my confidence about minimalist interventions had indeed grown and I deliberately kept myself away from the scene as far as possible. Their creations were simply superb. Several new designs emerged and an entire product range – coiled tiles was the result of the exercise.





Coil tiles designed by non-literate girls (age 13,14,15) and women



Sculptures done by Lakshmi who has no access to books, art galleries

This kind of work puts challenges to the prevalent notions about teaching and learning of art and aesthetics etc.

Through the series of efforts at recovering creativity, the realization also dawned that what is actually happening in the name of teaching and

training of rural and artisan communities is the corruption of their sense of knowing.

Traditional artisan's learning is experientially rooted, learner driven. It has the quality of re-creating, re-inventing and re-living knowledge. The cognitive space ensures the first handedness in these learnings and helps the learner to situate oneself in the cultural conditions of ones life. Can there be an education that is sensitive to these vital issues that retains diversity and authenticity?:

3. 4. LEARNING FROM CHILDREN

The latest of my interventions at initiating creativity among the village children proved beyond doubt that our interventions, if at all, need to be restricted to erecting a fence against outside influences that corrupt the genuine aesthetic sensibility and sense of perfection in children.

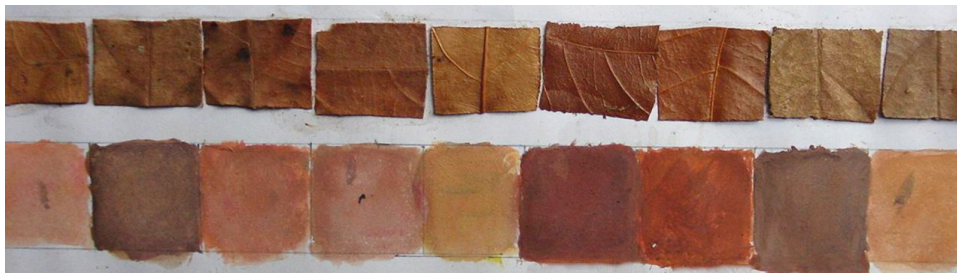
3. 5. SENSING NATURE; KNOWING NATURE

Sensing Nature; Knowing Nature is a workshop I have been conducting from 2003 at Aruvacode , Nilambur during the summer holidays – April and May. Each and every time children have proved that they are born genius and they need to be left alone to make sense of the world.

Senses connects not only to knowledge but also to the beauty of living. Sensitivity is in a way is matter of the awakening of the senses and feelings.

The fundamental issues we raise through this event is the 'nature of learning, biologically embedded aesthetic sense in children, role of the 'teacher', do nothing method etc. It looks like that we are already born with aesthetic sense. I think this is our connection to the world and the way we conduct our lives provided we leave that to the nature in us.

The work shop on sensing nature is for providing space to come together to listen, to see, to taste, to touch, feel, to make etc. There is no teaching.



Colour scale taking inspiration from dry leaves



Colour in nature. An exploration in colour. Executed by Sunil Kumar aged 14. Children mix colour on their own from the six basic colours (red, blue, yellow, green, black and white).





Collage made using dry leaves



Collage from magazines

4. EXPERIMENTS AT DESIGN SCHOOLS

From 2004 onwards I have been conducting some courses in various design institutions in India where I attempted to explore how aesthetic sense can be awakened in students rather than teaching them colour theories, rules of composition, exploring materials, exploring form etc. Need to integrate and sythesise various aspects of design education was another focus of my work. Material exploration is separate from form exploration and is separate from design process. This kind of compartmentalization is counterproductive.

4. 1. AESTHETIC AWARENESS

Awakening aesthetic awareness was the focus rather than teaching or imposing aesthetic sensibility. Various elements that are the building factor in awakening the aesthetic sense were explored experientially from the daily context of the learner's life.

This workshop has to be meditative and experiential with focus on keen observation of the immediate environment for colour, texture, shape etc. Various activities would be drawing, painting, clay work, wood work etc. So the focus is on experiencing of points, lines, colour, colour interaction, form, texture, patterns, geometry in nature, form transition etc is from the daily experience. Examples of this work can be seen at the following links. Material exploration naturally gets linked to the work. (<http://awakeningaestheticawareness.wordpress.com>)



Exploring colour scale from nature



Exploring lines, shapes, form etc



Original inside the fake made in clay and painted



Original leaves with painted ones





Form exploration and material exploration

4. 2. ORIENTATION PROGRAM

This is an integrated course of where the students were introduced and oriented to the self-learning culture needed in design education, getting the students to reconnect with their authentic self and ground them to the social realities with cultural sensitivity. They were also initiated in to a lifelong enquiry addressing the importance of hand/ body/ experience in the larger context of culture, ecology, spirituality etc and exploration of self. This will give them grounding in aesthetic sense and design thinking.

The whole program will re orient the students from product (knowledge) oriented learning to process (knowing) oriented learning.

There were three aspects to the program - Learning to learn (from teacher/taught paradigm to learner led paradigm) , learning to see (awakening the sense of beauty) Learning to be (exploration on self, context, society, cognition and culture)

Learning to Learn addresses the cognitive damages that prevents us from natural learning/ knowing. This is to re orient from 'knowledge dependency' to 'natural knowing' there by enabling the learner to regain the qualities and abilities of a true learner damaged by the 'schooling'. Openness, ability to hold doubts, exploring with out fear of making mistakes, humility and innocence are the true qualities of natural learner. And help students to re look at the tools acquired like rote learning, memory, reasoning etc.

