

TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture

2017 / 2018

Msc 3/4 Explore Lab 24

A GLOBAL APPROACH TO VERNACULAR PRACTICES

reflection

Tutors: Roel van de Pas, Nelson Mota, Hubert van der Meel

Student: Lorenzo Cocchi

In the spring semester of the academic year 2016/2017, I attended the Msc2 design studio Housing under the Himalaya.

During the experience I discovered my interest in the link between affordable construction in developing countries and the the world of vernacular architecture. I've been fascinated by the sense of deep truth and honesty that spontaneous "*architecture without-architects*" emanates and at the same time by the almost accidental holistic approach that it embodies.

It boasts the incredible feature that its value is generally determined by its non-value value in term of materials and construction process – and that this simple characteristic determines a revolutionary quality in terms of sustainability. My main hypothesis is that several contemporary issues regarding the mitigation and the adaptation of the built environment to the effect of climate change could be solved finding the meaning of innovation in the inspiration given from ancient concepts.

After a general study on the effects of climate change, on the phenomenon of migration and natural hazards in the southern Asia, my attention focused on India, and more specifically on the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh, a region in the northern part of the subcontinent. The area has a particularly fragile ecosystem and many issues are related to its built environment, nowadays and in the near future.

By means of literature and direct observations during the field trip I decided to research on the vernacular built environment of the area in order to understand which elements and *archetypical qualities* - already embodied by existing structures – need to be kept and transposed into new interventions.

The method consisted on a *research-by-design* based approach.

I developed two *meta-cases* of residential building inspired by existing structures with similar dimensions and programmes: one stands for the more modern vernacular practices and one represents the ancient traditional construction methods.

Technical drawings that show details and building processes in-sequence are the main tools to communicate the results.

Looking back to my research process, one of the main oversights was probably my rushed decision to establish the two meta-cases without an additional field-trip on the area. It would have given a further quality to the work produced.

During the design process I noticed that I have missed especially the local perception of such architecture from the point of view of the local inhabitants.

Interviewing people or physically living for a period in such vernacular environments would have upgraded my experience and knowledge of the region and therefore the accuracy of the research.

On the other hand one aspect that in my opinion succeeded is the value of the research (and research method) as approach in itself, applicable also in other different contexts.

In other words, the Himalayan valleys of Himachal Pradesh are a valid case study to demonstrate the applicability and validity of the strategy developed, but not the only possible example.

All over the world, especially in developing countries such as other regions of Asia, South America or Africa, it's easy to find areas where nowadays the population is facing similar issues related to climate change, migration, shortage of materials, environmental pollution and urban sprawl.

More and more professionals are called to work on the themes and therefore to think which could be the best architectural solution to apply.

When this happens, the risk is always that the foreign designer, professionally well prepared but culturally far from the specific context, imports ideas that are locally unknown and that pretend to radically modify the well-established customs. Such actions frequently ends up to be failures.

I decided to explore an approach that doesn't solve the problem by means, for example, of a finished intervention of architecture that substitutes parts of the slum, but that is, first of all, a method/means to influence local people to build differently.

The trend of the chosen area, as well as of other places, is that builders are often designers and users at the same time.

I think that this quality is fundamental and cannot be overlooked among the design process.

Architects sometimes neglect to consider what is already part of the local culture as starting point of their process of research and development. This fact is one of the causes of global civilization, namely the depersonalization of culture in certain contexts - followed by the gradual loss of traditional specificity and therefore of local identity.

A structured and clear system to generate awareness around the possibilities and solutions that are traceable in traditional patterns is in my opinion a fundamental tool to systematically help professionals in their decision-making processes. Every choice needs to be weighted and confronted first of all with what is already *in-place*: a way to avoid mismatches and incoherences in the interventions.

The combination of two main references were fundamental to achieve such conclusions: the book "*House, form and culture*" written by professor Amos Rapoport, that provide complete definitions and theoretical framework around the vernacular architectural practices – and the work of the *Rural studio*, led by Samuel MockBee.

The latter is an American professional who fought for his whole life for an *architecture of decency*, namely personal interventions for specific users even in poor contexts.

He claimed an architecture where the designer asks, understands and studies requirements, tastes and priorities of each specific person - and starts from the future user's personality to develop a tailor-made design.

I'm always been fascinated by professionals, such as Samuel MockBee, or even Alejandro Aravena.

