



METHOD IN THE MADNESS

DECADES ago, the great Indian Land Rush (or should we say Land Grab) started. Beginning with the DDA, our babus saw the opportunity in creating the DA's and the UDA's in towns - big or small. A noble idea, no doubt, as the growing Indian population needed to be "housed somewhere."

Large tracts of good agricultural land outlying towns and cities were acquired en masse by our DA's and UDA's and "Sector this / Sector that" boards, neatly painted of course, converted crop growing areas into barren lands.

Our planners forgot the infrastructure - roads, rail lines, telecommunications, water, sewage disposal systems or garbage disposal. (One doesn't mention unimportant details like fire stations, schools, playgrounds, university etc., because these come in after the hen, not oops, when the egg is laid.)

It soon became clear to most that property was a good investment — it also helped to hide all

the black money (but that is incidental), and the Great Indian Rush began. Everyone who was someone, whether he lived and worked in Ludhiana or Panipat, had to have a base in town (need a DDA flat). The fact that it could lie locked up for 20 years (till the kids grow up) was immaterial. But the Rent Control Act is so draconian that it is sensible to let it be inhabited by lizards, pigeons and the occasional cat.

Quality of design construction took a back seat — only square feet / FSI (in Mumbai) and FAR was important. The buzzword was 2BRD or 3BRDD. (2 Bed room + Drawing Dining) Quality of Design?? Architecture ?? Oh, these didn't figure in the vocabulary.

So we needed new buzzwords. Fashionable words like builder / realty developers come in. Nicer words like (modular home / Add a room when you want to and a host of others.

So architecture got reduced to façade treatment / cornices / cottage (ish) style, and "what is in

fashion". Sunlight / space / ambience / permanence etc. first went into the back burner and later on almost got doused out.

We started accepting the fact that "this is it"!! My friend Gautam Bhatia (trained like many of us as an architect) created history by rediscovering styles: Punjabi baroque, Bania gothic, and such.

The age of hype. The Gulf boom saw buildings on the Cochin coastline belt come up shaped like 2 in ones, — stereos, and 3 in ones complete with telescopic antennas, and staircase *jaali's* shaped like speakers.

But Rewind !! Kingsway camp crazy, Rajasthani *jaalis*, brickwork, stone cladding, and marble fronts — all became fashionable. The gate (however small the plot of land may be) became an expression of the owners manhood — inspired, indeed by the Mahabharat and Ramayan on the eighties new toy, the TV. Then security — ornate and complex grilles, boundary walls with spikes

— you name it, we have it. it.

Slippery granite and marble driveways (against all norms, of course of safety and caution) but we are a free society and can spend our money in any way we please.

The end result alas, is a holy mess. We have capital blocked away in apartments waiting for our kids to get married but we won't plough it into better schools. Buildings remain unused and decay (We can replaster, re-wire and put in fittings later.)

We cannot do without power hungry air conditioners - anyone heard of central air-cooling during the summer months?

And when will we loose the skills to design with passive solar gain devices for the winter months? We possibly have already lost them.

So we move on. New fashion. New buzzwords. Now there are curtain walls. All glass buildings, swanky and slippery. And guzzling power bills and therefore diesel (captive power, you see, is the only way—we do not have sufficient munic-

ipal power). When there is a power cut, the building cannot sustain itself for more than a few minutes.

Where do we go from here? Now even that "original saviour" — the property's value will always escalate — has gone. In fact, property values have dropped! The hype bubble has burst. The real estate developers are on their knees!! Very soon, the goodies will come gift-wrapped..

The sign of correction in this hype ridden imbalanced economy are slowly, but surely showing up — though in small numbers. A lot of small houses in the suburbs of Delhi and in Noida are coming up in consonance with sound and good architecture, and clients are getting aware of the value of what they are paying for. You would find the odd good brick finished house, with a neat little garden, a covered verandah and good details..

Built carefully, and built to last.

■Sudhir Vohra

After the ornate and grand periods, architecture is taking on realistic values and houses are built carefully and designed to last for a long time