

Architecture of Happiness: As in the way of Buddhism

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Abstract: This paper is a literature review to discover the author's architectural philosophy. A philosophy which is influenced by the teachings of Buddha in pursuit of finding happiness in architecture. It explains how true beauty can contribute to happiness and it lays out principles to follow in order to achieve beauty in design through compassion and liberation. Its principles are also very much in tune with the concept of sustainability and Gross National Happiness.

There is a need to review our current architecture and construction practices since with rapid urbanization and modernization, Bhutan has lost much of its traditional construction practices and with that some of our architectural beauty. What is common now is RCC buildings with a second-grade imitation of Bhutanese traditional architecture and poor integration of architectural layout with structural (column/beam) layout. Although, the nation has maintained the traditional architectural elements such as rabsel, payab gochu, kachen, among others, in some of the buildings it is noticed that the cornices end abruptly or langna dre zhu is just hanging without the supporting tshechu khanim. Traditionally such elements serve a function, but now that it is mainly decorative, one will notice lots of mistakes in their form and proportions resulting in an unpleasant facade. Moreover, with the introduction of modern plumbing within the building, most buildings have

plumbing pipes attached to the facades, sometimes with leakage problems giving a bad impression.

Our traditional construction methods such as building thick masonry or rammed earth walls also provided some level of thermal comfort inside. This has been completely lost in RCC buildings. Even government offices turn into a freezer in winter where every individual has to have a heater under the table. It results in high energy consumption but does not necessarily provide comfort with chilly breeze and drafts coming in through the gaps in windows. Even worse is the fact that some of the building designs have not considered their site, are not well orientated and nor does it have a form that can take advantage of sunlight, terrain, views and natural ventilation. Such spaces become uncomfortable to be in without mechanical systems.

Therefore, this paper strives to justify through literature review why one needs to invest in true beauty and showcases through a case study how one can try to achieve happiness in architecture.

Keywords: Architecture, Architectural philosophy, Buddhism, happiness, sustainability

Introduction

When one explores the concept of loving someone, it becomes clear that one associates that person with their taste in music or food or the beliefs that person may possess. One may find, to know a person, one should explore their thoughts, beliefs and experiences. So that, one may find them or be reminded of them by such things in other people or other places. That way one can feel a little closer to them even if that person is not near.

Such a phenomenon can be explained by one of Buddha's teachings (Hanh, 1991) on dependent co-arising which said, "In truth, there is nothing

which is separate and eternal, that in this life you depend upon many other beings for your existence, these other beings are part of you. If you can see that you will not suffer from the impermanence of life.” To sum this up he gave a perfect example which says “If the sea wave knew that it was merely water, it would not be sad when it dies. It simply returns to being water, it suffers only because it believes it to be a separate self.” He also said in a single leaf one can find the universe in it, one can see the seed of the tree it grew from, the earth it enrooted in, the sun and the rain that nourished it, and the space and time it took to grow. In that sense, an architect can be hopeful that others will find them in the buildings that they design.

That concept was further reinforced by one of Louis Kahn’s lovers; when the interviewer asked her, “Do you think about him a lot now?” and she answered, “He is kind of there you know, don't need to think about him, he is there in you (interviewer was Kahn’s son from another woman), in Alex (her daughter), in his buildings, I think the ideas you work on together connects you somehow” (Kahn, 2009). Therefore, as an architect, one must choose wisely what they would like to represent, and the values they want to project through their design.

Why Happiness?

One might conclude life is about being happy. Many people will agree and some may disagree but one cannot deny that it has been an eternal strife. Buddha left his prince hood to find the end of suffering which led him to happiness. Richard Rogers (2008) in an interview said the same exact words. Similarly, the fourth King of Bhutan introduced Gross National Happiness. So it is evident that Happiness is essential to one’s life, it is definitely essential

in our Bhutanese culture, Buddhism being at the heart of it. Hence, it is a valid endeavour to explore happiness in architecture.

