

Made in **India**



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Guest-edited by
Kazi K Ashraf



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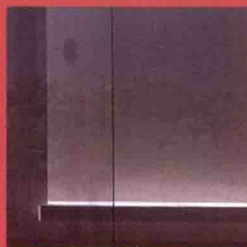
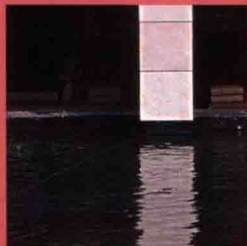
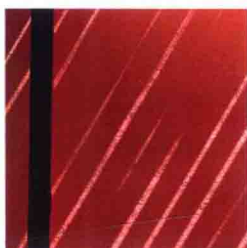
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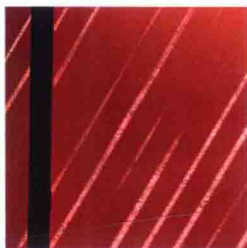
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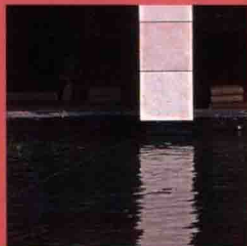
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'A fairground of monsters and miracles, India-town is different from other boomtowns. Don't be fooled by the plethora of cranes and confuse it with China.'

Ramesh Biswas, 'One Space, Many Worlds', p 25

The current economic excitement over the Chino-India region has meant that India's development has in recent years been all too readily identified with that of China. The figures produced by analysts to describe the 'Chindia effect' reflect this buzz; it has been projected that if the current growth persists in China and India, by 2050 the two nations will account for roughly half of global output. Encompassing a third of the world's population, this greater Asian region has the potential of not only huge domestic markets, but also cheap, highly skilled labour and governments that pursue capital-friendly policies. The impact of this will be to effectively position the world at a tipping point in terms of economic and political power. When the full realisation grew over India's potency as an economic powerhouse, both as a nation and in the greater context of Southeast Asia, two or three years ago, like any other editor my antennae were out. My motivations for wanting to commission an issue of *AD* dedicated to the subject were admittedly, in the first instance, simplistic. I was in no doubt that the confluence of a booming economy, globalisation and a rich cultural tradition – both historic and modern – rendered it fertile territory. The potential of a publication that could deal with contemporary architecture with acumen and insight – beyond the current treatments of China – only transpired when I saw Kazi Ashraf present the subject of current Indian culture and transnationalism at the Architectural League in New York for the launch of Sara Caples' and Everardo Jefferson's issue *The New Mix: Culturally Dynamic Architecture*, for which Ashraf was a contributor.

Ashraf has configured an issue that is able to deal with all the complexities and contradictions of India and the greater subcontinent: a region that is experiencing unprecedented prosperity, while much of its population remains stuck in a cycle of destitute poverty; it is an uneven urban landscape of decay and opulence, slum dwelling and emerging middle-class townships of pastiche mansions. While the majority of the population are embracing new technologies with alacrity, the new media is also effectively heightening anxiety and awakening superstitious beliefs; as a nation, India has for the past 60 years often been defining itself through its break with its colonial past, but with globalisation could, in Sunil Khilnani's words, be in danger of losing its 'self-understanding' in terms of its culture and architecture. According to Ashraf, India is a nation of 'messy cities', 'transmogrification' and 'blanketing landscapes'. Through a set of fascinating critical essays, Ashraf and his contributors adeptly define the many layers and simultaneous developments of a nation and its greater region. Threaded through this in *contraposto* is the work of some 25 architectural practices who are designing buildings for India from at home and abroad. Diverse in approach, style, type and context, they are in a sense the material evidence of the shifting, multilayered landscape of India in the present and the future. Δ

Helen Castle

Rahul Mehrotra Associates, Rural Campus for Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Tuljapur, Maharashtra, 2004
Maintaining a small practice in Mumbai, while also teaching internationally, Mehrotra focuses on culturally specific design solutions, such as this one for a rural campus that is clustered around internal courtyards. These sheltered spaces respond to the local climate while also encouraging social interaction between students.

