DESIGN IN THE TIMES OF COVID – 19

guidelines: a way forward
Design surrounds us; we occupy it - seemingly with little or no thought given to its impact, its history - or indeed, consciously or otherwise, what it responds to.

History has been witness to defining events that have forever altered our notion of the world we live in, and hence how we engage with it. They force a re-examination of life, our values, and our ideas of aspiration. Time and again, the process of design - the principles of design have evolved - to serve better evolving needs, and acknowledge this change - calibrating itself to an altered pace of growth, development, and the idea of community.

This year - 2020 - has seen one such event. The Coronavirus Pandemic has spread across the world, and forced us - as a community - to once again re-examine our lives; to adapt; to respond - and then - to persist in small ways and big.

How then, must the process for design adapt itself to these uncertain times? What are the principles - the learnings - that can be incorporated into our current ways of building - not just spaces, but a sense of renewed identity; a sense of comfort; a sense of association with that which surrounds us?
India - a country with a population of nearly 1.3 billion - has never been a single country, nor has it been a singular idea; rather, it is a nation of vastness and contradictions; of chaos and calm. With distinct urban and rural areas, there is a stark contrast when it comes to needs, and the approach to development.

With 70% of the Indian population living in the rural areas of the country, the facilities in terms of basic public infrastructure, and overall density varies as compared to the urban sections of the country; this disparity seems to be growing regularly. The country saw its first case of the Coronavirus pandemic on the 30th of January 2020. For sometime, it seemed as though a lack of density, and being some what secluded, had protected the rural areas from becoming hotspots for the virus. However, with disillusioned migrant workers making their way back home, and authorities being unable to provide the appropriate infrastructure in terms of testing, and healthcare, 98 of the country’s 112 poorest rural districts have demonstrated an increase in a number of cases – becoming hotspots.

At the present time, the country has close to 6 lakh active case. The virus has impacted all sections of our day to day life; the response – ever-evolving.

As a result of its scale, and reach – this pandemic is unlike the ones that have been witnessed in the past at a global scale – with some comparing it to the Spanish Flu of 1918, and its economic impact to The Great Depression. Its trajectory and spread has been hard to project – making an immediate response beyond social distancing and the wearing of masks, difficult.

Ultimately, however, in the face of all odds, the country - in June 2020 – came together to say that the life we knew before the pandemic must resume.
These are uncertain times; we have been forced to reconsider that which is known.

The Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID - 19), and the indicated practices for its control have, without question, impacted our idea of society and community,

Collectively, our response to the pandemic has been an emotional and psychological one. On the one hand, while it has evoked a sense of fear, the routine has accentuated a desire for change; it has created a sense of paradox in certain aspects of how we conduct ourselves; altering ways of communication; redefining ideas of proximity & comfort; altering notions of space and compactness.

The past 6 months have forced us to amend our thinking on what we had previously come to accept as the norm; our relationship with the built that surrounds us; conversely our relationship with the natural; ideas of simplicity; ideas of opulence. Unquestionably, we have been forced to recognize that which is of significance.

The spaces and buildings that we currently occupy are a response, or reaction to a time that is now gone; a response to challenges that we have grappled with, and in some cases, overcome in the past. Undoubtedly, in the wake of the uncertainty we have been pushed into - seemingly without guidance or direction - we will see an evolution of needs – an evolution in living patterns – that must be taken into consideration as we go forward.
What we seem to now seek value in has evolved; indeed, the very idea of value has evolved.

The approaches to the design of the spaces, will then, need to be fluid and continuously expanding; incorporating these renewed ideas, while allowing for the possibility of a new norm to make itself known. This becomes even more important when one considers that, now more than ever, we seem to be aware of our built environment - its composition, its materiality, usability, and its form.

This altered perception requires a modified approach to the manner in which the spaces we occupy must be designed. Not only must this amended approach take into account our emotive and mental responses, it must now account for renewed ideas of safety and security, navigation and movement through these spaces, and the social rules that have now emerged. Design, now must also account for our reaffirmed relationship with nature, and the idea of expanse; it must take into consideration the idea of a new sense of community.
What, then, is the need of the hour?
What are the principles we must follow?
Reassessing and acknowledging the need to be closer to land and nature; to let that guide the process, and to let land, through only required interventions, reset its equilibrium.

