

Contextual Modernism and the Built Environment of Shantiniketan, India

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The dominant narrative of modern architecture as ahistorical and universal is challenged in the idea of contextual modernism as shaped by specific socio-cultural contexts and historic circumstances. Its key attribute—hybridity—is evident in Shantiniketan, a site of design experimentation in arts, architecture and landscape and home to Visva-Bharati University, established in early twentieth century colonial India for promoting holistic education by the poet-laureate Rabindranath Tagore. His educational philosophy and view of nature were similar to American thinkers such as John Dewey and Walt Whitman. Tagore had established a school for young boys in 1901 that grew into a college by 1921, and a central university by 1951, a decade after his death (Pal, 2011). The school began as an *ashram* (hermitage) inspired by the ancient Indic ideal of retreat to nature for cultivating knowledge and wisdom and the belief that rhythms of nature inspire creativity (Sen and Sircar, 2018).

The built environment of Shantiniketan can be situated within the modern movement, in particular Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architectural style. A new style of art emerged in Shantiniketan, labeled as 'contextual modernism' with its origins in the local craft aesthetic and historic art motifs, reinterpreted in a different stylistic grammar (Kumar 1997). The term can be applied to architecture—buildings were designed in an eclectic style combining a diverse set of historic precedents with rural vernacular, creatively synthesized to produce hybrid forms (Biswas and Mete 2014; Das 2012). Climate responsiveness and use of local building traditions were incorporated in design practices. Careful attention to sun, breeze, and rain was given in building orientation and detailing. No building was taller than a tree and the building ensemble was organized to resemble traditional courtyards.

The paper will focus on the School of Art, Kala Bhavan, to interpret how its architectural forms, in particular, building walls became experiments in contextual modernism. Murals and frescoes dissolved the boundary between art and architecture, creating 'living' walls that interacted with the landscape. Nature was not framed in a picture window rather active engagement was encouraged for learning and making art, using building surfaces as a medium of representation. The built environment emerged as a didactic landscape, and a space for pedagogical dialogue, fostering close collaboration between teachers and students. The paper will conclude with thoughts on how art and architecture of Kala Bhavan opened up new directions for the built environment as a medium of self-expression, thus contributing towards a contextually specific alternative history of modernism.

References

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