Raga India

Architecture in the Time of Euphoria

As India celebrates the 60th anniversary of its independence, guest-editor **Kazi K Ashraf** introduces this special title of *AD* by holding up a barometer to the nation's cultural identity. Can architecture be best understood through a local sense of place or globalisation? What are the driving impulses behind India's chaotic urban landscape that is simultaneously 'messy' and utopian? Can Indian culture be best understood as a national entity or through a more elusive subcontinental substance?



The Pickle Factory

In a setting of an allegorical pickle factory – the pickle or chutney is a virulent Postmodern trope and decisively Indian – Saleem Sinai churns another story of national and autobiographical destiny in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's alter ego both refigures the present and prefigures the upcoming India in clairvoyant pickle jars. There are 30 bottles on the factory shelf. Twenty-nine bottles are full, and each one makes up each chapter/episode of the tumultuous and fabulous history of India after its independence in 1947. The thirtieth bottle is empty, waiting to be filled and written in. What will the next vessel contain?

Vritra's Ghost

The Husain-Doshi Gufa in Ahmedabad, which houses the work of the irrepressible artist MF Husain, was built in 1994 as a collaborative project between the artist and the architect Balkrishna Doshi. The undulating structure of the Gufa, dug cave-like into the earth, blurring the edge of building and landscape, has the unmistakable physiognomy of a terrestrial creature with its vertebrae, ligaments and eyes (Husain also painted a black serpent on the wall). The Gufa is also Doshi's counter-homage to Corbusier's paean to the right-angle. With every square foot, including the floor and columns, warping every other way and without a horizontal plane of repose, the Gufa is a perceptual *tour de force*. It marks a departure from the rational, technocratic modality represented by crystalline and cubic forms, upraised in the sun, towards reviving suppressed depths of the unconscious, as it were.

Vritra lay very dead, and not unlike Vastupurusa upon whose dismembered body a new episode and edifice might rise.¹ Vritra, a terrestrial dragon, held on to the waters of the world, as the story goes, until the celestial and luminous Indra ('smasher of enclosures') arrived to destroy the 99 fortresses of Vritra, kill the dragon, and release imprisoned rivers. On the destroyed ramparts and ligaments of a telluric structure arose a brave, new world. And in Ahmedabad, in a resurrected moment, a contrapuntal architecture arises uncannily from the ground, coinciding with India's increasing embrace of the fabulous and metarational.

From Raga to Ragas

August in Bombay: a month of festivals, the month of Krishna's birthday and Coconut Day; and this year – fourteen hours to go, thirteen, twelve – there was an extra festival on the calendar, a new myth to celebrate, because a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal



Balkrishna Doshi, Husain-Doshi Gufa, Ahmedabad, 1994
Terrestrial architecture and fabulous mythologies.

collective will – except in a dream we all agreed to dream; it was a mass fantasy shared in varying degrees by Bengali and Punjabi, Madras and Jat, and would periodically need the sanctification and renewal which can only be provided by rituals of blood. India, the new myth – a collective fiction in which anything was possible, a fable rivaled only by two other mighty fantasies: money and God.

— Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, 1980²

The pan-Indian edifice for whose mythical soul a French-Swiss architect wrote an urban epic at the foothills of the Himalayas, and which ironically has now been usurped by a (Hindu) religious right, exhibits multiple fissures. The tryst with destiny, as Nehru scheduled, gives way to a hundred trysts and a million destinies. Architects now hesitate to talk of an Indian value as debates rage between essentialist and differentiated positions. While a quasi-nationalist articulation

Surendran Nair, *Auto da fe*, 1996

'It's what you oughtn't to do but you do anyway.' The painting is part of Nair's 'Collected Mythologies', a body of work about belonging and dissent.