Buddha had found eternal happiness. He said, “Happiness is obtained by living a life of simplicity and freedom.” He chose the middle path and opposed the life of wealth and luxury. The findings of economists such as Richard Layard (2008) suggest that Buddha was being reasonable. He said after a certain point economic growth is no longer inextricably linked to increased well-being.

Buddhism teaches awareness, the nature of impermanence; to be mindful of one's surroundings and know that suffering is the truth of life and that only through understanding and love, can one be liberated from the suffering of birth, sickness, old age and death. He also said suffering is only one face of life, wonder/beauty being the other. The latter has the potential to give immense happiness, peace and joy to those who overcame suffering. But how does one apply this to architecture?

Happiness & Architecture

Our lives essentially exist in the built environment. Therefore, architecture must play its role in providing happiness. To say ‘my’ building will give people happiness would be as arrogant as Le Corbusier (1927) who said, “Happy towns are those that have architecture.” A building cannot command the people to feel happy; it can only imply or encourage it as told by Alan De Botton (2006) in his book titled “Architecture of Happiness”. Typically, in Bollywood movies, a song is shot in many different places, and all these places represent the emotion of the scene. Therefore, architecture can act as a backdrop or the place within which emotions are felt and different places incite

different emotions. As Martha Schwartz (2008) said, a happy place is composed within layers of memories, “An idea that is pure and elegant can make me feel very happy. But unless I am actively feeling something a place simply doesn’t register.” So the question now is how would a building hint at happiness or peace or wellbeing?

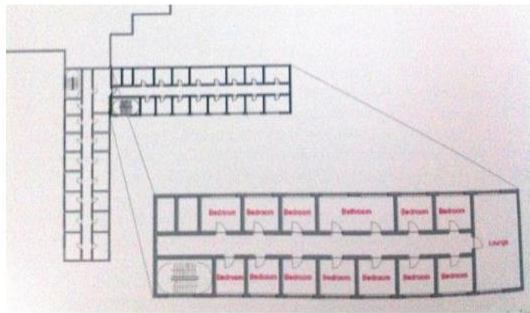
The first step towards happiness is the eradication of suffering. To do so one must first accept the presence of it and then try to overcome it. To overcome it one must be aware and mindful of it, only then does it lead to understanding. To understand means to understand the cause of the suffering (Hanh, 1991).

Volumes of literature can be found on the cause of human suffering; in books on psychology, religion, and economy among others. Here the focus is more on how the built environment can contribute to overcoming suffering. To sum it all up humans have needs and once these needs are fulfilled, a pathway of happiness may be shown.

According to McLeod (2012), there is a ‘Hierarchy of needs’; “physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem and self-actualization needs” and within that, there are needs such as “contact, privacy, identity, personalization and aesthetics” as pointed out by Byron Mikellides (2008). Building is vital in providing basic physiological and safety needs. According to Le Corbusier, the function of a house is to provide shelter against heat, cold, rain, thieves and the inquisitive. This should be done efficiently, using sustainable means.

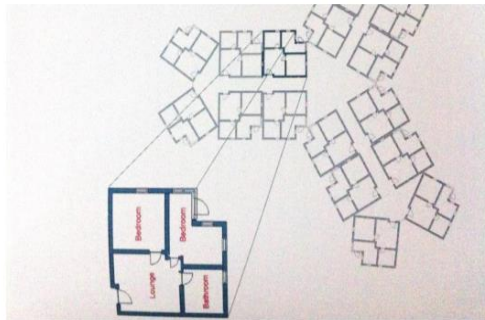
The book called “Building Happiness; Architecture to make you smile” (Warnick, 2008) addresses the higher needs and concludes that “the best places

are those which let us feel we are in control, and that allows for good social interaction and the opportunity to be at one with nature.” Defensible spaces and the transition from public to semi-private to private spaces address the issue of control (Newman, 1972). Control in the sense that one can choose when, where and with whom to interact, the built environment should therefore inherent spaces that lower the barriers of interaction (Halpern, 2008) but at the same time give one control as shown in Figure 1.



