Making Invisible Monuments Visible

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ABSTRACT

A monument is defined as a historically significant building commemorating a person/event. This perpetuates social injustice since monuments thus defined often record the history of a privileged minority. Common people could not access the palaces, forts and religious structures that we today list as monuments. Architecture must be equal in its narration of history. We know in detail how royalty lived, prayed, won wars, relaxed and were laid to rest. However, the principles and techniques of construction that we learn from grand edifices are not typically employed in the construction for the majority. In our veneration of monuments, we need to dig deeper to study the homes of the forgotten many, the structures that they built and interacted with on a daily basis. These 'invisible monuments' tell the story of the commons giving us a glimpse into their lives, their context and their history. Their native intelligence resulted in "living museums" of their craftsmanship. After all, the epitome of human civilisation - the Indus Valley - was not a luxurious abode of one but a fine example of architecture and town planning where over 5 million people thrived. A survey to establish people's notion of monuments along with the learnings from the first author's four extensive expeditions totalling over 2500 km on foot across the country titled - Walk for Arcause - Kolkata to Delhi, Kolkata to Dhaka, Konark to Bhubaneswar and Chennai to Bangalore have established the urgent need for documentation of vernacular and traditional practices through collective action. Clear possible action points will be elucidated as replicable models to create open-source repositories of these invaluable invisible monuments.

Introduction

While monuments may tower over history, it is in the intimate embrace of vernacular architecture that the soul of culture finds its true resonance, echoing the voices of generations, both past and present. Monuments are often seen as epitomes of historical significance, yet they tend to overlook the narratives of the everyday. This paper seeks to reframe our understanding of monuments by spotlighting the significance of vernacular architecture. These everyday structures have profoundly influenced the lives of ordinary people throughout history and continue to take inspiration from everyday needs and aspirations. Drawing on insights from scholars like Clifford Geertz (1973), Amos Rapoport (1990), and Arjun Appadurai (1986), along with original observations and inferences drawn from extensive journeys on foot across India totalling over 2500 km by Gita Balakrishnan, the first author of this paper (henceforth referred to as first author), this literature review makes a case for the need of a more inclusive historical understanding that respects the diverse experiences and cultural heritage of all societies.

To achieve this, it is imperative to shift our focus towards acknowledging and preserving equally, both monumental structures and the often-overlooked everyday architecture - homes, workplaces, marketplaces and many others that the masses frequent, coined by the author as "invisible monuments". These invisible monuments, represented by everyday structures deeply intertwined with the lives of ordinary people, hold profound significance in shaping cultural narratives and reflect the collective identity and heritage of diverse societies.

Historically, narratives of architecture and heritage have predominantly focused on monumental structures- palaces, temples, churches, mosques, amphitheatres, etc., usually associated with the powerful elite, neglecting the lived experiences and contributions of the majority. Clifford Geertz's (1973) assertion that culture is a dynamic process of interpretation and negotiation highlights the need to tell history from the lens of the majority, encompassing the diverse experiences and cultural heritage of ordinary people. This perspective underscores the significance of vernacular architecture as a tangible expression of the collective wisdom and ingenuity of communities, offering insights into their social, economic, and cultural contexts.

Arjun Appadurai's notion of "The Social Life of Things" complements these perspectives by highlighting the role of vernacular architecture in uncovering marginalised voices and hidden histories (Appadurai, 1986) which have been overlooked in traditional narratives of monumentality. By examining vernacular architecture, we can shed light on these histories and give voice to those whose stories have been overlooked. Everyday architecture or the architecture of common folk serves as a tangible record of these marginalised voices, offering insights into their lived experiences and cultural contributions.

Methodology

The Walk for Arcause campaign grew to become an extraordinary journey with the first author covering a mighty distance of 1700 kilometres on foot from Kolkata to Delhi, followed by subsequent similar expeditions across different geographies. The diverse landscapes, cultures, and communities of India were intimately experienced at a pedestrian pace. From bustling cities to tranquil villages, from highways to serene hinterlands, the walks immersed participants in the rich tapestry of India's everyday life.