They could be defined *humble architects* who neglect the total control over the projects but strive for an architecture that is closer to the local community and to its particular needs.

If the former works together with the future users to achieve his project proposal, the latter brings the spontaneity of common people directly into his projects. This is clear, for example, in Aravena's famous social housing project in Quinta Monroy (Chile), where the inhabitants became active protagonists - namely vernacular designers and builders - within the design process.

The experiences of such architects demonstrate the possibility to put aside both preconceptions and the background knowledge of the *cultured designer* (which often risks to be superimposed on the final users) – and rather substitutes it with an attitude that is based on *coherent questions*, addressed to places and to people.

A statement that Aravena said during his conference at the "*Garage Museum of Contemporary Art*" has echoed in my mind during the last months:

"You need to find the right question. There is nothing worse than answering the wrong question well."

In this perspective I struggled to develop a design approach - which doesn't pretend to discover a final, direct and immediate solution, but wants to be the first step in a process of research and development.

I wanted to be somehow in-between the approaches of the two architects, merge the teachings of the two experiences into one project. This has been the real challenge since the beginning of my creative process.

Since the first weeks of Msc4 indeed, my idea was to both develop a *showcase building*, namely a pilot project with a pedagogical function for the community of the Kullu Valley, to demonstrate new ideas within the local building practice - and in parallel a sample design for a *new vernacular house*, that can stand as result of my conclusions.

However I gradually understood the evident contradiction that arises when, I - as architect - try to design a *generic* vernacular house, namely a *false architecture-without-architects*.

Every villager in the area requests what can be defined a personal - and therefore *specific* - house with *generic* qualities.

Through the research process I explored the generic qualities of the site-specific architecture while during the design process I understood my inability to forecast all the forces that normally play during the vernacular design-and-construction practice, such as banally an household's preferences.

I decided therefore to concentrate my attention mainly on the aforementioned *showcase building*, whose main goal is to demonstrate how to integrate and to re-interpret the generic archetypical qualities inspired vernacular architecture with a more global contemporary architectural knowledge.

It's my personal attempt to formulate an answer to the complex questions that arises from the area, a balance between what is already part of the culture and what an architect should import.

To which extent new technologies and solutions have to be applied to the project was object of discussions several times during the weekly meeting with my tutors.

The proposal for the *new vernacular house* on the other hand has been maintained in the project with a marginal purpose. It's only a short study on which could be the effect of the showcase building designed on the surrounding built environment. According to both me and my mentors, it's important to dedicate part of the project to this *scenario thinking* practice. The exercise is useful to understand the necessities that the project should address.

One of the main issue within the composition of the showcase project storyline was the separation between its generic qualities, inherited and inspired from vernacular architecture (potential solutions that can be transposed into new other interventions) - and the very specific typology, scale and programme of the building that has been chosen as case study.

It's in fact a school comprised of a dormitory and playground for sixty children, part of a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, which will also have some public functions for the local community that live outside the compound.

The choice of using the monastery itself as site of intervention has been questioned several times during the decision-making process, mainly because of its peculiarities.

The compound is in fact closely related to its specific culture, religion and typology. These peculiarities make it an enclosed and Introvert reality, apparently very difficult to link to the several generic issues of the context that surrounds it.

It can be defined as an exceptional element of discontinuity in the area that addresses, potentially, a large range of possible themes.

It can be linked, for example, to *political topics*, such as the Tibetan Diaspora (and therefore the general phenomenon of migration); or *social topics*, namely integration of different cultures that co-exist in the same area, or even religious topics (such as the link between contemporary architecture and Buddhism) etc.

Given that, I wanted to keep it, since the beginning of my project, as site of intervention - and I hardly struggled to find a precise focus for the research within this broad variety of possibilities during the first weeks of Msc3.

The possibility to co-operate with the Msc2 studio "*Building under the Himalaya*" as teaching assistant however was very useful for my personal development. The experience, together with the continuous suggestions given by my tutors, really helped me to clarify my initial fascination, as well as to transform it into a project, or even a passion for an architectural theme that is becoming more and more my main field of interest, also outside the academic studies.

It gave me the opportunity to discover what I really like into places, buildings, building's representation and therefore into the architectural practice.

The graduation project surely contributed to clarify the idea, before only a blurry image, of the architect I want to be.

I wish that such approach, knowledge and discovery will be useful and applicable along my future professional career.

Lorenzo Cocchi