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### 'Benefit from natural environment'

'Green' is a modern buzz-word for the way we used to build before  
technology made it easier to turn on an air conditioner rather than to open a  
window, say Australian architect-couple Judith North & Neville Cowland of  
'NOW Architecture' in an interview with RANJANI GOVIND

— Photo: V. Sreenivasa Murthy



**GREEN BOND:** Australian architect couple Judith North and Neville  
Cowland believe that one has to lend a physical identity to buildings.

*This is the concluding part of the interview with Australian architects Judith  
North and Neville Cowland who were in India recently. The couple are being  
commissioned to design a sustainable office tower in Bangalore. Awards and  
accolades are part of their professional lifestyle, just as their sustainable  
buildings that talk of grabbing nature in all its glory in every aspect of brick-  
and-mortar.*

*"We are keen to form relationships with local businesses for joint ventures  
which would benefit from the added depth provided by the different  
backgrounds and knowledge bases," said Judith and Neville, who are looking  
forward to creating an international team to work on one of their projects  
here.*

**Are green projects more for the 'upper economic segment' or directed  
at realising rich, sustainable values?**

Green building is not an 'exclusive' way of building. It is less about cutting-  
edge technology and more about rediscovering that buildings can be designed

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to benefit from their natural environment — climate, sun, topography and winds. 'Green' is a modern buzz-word for the way we used to build before technology made it easier to turn on an air conditioner rather than to open a window! Of course technology is a great ally to sustainable building, allowing us to create energy from the sun, force air through buildings, control electric lights, and generally make us more comfortable, but it is not a solution in itself. A well designed and well-oriented building with no 'expensive' technologies will perform better and at less cost than a poorly-oriented building full of gadgets.

#### **Mr. Neville, your 'green star professional' status...**

I have undertaken a training course and professional exam which qualifies me to analyse and 'rate' the performance of buildings to ascertain how efficient they are under the Greenstar rating system. This rating system is administered by the Green Building Council of Australia and is essentially a localised version of the LEED system, just as the LEED system has been localised to Indian conditions and is administered by the Indian Green Building Council. I have also undertaken a training course for the Indian LEED system.

These rating systems are specific to building types and locations and are internationally recognised which allows buildings around the world to be compared on the same footing for their environmental performance. A wide spectrum of criteria is involved, arranged under eight categories of management, indoor environment quality, energy, transport, water, land use and ecology, materials, and emissions.

#### **Ms. Judith, your study in 'low energy vernacular architecture'?**

I studied the topic because of a genuine interest and belief in the skills and knowledge demonstrated in vernacular buildings. At the heart of it, it is a simple concept embedded in common sense which says we should not build the same way in a desert that we would in a tropical environment or on a cold mountain. Vernacular buildings look different in different regions for the simple reason that they function differently for their environment. Why shouldn't office buildings or institutional buildings respond in the same way?

#### **And your unique features...passive solar design; controlled natural lighting; spatial and the physical identity you lend to your buildings...**

Passive solar design is the most fundamental part of 'green' design. It is about designing a building in such a way that it retains a comfortable internal temperature without the need for 'active' systems such as air-conditioning. By correctly orienting the building and shade devices, the amount of sunlight and the time when sunlight can enter a building can be controlled. Because the angle of the sun changes throughout the year, correct design of shading systems can let sunlight enter the building in winter months, but keep it out in summer.

Also, appropriate landscaping around a building can also improve the micro-climate, shade building walls and cool air before it reaches a building by introducing pools and ponds.

This is the essence of passive cooling — that warm air is passed over a cooling element (such as a natural water body, cool rocks or a man-made system of water pipes) before it enters a building, bringing cooler air.

Controlled natural lighting is 'intelligent interplay of light.' Natural light is more desirable in all cases to artificial light and we must look for ways to maximise its distribution through a building. Roof lights, appropriately-sized windows, reflective surfaces and glass internal partitions can all help the distribution of light.

The form and plan of the building also play an important part in responding to natural daylighting.

All NOW Architecture buildings and master plans seek to create a sense of place. We seek to impart the individual essence of the location to the project, the site context and a cultural value. This means, firstly, that users and visitors of the building should have a feeling that they have arrived somewhere, that the building is a unique destination which expresses those cultural values. Users should also have a feeling that they belong in that place.

Does the building speak of history or modern progress, or both? Is it an oasis, a landmark, an icon, a retreat? How a building feels is a complex relationship of ideas, but critical to making it a place with its own identity, rather than just another building.

Occupants should have an awareness of the outside world while they are in the building and continue to be able to identify with the broader context of where they are. Is a building identified by the company that works there, the materials it is made from, its height, its setting, or a mix of all these?

Modern technology allows us to computer-model buildings at the early design stage to test daylighting, solar shading, ventilation and thermal performance, to assess options for the most effective design.

We see this as an integrated architectural design approach rather than having an engineering solution added after the design is completed.

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