

Book Review by Shishir R Raval

# LETTERS TO A YOUNG ARCHITECT

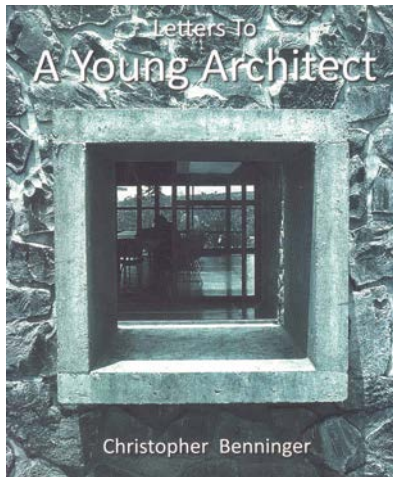
Author | Christopher Benninger

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chitecture in order to shape the world through your design ideas. Each one of us has unique paths and destinations in this quest. We continually develop newer understandings and questions about architecture, our relationship with it and its and our role in this world.

In *Letters To A Young Architect* by Christopher Benninger, a renowned American-Indian student, teacher and practitioner of Architecture for over fifty years, freely and vividly shares his quest for understanding architecture and shaping the physical and social world anew — a quest that is full of zeal, sense of mission and even restlessness. This book is at once a diary, memoir, travelogue, textbook, sermon and an autobiography of sorts of not only the author but also of modern architecture and planning. It whispers and exclaims, cajoles and guides, admonishes and inspires. Benninger talks directly to the students, teachers, decision-makers and practitioners about different facets of architecture with a deep sense of purpose and urgency. It has nuggets of wisdom as well as principles to practice the profession and values to live by. It is a mirror for self-reflection and a beacon for future action, even though one may choose not to follow his dictums or dreams.

Benninger achieves this by delving deep and wide in space and time and into the personal life stories, ideas and works of his own and that of his teachers and contemporaries. These have been purposefully divided into six interrelated themes, each having a set of “letters”. These themes are *Beginnings*, *Conception to Realization*, *The Importance of Being Modern*, *In Search of the City*, *Remembrances*, and *Meanings*. It also has a salutary dedication, an apt foreword by B. V. Doshi and a prologue that sets up the themes and message of the book.

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In *Prologue*, it is quite welcoming to find Benninger, who has many teachers and has successfully played many roles centered around “doing good” and making an “impact on society” talk about values and idealism. His consistent attack on effete and commercial mindsets and his views on truth, equality, justice, contexts, liberty, modern ideas, trusteeship, knowledge, planning, openness, fraternity and legacy (“*gharana*” or school of thought) provide a useful but somewhat overwhelming framework to organize and challenge one’s own values and ideals. The hope or the goal is explicit – pass on what his teachers and

Dear Student of Architecture / Built Environment Design:

Hello!

I have met you often in different schools and offices. Now, I get this opportunity to meet you through this letter about a new book that I have just read. It is a treasure of collected lectures, articles, interviews and musings. I am prompted to write to you directly because I have observed that you are eager and active and, often, aloof and adrift. Yet, you are also striving to unravel the mysteries, histories, theories and practices of ar-

experiences have taught him and ask students and young architects to join his mission and “carry the journey forward”.

The first (*Beginnings*) and the last (*Meanings*) sections are perhaps most inspiring and expansive in their insight and impact. Benninger’s raw passion for travel, reading, meeting people and learning lessons from all this comes across very nicely in the *Beginnings* “letters”. His progress from not having a direction or clue about what he should do or become to discovering architecture and the order and beauty it brings (after reading Frank Lloyd Wright’s book, *The Natural House*) is a lesson in how being curious and committed leads to ideals and lessons that can inspire a meaningful journey of an architect or designer. Rational approach, idealistic outlook and role of serendipity are revealed. The narrative here is a personal reflection of his early life experiences that shaped his professional work and intellectual ideas of various kinds in the later years.

The “letters” in the next three sections (*Conception to Realization*, *The Importance of Being Modern and In Search of the City*) form the core of the book. These sections are cogently organized and, respectively, talk about Benninger’s mature, albeit debatable, attitude and approach to the purpose and practice of architecture, critical views on modernism (the effective and needed) and post-modernism (the effete and to be shunned), and the challenges and principles of urbanism and planning. The

role of good teachers, team members, enlightened clients, community and political processes in practicing a value-based architecture and planning becomes evident. These “letters” are to be read with a critical eye and patience to capture not only the tenets and applications of good design that is tied to society’s many facets (economy, politics, etc.) but also to examine the underlying logic of sweeping indictments of the effete mindset and what damage it wreaks upon the academia, practice and the world at large. These are the words of a well-traveled, experienced and impatient man that provide impetus for debate and deliberations for making a serious change in the ways we think about and practice the professions of architecture and planning.

