

Narratives and Storytelling

Tools for Teaching Architectural History, Theory and Design

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Introduction

“Tell me a fact and I’ll learn. Tell me the truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.”- Indian Proverb

Research (or search), in hard science, is usually based upon non-imaginative rational methods. Empirical and numerical techniques are the main currency of science. Imaginative approach is usually disregarded as conjecture and is abhorred by the scientific community. But one wonders if that is the correct thesis; for then what shall we say about Newton who just had an apple to begin with, or Einstein who traveled both in time and space but just in his imagination or Copernicus or Galileo or Darwin or Alfred Wagner and many others who had nothing to begin with but simple conjectures? What about the prophets, saints, reformers, and *avatars*, who claim to have traveled to the core or ends of the universe and seen the past, present and the future? Their experiences are neither conjectures nor scientific but are hallmark of imaginative experientialism and have triggered much of human intellect to give rise to what we now know as science. What about political and social sciences? Where would this domain of human endeavor fit, as these fields of knowledge have no laboratory to fit into? So, one can say, with some assurance that all human knowledge whether scientific or otherwise stems from imaginative and conjectural thinking.

It is also known that in many societies, especially where intellectual and scientific inquiry is in stagnancy, most of this imaginative and conjectural thinking turns into hearsay and embeds into peoples’ memory as stories and narratives, and ridiculed by scientific community. The impact is extremely negative especially on social sciences where empirical and numerical methods are

either not the best suited or are not liked by mainstream thinking. Indeed application of empirical and statistical methods as applied to many social sciences are already being questioned as the results are severely misleading in predicting the correct course of action. A simple evidence is collapsing of the current global social, economic and cultural structure giving rise to mistrust among nations, international and regional conflicts, wars, violence, crime and terrorism.

History, Historiography and the Education of an Architect

According to Vitruvius, teaching of history to architects is of paramount importance. History of architecture, on the other hand, deals with different geographical locations, time periods, buildings and other man-made objects. Instructional tools play an important role in the ability to achieve the objectives of teaching history of architecture. It is, therefore, important to use appropriate tools for teaching of architects. Use of text, context, conjecture, storytelling and narrative are matters that need elaboration. However, before moving on, let us take a closer look at the basic meanings of the words 'storytelling' and 'narrative'.

Storytelling is the conveying of events in words, images and sounds often by improvisation or embellishment. Stories have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation, and to instill moral values. Crucial elements of stories and storytelling include plot, characters and narrative point of view. Architecture has always promoted storytelling; from storing, and making available, books, to creating places for performance, entertainment, worship, sports, commerce, and education, designed spaces have facilitated the creation of history, fact and fiction.

Narrative is a story that is created in a constructive format (as a work of speech, literature, pictures, song, motion pictures, television, video games, theatre, musical theatre, or dance) that describes a sequence of fictional or non-fictional events. According to Lawrence Stone, narrative has traditionally been the main rhetorical device used by historians: organized chronologically, focused on a single coherent story, descriptive rather than analytical,

concerned with people not abstract circumstances, and dealing with the particular and specific rather than the collective and statistical. Today, rather than simply serving as a home for storytelling, architecture becomes a device for storytelling as narratives are woven into its foundations.

Every experience encapsulates stories. While the human mind spins its tales through memory and thoughts, each space - with its history, program, materials, and design - produces a unique set of narratives.

Author's own Experience with Narratives and Storytelling

During the culminating years of my architectural training, I discovered a fascination for the art of debating and philosophizing. It fascinated me to argue a hypothesis or a conjecture that was unproven, yet appealing and convincing. A particular attraction was for discussing and supporting abstract ideas heavily enshrined in metaphysical world, a world that eventually took me to loving architecture, not only as a profession, but more as a passion. Some philosophers who pulled me into this realm are worth reporting: The Greeks giants: Plato, Socrates, Hippocrates, the German philosophers: Kant, Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Hegel, Einstein, and mystics such as Rumi and Iqbal. It was through reading the work of these great giants that I fought my way into studying architecture as opposed to medicine or pure engineering that my parents wanted to impose upon me.

