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Learn the lay of the land

Physical geography should be integral to larger ecology and not just a beautification tool, says landscape architect Akshay Kaul

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While building on steep land, the important issue of hydrology is rarely taken into consideration. Photo: PTI

There is a limit to the carrying capacity of hill towns. People run to the mountains during the most dry months and that adds to the water crisis even more. So if you want tourism, manage your water better,” says Akshay Kaul, founder of Delhi-based architecture firm

Akshay Kaul and Associates, which focuses on environmentally sustainable landscape planning.

Kaul, who has a master's degree in landscape architecture from the State University of New York, says our landscapes are fragmented; so are our water systems. "We look at landscape as a beautification tool rather than as part of larger ecology and regional landscape possibilities or green infrastructure," he adds.

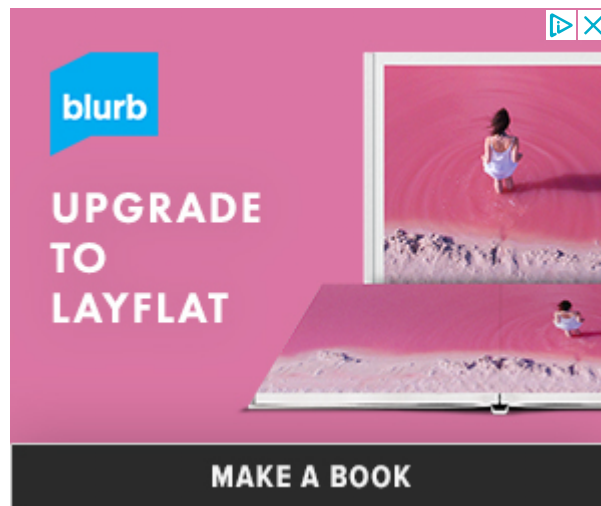
Kaul says there is a severe shortfall in human resource in India to manage the environmental challenges in planning and design. The reason for this is the gap between academia and the profession. "Our landscape education is very 'garden centric' in approach," he adds.



Kaul holds workshops to sensitize architects and architecture students to the issues of environment and planning, typically about how to build in the hills. He's holding a workshop in Delhi with a field trip to Pahalgam, Kashmir (till 24 June) where the participants are visiting nearly 20 villages to understand how people live in these areas. "Through observation, photo-documentation, mapping, drawings, primary survey of various socio-economic systems, we intend to create a basis for environmentally sensitive planning and development that is specific to and rooted in the place," says Kaul.

Edited excerpts from an email interview:

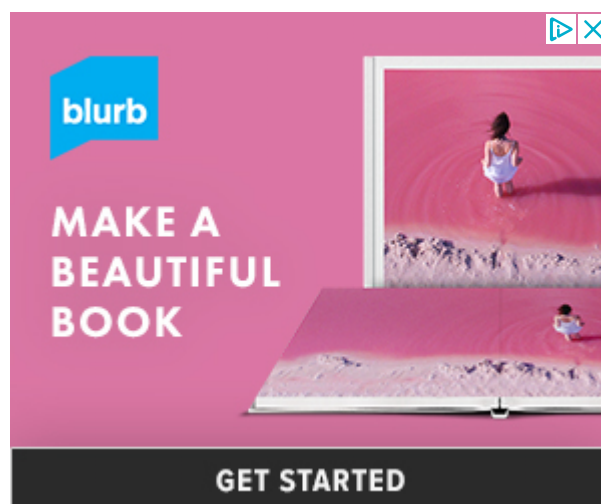
What is the difference between an architect and a landscape architect?



An architect's training is in the making of a building, while the landscape architect is trained to understand aspects of geology, soil, vegetation, drainage and hydrology, site and master planning, site services, and also building design. The architect is trained to design buildings, and the landscape architect should be telling the architect where to place the building on site, on the master plan, and design the open spaces.

So, there has to be a dialogue between what you are building and the landscape, that design has to complement nature and not vice versa?

