

The challenges of maintaining traditional architecture

The issue was discussed during a panel discussion held this week in Thimphu

Gyalsten K Dorji

Issues related to meeting traditional architectural requirements vis-a-vis contemporary building materials and methods, which seek to minimize building costs, were raised in a panel discussion organized by Helvetas on Tuesday.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Helvetas has been involved in the architecture and construction of several structures in the country like the Wangduechol-

ing district hospital in Bumthang and more recently, the Royal University of Bhutan in Thimphu.

The discussion began with historian Karma Phuntsho (Phd) pointing out how far back records of Bhutanese architecture could be traced. The furthest text reference dates to the 12th century, he said, and refers to the building of the Kichu and Jambay lhakhangs by the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gempo.

In the 14th century, the first detailed report of Bhutanese ar-

chitecture was compiled by Tibetan saint Longchen Rabjam. From his report, it is known that the traditional Bhutanese roofs seen today existed then as well, the historian pointed out. More detailed texts become available with the arrival of Bhutanese treasure discoverer Pema Lingpa the next century followed by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in the 1600s, responsible for building most of the dzongs in the country.

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Karma Phuntsho also explained that there is a connection between Bhutanese architecture and Buddhism, and that in Buddhism, the built environment should contribute to inner well-being. As a result, spiritual symbols are a part of traditional architecture.

However, vernacular architecture is undergoing a "major transformation," said another panelist, Nagtsho Dorji, who is the head of the conservation of heritage sites division of the home ministry.

She pointed out that with the availability of new materials and techniques, traditional architectural elements are being deemed structurally redundant and serving more of an ornamental aspect. How-

ever, she added that when it comes to structures the conservation department works on, there would be no compromise when it comes to certain traditional designs like the roof, windows, and columns, among others.

An audience member and contractor, while appreciative of the government's requirements to adhere to elements of traditional architecture pointed out that the times have changed. He said that once people are employed, they want to own their own homes but that costs of construction

are driven up by at least 10 percent as a result of traditional architectural requirements. He added that private houses or buildings should be exempted from this requirement and that the government should instead focus on ensuring structural strength, utility, and comfort.

Prior to the contractor's statement, Karma Phuntsho said that in the same way Bhutanese now appreciate antiques, a cultural transformation achieved through education is required so that people understand the concept and value of aesthetics.

Panelist Hanspeter Buerigi, a professor of architecture, pointed out that he had observed many concrete buildings, largely influenced by

designs in India, being built in Bhutan today. The professor of architecture, who has worked periodically in Bhutan since 1991, also critically observed that the Helvetas projects in Bhutan may not have disseminated much innovation, and were more costly as a result of high usage of timber.

"We need to find a third way," he said. He also pointed out that there must be debate about the future of architecture in Bhutan and that the public must be a part of the discussion.

Chimi Dem, the estate



An architect questions a panelist during the discussion

manager of the Paro College of Education, another Helvetas project, said that while the structures were of high quality

and design, also resulting in minimal damage to the structures, such as peeling plaster, during recent earthquakes, there are problems associated with the use of timber.

She said that the high use of timber, besides impacting the natural environment, results in higher operation and maintenance costs for the college. She added that more energy was consumed for heating, and more funds were spent to customize fittings and accessories. It was also pointed out that water adversely impacts the timber used.

Architect Fritz Baumgartner defended the use of timber. In fact, he argued that more timber should be used.

But he pointed out that timber is too expensive in Bhutan at Nu 400 per cubic foot as a result of extraction methods. The cost of timber must be reduced if the intention is to preserve traditional architecture, he said.

Fritz Baumgartner added that timber is a good material for construction in this climate and that as long as the detailing is carried out properly, it can even be used to build bridges that are exposed to the natural elements. He also pointed out that there's also the safety aspect of using tim-

ber that should justify its high use.

Helvetas Country Director, Hansruedi Pfeiffer, con-

cluded the event with the hope that the discussion had deepened understanding of the complex issues related to architecture in Bhutan. While he said it was heartening to know that the Swiss organization stands for quality design and implementation in the country, he also took note of the deficits.

He acknowledged that Helvetas may have been less successful in dissemination of technologies and methods, and in keeping costs down. However, he pointed out that the local timber market must be examined so that the material becomes a viable option to bricks.

He also said that Bhutan cannot let development be driven by commercial interests, and that further debate on the topic must take place.

The panel discussion was the closing event of the 40 year anniversary celebrations between Helvetas and Bhutan.

A week-long exhibition on architecture at the Royal University of Bhutan closes on Sunday.

Swiss assistance to Bhutan, through Helvetas, began in 1975.

CORRIGENDUM

MINISTRY OF HEALTH
Department of Medical Supplies &
Health Infrastructure
Health Infrastructure Development
Division

2/HIDD/MCH/MeH/2015-16/251

The last date of submission of Tender for the "Supply of working wares and safety materials" for various construction sites is hereby extended till **12:30 pm on November 6, 2015** due to some administrative reasons. Rest of the terms and conditions of the original notification dated January 14, 2015 shall remain unchanged.

Chief Engineer

Curtain falls on Paro thromde issue

From Pg.1

The National Assembly (NA) this month rejected the Paro local government's petition stating that the thromde was endorsed by a majority decision of the parliament. The National Assembly Speaker Jigme Zangpo in an earlier interview said that the Parliament's decision couldn't be reversed since it is the supreme

law-making body.

The thromde boundaries of Paro were passed with a majority of 60 out of 68 members during the joint sitting. The Speaker said that the works and human settlement ministry carried out enough research on the issue and that the decision was taken in the best interest of the nation and democracy.