But very soon into my training I was frustrated by the perception of most teachers of the profession of architecture in a stark 'black and white' worldview; this was against my wishful picture of architecture as a palette of ideas, philosophies, stories and lullabies that parents and grandparents sang to pacify children, and soft-talk to paint the world in shades of grey and colors of rainbow. As I almost decided to switch my studies to more mundane topics, the course of 'Theory of Architecture' was thrust upon us. This suddenly changed my outlook towards the architectural education which, so far, had been boring drills of drawing and design without soul. For the first time I found I could discuss with my teachers, with my classmates and especially with myself, the ideas and

dreams that had been brewing in me for long. Somehow this rekindled interest led me to excel in my studies and I graduated with the highest merit. This was the beginning of a different life for me. Looking around for a job to steer my life, I opted for teaching against a lucrative practice oriented life. I have never regretted my decision.

But reality soon confronted me in terms of teaching design studios in an innovative manner rather than using conventional tools. It was here, that after initial teaching hiccups, challenges and pitfalls, I discovered the technique of using narrative and storytelling as a tool to further design education. Rather than discussing mundane issues of brick and mortar only, I used to indulge and divulge in metaphysical nature of architectonics of architecture. Remember it was early 1970's, a period of turmoil in Pakistan, which led to the breakup of the country and emergence of Bangladesh. It was during this disturbing period that debates and discussions on socio-political environment in the country forced me to speak my mind, only to be labeled as a 'traitor' 'anti-Pakistan' and what not. It was a very sad day of my life to have been vindicated only through loss of half the country. No proof of philosophical acumen could be so painful, yet so revealing one's insight.

Incidentally, although very unfortunate, the society, for the first time since its inception in 1947, was in a mood to ponder over the happenings especially over the loss of half of the country. Almost overnight most people turned into sorts of statesmen, philosophers and even speculators propounding all kinds of conspiracy theories and predictions, from bliss to doomsday etc. At least, the nation had realized the need to 'think' even though it was not even clumsily equipped to do so. It was through this period that I discovered the power of narrative and storytelling in using these to further the design education.

As I had to leave soon after this for my doctoral studies, the experiment was half baked and would only continue after I would finish my Ph.D. in 1978 and drive through Eurasia to Pakistan after personally witnessing the changes that took over the neighboring countries namely Turkey (Martial Law), Iran (Fall of Raza Shah

Pehalvi and rise of Imam Khomeini), Afghanistan (the USSR invasion) and finally Pakistan (the Fall of Bhutto and rise of Ziaul Haque and everything associated with him).

The Power of Narrative and Storytelling

Stories give people purpose and meaning. It helps people make sense of their lives in an otherwise chaotic and meaningless world. In a study conducted on children, it is well understood that children, as young as two, formulate and understand their world mostly through narratives and stories and, thus, show a surprising power of comprehension and understanding of the world.

Even through adulthood, we are also enigmatically drawn to the power of stories. We spend huge sums on producing and watching TV shows and movies. It is an unquenchable thirst for meaning that fuels the desire for stories. And, given the opportunity, people want to be part of the story – part of history.

Another area of human intellect that has left a strong impact upon history and culture is mythological interpretation of supernatural forces. Classic mythologies include the Indian and the Greek mythologies. Of these, Greek mythology is especially of interest to architects as many gods of Greek mythology left a great bulk of architectural legacy in terms of buildings of temples, monuments, sculpture etc. Another important area that mythology contributed to is the storytelling legacy for a number of cultures.

We all see the impact that Greek mythology has had on areas like literature, poetry, sculpture and architecture. Greek myths especially were expressions of the fears, problems and aspirations that people have had for generations. These fears and dreams gradually became a sort of reality to them in the form of myths, such that were compiled and written by poets who didn't hesitate to make changes whenever it suited them. Various definitions of the word myth (Linguistic) included:

- A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that served as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people, by

explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society.

- A popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence, especially one considered to illustrate a cultural ideal.
- A fiction or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology based upon words such as fate, enchantment, curse, immortal, chariot, oath etc.

Storytelling and Use of Narratives in Architecture

Many buildings close to us afford stories and narratives usually of ideological and cultural nature. Among many such buildings two are being mentioned here as examples that the author has used over the last many decades for teaching design. One is the ideological memorial to the freedom movement of Pakistan while the other is in memory of the beloved queen of a Moghal Emperor, Shahjahan.