The road to Gurgaon: the city in search of urbanism.

was premised in most work until the late 1980s, architects, like Prem Chandavarkar in his essay in this issue of *AD*, currently consider the palpability and specificity of places in lieu of a singular spatiality of the nation. A critical post-nationalist practice now maintains a triple resistance – to both Indianism and globalism – and at the same time does not appear to be ‘backward’.

Sundarnagar – A Place Called Elsewhere

Urbanism is the Achilles heel in the rush for euphoria. An upsurge of houses, malls, IT campuses and condominiums marks the architectural landscape in market-driven India, yet there is little attention to how the individual creations come together as a social and spatial matrix among themselves and with the existent. In his essay Ramesh Biswas writes that a paradigmatic thinking in city-making is needed for this unprecedented urban phenomenon, notwithstanding forms of media, broadcast and cinematic urbanism. The urban utopia of Chandigarh that was criticised for its alienating features has been superseded by a greater phantasmagoria – of a Gurgaon in Delhi or Hiranandani in Mumbai, which are at best exclusive places in relation to the larger context, or, more questionably, in Gayatri Spivak’s rephrasing of global capital behaviour, ‘secessionist’.³

Popular Hindi films provide a vicarious view of this new translocation. The setting of the 2003 film *Mein Prem Ki Diwani Hoon* is a fictional town called Sundarnagar, or ‘the city beautiful’. It is a place of bourgeois opulence, of resplendent houses populated by patriarchs and purveyors of tradition. The lawns to the houses are wide, and the driveways regal, while the riot-free, languorous town harbours manicured parks (obviously water supply is not a problem), quaint telephone booths (no sign of the ubiquitous ISD-NSW-Local),

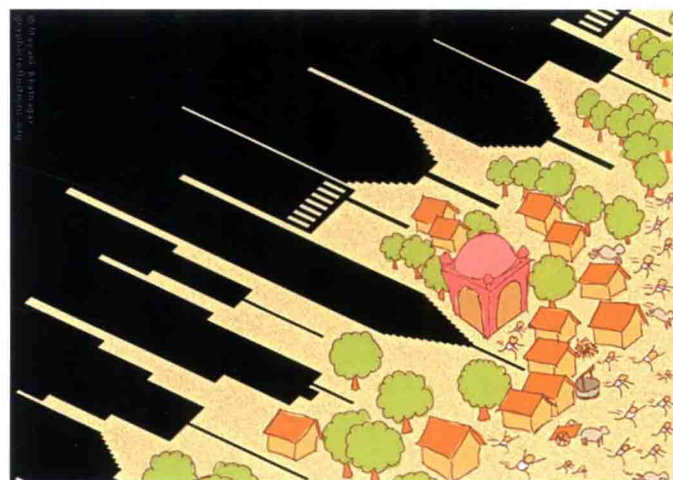
and lush outdoor spaces for cavorting (no pulsating mob either). In the film, Sundarnagar is depicted as a town in India, but the reality is that the entire film was shot in New Zealand. The Indian city of Sundarnagar may be fictive, but it is depicted in a real place, and that place is elsewhere, and that is the fixation in the Hindi filmic imagination: the relentless flight towards elsewhere.

This flight is embedded and encoded in multiple realms, from the ‘song-site’ numbers in Bollywood filmic productions to new building configurations.⁴ This presents a juxtaposition of the place here and now and a place elsewhere, the messy city and a dream topography, where the former is of a native and the latter of a transnational provenance. The places from elsewhere in the song-sites, which are real and actual, become fictive in the Hindi film narrative because the places are not named, nor located with precision; they are literally framed to be ‘foreign’, to be elsewhere. What makes *Mein Prem Ki Diwani Hoon* striking is that it takes the elsewhere of the song-site to the entire film. The longing for elsewhere – or the desire to secede – is increasingly being embodied in new building configurations that are radically altering the urban landscape.