Corridor setting – excessive, unwanted and uncontrollable interaction resulted in withdrawal and hostility in students

(a)



Suit setting – fewer controllable interaction -happier students

(b)

Figure 1. (a) Plan of Corridor setting- less control; (b) Plan of suit setting- more control

Sustainability, Buddhism & Architecture

In nature one finds beauty. Buddha (Hanh, 1991) asks, “Can you see the trees standing in the morning mist? Are they not beautiful?” He says, “The moon, the stars, the rivers, the mountains, the sunlight, the songs of birds, and the sounds of bubbling spring are all manifestations of a universe which can provide us with endless happiness.” However, to harness the beauty of nature, one should not allow the destruction of urban grain like Le Corbusier or one should not destroy nature to be in it like the Garden movement of Ebenezer Howard. Instead, one should appreciate and draw from what is on the site and maybe enhance it. Buddha calls for love for all sentient beings which relates to the non-anthropocentric view of the sustainable movement described in “Strategies for Sustainable Architecture” by Paola Sassi (2006) where he also says, “non-materialistic, socially and nature orientated values of sustainability could be the basis for a new ethics.”

In our current age, sustainability is the driving force to redeem humanity from the negative impact it had on the environment and also in securing the future of its children. The sustainable code suggests (Bulkeley, 2012) that the designer must assess the potential offered by a particular context, both the benefits and constraints and determine the extent to which passive means can be employed to ensure an acceptable level of human comfort. Only then should mechanical systems be considered and coordinated in support. Research suggests (Liddell, 2008), that passive designs such as high insulation levels, airtight skin, good orientation of the building to the sun and heat recovery systems are the most effective means of reducing energy consumption in comparison to other methods such as heat solar roof, heat pump, low embodied energy materials, energy-saving fittings, etc.

Hence architecture in tune with sustainability and Buddhism; architecture of simplicity and freedom which promotes wellbeing, social interaction and appreciation of nature and its site should be the architecture of this era; architecture of awareness and mindfulness of all the past, present and future needs and wellbeing of the society and the nature it lives in. But how can one achieve that? How can one make simplicity something desirable, what do simplicity and freedom actually mean? How does one compete against the glossy architecture found in magazines which say “hey look at me I am picture perfect”?

In the end, it is a matter of personal taste. But there is evidence and stories which show a life of splendour, pleasure and money doesn't bring any contentment or meaning to one's life. Life of Buddha as Prince Gautama lives of some current celebrities, the novel “Picture of Dorian Gray” by Oscar Wilde depicts so. Hence a building shouldn't be made of superfluous possessions and embellishment but should represent a virtuous life in which as Aristotle said, “one might find happiness and realize one's true potential/nature thus discover life with meaning”. So, what does this virtuous simplicity look like?

Beauty & Architecture

Albert Einstein once said, “things should be as simple as possible but no simpler.” (Liddell, 2008) In Alan De Botton's (2006) words, “We delight in complexity to which geniuses lent an appearance of simplicity” meaning “we admire starkly simple works that we intuit would, without immense effort, be very complicated.” Elegance can be an attribute of simplicity which is associated with beauty. Botton (2006) says one finds beauty in those that are

stronger than oneself, grace in structures which does work so effortlessly and modesty in those which barely draw any attention to the difficulties it has conquered. There is truth, honesty and purity in exposed structural materials as shown in Figure 2. Such structures may well be more economical and sustainable as well. Consciously or unconsciously these values/virtues put forward are the very essences of Buddha. It is said that one finds beauty in what one lacks or aspires toward and these are the very values, one should aspire to, in themselves and their building. This can be used as the first approach to design and create wonder or beauty in a building. As Buddha, Stendhal and many others agree, “Beauty is the promise of happiness.” (Botton, 2006)





Figure 2. Example of exposed structural material, Architect: Tadao Ando

However, beauty is very subjective. What is more disturbing is the fact that architectural students have very different concepts of a beautiful building than ‘normal’ people. This was shown in an experiment carried out by David Halpern (2008), where he asked a group of architecture students and a group of ‘normal’ people to rate the attractiveness of two sets of pictures. One set was of faces and the other was of buildings. The result was that both groups highly agreed on the attractiveness of faces but not on the buildings and the longer the student had been studying architecture, the more the divergence from the concept of beauty to the ‘normal’ was seen.