Fig.1. Walking past homes in Singrauli District in the state of Madhya Pradesh (National Highway 39), India

Fig.2. Interactions along the route - Purulia District, State of West Bengal, India

Fig.3. Interactions along the route - Nadbelwa, State of Jharkhand, India

During these journeys, meticulous observations and documentation of vernacular architecture were conducted, defining the essence of regional communities. Homes, shops, public spaces, institutions, and workspaces became the subjects of exploration, highlighting their integral role in shaping the everyday lives of people. By prioritising the study of these everyday structures, the initiative aimed to unveil their profound significance in reflecting the socio-cultural fabric of Indian society. The methodology employed by the Walk for Arcause campaign involved a comprehensive examination of various architectural styles and construction techniques prevalent across different regions of India.

In addition to physical observations, engagement with local communities was prioritised to gain insights into the cultural significance and historical context of everyday architecture. Conversations with residents, artisans, and craftspersons unearthed invaluable stories and practices passed down through generations, enriching the understanding of the built environment. Efforts are underway from a few institutions to initiate dialogues on contextual approaches in pedagogy and the practice of architecture. However, there is a need for institutions to delve deeper into regional specificities and cultural heritage. Furthermore, critical reflection on the disconnect between architectural education and local contexts was an integral part of the methodology and this multifaceted approach yielded rich insights into invisible monuments that embody the collective wisdom and ingenuity of Indian communities.

Results

While experiencing changing landscapes and climatic conditions, during the Walk for Arcause journey, distinctive variations in built environments were noticed. Local architecture mirrored the hues of the soil, showcasing the utilisation of locally sourced materials. Moreover, it was fascinating to observe the integration of cultural influences and climatic adaptations into the architectural designs

encountered along the way. On the contrary, modern constructions involved materials and techniques which did not necessarily come from or speak of the local surroundings. Asbestos sheets, PVC roofs, concrete, brick, plastered and standard painted walls found their way into common construction regardless of location. On the other hand, a remarkable diversity in materials and building styles was observed in the vernacular constructions, ranging from traditional thatch roofs and different types of earth construction to intricate Khaprail (clay tile) roofs and bamboo structures. Moreover, regional variations, such as changes in soil colour and availability of materials, were noted to influence architectural practices. The change in soil colour, from a reddish tint in Jharkhand to a more sandy, fine soil upon entering Uttar Pradesh, with the same reflected in the colour of brick and mud walls was self-explanatory. In regions such as Joypur in West Bengal and even extended stretches of the first author's second walk from Kolkata, India to Dhaka, Bangladesh that boasted of abundant forest reserves, extensive use of wood and bamboo for construction, as well as furniture, was noted; similarly, in regions known for clay works and pottery, clay roof tiles were observed. Reflecting on the coming together of the traditional and the new, a new vocabulary for a vernacular is emerging and this new vernacular seems to be distant from the local. Drawing from real-life examples and field studies, the need to preserve local and cultural identity while embracing development is imperative.

En route, the first Walk for Arcause journey, an interaction with Anjali, who worked at an eco-resort provided insight into the dichotomy between tradition and modernity in rural architectural practices. While completely in tune with vernacular wisdom, Anjali's aspirations for a modern brick-and-mortar house highlighted evolving socioeconomic dynamics in rural communities. Architectural transformation is evident in the transition from traditional mud dwellings to more modern constructions. This change is driven by factors such as aspirations for stability and prosperity often associated with modern or "pucca" (permanent) construction while construction with indigenous materials is classified as "kutcha" (non-permanent).

