Marginalization through Design and the Built Environment

Rohit Bharti[1] , Ayla Khan[2]

[1]Architect & Ph.D. Scholar, [2]Architect & Associate Professor
[1]Faculty of Architecture and Ekistics, [2]Faculty of Architecture and Ekistics
[1]Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India, [2]Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi, India

Abstract: Marginalization can happen in various spaces where the people are marginalized by the society, there, the built environment also becomes equally oppressive. One must understand that the design of the built environment is the outcome of the underlying discrimination borne out of either ignorance or lack of awareness and sometimes even, insensitivity. The examples of the built environment given in this research paper show that the design and the built environment become the mode of conveying an ideology or the mind-set of the society at large and hence, blaming the architects or designers would not be sufficient.

I. INTRODUCTION

Discrimination and marginalization are not new practices and the world has witnessed it throughout the history. Whether it is apartheid in South Africa or the gender discrimination prevalent in various parts of the world, the world is no alien to such practices even in today's context. Although various lessons have been learnt at global level and more humanitarian social concepts such as the egalitarianism and liberalization are being accepted with more vigor than ever before in the history, such practices still exist, however are expressed in a more coveted and hidden manner. With the advent of social media, the voicing of one's opinion and ideas about a certain act, practice and policy has become easier as it makes it accessible to the public and even to the people with authority. This has provided people, a platform to convey their discontent towards certain practices and speak up about the camouflaged discrimination that is expressed indirectly towards them whether by a person or even the design of the environment around them which can be equally insensitive towards their existence and presence. To understand this, an example could be a day of a person who is dwarf or has height much lesser than that of an average man's height in an Indian city such as Delhi. The person would begin his/her day with daily morning activities such as bathing, brushing teeth, using commode etc. in the dwelling unit which might be his own, where he/she has gotten everything designed according to his/her height or if he/she has bought the flat in a housing society, then that itself might be a struggle every day. The next step would be moving out to do his/her daily chores; a privately owned vehicle might work fine for them but if it's a public transport by which he/she commutes, then he/she requires a certain height of platform which he/she can climb comfortably. Moving on, he/she might face the same struggles in the buildings. Even if the people have been highly sensitive towards him/her, the larger picture which was conveyed by the built environment denies him/her their right to live with equality.

II. REFLECTION OF MARGINALIZATION

With people becoming more aware and sensitive throughout the world due to dissemination of various campaigns being run around the world and even at country level, the discrimination and marginalization has not been eradicated but has become more camouflaged or expresses itself in coveted manner in form of product design, architecture, garments design or even in the whole of the built environment. One of the examples to explain the above-mentioned phenomenon could be taken from the Fashion industry, while the body shaming is a *trending* social issue, where people who are too fat, too slim etc. are shamed for not being fit or labelled as ugly for their physical appearance, still very few luxury fashion brands identify as plus- size brands or designing for fat people. The fashion design industry here is indirectly reflecting the non-acceptance of people who do not fit in the regular body size, which is defined by the majority of the society.

While it is almost "in" to be sensitive towards different communities and people and their issues, the resultant behavior of the so called "sensitive and 'aware" people, or as they are commonly known as "woke" people (people who are more alert to injustice in society and other issues) is superficial or only for the social media attention. This itself is a dangerous trend as it displays how the social issues such as discrimination become the source of gaining attention with almost negligible beneficial action towards the actual cause. While voicing an opinion is itself an act of a protest to the discrimination but not doing anything to change the decision can be detrimental. This can be explained using an example of *Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan (Clean India Campaign)* in India, while majority of people did actually clean their built environment for many weeks and even months, a lot of people and politicians did it only to post an act on the social media and forgot the whole intent later. People can still speak up the about the issues but the change not being reflected in the built environment is the implication of the underlying insensitivity towards the issue.

The root cause of discrimination and marginalizationlies in the non-acceptance of the "different", different from the deemed "fit" person in a society. While the power of deciding who and what is fit is decided by the people who exist in majority mostly, sometimes, it is also decided by the people who have power and more resources than the rest of the society. When somebody exists outside the circle of majority, then that person becomes the "other" or "different" and the sense of belongingness peoplehave for one another weakens. Its weakening can be detrimental as it results in insensitivity towards the "other" people as "fit" ones start forgetting that they too have rights. It is here the marginalization starts creeping in and sets in the majority of people and results in subtle and sometimes, unfortunately, not so subtle practices such as racism, gender discrimination, discrimination towards disabled people etc. However, when the marginalization isstrong and more apparent, it faces stronger opposition and protests which, in a way, is positive as it results in a more effective way of dealing with itas it is easily identified. But when it is more coveted and presents itself in the garb of non-inclusivity in terms of design and the built environment, it is considered as harmless mistake or ignorance which doesn't result in stronger opposition but an indifferent attitude prevails towards it which fuels it continue further till someone identifies it. Hence, it becomes very important for the designers from various disciplines and architects to understand the implications of their design as they can convey a certain meaning to the user about the ideology of thatplace.

While the examples taken above are reflecting the ideology of a place in smaller design elements, sometimes, the urban design or the way a town or city is planned can reflect the collective thoughts of asociety. One of the examples which explain the above-mentioned statement is the marginalization of the disabled people through the built environment in various part of India. When a physically disabled person starts from his residence, the struggle begins from that point, whether it be about boarding a mode of public transport or walking the streets andpathways in cities of India, every single activity is a struggle, making the disabled person realize that the independence is a far-fetched dream with infrastructure like that, as provided in various cities of India. The next part of the struggle begins in the workplace as most of the workplaces lack the infrastructure required for variety of disabilities such as the floor guiding tiles and the audio-visual aids forthe blind people, ramps and slopes at level differences inside the building for the people on wheel chairs. The struggle continues for recreational areas as well with almost negligible options for recreation for people with disabilities, even the ones which exist for general public are mostly inaccessible by them. Whether it be malls oradventure parks, even roaming in without any help inthese spaces also proves to be a difficult for them. One must understand that all these designs are the outcomes of the underlying discrimination borne out of either ignorance or lack of awareness and sometimes even, insensitivity. The built environmentin the above given examples becomes the mode of conveying the ideology or the mind-set of the societyat large and hence blaming the architect or designers would not be sufficient.