Landscape must be understood as planning, site design and landscape design—as three distinct components that come together in a project. Through landscape planning, we suggest how the various types of open spaces will be distributed on a site based on movement of water, people, wildlife and vegetation. Sub-surface soil structure and hydrology are the primary guiding principles for land-use determination and location of buildings and services on site. Through site design, we create critical infrastructure to enable the planning principles, and, through landscape design, we celebrate nature.





Akshay Kaul.

In an urban space like Delhi, how neglected is the landscape?

Our lakes and water bodies, more than 500, are dead, dry or have very high nitrate and phosphorus levels, and are no more in potable condition; forest cover is way below the requirement level; our landscapes are fragmented, and so are our water systems. Rainwater does not percolate in the right places to recharge the ground and we are only looking at landscape as a beautification tool rather than as part of the larger ecology and regional landscape possibilities or green infrastructure.



Given the pollution in Delhi and the water crisis in Shimla, what are the interventions needed?

To begin with, connect the green patches and corridors, reconnect the fragmented water systems, revive the water bodies and restore their catchment, which is fragmented and urbanized, look at native plants as a more viable option for planting and so on.

Pollution monitoring and controls would need to be a year-round exercise, not just during winters. (We need) large green belts, more intensive planting. Ways to bring down temperature around urban areas include planting to reduce exposed soils, increasing planting on building skins, vertical surfaces, roofs of buildings. There have to be better construction management practices to control dust, other than managing particulate matter from vehicles.



Water crisis can be easily managed by intensive water-conservation strategies at scales ranging from individual homes, streets and neighbourhoods to the streams and river catchment areas. There are so many ways to do it but it needs immediate attention. Also, there is a limit to the carrying capacity of hill towns. Look at Kedarnath or Shimla today, it's an important wake-up call.

Which city fits the bill—where the built is in harmony with the landscape?

Look at the mandates and benchmarks that the Scandinavian countries are setting up for themselves for 2030 (sustainable development) or at the fact that while one-third of the Netherlands is below the sea level, yet, it manages floods through dykes and coastal sand dunes. We are way behind both at an awareness level, as well as a systemic approach to resolving these issues.



You are holding a six-day summer workshop in Kashmir (to be continued in Delhi from 25 June-1 July). What does it focus on?

The workshop intends to show the fragility and vulnerability of the Himalayan landscape. It aims to sensitize people about the significance of living and building with natural processes—how natural systems and processes are dynamic. They continually change, shift and evolve, thus reminding us to be aware about it, while planning our settlements and buildings.

In the context of the 2014 floods in Kashmir, have any lessons been learnt?



The people suffered a lot and they did understand their vulnerability. But whether it has materialized into an ecologically sensitive response, say like in Amsterdam or other countries, is a big question mark. Are we prepared to manage or mitigate another flood or natural disaster? Then the answer is a big “no”.

How important is the need for sustainable landscape/ecological planning training for young architects?

Unfortunately, the undergraduate architecture programme across the country does not teach ecology or site planning as a tool for planning urban or rural settlements. A lot of architects end up doing planning without understanding these critical values. Hence, it is imperative to train young architects. Also, our institutions need to understand the urgency of making environmental issues central to the curriculum because of the sheer number of people we have in India, and the stress on natural resources.

You say the endeavour should be to train the new generation for tomorrow—be the hands that restore the land....

There is a severe shortfall in human resource to manage the environmental challenges in planning and design. Consider the Himalayas. Over the years, the less steep land has been built upon. We are left with very steep land to build on. It poses huge challenges in terms of creating roads, managing storm water, sub-surface drainage system, erosion and slope stabilization. The present techniques of retaining walls through concrete or stone are expensive and a visual eyesore—they do not take the more important issue of hydrology into consideration. While constructing, we deplete the top soil as well as make the land mineral-less. Our approach to these issues should be multi-disciplinary, and we have very few professionals who address it holistically. We are making roads, hydel projects, dams at an unprecedented pace without taking these aspects into consideration.

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