There is a need to recognize the wisdom that land and natural resources bring with them; to recognize the relationship that they share with their surroundings; the relationship that we share with the environment that surrounds us. There is, now more than ever, the recognized need for sustainability – a need to reassess ideas of hierarchy – ideas of value; to go back to nature, and to demonstrate conversations on protection, preservation, and reservation of land, and what it brings with it.
There is a need to look at the idea of recreation in a renewed context; to devise spaces that aid a continuous expansion of what constitutes recreation, and relaxation.

Outside of defining the idea of the ‘workplace’ – this pandemic has also reformed the idea of recreation; it has decoupled the idea from indoor, confined spaces – to outdoor spaces. This, of course, necessitates the creation of requisite infrastructure that facilitates and accommodates these ideas in the present realm of urbanity; adapting them where required, and forging them where they currently don’t exist.
How would the impact of the pandemic in India have been different if our approach to urbanity, the manner in which cities are laid out, and the infrastructure that is provided for the citizen body was altered?

Addressing ideas of city planning, management, and density through infrastructure, mobility and walkability, open spaces, and ensuring that each space is self-sufficient – needs to be incorporated in the manner in which we plan spaces; the manner in which they respond to what is an absolute need in city planning.
The word ‘community’ has been defined time, and again. The idea of community that was once meant to include groups that shared specific values, inhabited spaces within certain geographic proximities, groups that shared the same space, shared bread – groups that relied on one-another in one form or another – seems to have been replaced. The idea of community – and hence community activity – has come to take on a broader meaning – be it in the sense of recreation, in the sense of conversation, or in the sense of growth and development.

Spaces, now need to be created that accommodate the newer forms of community, and the values and activities that they share; ever evolving, ever adapting.
There has long been a need to look at, and examine that which we consider essential; to reassess the idea of modesty – of satisfaction – and to address the manners in which we achieve this. The design processes that we undertake, then, must become a tool in evaluating ideas of simplicity, opulence; through program development and materiality.
“The studio strongly believes in letting the project evolve organically; disposing of any preconceived notions of what a typology should entail, or the aesthetic values it should aspire to imbibe.”

Aspiration, and vision for the space have been built into the design process. The studio believes that spatial design must go beyond responding to tangible ideas of space, usability, and cost; it must respond to notions of history and context, life, and livability.

The initial years of the studio saw design being guided by ideas of ecology, space use, and sustainability; responding to the land. More recently, while these continue to remain integral to the design, there is an added layer of semantics, societal import, and the telling of a narrative; creating a story. These narratives are not solely dependent on the space or land; rather equal significance is given to the patron, and the manner in which they use and envision the space in question.

This has ensured that the design outcomes are consistently relevant; esoteric at times, yet accessible.
Exploring the land; connecting with Nature
A house to live by - Udaan I Vadodara I
8.4 Acres

Defining Recreation in The Natural
A weekend Home I Thol I
21 Acres

Examining the Relationship between man & nature
Restoring a Basalt Quarry I Timba I
172 Acres

Regarding Environmental Planning & Preservation
Maha Eco I Western Ghats I
2428 Acres
Exploring the land; connecting with nature

A land with many undulations; a land with many interpretations of the idea of landscape – Udaan, a house in Vadodara that was initially intended to be a weekend home. The soil was poor; the water brackish. A bridge connects the two sections of the house. It becomes a stage from which to view the many transitions of one idea of nature to another; to witness the drama - the delight - that these interactions create.
What starts off as a formal garden, slowly transitions into the untamed; comprising productive landscapes and orchards; at all times creating distinct yet connected spaces. Spaces unto themselves, the landscapes allow appreciation for each detail – consciously and constantly creating manners in which water maybe recharged; soil quality improved.
Defining recreation in the natural

A weekend home not far from the bird sanctuary in Thol tests the various manners in which we interact with land, the various expressions we are able to allow nature - nature that is wild, yet controlled, and indeed, what we understand as the idea of recreation.
The process has kept at its fore sustainable methods for water recharge, the design of productive gardens, low maintainability, biodiversity, and native planting. The overall design has capitalized on the ability of the site to express the idea of recreation in manners that are diametrically opposed to those that are offered by the city.
Examining the relationship between man & nature