III. ROLE OF EDUCATION SYSTEM

The education system in India is also at fault by not creating enough sensitivity and awareness around theissue of disability and more so, about unapparent discriminations or marginalization happening around them towards various communities. Later on, as the students with such education system go on to become design professionals and architects, they carry the same insensitivity and lack of awareness with them as their education system taught them so. Another example of this insensitivity and lack ofawareness is the lack of empathy towards the LGBTQ community, more so, towards the Transgender community, which can be seen in the accessibility of the public spaces and washrooms.While the Supreme Court of India has already passedthe Transgender Persons **(Protection of Rights) Act,2019,** stating that it is to provide for the protection ofrights of transgender people, their welfare, and other related matters, it is still a long way till the built environment reflects it. The washrooms for transgendered are uncommon and rarely seen. While anatomically and ergonomically, the design requirements hardly differ for them, the lack of separate washrooms for them and choosing to use either a Male or Female washroom is like forcibly bringing them to the same scenario which they never identified with and this is a direct reflection of society's rejection of them to be considered as a thirdgender yet.

Built environment not only reflects the socio-political ideology of a place but also how itmarginalizes a certain section of the society such as the Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). While, this hasbeen considered a global issue by the UN, various developing countries like India are still to reflect the much-required inclusivity of PWDs socially, politically and even legally and such ideology translates blatantly into the built environment of many cities in India. Various cities in India are not accessible for persons with Disabilities and the underlying force behind it is the socio-political background around the issue and perception of disabilities. It, then, becomes of paramount importance to study the social, political and evenlegal aspects around this issue before one can attempt to improve the situation of built environment.

IV. ISSUE OF IDENTITY

Marginalization can happen in various spaces where the people are marginalized by the society, there, the built environment also becomes equally oppressive. One of the examples could be the design of the prisons in India. It must be understood that the built environment can actually reinforce a certain identity to an individual which may also get embedded in thatindividual's subconscious mind which can have a positive or negative impact on that person's psyche. This can be well illustrated with an example of Prisons. When one talks about a place like a prison, the underlying ideology becomes really important as it gets reflected in the layout of the prison such as thepunitive ideology results in something like Linear and rigid layout while reformative prisons become more like housing clusters. While the legal punishment may decide the term of punishment, the goal of incarceration should be rehabilitation and if one has to be rehabilitated, then the punitive environment might not work for the long term and hence the ideology has to be worked upon, so thatone can design according to that. One must understand that if the idea behind design is not worked out beforehand then design will never reflect what it needs to, in the built environment.

The issue of identity in architecture and built environment also needs to be addressed in this article as one's identity is deeply intertwined with the built environment. This has been studied by various authors and architects and can be explained through various examples. Whether it is personal identity or social identity, a man considers the external builtenvironment a source of reaffirming his own identity. This has been claimed by various famous psychoanalysts such as Carl Jung. As the book *Identity by Design* explains this process though the example of the old bridge of Mostar, where people said, on the account of it being broken during a war, that they felt a part of their own body was broken when it broke. This also suggests that that the permanence that the architecture has, also helps people to hold on to some tangible feature in place that they can identify with. However, the identity in architecture can also lead to a problematic issue, which is the rigidity in identity. When one becomes too rigid with a particular identity, the one

starts defining the "us" and then the rest become the "others". This can lead to problematic ideologies such as Fascism where one's identity becomes superior than the others. Then, one can say that architecture or the built environment can also marginalize through modification of built environment as the communities start identifying strongly with the built environment and destruction of that could lead to marginalization of that community as explained the example of Old Mostar's Bridge.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Since one's identity is reinforced by his/her built environment, one can also argue that changing that person's built environment would also transform his identity, this has also been seen in various examples throughout the world, whether for good or worse. Carrying forward the same example which was mentioned earlier, the old bridge of Mostar, when it was broken; people initially became nostalgic and felt that a part of their selves was uprooted. This shows two important points, first that the people who attacked, also chose to attack a piece of built environment which was a symbol of that culture and in order to uproot their roots and second, that the people, in absence of that bridge felt an unbearable void, that even after the war retreated, they wanted a bridge to be constructed to which they can connect to again. This same analogy was very clearly seen and documented by various researchers in the event of plane crash in World Trade Centre, wherein the building itself became the symbol of American Power and Dominance, and to undo that and break the existing hegemony of the US, the terrorists chose that building to literally break the backbone of power of the US in the world. Unfortunately, it did succeed in doing so. But left the built environment designers with the question how the identity of a building can also make it an insecure or a vulnerable built form. In both the above-mentioned examples, one can clearly see that the modification in built environment can lead to either marginalization of a certain community or makes one community a target of the other.

Another very important thing that must be considered before planning for a building or city is the culture of the place and also if the place can be flexible enough to incorporate the multiplicity of the culture. Transcultural inclusivity has been a principle advocated by many authors including Ian Bentley of *Identity By Design* which states that the place should allow for multiple cultures to part of it as it decreases the chances of conflict and also gives people the scope to create multiple identities rather than have one rigid identity. Multiple identities lead to less discrimination and marginalization as one feels connected to various communities.

It becomes so much important for all architects and designers to understand the implications that architecture can have on the life of the people. Hence, every aspect must be taken into consideration before designing the buildings and built environment.

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