So beauty through vision is very unreliable. Furthermore, societal concept of beauty changes constantly. History shows societies’ fickle-minded nature; their shift in attitude towards certain art movements and even more conspicuously shown in their constantly changing taste in fashion. So how can one define beauty with absolute authority? The answer is that one can’t. Moreover, as Halpern (2008) said “What seems beautiful and attractive to a visitor rapidly fades into the background for the long-term resident.” In seeking Buddha (Hanh, 1991) again, he said, “a compassionate and liberated

heart is true beauty.” This is not something one can see but only experience and how does one go about doing it? Well, through the six consciousnesses; sight, hearing, smell, taste, feeling and thoughts but only when one is mindful, appreciative and grateful.

This is the answer, what one feels is more ‘reliable and similar’ to what most people feel, moreover architecture is not visual art, one lives in it; hence one must sense, experience and feel it. As Lorna walker and Jeremy Hill (2008) said, “The responsibility of architects lies not in the refinement of the building as a static visual commodity but as a contributor to the creation of empowering spatial and social space”. This is further exemplified in the book “The eyes of the skin” by Juhani Pallasmaa (2005). He explains why one finds architecture of traditional culture more enjoyable and appealing than the modern ones; it is because of its haptic and tactile nature which is rather absent in the optic-centric modern architecture. So yes, architecture should be one with feelings, feelings of compassion and liberation. Now the question is what is a compassionate and liberated building?

Architecture of Happiness

Therefore, Architecture of Happiness is an architecture derived from beauty, true beauty that comes from compassion and liberation. Compassion is a result of love and understanding. Therefore, the following five principles for Architecture of Happiness are proposed:

- 1) Building should generate a feeling of love:

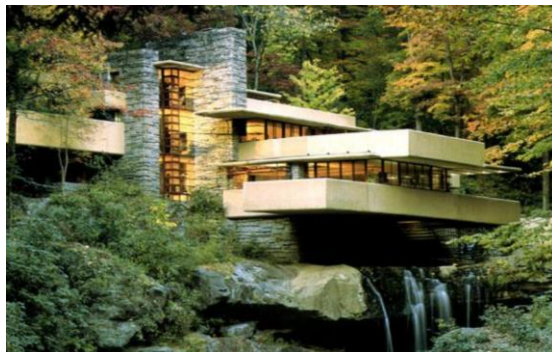
One shouldn't have to be an intellect to appreciate its beauty; everyone should be able to feel it through their instinct/ intuition; it should be able to move one without needing abstract reasoning or

intellectual meaning. It should aspire to be a thing of wonder and elegance. This is the truest form of sustainability; a building which is loved and used for generations to come.

2) Building should understand its site:

It should form a symbiotic relationship with the site (Figure 3); it should grow from the site. As Utzon (Unwin, 2003) puts it, it should harness the beauty and resources from it (use of sustainable passive methods for defining construction, material, building form, orientation, windows, etc.) but at the same time ‘enhance’ it. As Botton (2006) suggests, it should be worthy of the land. The building should be able to make the occupants feel connected to the place, giving one a sense of belonging. It should also adopt the traditional architecture and materials to give it a sense of place and identity.

The structure should connect one to the site; through its form, it should either give a presence of “gravity, weight and earth” (Figure 4) or entice one with the dreams of “levitation and flight” (Figure 5) (Pallasmaa, 2005).



