

Tapping the surface of architecture

[Design](#), [Architecture](#)



Over the decades, architecture has attempted to create theoretical manifestos to accompany built works, often leaving little room for the building to speak for itself. In another kind of practice where the eye draws from observations of cultural and historical contexts, the architecture of Studio Advaita taps into the essence of architecture with structure, skin, and details that are individualistic and inspired.

Reflecting on the past, there still exists a recollection of a time where good architecture was once identified with spaces of worship such as Temple Architecture, or with structures of power such as kingdoms, forts, and assemblies- among many other forms of public architecture. Today, the scope has broadened and architecture is mostly a setting for everyday, ordinary activities. Despite this familiarity of architecture in our everyday lives, very often we find ourselves asking, “ What is good architecture?” History is an omnipresent context since buildings are made with an intention to last. And good architecture acknowledges that cultural ideas about how buildings are used last a long time. The Shivsagar School in Assam, and the Agricultural Training Centre in Ahmednagar are illustrations of architecture as an applied art, whose imagination is experienced in the manner of application.

In most traditional architecture belonging to a particular region there is always a beautiful relationship between semi-open spaces like the verandahs and open-to-sky spaces like the courtyards. The natural landscape and designed spaces complement each other more than being distinctly experienced as outdoor and indoor spaces respectively. At Studio Advaita, preliminary conceptual ideas emerge out of contextual situations. When

architecture must find a place amidst abundant nature, Rasika Bhadave describes how, “ Travelling through distinct landscapes across the country, we always observe the colours and patterns of life, and in that way, we try and reinterpret their inherent relationship with materials.”

Tucked away in a site replete with tall, dense foliage of Assam the Shivsagar School is situated carefully to protect the traditional ‘ maidams’ or tumuli of the erstwhile Ahom Kingdom. The organic layout of the school is a responsive derivation of tracing light wells which act as open courtyards. Run by an NGO and built with the help of local community, the building uses indigenous materials and technology fused with modern needs to allow dissemination of knowledge to a community. The classrooms have open configurations, and an education programme restructured to focus on building confidence among students.

This approach sometimes challenges the design of the envelope of the building with the introduction of locally available material and skill instead of using conventional materials. Responding to climatic conditions, a sloping roof is projected from all sides like the commonly used traditional cap called ‘ jappi’ which protects the entire body from rain and sun, and is made from a tightly woven bamboo. The building envelope is itself composed of interactive, openable bamboo panels that facilitate interaction. In another contrasting setting amidst dusty terrains of interior Maharashtra, the architecture produced remains resolutely physical and relatable. In their preliminary observations of the site and its surroundings, the architects weaved a narrative to impart sense of Place and Space:

- Black rock like a crocodile back surfaces
- Spread out in the scorching afternoon heat
- A single, narrow dusty trail passes by
- A small pond that has dried up completely
- Hot, dusty air blows under a brightly lit afternoon sun
- Factory smoke makes its way into the clear sky
- A saffron flag flutters on top of a temple in the distance
- A sudden plunge of a black kite towards its prey and a deep, shrill cry
- A vast, barren plateau with dusty, hot air
- It was the most desolate and lonesome environment
- With a dry, pale green and brown landscape
- Two dark men with pale, bent bodies worked slowly at the brick kiln
- A bullock cart passes by with a rattling sound
- Under a babul tree sat a shepherd in a pink turban with his goats, observing us.

Syngenta foundation and Snehalaya organization (NGO) came together to build an Agricultural Training Centre in Ahmednagar for children of marginal farmers where the younger generation could learn about various, new agricultural techniques through short-term courses. Situated on a barren land with recurring droughts, the design of the building is introverted with a central court and indirect natural light. The basic square plan and the central open space are derived from the traditional local structures such as the ‘wada’ from nearby villages. The external staircase is reinvented from native elements of design in the region, while the building envelope is carefully chosen to reduce costs and harmonize with adjacent surrounding structures.

Grey and coloured fly-ash bricks are used with a cavity for thermal insulation in the external walls, and all internal spaces receive natural indirect light to marginalize dependence on electricity.

In the many conversations, definitions, and boundaries that initiate, inform, and influence the architecture of learning spaces; it is the communities who inhabit these spaces and lend it an identity that takes over its architecture eventually. Rajeev Gujar from Snehalaya Foundation explains how, “ Despite being a contemporary structure, the occupants do not feel alienated in this space- there is controlled natural light and ventilation, and the indoor-outdoor atmosphere harmoniously blends purpose, ambience and integrity of space.”

Traversing diverse climatic conditions, cultures, and demographics, the work of Studio Advaita finds continuity in their language of architecture perceived which is meant to be familiar, and at the same time complex in the unseen resolution of the site and its surroundings that are manifested into a building's plan. Because all architecture, no matter the profound ideology shares common concerns with programme, site, materials, and the process of construction; but above all a search for an ineffable something that is its essence, and a memory of a good experience.