Despite the exhilarating lightness of arbitrariness, the relentless dissolution of geography and the adoption of mimicry as an economic policy (Meenakshi in Mangalore presenting herself as Monica to a housewife in Minneapolis), many architects return to the intractable and redemptive theme of place specificities. The critical question – whether it is in this issue for Bijoy Jain in the humid swamps of Mumbai, Prem Chandavarkar in a temperate and verdant Bangalore, or Rafiq Azam in the terracotta terrain of Dhaka – is still ‘where is architecture’ and not so much ‘what is architecture’.

House Works

Housing is out, houses are in. If one allows for some more divine apparitions, gods are now in small structures, and in their meticulous crafting, where the condensed poetics and



The new battleground.



Hafeez Contractor, Proposed Software Development Centre, 2005
Fabulous forms and phantasmagoric visions.

tectonics negotiate the pendulum of the inevitable here-ness and the tantalising elsewhere. Since the 1960s, housing (and other public projects) was a major domain of the Indian architectural enterprise that reflected a communitarian concern of the post-Corbusian/Nehruvian period. The emerging economy and radical shift in the lives of the middle classes have now opened up new desires for articulating the house. The Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk writes that the way to understand the people who have been part of the astounding expansion of the middle classes of India and China is to see their private lives reflected in novels.⁵ In India, a vast part of that transformational imaginary is being narrated through the house, from opulent *havelis* (private residences) and fictive 'farmhouses', to the elegant constructions of Bijoy Jain, Rahul Mehrotra and others, and the delectably delirious propositions of Michael Sorkin.

The dialogical continuum of house/home with the world is being refashioned according to the emergent 'secessionist' tendency to Home versus World. It is also in the context where the public building recedes in the social horizon, on the one hand, and unprecedented atomisation proliferates socially on the other, that house/home is now a major site of the architectural exegesis in India. Whether it is merely another object in the consumerist cosmos (KK Birla of the famous industrialist family points out that what was once a symbol of attainment, the brick house, shifted first to the motor scooter and now to the car),⁶ and whether it retains the gravitas of dwelling, remains unclear, but the projects presented in this issue return to the house as an embodiment of situation and materiality.

Reincarnating Types

Rahul Mehrotra's Orchard House outside Ahmedabad recalls both the courtyard paradigm of hot-dry climates and a reactive interiority that may stem from the raucous urbanism of Indian cities (Mehrotra explains that his architectural vocabulary hinges on the reading of his city of practice, Mumbai). While courtyard houses are by nature exclusionary (socially and visually), the redemption is in the itinerary, in the arrival and passage through the various articulated thresholds articulated by walls into the ecstatic focus of the house: the open-to-sky court.

The obverse of that model is the pavilion where the inner court gives way to a canopy, and the predominantly solid wall dematerialises into perforations, membranes, lattices and *jails* (perforated screens). Much of the architecture of Bijoy Jain (Studio Mumbai Architects) is a delightful celebration of the pavilion, approximating the Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa's consideration of the house-as-a-garden in the hot-humid milieu. Whether in tactile-rich wooden slats, or a diaphanous luminous screen, Jain's architecture amplifies the phenomenal and spatial continuum between the house and landscape in a moisture-saturated environment. However, such singular typologies are not always possible as one confronts inevitable complexities, either programmatic or urban. Samira Rathod, in her Mariwala House, creates a horizontal symphony of disparate pieces that are tactile, colourful and voluble. Mathew & Ghosh, for their studio and residence on a small site in Bangalore, produce a compacted bricolage of diverse pieces as an urban essay. In their attempt to reconfigure the contemporary urban box, in a context



Sanjay Puri Architects, Silver jewellery mall and office tower, Vashi, Mumbai, 2008
A spectacular presence.

where a purity or unity is no longer possible, the architectural body is composed of fragmentations and a patchwork of memories and events. Rafiq Azam, in Dhaka, rearranges the conventional location of building, garden and landscape, and in doing so boldly devises a house of landscape layers even within the city. Many of these works share a material and expressive language with a trans-Asian tropical modernity.