At Bharra, a quaint village in the state of Madhya Pradesh, a residential structure constructed in 1972 by Jagjiwan and Vidyapath's father became a point for architectural study. This dwelling epitomises enduring artistry, skills and sustainability, embodying traditional building practices prevalent in the region. The colloquial term for construction with local indigenous materials is 'kutcha' signifying temporariness, while modern construction is termed 'pucca,' implying permanence—an aspiration for many. Ironically, everything created eventually returns to the soil, echoing the cyclic nature of life embodied by 'kutcha,' yet there persists a human craving for permanence, or 'pucca'. This house is a clear case of cradle-to-cradle design and construction.

Constructed primarily from locally sourced materials, including earth for wall construction and handcrafted roof tiles, the house reflects a close connection to the surrounding environment. The utilisation of manual labour for intricate details such as door and window carving and the creation of every element from scratch resonates deeply with the way people once lived, worked, and built together. Anti-termite properties of a by-product from the rice crop used to protect their home were learned from the Bharra brothers. Such traditional wisdom about the built environment and many techniques and tips passed by word of mouth from one generation to another will continue to be lost to posterity if we do not consciously bring the focus to these invisible monuments.

The paradox lies in the juxtaposition of the scholarly emphasis on vernacular architecture as a repository of cultural heritage and indigenous wisdom with the challenges facing rural communities in India. While the works of McDonough and Braungart (2002) highlight the principles of sustainability and circular economy inherent in traditional building techniques, advocating for a holistic approach to design and construction, the reality for many rural communities, as illustrated by Anjali's story, is one of evolving aspirations and challenges. Despite the value attributed to vernacular architecture, the pressure to modernise and adapt to changing socioeconomic conditions often leads to the neglect or abandonment of traditional practices. This paradox highlights the tension between preserving cultural

heritage and meeting the needs and aspirations of contemporary society, emphasising the complexity of balancing tradition and modernity in architectural practices.

Challenges to architectural heritage preservation extend beyond individual homes, it's also about community aspirations, as seen at Madla. The first fellowship by the Ethos Foundation under its action area ADaR (Affordable Design, a Right) was for Madla - a village in the Panna district of the state of Madhya Pradesh, India. 20 kilometres away from Panna, it has a population of around 3000. Being in the vicinity of the Khajuraho Group of Monuments and Panna National Tiger Reserve, with National Highway 39 passing through it, Madla holds cultural and touristic significance in the region. However, with the run for development and introduction of modern construction, lifestyle changes, and other influences, Madla is on the verge of losing its unique identity. Negative consequences related to this loss of visual identity go far beyond a cultural loss and severely compromise the sustainability, resilience, economic vibrancy, and quality of life of the inhabitants. Unplanned sanitation and water supply at the community level as well as at the household level are resulting in deteriorating infrastructure and living conditions. A study done by the Ethos Foundation's fellowship recipient architect Gaurav Chordia under the mentorship of Hunnarshala, a not-for-profit organisation working towards developing sustainable habitats based in Gujarat provided local, vernacular recommendations to elevate the invisible monuments amidst an era witnessing the rapid erosion of identity in smaller towns and villages.
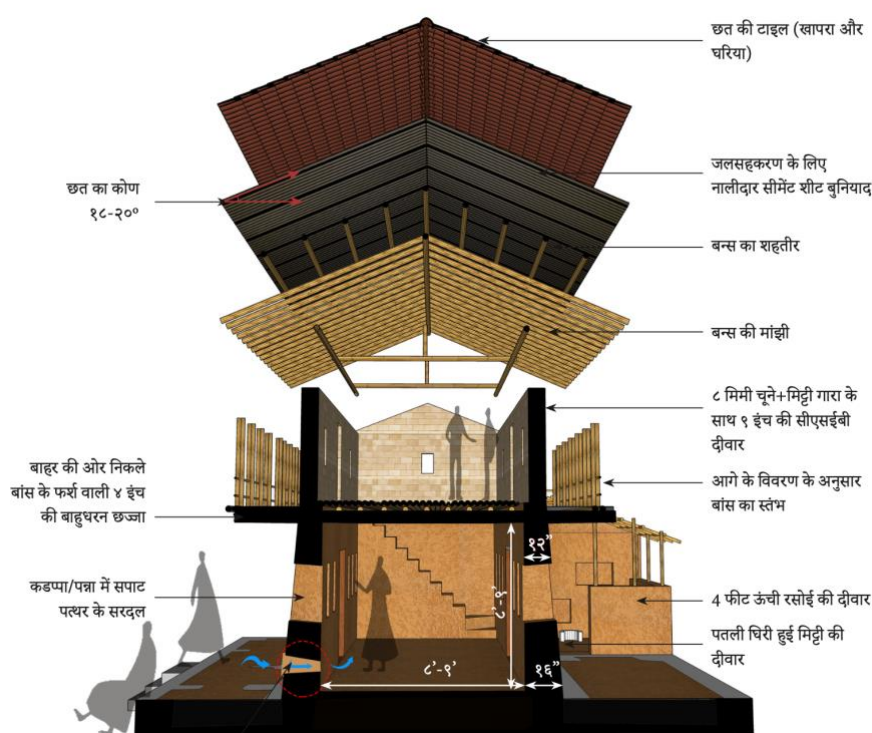

