It’s All About “Green Attitudes”

Sustainability has become such an overused, misused, fad word that we seem to feel that sustainable and green features can be added on to a design just like any tapestry or upholstery.

It is good to see this awareness amongst various strata of society including electrical and HVAC manufacturers and consultants. But this popular recent scenario tends to be based on an assumption of a high end, very comfortable, highly consumeristic, and thus highly exploitative life style where air conditioning, expensive gadgetry is taken for granted. Within these parameters, they introduce technological inputs (which many times are expensive with high level of embodied energy) to bring about some savings in energy consumption.

What I would like to discuss today are the basic issues like our attitudes which can minimize our consumption with genuine concern and mere commonsense.

In today’s world, we seem to be having the perfection of means (lot of knowledge) but a confusion of goals (lack of wisdom).

Attitudes are what shape our goals and objectives in life – attitudes which could be born out of short sighted manipulative vested interests or out of wisdom— the holistic understanding of life. Without the right attitudes, the sustainable becomes unsustainable and green becomes a greenwash.

Self restraint (“Sanyam”) and self denial have become antiquated values in the “got mine” culture of the “me” civilization.

For sustainability, it is better to have fewer wants than larger resources.

We need to learn to make short term sacrifices for long term gains. Politicians are afraid to even suggest this – as they them-
selves also love living as if there is no tomorrow.

Today we see those people who consume so much energy and resources by their greedy, flashy lifestyles and businesses are those who are talking about sustainability. These are people who exploit these trendy words ‘green’ and ‘sustainability’ to increase their own profits which would in turn allow them to consume more and more.

We fail to grasp that this ‘compulsive consumption’ – retail therapy – happens as a relief from the lacuna of an unfulfilled life.

Thus, instead of learning from the mistakes of the overconsumptive developed countries, we see today an alarming growth in energy consumption of the developing countries. Whereas the growth in energy consumption in U.S.A is 1.3%, this growth in some developing countries has risen to 4.3%. The construction industry which consumes almost 50% of the total global energy has grown by 5% in the west as compared to 10% in the developing countries.

Gandhiji – when asked if Indians should have the standard of living of Britishers, said – “it took Britain almost half the world’s resources to do so. – what would happen if we all have that standard of living?”

To prevent global warming and to have a sustainable future, truly green and sustainable environments need to be created. For this, green buildings with green ratings are suggested.

The basic intention of the ‘green’ rating in the western context is good. In India, It is desirable in cases where high tech parameters and air conditioning etc are a must like hospital O.T.s, I.C.U.s, pharmaceuticals, research labs and so on. There would definitely be some benefits if one goes by the green ratings.

Further, it is always better to buy truly ‘green’ products which have minimal footprint on planet earth – in the form of minimum energy used for the basic raw materials, the manufacturing process, the transportation, the marketing and finally for the actual installation and use. Fortunately we see some awareness and steps being taken in this direction by atleast a few.

But otherwise, today the word ‘green’ has became a marketing gimmick for materials that are sold with ‘green points’ that not only improve your green rating, but also tend to offset and partially make up for the higher expenses of these materials.

- A building that works well without air conditioning does not
qualify for the LEED ratings. But a building that saves 10 TR out of 100 TR of air conditioning load gets its green points.

- A couple of green points can be further added only if you use a carpet with some recycled raw material content – whether we need a carpet in the first place is a different issue.

- A window with expensive, imported, high embodied energy, heat reflecting / absorbing glass that reduces the heat ingress by 25% gets the green points, whereas a simple window with a good shading chajjah that reduces the heat ingress by 50% does not take you any nearer the “green gold” or “green platinum” status. Simple planting of shady trees on this sunny side can also reduce the heat ingress considerably.

This kind of grading additions are done for numerous parameters – in order to categorise your building as ‘green’.

I was invited to speak at an international green building conference, where the event venue was a large five star convention centre with extremely energy intensive, huge air conditioned halls and foyers. Many shops / stalls displaying hundreds of the same normal products with a ‘green’ adjective added onto it were set up in a very large air conditioned space. There were continuously running, energy guzzling escalators to go to the mezzanine level for lunch. No simple stairs was visible to walk up this 3 m height. As a speaker, I was put up in an air conditioned apartment with spacious living room, bedroom, dining, kitchenette, fridge, two L.C.D T.V.s, 3 telephones, part wooden flooring.

Could we not be a little more mindful in selecting appropriate venues and hotels and not fall for the unsustainable five star glitz?

The deeper we architects delve into the true meaning of sustainability, we realize that it is not just an add on gimmick to design but the design itself that is born out of a way of life, with compatible supporting attitudes.

“True green sustainable design happens as a result of a unified, holistic and compassionate attitude to life – attitudes of simplicity, empathy and caring concern for mother earth and for the present and future of all species – living and non living”.