Of the last two sections, *Remembrances* is a heartfelt homage to the great masters that have influenced his life and work and that of many architects over the last century and decades. It is heartening to see a master acknowledging the finer qualities and sharing intimate anecdotes of other masters of the profession. For the younger generation who has never met these masters, Benninger provides a front row view of the minds and methods of these role-models, Anant Raje and B. V. Doshi being fêted in two separate “letters”. The love and respect for the “*gharana*” teachers are from a humble and proud pupil who has now become a colleague and a master himself.

The final section *Meanings* is the most erudite as well as candid offering glimpses of a curious and caring person, yet again. It offers a larger perspective

of the human quest for “ordering” and reveals that his “passion for life has not really come from architecture (but) from adventure and explorations”. While tying the themes of the previous sections, it also links back to the more fundamental ideas of the book (being a perpetual student and the greatest and only kind of fortune is to have good teachers). These are the words of an intelligent and contemplative man who cares deeply and shares widely while pulling together ideals, ideas and ingresses for a better future.

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What makes the reading of these “letters” directly relevant is that my (and, I believe, many other readers’) journey in the field of built environment design overlaps somewhat in time and places in which Benninger grew up and with the people (FLW and other modernist teachers and fellow-professionals) who have influenced his (and our) worldviews. Another quality of this book is that even though (or maybe because) Benninger is an expatriate, he is uniquely positioned to provide perspectives on both the Western (mainly the US) and Indian virtues and pitfalls. In his candid replies to interview questions as well as his talks, Benninger is acerbic and astute in weighing the good, the bad and the ugly of both places and cultures. Collectively, these views provide a much needed perspective and anchor to the students and young architects who are awestruck, remain aloof to or feel adrift in only the glorified and superficial aspects of these places and their achievements.

The page layout allows for the needed pause and space to annotate while wading through the “heavy” text. The simple motifs and symbols placed at the beginning of each letter also add an intriguing dimension to the narrative. The book doesn’t need to be read linearly. One can explore different “letters” for different moods or needs to get informed and inspired. While the glossary helps a foreign reader, an index of key words would have been useful for locating and cross-referring key ideas. Apart from correcting some minor typological errors, adding more and better illustrations and diagrams to augment the description of the projects in the text would have been very helpful. (Perhaps, a future book will present these projects and their principles and processes in more detail?)

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As a landscape architect and student of ecology and design, I have few observations to offer and questions to raise with the hope to elicit more debate and interaction among the students, teachers and professionals.

I find it surprising and somewhat disturbing that Benninger has focused his ideas exclusively on the conditions and possibilities for a better *human society* only. Though, through examples of his projects, he talks about nature and context but they are not the immediate concerns or central themes. They are merely references for creating architecture for *human society*. Architecture is presented as the main reference point for defining society’s problems or achievements and a panacea for ad-

ressing its many ills. Can or should an architect just be architecture- and anthropo- centric? While addressing poverty, social justice, good design and frivolous fads in architecture is vital, is it also not important to remind the architects on the vital role of nature, ecosystems and landscapes in shaping a future that is facing grave consequences of unabated consumerism and the resulting negative impacts on this planet and its many species? Isn’t it time for architecture to be projected as not the only or main but one of many disciplines or vocations that give vital modes and meanings to human enterprise on an increasingly fragile planet?

Also, at times, the messages seem contradictory. For example, Benninger asks us to blaze our own paths and, still, urges us to join *his* ideals and mission. Is fitting into a “*gharana*” the only or the best way to question, understand, or do meaningful work? Will not a multiplicity of ideas and ideals, to be tasted and tested through one’s own journey, develop a more well-rounded, multi-intelligent (“pluraform”) person or architect for the emerging world?

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Overall, there are things that resonate deeply and move us to question our professional and personal purposes, processes and products. It is a challenge for the reader to understand what is written, discover what is implied and then to

decide whether, why and how to relate, accept, reject, reflect or build upon. Though at times one finds the narrative to be preachy and the positions debatable, I highly recommend adopting parts or whole of this book in architecture and planning curricula and professional deliberations.

The year 2011 has been quite fortuitous for all of us who study, teach, admire and practice the built environment designs. In addition to this book, two other books, *Paths Uncharted* by B. V. Doshi and *Architecture in India since 1990* by Rahul Mehrotra, were also published in 2011. Together, these three generations of architects present ideas and projects that are rooted in Indian ethos and yet have a wider appeal and message. More such writing needs to be done and published by other teachers and masters.

I urge you, dear student, to read these and other such books for the way they expose us to the world of diverse ideas and actions that have a rich historical lineage and meanings and for the way they implore us to shake up our status-quo, schooled views, or commercial trappings. May we lead a life of studentship and reflective practice that goes beyond the mundane and the myopic.

Hope to hear from you soon.

With best wishes and regards,

–Shishir

**Shishir R. Raval**, landscape architect, has diverse a experience in teaching, research and practice in India and the USA and is currently Professor and Officiating Head at the Department of Architecture, MS University, Vadodara. He can be reached at [saadesign@gmail.com](mailto:saadesign@gmail.com)