Fig. 4. A house at Madla, presented by Arcause Fellow, Gaurav Chordia

In traditional Indian architecture, homes lined closely along roads often feature elements like *chabutras* (raised platforms) and verandahs, fostering social interaction and community engagement while forming a threshold between the outdoor and the indoor spaces. Such elements promote a sense of belonging and facilitate neighbourly connections. However, modern trends of building homes right up to the edge of properties and high compound walls have begun to isolate residents, hindering community cohesion.

(a) Front yard as a workspace at Kuru   (b) Front yard interactions at Sikni

Fig. 5. Observations along the route showcasing front yards used for various purposes, in the state of Jharkhand, India

The third Walk for Arcause in September 2023 was in Odisha from Konark to Bhubaneswar via Puri and was designed as a first-of-a-kind walking studio where students from different colleges of architecture interacted with and studied different communities. The community working on the Pipili craft was one of the explorations of the walking studio. Pipili Applique Work is a form of traditional patchwork, where artisans create stunning images by combining colourful pieces of cloth, often in contrasting colours. Combining traditional motifs like animals, birds, and flowers, alongside modern patterns, onto the fabric, this form of art is a beautiful blend of tradition and creativity. This traditional art form suffered from loss of patronage and tourism when a new highway project bypassed the village. The idiom '*out of sight, out of mind'* holds for Pipili's declining art and tourism. The magnitude of the impact of seemingly simple decisions was uncovered by a student – Pipili has started fading away ever since the highway was designed to pass a distance away from the town. Travellers who were potential customers as they passed by Pipili earlier, are no longer exposed to this craft and the community has lost its livelihood. The first author encountered many stories of how highways are designed without taking the local economies into careful consideration resulting in great discord and hardships. Pedestrians who still need to navigate these highways to get to schools, their fields, places of work and cattle grazing were not factored into the design either. Most of the new expressways have no trees lining them and there are hardly any resting places for a weary traveller on foot.

This walking studio falls under the umbrella of Arcause's action area, BODH, Building On Design Histories, a transformative initiative by the Ethos Foundation aimed at bringing the spotlight on the value of traditional wisdom and skills, fostering innovation, and revitalising indigenous architecture and vernacular arts and crafts. The primary goal is to create repositories - in oral, visual, video and written formats that are preserved for posterity to convey the true history of places and people. This could lead to ways of breathing new life into these traditions while motivating artisans, craftspersons and even common home-builders to pass down their expertise and simple best practices to future generations by celebrating both heritage and invisible monuments. The evolution of past art forms, crafts, and practices to suit contemporary times will better ensure their sustenance.

