

The hidden hand

Reflections on creation, pedagogy and the body

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*'Little did we know what would happen next. We did not have an idea of what we were getting involved in at the start; we had no idea where the journey would lead us to and no idea how we would succeed. We had few resources and means. We however had great faith. We had intense skill and dedication. We persisted and persevered. We built it together. It was an extraordinary journey.'*¹

As I reflect on these words, I begin to ask myself: what inspires creation and how do we create? How do we perceive and how do we know? How do we think and learn? How do we feel joy and love? How do we feel beautiful? These questions bring me to another profound question connecting all the above: what constitutes 'we'? Is 'we' the body or is it the mind? Is 'we' a collective or is it an individual? Is 'we' the conscious or is it the subconscious? Is 'we' tangible or is it intangible?

In my opinion, 'we' represents the living continuum of human knowledge, experience, skill and behavior, and its integral relationship with the human body and the mind. 'We' constitutes both the conscious and the subconscious. 'We' is our collective existence, our collective development and our collective intelligence. 'We' creates, and is being constantly and simultaneously created.

Creation is a deeply intuitive process, which emerges through a complex flux of infinite associations triggered in the body and the mind. Dynamic movement of the body is a critical and integral part of this process, and here the hand plays a pivotal role. A lively hand is a product of a lively mind and this in turn is reflected in the face.² We are intrinsically, ecstatically and intensely dependent on our hands and its unique cognitive abilities. Hands have always been an undeniable constant through all the material gestures on this planet. They have been our key to the most sublime creations, translating our conscious and subconscious thoughts into material realities. Puppeteers live through them and so do musicians, weavers, blacksmiths, gardeners and bread makers. Hands are the silent forces behind all the machines and pastries too!

It is important to understand what constitutes the 'hand' and what transpires when we make with our hands? Hands are not limited to the visible physical boundary extending from the wrist to the fingertips. From a biomechanical perspective, a hand is an integral part of the entire arm; and from a neurological perspective, the nerves near the fingertips under the skin extend through to the spinal cord, where they transmit impulses of sensation to the brain.³ In the past, when we used our hands and built together, almost every material gesture had a spirit, it was alive and honored with a celebration. Building together gave us a distinct material, cultural and spiritual identity and instilled in us a sense of purpose and a limitless desire for growth. Societies that built together were models of love and joy, resulting in cities and buildings, which were exuberant material gestures. Cities like Barcelona and buildings like Golconde⁴ have emphatically demonstrated this and continue to evoke silent admiration for the hand and the spirit.

Big city architecture, which was once a great opportunity, has today reached a dangerous and tragic state of repetitive boredom. Manual skills are shunned and practical and material concerns are prioritized under the label of efficiency. We do not build together anymore. We do not use our hands the way we did before. Cities are today faced with the reality of losing its most revered and intangible core – its soul. Surrendering to shallow, soulless and arrogant

architectural solutions, concealed behind the veil of slogans and gimmick, will be a catastrophe. As architects and humanists we must challenge this. Architectural pedagogy must reassess the mindless chase for the 'new', and innovatively nurture the enterprise of using the hand.

Traditions of the handcraft are vessels of great wisdom, and by integrating these with recent developments in science and technology, inclusive opportunities and systems can be generated. Balancing the two is an exciting challenge, and blurring conventional boundaries between the hand and the handmade might well be a question of regaining our soul, our joy and our combined spirit. Our hands will continue to shape our future as they have built our past.

Notes

1 An excerpt from a discussion on the design process of 'Jugaad', presented by Sanjeev Shankar in 'Ecology of the mind', *Nordic Architecture Congress*, Arkitekturmassan, Sweden, October 2011. 'Jugaad' was a freestanding shade canopy created using 945 discarded cooking oilcans. More information about the project can be found at <http://www.sanjeevshankar.com/jugaad.html>

2 Napier John, *Hands*, Princeton University Press, February 22, 1993.

3 Wilson Frank, *The Hand: How its use shapes the brain, language and human culture*, Vintage Publication, September 14, 1999.

4 Golconde is a dormitory for a spiritual community in Pondicherry built almost entirely by hand. Designed by architects Antonin Raymond and George Nakashima it was substantially completed in 1942. For more information, see: Raymond, Antonin. *Antonin Raymond: An Autobiography*. Rutland, Vt.: C. E. Tuttle, 1973 and Nakashima, George. *The Soul Of A Tree: A Woodworker's Reflections*. New York, N.Y.: Kodansaha Intl., 1981.