What was once a basalt quarry near Vadodara now is a testament to the idea of the resilience of nature.
Close to 8 years in the making, the process involved improving the quality of the topsoil, and allowing local species of grasses and trees to rejuvenate. This transformation required an understanding of the relationship amongst natural elements - allowing them to take over the land. More than anything else, however, the land reinstates the need to find – to establish – value in nature; a value that is exclusive from us – from our needs.
Regarding environmental planning and preservation

The undertaking of this project – Maha Eco - was more about the process than the outcome – a process than stemmed from an understanding of, and the need to develop a method to maintain the intricate balance within the existent ecosystem. The project was divided into multiple steps – starting from initiation and planning to execution and monitoring.
The resultant report is now a tool to be referred to in conversations pertaining to environmental planning and assessment at various scales.
Recognizing the need for public parks in community building
Udhyan Pravah I Ahmedabad I Varied

A tool for recreating history; indulging in nostalgia
Linear Park I Mumbai I 1.5 Acres
Recognizing the need for public parks in community building

The 250 public parks in Ahmedabad are evidence that a model must be developed to address the challenges pertaining to the design and rejuvenation of public parks. The Udhyam Pravah initiative, supported by U.N Mehta Foundation, began by studying parks across the city and assessing them for their location, approach, grading, canopy cover, lighting, and existent plans.
The adaptable kit of parts that has been developed, as a result, is cost conscious, and efficient. It comprises elements such as entrances, curbing, fencing, waste bins and waste management, play equipment, lighting, and plant material. With the first phase of the project having completed 6 public parks, the second phase is underway, and comprises the refurbishment of the Parimal Garden, and the Victoria Garden. Through this initiative spaces have been created in the city that allow for community gatherings, and bring attention to the need for public parks not only in the development of the urban fabric, but also a renewed sense of recreation, and association.
A tool for recreating history; indulging in nostalgia

Spread over 6000-sq.mt, the Linear Park makes the story of Mumbai absolute. It pays tribute to the economic, social, and cultural significance of Mumbai - tracing the journey of the city from the time it was a Maritime Trade Port - to the present day.
Through the park, that is attached to the one of the world’s tallest residential towers – World One – the abstractions weave within them the story of the Maximum City. While acknowledging the social, and ecological responsibilities of a public park, it has taken on the additional responsibility of becoming a tool to facilitate collective memory; of recording history.
On Urbanity, Development & infrastructure
City Making - Palava I Mumbai I
4499 Acres

Reimagining Ideas of living; reimagining ideas of domesticity
Ideas of Suburban living - Firefly Farms I Ahmedabad I
131 Acres
On urbanity, development & infrastructure

Amongst the many experiments that have been undertaken to address the many issues as they pertain to urbanity, Palava a city in North Bombay spanning 4,500 acres stands out. The Master Planning of the city has focused on livability standards. It has tested various building typologies while ensuring that the overall intent is undisturbed.
The studio has taken upon itself the significant responsibility of mapping the way for city planning in areas of mass-housing, public spaces, roads, infrastructure, cultural spaces, schools, sustainability, and the idea of community building in the country. Palava is a case study in city design, master planning, and the quality of life that a city must be able to offer its citizens through its spaces and amenities. It must be noted that the model is adaptable; replicable.
Reimagining ideas of living; reimagining ideas of domesticity

The pandemic has guided our ideas of living, space, and opulence. Luxury has come to be defined not in terms of materiality, but rather in terms of space. It has altered our relationship with the spaces we occupy. Suburban living has provided a contrast to the dense urbanity India has to offer, along with altered ideas of recreation.
Firefly Farms, weekend spaces a few kilometres from the city of Ahmedabad, has redefined suburban living - incorporating productivity in leisure. The common spaces include natural enclosures with dense planting. The planning and distribution of space provides priority not only to privacy but also community.
Creating a renewed idea of community & culture
Ark I Vadodara I
0.78 Acres

A narrative of empathy, care, & humility
An office landscape - Samanvay I Ahmedabad I
3.2 Acres

Of conversations & consultation
Nirmal Bhartia School I New Delhi I
1.9 Acres

A narrative of learning, growth, & innovation
Red Bricks School I Ahmedabad I
10.3 Acres
Creating a renewed idea of community & culture