Fig. 6. Front Yards of homes in Raghurajpur, State of Odisha, India - Walk for Arcause 3.0

The observations made during the study resonate with the scholars' emphasis on the significance of vernacular architecture as a repository of cultural heritage and indigenous wisdom. Initiatives such as the Ethos Foundation's BODH project and the fellowship in Madla exemplify grassroots efforts to preserve cultural identities amidst the tide of modernisation. However, challenges persist. Overall, the study underscores the importance of integrating local perspectives into urban planning processes to safeguard cultural heritage and sustain traditional livelihoods in a rapidly changing world.

Conclusions

In contemporary society, public awareness plays a significant role in shaping cultural heritage policies and practices. As awareness of the importance of preserving the architecture of the common folk grows, there is increasing pressure on governments, heritage organisations, and communities to prioritise the documentation, conservation, and interpretation of everyday structures. The process of pulling down any structure big or small with any historical significance must involve a thorough analysis of the existing and documentation and the creation of a publicly available and easy-to-access repository.

Public engagement and participation in decision-making processes regarding heritage management are crucial for ensuring that diverse voices are heard and that heritage resources are protected for future generations.

Efforts to document and preserve vernacular architecture should prioritise its cultural and ecological significance, ensuring that it does not leave behind negative environmental consequences. Moreover, by identifying and studying neo-vernacular trends, researchers can gain insights into evolving cultural dynamics and the ongoing relevance of vernacular principles in contemporary architecture.

Based on the grassroots and personal experiences we recommend the following framework to extract lessons for India in 2024.

Telling History from the Lens of the Majority and not just the Powerful

Historically, narratives of architecture and heritage have often focused on monumental structures associated with the powerful elite, neglecting the lived experiences and contributions of the majority. However, by shifting the lens to include vernacular architecture, which represents the built environment of everyday people, we can tell a more inclusive history that reflects the lives, values, and cultural identities of the larger sections of society that are not part of the elite. Vernacular architecture serves as a tangible expression of the collective wisdom and ingenuity of communities, offering insights into their social, economic, and cultural contexts. While the focus on vernacular architecture broadens our understanding of history to include marginalised voices, it's also essential to acknowledge the influence and impact of the powerful few in shaping the built environment. The monumental structures associated with the elite reflect their wealth, power, and cultural aspirations, and studying them provides valuable insights into historical power dynamics and social hierarchies. However, it's equally important to recognise that these narratives should be balanced by incorporating perspectives from the broader population.

Public Opinion in Today's Times:

In contemporary society, the significance of today's buildings in shaping future cultural heritage policies and practices cannot be overstated. As we contemplate which structures should become monuments of tomorrow, we must consider which windows and doors of today will lead future generations to understand the history of our current times. The efforts need to target raising awareness which will allow appropriate public opinions to form. As we begin to share these narratives, we also enhance our appreciation for these traditions and hidden landmarks, potentially influencing people's decisions. By shedding light on these stories, we contribute to the increased recognition of their significance, which in turn may impact the choices people make. With growing awareness of the importance of preserving vernacular architecture, there will be increasing pressure on government agencies, heritage organisations, and communities to prioritise the documentation, conservation, and interpretation of everyday structures. Public engagement and participation in decision-making processes regarding heritage management are crucial for ensuring that diverse voices are heard and that heritage resources are protected for future generations.

Visibility on the Internet:

When searching for information on monuments and heritage sites, the prominence of iconic landmarks and tourist attractions may overshadow the rich diversity of vernacular architecture and local living heritage. To ensure a more balanced representation of cultural heritage, search algorithms and databases should prioritise visibility and accessibility for vernacular architecture and community-based heritage initiatives. More content on homestays should be popularised/sponsored to improve visibility. The project at Madla, leading to opportunities for eco-tourism could help in influencing the encouragement of bed-and-breakfast schemes in government policies are potential steps in this direction. By amplifying the voices and stories of everyday people and their built environment, we can create a more inclusive and representative narrative of cultural heritage.

