

architecture

VOL. 3, ISSUE 1&2

January 1-15,16-31, 2009 ▲ Rs.40

Pages 106

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Towards a saner green agenda

Mumbai-based **Kalhan Mattoo** expresses concern over how the sustainability movement risks a backlash due to overkill

Everyone is talking green. It is hard to find a product catalogue, trade publication, design statement, college curriculum or even a corporate manifesto that does not profess eco-credentials. We are now constantly inundated in well-meaning goodness that has swelled into a cultural and intellectual tide capable of obliterating other dissenting points of view. Eco-evangelists speak down on all who dare question this belief system and shame us into cowering submission.

Our problems with this are many

First, an architectural programme is like a multivariable equation that needs to be solved. Sustainability is only one of the determinants that have to be factored in. While we do not dispute its relative importance, we certainly think that any project is more than one agenda. In order to make it the only defining characteristic is to do a great disservice to the client and the end-user. Second, the needless moralising has the potential to breed guilt in the minds of wonderful, normal people including design practitioners. We do not want to reduce the quality of our lives by living without air-conditioning in humid

tropical climate, live in small dimly-lit homes, worry about the trickle of water while shaving, do without bathtubs or whatever else to reduce carbon footprint and save Mother Earth.

From a developing country perspective, the conveniences of modern life are a blessing. In order to be lectured on our responsibilities by the West is hilarious. While they may have come a full circle by wanting to go back to nature, to impose it on those who aspire for richer and better life is coercive in the least. The necessity of the moment for us is to improve our condition and not pander to the romantic notions of the privileged.

Third, good intentions are a poor substitute for intellectual enquiry. Many green initiatives are accepted at face value purely on the merit of the intent.

We are made to accept that by following the defined green agenda, everything that is 'wrong' with our planet will turn good. How can we be so sure? It is intellectually bankrupt to not admit other points of view, something demonstrated by the current ethanol production problem.

A lot of green pet peeves, be it ozone depletion or melting icecaps, have not been conclusively

Lens' eye



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linked to human activity. It is not science to extrapolate from a thin base of evidence and offer doomsday scenarios. The assumption that the pre-industrial climate state was ideal is open to debate. We know for fact that earth's climate has been changing and will continue to do so irrespective of human activity.

(Mattoo can be contacted at kalhan@planet3studios.com)

ens' eye

What needs to be done?

It's quite simple. Service the self-interest of individuals. When we suggest a client that using LED lights will reduce energy bills substantially, we have his attention. Ditto, when we talk about increasing natural light, using appropriate construction technologies, and sourcing locally available skills. Socially responsible behaviour can be a desirable side-effect of addressing fundamental client needs. Finally, the eco-green-sustainable movement risks a backlash because of overkill. As the marketing adage goes - starve a fad, feed a trend - it is important that we all take a collective pause and ease the intensity of communication a bit...or risk watching this fad die sooner than expected.

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Mobile: +91 98212 63591, 9323700860
www.globalprofiles.in, nitindeshmukh@globalprofiles.in
nmd45@rediffmail.com