When I design, I have the following attitudes as a guiding force. They help me to design buildings that attempt to be truly ‘green’.

- An attitude that does not equate good life with the number of goods that we have; - where outer simplicity brings about in-
ner plenitude.
- An attitude that celebrates simplicity in life and in design. This frugality and simplicity need not be forced upon us, but they should be voluntary and spontaneous - arising from our true understanding of life, - where consuming less can be more liberating than limiting. A simple life style leaves more space for our spiritual renewal. Out of this simplicity is born a sense of freedom and spontaneity.
- An attitude of empathy, reverence and caring towards Mother Nature – its living and non-living entities like water, air, soil, plants, animals and others. This care also extends for the future generations to come.
- An attitude that understands and recognizes the importance of the immeasurable spirit dimension in the design of any space.
- A spontaneous attitude that achieves the desired honesty in design rather than the make-belief – superfluos pseudo add ons.
- An attitude that integrates various disciplines such as interior design, architecture, climatology, landscape design, ecology, economics, behavioral sciences etc. to find comprehensive and mutually compatible sustainable solutions.
- An attitude that understands and reduces this consumption of building related energy at three levels.
  • At the end use energy level – here too well designed, well lit and ventilated buildings (with passive cooling) can help reduce energy consumption at the base level. This is where the new truly ‘green’ products as well as technological innovations in the process can help. e.g. The simple CFL fitting instead of an incandescent bulb - a heat recovery process during air conditioning to heat water and so on. Use of renewable energy from the sun, wind, water, bio gas and other sources will also help.
  A simple life style will require less resources and consume less energy with its smaller space requirement as well as lesser gadgets that consume energy.
  • At the embodied energy level – this energy is the energy used during the making, transporting and installing of any building material or product - use of simple, natural materials from the vicinity of the site will help reduce this energy. Similarly
materials / products produced by simple, less energy consuming processes in not too far off places or by products of some processes will have less embodied energy.

In food, an apple imported from Australia would have greater embodied energy than a locally produced apple. Consuming optimum spaces, food, clothes, furniture, gadgets will reduce this energy consumption. If the same space is put to use for multiple functions during the day and night (a living room can double as a dining space as well as a bedroom), lesser building resources would be used and thus the building would embody less energy.

- At the recycled energy level – reuse of discarded materials, recycling of sewage for water, recycled use of an old structure for today’s functions will reduce energy consumption at this level. Using products, which can be recycled and reused after their designated functions ceases, will also contribute.

At this point, I am reminded of the story of a monk and his master. The monk, whose robe was not good enough to wear anymore, asked the master for a new robe. The master, after seeing his robe, agreed and got him a new one.

Later the master went to the monk’s room to enquire if he was comfortable and see what he had done with his old robe. The monk had started using that as a bed spread. The old bed spread was used as a window curtain. The old curtain was being used for handling hot kitchen utensils, after which it would be used to mop the floor. This tattered cloth then would be made into wicks to light his oil lamp.

Fortunately, this does happen to some extent in many Indian/Asian households too. But unfortunately this trend is being replaced by the ‘throw away’ waste making culture. Can’t this reducing, recycling and reusing happen with our building materials too.

We can learn a lot about sustainability from various examples in nature and our vernacular architecture. In nature and in earlier traditional societies, designs happened to spontaneously maintain the optimum level in the consumption of all resources and energy – truly ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ - This “optimum” or “green” level of consumption was the result of their basic attitude and idea about the kind of life they aspired to – holistic, caring, simple, frugal and honest.

All our designs of outer spaces have their true source in our
‘inner space’ (‘The Chitakash’) of our values and attitudes.

Take the example of today’s ugly fertilizer plant that vomits toxic smoke and pollution in the air is in itself so very expensive to and make, has to guzzle so much energy to produce the chemical fertilizer that can be harmful to the soil and sub soil water. The attitude is that food is a commodity which can be produced faster with greater profits with the use of another commodity – the fertilizer. The well being of the other important constituents like the soil, air, water, birds, insects, becomes immaterial.

Whereas the ancient fertilizer, manure making unit made of these beautiful tall 2.5m wide mud towers in the African desert sets a wonderful example of sustainable, symbiotic production. The holes on top of the tower are entry points for the many pigeons which go inside to rest on the many pegs on the wall of these dark cool towers. While they sit, these pigeons also shit. Lots of pigeon shit gets collected inside the tower base. Bags of this organic, healthy manure are filled and taken to the fields by opening the rear door of this tower at ground level. In this case all the environmental constituents are happy – the birds, the insects, the soil, the water and air.

Can our designs evolve out of our sustainable attitudes which will help in taking us closer to nature, closer to other fellow beings, living creatures and to our own selves?

Isn’t living sustainably synonymous with living more mindfully.

The world is not that which we inherited from our ancestors, but what we leave behind for our children and grandchildren.

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