Reasons for Insufficient Documentation:

One reason for the insufficient documentation of vernacular architecture is the perception that these structures are ephemeral and less worthy of preservation compared to monumental edifices. However, as the concept of "cradle-to-cradle" sustainability gains traction, there is a growing recognition of the

value of vernacular architecture as a sustainable and environmentally friendly building practice. Efforts to document and preserve the technical skills and know-how of vernacular buildings should be prioritised. We should also study their cultural and ecological significance, ensuring that the new architecture does not leave behind a negative footprint.

Fig. 7. Image showing vernacular elements of Bhunga houses physical models by students of Piloo Mody College Of Architecture, Cuttack, Odisha, for Arcause club activities, part of the documentation.

Quoted in the first author's book 1700 in 70, "While our history textbooks from even the curriculum of the college of architecture speak of most large temples, monuments and forts, the sights that were seen along the way had me wistfully wishing that the real story of these relatively lesser-known monuments also find their way into history classrooms. It is together that they make the history of a place." She adds "The bling, glitz and glamour of what we call monuments may have some relevance to the ways of building and technologies for the privileged. We have been learning, studying and documenting the lives, and cultures, of only certain elite layers of society. While there is a lot to learn from them too, how much of what we learn from our large monuments can we apply to our buildings of much smaller scale? From that viewpoint, do we not learn so much more from the homes of commonplace people?; our invisible monuments!"

Despite India being one of the largest countries in the world, encompassing diverse geographies and cultural contexts, architectural education follows a standardised curriculum across the length and breadth of this land. If institutions in each region delve deeper into their context, the value of knowledge and useful data that could have been generated to shape a more sensitive and holistic built environment could not have been quantified. A mere 306 km journey on foot along the border separating India and Bangladesh revealed a rich tapestry of diverse building styles and techniques. It became evident that it was the geographical, climatic, and cultural factors—not the political borders—that truly shaped the indigenous architecture of the region. This journey conveyed a powerful message about the intrinsic unity fostered by thoughtful design. Our region is rich with abundant traditional wisdom translating into our built environment and this must inspire the younger generation to look within to seek inspiration rather than outside.

Capturing the Wealth of Wisdom:
Vernacular architecture embodies a wealth of wisdom accumulated over generations through trial and error, adaptation to local conditions, and communal knowledge sharing. This wisdom encompasses not only construction techniques and architectural styles but also the cultural, social, and ecological principles embedded in vernacular buildings. At the same time, evolution is important. These indigenous practices have also evolved with time and require constant utilisation, experimentation and

adaptation to keep them relevant with changing times. Hence evolution and adaptation of this wealth of wisdom is as essential as documentation and preservation for maintaining cultural continuity, fostering sustainable development, and promoting resilience in the face of environmental and social challenges.

Identifying Neo-Vernacular Trends:

In addition to traditional vernacular architecture, there is a growing interest in neo-vernacular architecture, which involves contemporary interpretations of traditional building styles and techniques. Neo-vernacular architecture reflects a desire to reconnect with local identities, revive traditional craftsmanship, and address contemporary challenges such as sustainability and cultural globalisation. By identifying and studying neo-vernacular trends, researchers can gain insights into evolving cultural dynamics and the ongoing relevance of vernacular principles in contemporary architecture.

Impact of town and urban planning on traditional practices:

The third leg of the Arcause expedition in September 2023 traversed Odisha from Konark to Bhubaneswar via Puri, engaging students from various architecture colleges in a walking studio format to interact with diverse communities. Among these encounters, the plight of Pipili, a town known for its traditional craft, emerged as a stark illustration of the impact of town and urban planning on traditional practices. The construction of a highway bypassing Pipili led to a decline in livelihoods, as travellers were no longer exposed to the town's craft, resulting in significant economic losses for the community. Moreover, the absence of local considerations in highway design has created discord and hardships for residents, with pedestrians facing safety risks and inadequate facilities for commuting and resting. This case underscores the urgent need to integrate local perspectives into urban planning processes to safeguard cultural heritage and sustain traditional livelihoods.

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