15 to 20 years of spoon fed schooling makes the student in to a passive learner. This shift can be quite difficult as 10 years the student had relied on teachers' words thereby making memory and reasoning the only faculty that developed. This leads to fear of exploration, fear of making mistakes, inability to judge ones own work, inability to hold the question/doubt as the mind is very static and is full of rigid notions of

what is right & wrong. The brain structure is of a believer; just collections of truism & belief. Habit formed mind

Learning to See

Even though the most natural act as of now seeing doesn't happen as we are full of theories. Seeing requires us to be present. True seeing also awakens our aesthetic sense. Beauty can help us to move away from the egoistic reasoning mind. Learning to see is about seeing without concepts and biases. Conditioning makes us see the conceptual world as per our convenience or as we are directed to see. This is important for all and for design students the aesthetic aspect of seeing needs to be addressed.

Learning to Be

Learning to Be has to do with learning from children or from non-literate people as they are being in the world totally grounded/ totally present. Flowing with life and being part of what is happening.

Preoccupation with knowledge has turned us from 'human beings' to 'human knowings'. This alienation has resulted in dislocation from being rooted in culture and nature. In a strange way knowing culture/ nature has taken precedence to being rooted.

Exploration is around nature and nurture, to understand the equilibrium.

Exploring how we are formed by culture and then how we in turn form culture. Other aspects that will be explored are What does culture mean to us subjectively. How am I cultured or uncultured or colonized etc? what of me can be called as my 'thought'. Role of education in forming culture, world view etc. While we talk about some great Indian culture we imitate the west in most things we do. how did this happen? what can we do about this? How is 'culture ' transmitted? Where will you place Laurie Baker, the British born , educated architect who made very rooted architecture in Kerala, Himachal etc? Where as most of the indian architects shamelessly imitate the western architecture? what is the role of commercialisation and commodification in forming culture? The role of people like Tagore, Gandhi in the formation of the modern Indian 'culture' as well as how did colonization effect the culture as well as how it continues to have impact.

5. CONCLUSION

I draw the following conclusion from my experience.

1. Beauty is a biological aspect with our body/being and Art is a psychological construct.
2. Beauty is not something to be developed separately but to be present as part of our being, which gets awakened in the process of engaging with the world.
3. Beauty is the most fundamental of human existence. Beauty is

what truly makes one authentic. Beauty is what binds us to the external world. Beauty is what creates culture-the architecture, the food, the music, the artifacts, various dance forms and agriculture.

4. De-colonization and de-conditioning process is essentially a process of recovering ones authentic sense of beauty and reclaiming ones senses.
5. Rather than 'teaching' what one should do is to create situations for awakening the aesthetic awareness.
6. Process of learning need to be re awakened to recover various natural cognitive tools.
7. One doesn't create culture but culture gets created through our innocent and non-egoistic selves.
8. Human beings are in some sense the most helpless and with enormous capacity for self-deception...

Every generation needs to relive, relearn, recreate and reinvent certain aspects of its cultural sensibilities by engaging with the reality around them.

The natural state of being is to be authentic and original. In that state one is creative, is inventing all the time, is discovering all the time and is new all the time. This brings in concrete and first-hand experience as the basis for creating/ accessing or being in knowledge. Senses are tools that connect us to the concrete experience as well as our inner nature. This demands then we sharpen or sensitize our senses as those are our primary tools for knowing.

An educational process based on this would require sensitivity, trust and indeed careful planning for the unplanned to happen.

APPENDIX:

The main write up is from my personal experience of living with the rural tribal communities and from the documentation and research done to understand how children as well as non literate artisans learn. Many philosophers, thinkers, scientists and teachers have helped me to understand these issues.

Among them the prominent are as follows. Ivan Illich, Dr. Humberto Maturana (the Chilean School of Biology of Cognition) , John Holt, John Taylor Gatto etc

web site and blog link to my research/ work with artisan, children, design schools.

Artisans

The basic approach in working with artisan is to enable them to create without any inputs. See detailed philosophy at <http://www.re-cognition.org/crafts/philosophy.html#>

Sculptures by Lakshmi who has never been to school or even seen books on art etc. <http://my.opera.com/enableartisan/albums/show.dml?id=896327>.

The women potters have been developing unique tiles and murals and this can be seen at <http://www.re-cognition.org/crafts/coiltiles.html#> ,

<http://www.rediscoveringchildhood.org/kumbham.htm> .

Similar exploration with women artisans doing straw craft

<http://www.rediscoveringchildhood.org/kollam.htm>.

Enable artisan was a project I attempted in order to work towards setting up an institution for artisans. (www.enableartisan.org)

<http://www.rediscoveringchildhood.org/enableartisan.htm>,

<http://my.opera.com/enableartisan/albums/show.dml?id=761059>.

Children

The sensing nature; knowing nature workshop I have been doing from 2003 during the April/ May months at Aruvacode, kerala proved to be of great help in

understanding the true potential of children. See the link

<http://my.opera.com/jinankb/albums/show.dml?id=65285> ,

<http://www.rediscoveringchildhood.org/sensing.htm>.

Based on this understanding I set up a rural design centre for older children of Aruvacode.

<http://www.rediscoveringchildhood.org/ruraldesign.htm>

Reimagining schools is a project that came out of this experiences with children.

<http://reimaginingschools.wordpress.com/>

Design education

See the link to see exploration at various design schools on aesthetic sense awakening.

<http://awakeningaestheticawareness.wordpress.com/about/>

POWER POINTS <http://www.authorstream.com/tag/Jinankb>

<http://www.slideshare.net/jinan>