Story of the Minar-e-Pakistan

While working for the famous designer of the Minar-e-Pakistan, Nasiruddin Murat Khan, I was introduced to the story that now is well known. This is the story of creation of Pakistan through architectural symbolism. When told, it leaves a lasting impression of Pakistan Movement on the listener.

The tower rises above a platform shaped like a five-pointed star. The terrace is three feet from ground level, the platform's height is about six feet, and the star platform is about 12 feet high. It is surrounded by two crescent-shaped pools, four feet deep and lined with green and red marble. From the main direction of entry i.e. from the side of the Badshahi Mosque, one reaches the platform by crossing the red marble lined crescent-shaped pool. The tower has a spiral shaped hall spanned by arches. The rostrum facing Badshahi Mosque is a quadrant constructed with Mughal patterned tiles. The circular perimeter of the tower is 320 feet. The petals, 30 feet high, look like a blooming flower. The total height of the structure

is 203 feet from ground level. On the marble slabs of the central shaft is inscribed a brief history of the Pakistan Resolution in English, Urdu and Bengali, the 99 names of God and poetic verses from Allama Iqbal. The tower has 10 vertical covering slabs interlaced with flower petals and glazed cement domes, with a sightseeing platform and a central spiral staircase.

The story: *The design of the base and the first four platforms depict the history of the Pakistan Movement through architectural symbols. Rough stones and cement have been haphazardly laid representing the chaotic conditions and the lack of direction in the early stages of the Freedom Movement of the Indian Muslims. The stones used for the first platform are rough Taxila stones. Hammer-dressed stones are used on the second platform. On the third platform are laid chiseled stones, while the fourth and final platform is of highly polished marble, symbolizing the ultimate success of the freedom movement. The two pools finished in red and green marble signify the sacrifices (the red marble) while the green marble lined pool signifies peace and tranquility achieved after the struggle. The first level signified by flowering petals identifies the beginning of national maturity while subsequent floors add to historical growth and development over the years. Originally, each floor was to represent a decade of progress to be supplemented by additional floors every decade but bureaucratic and political interventions forced a domed lantern on top to cap the tower.*

Lesson: Using ideological attributes and transposing these into architectural language can help create an stimulating and motivating entity. The result may help instill the ideology in a creative and effective manner in those who believe in it. The story and narrative that go with it can more successfully instill historicity and pride in the mind (and heart) of the visitor.

Storytelling about the Taj Mahal

The Taj Mahal generally regarded as one of the most beautiful and important historical places, is the Symbol of Love and portrays something which dreams are made of. This exquisite white and yellow marble structure stands 55 meters tall and is one of the most visited sites in the world. Built in 1653 by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal, this “elegy in

marble” can also be called the ultimate tribute to love. But is that all that a student of architect is entitled to know, or is there something more that he can experience? In order to inculcate an inspiration of the spirit behind the creation of this symbol of love, it is worth attempting an additional technique – perhaps making a story. The author attempted one as provided below.

The story: *When Mumtaz Mahal died from child birth, Shahjahan was heartbroken and devastated and dreamed of building a lasting monument to the memories of his beloved wife. The Emperor invited a number of architects to ask them realize his dream, but none succeeded. As he lost hope he was approached by a Persian architect named Shirazi, who tried to convince him he could deliver the promised design. Sadness took over Shahjahan to disbelieve the Persian architect who insisted he could achieve the impossible. As the Emperor reluctantly permitted him to undertake the commission, the architect requested that certain prerequisites may be allowed to be met. On inquiry, the architect insisted he would like to stay by the side of the Emperor for some time that included staying in his bedroom and in the court and attend all ceremonies the Emperor would call for. After an initial hesitation the Emperor agreed and the architect promised he would deliver his design within the next six months. As time passed, Shahjahan became more and more reclusive and stopped talking about the mausoleum he used to dream of. But the architect kept working, thinking, and searching for a solution. Just as the Emperor almost forgot about the mausoleum, the architect, one day after about three months of staying with the monarch, announced he would have the design ready the next day.*

The following day the court was specially arranged for viewing of the proposed design but most courtiers found the Emperor very reclusive and uninterested in things to come. He had given all hopes of his dream being realized. So when the architect presented the model of his design, he preferred to hide it by a shrouding sheet of white cloth to dramatize the opening event.