(a)



(b)

Figure 3. Example of Building in contact with Nature and Site (a) Architect: Frank Lloyd Wright; (b) Mie van der Rohe



(a)



(b)

Figure 4. Examples of building of great presence (a) Pyramid; (b) Parliament Building by Louis Kahn



(a)

(b)



(c)

Figure 5. Examples of building of levitation and flight (a) Architect Tadao Ando; (b) Will Alsop; (c) Eladio Dieste’s elegant structure using local economical materials

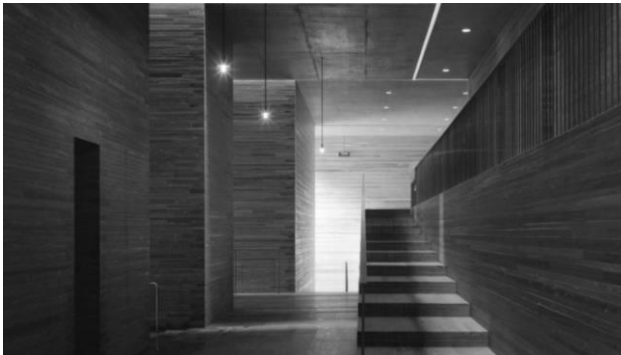
3) Building should understand the material used in its creation of form:

As Louis Kahn (2003) said, “If the bricks want to be an arch, make an arch.” Understand the material and express it with all its honesty/

efficiency and strive for elegance. The form created by it should transcend from being a mere envelope that provides shelter but gives spatial qualities and create an atmosphere that makes one feel protected and secure. Peter Zumthor (2012) describes one such building saying, “The transition between the inside and the outside gives an incredible sense of place (Figure 6), an unbelievable feeling of concentration when we suddenly become aware of being enclosed or something enveloping us”.



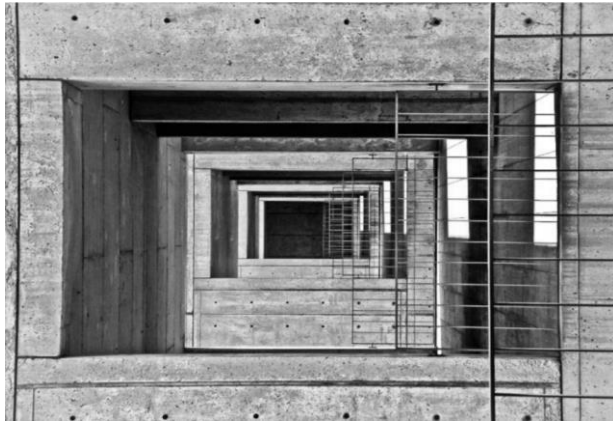
(a)



(b)

Figure 6. Example of building with a sense of place (a) Architect Louis Kahn; (b) Peter Zumthor

One should understand the nature of the materials on how it deals with light, sound and heat. Accordingly, one can play with reflections, echoes and temperatures; which all contribute to the experience of the place giving a sense of connection. Pallasmaa (2005) says one can sensualize architecture through “a strengthened sense of materiality and hapticity, texture and weight, the density of space and materialized light.” (Figure 7).



(a)



(b)

Figure 7. Examples of materiality and texture (a) Louis Kahn; (b) Cecil Balmond

Buddhism teaches understanding and tolerance likewise, architecture should tolerate the imperfect nature of all-natural materials such as timber, rammed earth and stone. It should be cherished because that's the source of texture which subtly hints at its life history of how it was made or how it has been used. It gives a sense of time and place and has life within it, unlike the clinical, factory-produced materials (Pallasmaa, 2005).

4) Building should understand its occupants.

The first task would be to fulfil the space requirements such as rooms, office, toilets etc. bearing in mind how the occupants might use it. The second would be to provide comfort; a building that is warm in winter and cool in summer, a building that is well ventilated and not stifling. The third would be to provide well-being, creating exciting, enjoyable social spaces between or within them catering for their need for social interaction. While doing so, one should give the other enough control, space, privacy and freedom. In Zumthor's (2012) words, "the space should generate the feeling that I am not being directed but can stroll at will; just drifting along."