A transformation is also happening where architects fear to tread – rural houses or dwellings for the economically disadvantaged, both of which constitute a significant figure in South Asia. For his contribution to this issue of *AD*, Adnan Morshed, in a sort of subaltern narrative, traces the anthropological metamorphosis of rural dwellings touched by the Grameen Bank housing programme, and argues that a quiet revolution is happening to these ‘timeless’ villages, something that needs to be incorporated into the story of Indian and South Asian architecture, especially as the axis of contention in the new economy is increasingly between the city and village.

Gandhi in Exile

Our strategy should be not only to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen. To shame it. To mock it. With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our brilliance, our sheer relentlessness – and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we’re being brainwashed to believe.

— Arundhati Roy, 2003⁷

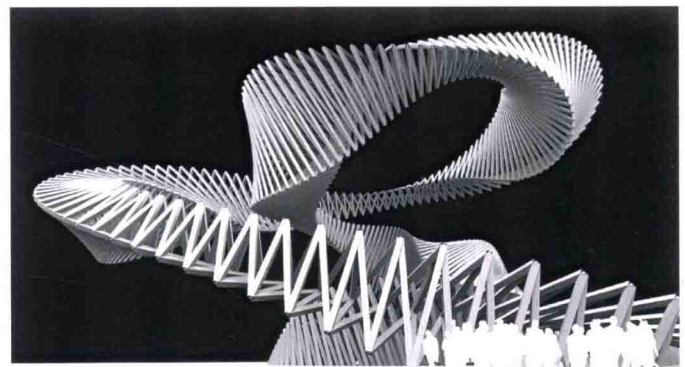
Our architecture? I was not wholly surprised on a visit a year ago to see Gandhi’s ashram in Wardha (Nagpur) rather desolate like a residue of an abandoned village. A few Japanese tourists sat down for a lesson in the *charka* (spinning wheel), while giggling couples from the neighbouring areas roamed the yards in oblivious frivolity. If the *charka* is an emblem of sustainability – and Gandhi is to be credited for that much fashionable architectural term now – it is now as alien as Buddha’s *dharma-chakra* (the wheel of law). I was more surprised to find the name of the venerable Ivan Illich on a

dusty, monotyped pamphlet on Gandhi’s house. Written in 1978, as an ethical and sociological explanation of the emblematic *bapukuti* (Gandhi’s own house in the ashram), the pamphlet predicted the challenges of the coming decades, the onrush of accumulation and consumption in a ‘shining and incredible’ India. Both Nehru and Gandhi represented Modernist self-reflectivity, but while Nehru professed what was then an internationalist position, Gandhi appeared parochially nationalist. The matter has reversed now. If Nehru is the Modernist of the now much discredited industrial-socialist makeover, Gandhi’s experiments with himself align with the radical Modernist project of transfiguration: through the ascetic body in the minimalist space. I see Gandhi sitting on the floor of the Farnsworth House, and being quite at home behind the large plate-glass walls. The once national is now the irrefutable international, but in his own ashram he is ironically absent.

Following Illich’s prognosis, an accelerated consumerism proceeds at warp speed (pun intended) throwing caution to the wind and revelling in a febrile architectural outpour India has never seen. What to make of this all?



Studio Mumbai Architects, Jamshyd Sethna House, Mumbai, 2007
The landscape and an architecture of the pavilion.



Nuru Karim, ‘Charkha’: Celebrating Mahatma Gandhi’s Philosophy of the Spinning Wheel, Pune, India, projected 2008
Spinning the Wheel competition-winning entry for an Architectural Symbol for Contemporary India.



Samira Rathod, *My House*, Alibag, Maharashtra, 2005

Weathering the house: an artificial sheath of rain that can be turned on to create a cooler microclimate.



Looking at the subcontinent: a Himalayan view.