Just when the court was called to order and the architect was invited to unveil his design, he (the architect) requested to be allowed to give an explanation of his concept and how he had arrived at the final design. He stated that it was possible for him to see (share) the dream of

the Emperor by living with him almost around the clock by observing him during various phases of life; what he did, what made him happy, what made him sad, why he got angry and how he vented his anger, what he liked to eat and what music he enjoyed, when he reposed in God and when he acted as one while dealing with his subjects, and all sorts of things a monarch would do in those days. The architect claimed that he was able to see the building that was in the dream of the king by 'living through the Emperor's life' during the three months or so he stayed in the palace.

And when the emperor desired the design should be unveiled, the architect simply removed the shrouding white sheet from the model of the Taj and the King almost cried out of extreme feelings of excitement, happiness and sense of success and exclaimed: "Yes. This is the building I saw in my dream that would house the sacred body of my beloved. Yes, Shirazi, indeed this is what I dreamed."

And the rest is history as we all know. The Taj Mahal was built and stands today as testimony to the love of a king for his beloved queen, the symbol of human creative genius and above all a lesson in the everlasting relationship between an architect and his client.

It is reported that the original model of the Taj was constructed using ivory as the main material and is so detailed that the grills (jalīs) all around the project not only match the pattern of the ones actually built, the actual number of patterns (holes) are also exactly the same as in the real ones. This model is said to have been taken to the British Museum by the colonial rulers and was finally brought back when Pakistan's president Ayub Khan requested the British Monarch for it on his maiden visit to UK in 1960s. Today it is one of the prized possessions of the galleries in the Lahore Fort.

The lesson: I do not know what truth lies in the above story. All I know is that I coined this story some thirty five years ago while attempting to convince my students of the importance of *'listening' to their client(s), sharing their dreams and attempting to take up the challenge of realizing it, using whatever manner they can.* Over the years, this story has traveled all around the world, the storytellers being me and my students.

Conclusions

In conclusion one can say that storytelling techniques and use of narratives carefully chosen to suit the topic and issues debated in design studios can go a long way in moving students to deeply probe the architectural design process. This can also inculcate among students the importance of reading and understanding the minds and aspirations of the client to help him (the client) realize his/her dream. In this respect the pertinent question, “Why use storytelling as a Teaching Tool?” is discussed from many aspects in the following lines:

- 1. Storytelling is the oldest form of education.** Cultures have always told tales as a way of passing down beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations. Stories are at the core of all that makes us human.
- 2. Stories are the way we store information in the brain.** A list of facts will be forgotten, but stories are remembered. Stories help us to organize information, and tie content together.
- 3. Stories go straight to the heart.** Because students are emotionally involved and truly enjoy storytelling, it can help to create a positive attitude toward the learning process.
- 4. There is a difference between telling and reading.** Without the book as a barrier, the teller looks directly into the eyes of the audience and is free to use gestures, facial expression, and body movements to enhance the telling and help children understand the story better. The reader sees only the words on the page, while the storyteller sees the wonder and excitement on the faces of the listeners.
- 5. Listening to stories instills the love of language in people and motivates them to read.**
- 6. Storytelling stimulates the imagination.** Scientist Albert Einstein said that “imagination is more important than knowledge.”
- 7. Stories teach lessons.** Stories are excellent tools for teaching about desirable behaviors and strengthening character.

8. Storytelling develops listening skills. Storytelling helps students develop concentration, and the pure pleasure that they experience while listening to a story helps them to associate listening with enjoyment.

9. Stories act as a humanizing element. They help to counteract the increasing emphasis on technology at home and in class.

10. Telling stories from around the world creates an awareness and appreciation of different cultures.

11. Storytelling by teachers motivates students to tell stories. Students recognize storytelling to be an authentic activity, and a skill that is well-worth acquiring. This has been found to be true whether it is telling world tales, works by other authors, or their own stories. But, the teacher, *must act as role model* for them.

Finally, you don't have to tell a story perfectly or very dramatically to be successful!

Students of all ages love stories and are a very forgiving audience. After telling them stories, teachers often say, "Look at how quiet those kids were; they were mesmerized." We tell them its not us creating the "hush", its the stories. If you choose a story you really love and tell it from the heart, you'll have that great attention, too.

Endnotes

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