More importantly, the spaces created should empathize with the different emotions the occupants felt at any particular moment. It should play with light and shadows (Figure 8(a)) to create different moods within; shadows can create intimate spaces, which "invite unconscious peripheral vision, tactile fantasy, imagination and

daydreaming” (Pallasmaa, 2005), a space of privacy as opposed to constantly brightly laminated space which Pallasmaa describes as “an efficient method of mental torture that leaves no space for mental withdrawal or privacy; even the dark interiority of self is exposed and violated.”



(a)



(b)

Figure 8. (a) House design by Rem Koolhaas depicting "intimate bedrooms on the top and open social spaces on the bottom"; (b) Architect Le Corbusier

Sound and smell generated by the users should contribute to the creation of a sense of life and be part of their fond memories rather than a nuisance. Careful placement of barriers can achieve that and these walls also become “a receptacle to house objects” as Zumthor (2012) phrases it. The richness of the texture of the materials used should however discourage superficial decorations but encourage simplicity within which few objects dear to one should be placed. The walls should also know where to be transparent and where to be opaque, to provide either easy interaction with nature/ people or to provide enclosure and privacy; a little niche where one can be themselves (Figure 8, Right).

The architecture should be such that it acts as an empty canvas left to be painted by the occupants either with their memories or something more tangible such as furniture, one should be given the freedom to personalize,

giving the place a sense of identity and giving the users a sense of belonging. Moreover, in this way, one might leave their presence or mark their existence in this world.

5) Liberated Building:

Liberation is achieved through tolerance and acceptance of the transient nature of all things. Buddha said, “From interdependent origins all things arise and all things pass away” therefore nothing is permanent and a building should accept that but it should accept it with grace and elegance, it should weather with dignity. The book “On Weathering; The Life of Building in Time” (Mostafavi, M and

Leatherbarrow, D, 1993) says one can avoid stains on a building by using inventive elements that direct or prevents the flow of water on its facade and letting the materials change at their own pace seeing it as “a way of renewing beginnings by allowing refinishing.” A concept similar to Wabi-sabi which teaches one to see beauty in “unpretentious, simple, unfinished, transient thing” (Botton, 2006)

Case-Study: Shari Twin Duplex

Applying the five principles proposed for Architecture of Happiness, a twin duplex in Shari, Paro was designed and built. The following will attempt to explain how the design embodies the principles mentioned above, supplemented by figures for illustration.

1) Building should generate a feeling of love

The design tries to achieve that by being visually beautiful while still following the design principle of ‘form follows function. The building is symmetrical and it uses different materials such as timber, stone cladding and cement-lined cladding to enhance the positions of the windows, doors and the traditional Nyimchu Rabsels. The traditional components made of timber are proportional. It is also elevated from the parking floor to give a sense of reverence and presence as done in Dzongs. The plumbing pipelines are all hidden in the service shafts behind timber louvres, hence keeping the facade clean.



(a)



(b)



(c)

2D Render –First Floor Plan



(d)



(e)



(f)

Figure 9. Shari Twin Duplex in Pictures (a) 3 D Rendered Design; (b) 2 D Rendered Design- Ground Floor Plan; (c) Installation of XPS insulation; (d) 2 D Rendered Design- First Floor Plan; (e) After Completion; (f) Close-up views

2) Building should understand its site:

The elevated ground level of the building is such that it follows the natural terrain of the land, to avoid unnecessary excavation and cutting of slopes. Therefore, avoiding the need to build large ugly retaining walls behind the house which gives one a sunken feeling. The elevated ground floor level and its position within the plot ensure that the sunlight and views from the house of the beautiful valley are unobstructed, even if there may be future development on the adjacent plots or by the cars parked in the parking space. The parking space approaching the access road is kept at a minimum to keep large enough space in the backyard for lawn, gardening and hot-stone bath, thereby promoting connection to nature and leisure.