These are times that require respite; times that require conversations outside of the mundane. There is a need to create spaces that allow for creative pursuits; that speak to the more abstract ideas; spaces that continuously assist the forming of new communities. In Vadodara, stands a building - The Ark - that is a rejection of its humdrum surroundings. The building design takes inspiration from a painting by Paul Klee - Uncomposed Objects in Space (1929). At its core, a place of work – the building is distinguished by its design and program.
Within the city, the building has fostered a renewed sense of community; it has opened up opportunities for various art forms to work in tandem. It has become a space of interaction between artists and their audiences; artists who have just begun their journey, with artists who are masters in their own right. It has allowed for the creation of something that is contemporary and relevant - while redefining the functions that may be associated with the workspace.
A narrative of empathy, care & humility

The landscape that the studio undertook for Samanvay - an office space in Ahmedabad builds in a narrative that talks about ecology, preservation, and the idea of nurturing. The form takes inspiration from the Aram Bagh in Agra.
The components of the landscape include a court that has been designated for herbs, and vegetables – used in the office kitchen, and a water body at the centre, which has become a habitat for a variety of birds. A Court of Lost Trees pays homage to tree species that are rarely seen within the urban context of the city. The many components of the landscape have been designed for care, conversation, and recreation. The spaces require that the occupant continuously acknowledge the relationships they share with nature – by finding ways of engaging them in a conversation.
Of conversations & consultation

A pro-bono effort for a school in Delhi, the design was intended to be a composition of a kit of parts. The children for whom the spaces were being designed were involved in the conversation; allowing for a careful observation for how they used these spaces.
These conversations allowed for a unique composition – unconnected, but allowing for a multitude of activities. The ultimate design consisted of trees, objects of play, and floorscapes; recognizable objects that allowed for creation, exploration, and development. The conversations allowed for the design of customised spaces - designed to respond to usage.
A narrative of learning, growth & innovation

The studio began the design of a school campus by creating classrooms for Kindergarten to the 3rd Grade; the campus for Red Bricks has been envisioned as a township. In its approach, and choice of material, the execution of this space is unconventional. With the use of cast Earth, and Earth Bricks, ideas of ecology and connection to land have been inculcated. The material language for the second phase of the design integrates a more industrial, controlled material palette.
The interactive walls, and displays provide order and structure to the manner in which the space is navigated. The space inculcates innovative ideas of education, and is designed to age with the psyche and development of the child, and the structure that they would need - creating varying forms of order.
About simplicity & quietude

Mud House I Ahmedabad I

9.1 Acres
About simplicity and quietude

The pandemic has required that we find for ourselves a new idea of what may be considered to be opulence; to redefine simplicity. The Mud House is an embodiment of this philosophy. Barring two tall Mango trees, the land on which the house stands was barren. To allow for an appreciation of the space, the program included a place to sit, and a toilet block; the Mango trees becoming the feature around which the execution of the space was oriented.
The materials and colour palette simulate ideas of calmness; oneness with the land, with the execution being undertaken using simple material - brickwork in mud mortar, or simply mud for the walls. It is a testament to the fact that comfort can be found in simple programs; simple ideas; simple executions.
Design is fluid, and its processes and outcomes must respond to the current times. Like so many other elements, the pandemic has impacted our idea and relationship to the spaces we inhabit – altering our relationship with nature, space, and even our idea of comfort. How we approach the creation of the spaces then, must be altered to reflect a new set of circumstances and needs.

The principles mentioned in the document serve to act as a guide – reminding designers of changing priorities, the need for a renewed approach, and most importantly, to respond to nuances presented not only in the conversations with the patrons, but by the very land with which they interact regularly.
M/s Prabhakar B. Bhagwat is a design studio established in 1973. It now leads thinking on landscape design, master planning, and environmental planning in the country. It is also highly acclaimed for the commissions it undertakes in the fields of architecture, and interior design.

www.landscapeindia.net

Landscape Environment Advancement Foundation - the research arm for the studio – was established in 2007 to further research and thinking in areas of plant material, sustainability, and landscape design – making it one of the very few organizations in the country to do so. Over the years, the Foundation has expanded its areas of work.

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