Anthologising India

India is a giant squid that every now and then must be wrestled to the ground in order to make sense of it. And in the melee, one tentacle does not know what the others are doing. Is India poised for an economic lift-off the likes of which has not been witnessed before, or is it perched on the precipice of an urban and ecological cataclysm? Is India about the irrefutable phantasmagoria of Bollywood or the timeless poise of a Bharatnatyam? Is the Indian an argumentative one or a meditative one? Is India about the conciliatory Gufa of Doshi and Husain, or the virulence of the religious activists who vandalised it?⁸ Is India in the end really about India itself, as understood by notions of nations, or the much more fluid, elusive and yet definitive subcontinental substance? When the

giant squid is finally pinned to the ground, all tentacles flailing, one realises it is not a multitentacled squid after all, but a hydra-headed creature.

With the task of mapping contemporary architecture, I wanted to see what analogy could be drawn from literary anthologies. Among various anthologies of the vibrant literary outpouring of India,⁹ that edited by Adil Jussawalla, a very early collection (1974), is particularly prescient. Jussawalla opens the volume with an excerpt from Qurratulain Hyder's reflection on statelessness from her transhistorical fiction *The River of Fire*.¹⁰ While a Himalayan view of India is always a dubious project, Hyder's *River* speaks of the 'Indian' state of mind that overflows the imperviousness of new nation-states. Within an effluent history, it charts the cultural fluidity, geographic porosity and transnational mobility that describe the South Asian meta-national matrix.

Is the vitality in literature matched in architecture? As this issue will show, there is certainly a definitive inauguration of new latitudes and energies in Indian and subcontinental architecture. The enigmatic empty jar of Saleem/Salman that portended an archaeology of the future is now and here. And if that bottle were filled, would it look like the present issue of *AD*, a raga of indelible vitality? Δ

Notes

1. In an idea where ritualised death is conflated with the production of the mandala, Vastupurusa is an undefined being who was seized by the gods and pinned down to the earth, and whose dismembered body was distributed across the gridded mandala before building and habitation could begin. Vritra is mentioned in ancient Vedic texts as a terrestrial creature who controls the waters and must be annihilated – in this case by the celestial Indra – before a proper socialised beginning. Both myths perhaps circulate the prehistoric subjugation of terrestrial and locational symbolism by the predominantly celestial and abstract Vedic ideology.
2. Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*, Penguin Group (New York), 1980.
3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'City, Country, Agency', presented at the conference 'Theatres of Decolonization', Chandigarh, 1995. Spivak was referring to a statement on the nature of electronic capitalism by the US Secretary of Labor.
4. The 'song-site' is a literal space of the exotic and faraway in popular Indian filmic imagination that weaves music, dance, couture, urban and landscape imagery into a phantasmagoria of dreams and desires.
5. Orhan Pamuk in an interview with Alexander Star in *The New York Times*, 15 August 2004.
6. Dr KK Birla, 'India 2020', *Hindustan Times*, 9 May 2007.
7. Arundhati Roy, from her address at the 2003 World Social Forum, Porto Alegre, Brazil.
8. Bajrang Dal activists vandalised the Gufa in 1998 over MF Husain's artwork in what appears to continue up to now as the Hindu religious right's policing of art and cultural production.
9. I especially mention Salman Rushdie, *Mirrorwork: Fifty Years of Indian Writing*, Vintage (London), 1997; Amit Chaudhuri, *Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature*, Picador (London), 2001; and *The Granta Book of India*, London and New York, 2004.
10. Adil Jussawalla, *New Writings in India*, Penguin (Harmondsworth), 1974. Qurratulain Hyder's *River of Fire* was first published as *Aag Ka Dariya* in 1957.

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The India Project

While pockets of India are now approaching the living standards of Switzerland, other regions are debilitated by a level of poverty that is akin to that of Zimbabwe. **Sunil Khilnani** asks what remains of the universalist project of India's political founders. Has architecture, in the rush for market and economic success, lost its self-understanding?



A landscape of frenetic changes.