The orientation of the building is tilted and does not follow the plot boundary, to maintain the beautiful view of the valley instead of the mountains. This also will serve to provide a sense of connectivity with the valley and enhance a sense of belonging to the valley. The design also incorporates the beautiful Nymchu Rabsel and Gomang Rabsel so that it gives a sense of place. One look at the building and one knows that it can't be anywhere else except for in Bhutan. Hence, giving it a sense of identity as well as belonging to the neighboring traditional village. The layout is also such that most used spaces such as the kitchens/ dining room have sunlight almost throughout the day and the bedrooms have at least evening or morning sunlight. Moreover, at least two windows in a room are openable to help natural cross-ventilation.

3) Building should understand the material used in its creation of form:

Although it is a modern RRC building, it has managed to express traditional materials such as timber in the Rabsels in the most authentic way possible. Also, within the traditional component of the Rabsel, where there is a concrete slab, it is expressed as a slab without trying to hide it behind timber cladding. This gives a sense of time, although the facade design has traditional components, one can know that it is built in this decade with RCC frame construction. The traditional Gomang Rabsel located above the main doors, with its outward projection also gives a sense of shelter and protection and mentally prepares the individual that one is entering an enclosure.

4) Building should understand its occupants:

The building fulfils all the space requirements of the occupant/ client such as the number of rooms, toilets etc. It is also a house that provides thermal comfort since its AAC walls are highly insulated using XPS insulation foams and windows with double glazing. The windows and doors are designed such that it provides air tightness meaning no chilly drafts entering the house with its double profile shutter frame and rubber padding. Most of the windows are openable to aid natural ventilation. The residents informed that they have had nice winters where they hardly used any heater (making it energy efficient with lower electricity bills) and summers where it was nice and cool inside. The double glazing also provided much insulation from outside noise including the noise from rainfalls.

The ground floor plan is such that it has a modern open plan kitchen with dining and living room adjacent and windows looking outside to the backyard. This has proved very efficient in cultivating family bonding since the children can be drawing or reading at the dining table or outside in the backyard playing, when one cooks or when the other one relaxes watching TV in the living room. This building has twin duplexes since the two families wanted to live together but in separate houses. To give a sense of privacy yet promote social interaction between the two houses, the design incorporates shared spaces such as the first-floor open veranda and ground-floor common room. This gives a feeling of control. The very private areas such as rooms and semi-private spaces such as living rooms are positioned in such a way that private rooms are furthest from the main door and living rooms are readily accessible through the foyer. This promotes social interactions that are enjoyable while maintaining one's niche for retreat when needed.

The finishing incorporated is of high quality with putty-finished walls, teak floorings, carefully positioned lighting fixtures and readily accessible switches. This encourages minimalism but also gives freedom to incorporate their personal touches with furniture and rugs knowing that anything will look good in that space.

5) **Liberated Building:**

The materials used for finishing are as far as possible naturals, such as marble, timber flooring and stone walls as such materials age with grace and elegance. They also can be easily renewed by polishing or

cleaning. Unlike tiles or laminated flooring which once chipped at the surface leaves an unpleasant mark. Also, the roof and its overhang are ample such that the building is protected from the natural elements. There is also well-planned water drainage system surrounding the building, hidden under the stone aggregates so that rainwater can runoff and the building is protected from getting damp.

In all, the residents of the house enjoy living there, hence, it may be concluded that the design has managed to encourage happiness in architecture by emulating true beauty – love, compassion and liberation.

Conclusion

One must be mindful of the impermanent nature of all things. Therefore, one should try to live in the present. Only in the present can one find happiness. So one can only hope that in one's architecture, the users feel the propensity to find happiness and love, that it would be a building of simplicity and elegance within which, one may remember the architect and themselves through the values it projects; the values of freedom, compassion, spirituality, connectivity and sustainability. Last but not least it should be a building which gives a sense of context, place and time.

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