



Architecture between
Demolitions and the Contemporary
between Histories

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I

In our times history and the contemporary are deeply entwined, and architecture has often been at the centre of some of these negotiations and wars on what matters more; history or way forward into a future? But will history shape this future? And what kind of history will write this future? We stand at a juncture in India, where clearly one of the most iconic architectural moments is shaping our soon upcoming architectural moment; the demolition of one architectural form to allow the construction of another architectural form – from dome to shikhara. One has worked much with the question of history, in architecture, as well as the way we understand and look at, and learn from cities and landscapes of civilisation ever transforming – these engagements have in no way been out of a need to discover a beautiful past to restore or a strange notion of regionalism to be frozen, but these explorations have been much more towards and excavating of the present; why is the present behaving the way it is? My work with *Bhuleshwar* and *Kalbadevi* neighbourhoods in Mumbai, the once 'native town' areas in

colonial Bombay is actually not a plea for conservation or restoration of an urban past, but a project towards the recovery of the city at large itself; it is a project towards our engagement with history as a practice of everyday life. When the present is swallowing away our living times in drastic ways, from demolitions to erasing of cultural fabric, to every desperate conspicuous construction, it is necessary to know there is a need for us to reclaim that which is necessary for critical creativity and a humane civilisation. Every time I walked the streets and buildings of Bhuleshwar, I thought of how people live, and why they live the way they do, but I also wondered why did these people turn violent as seen during the riots in 1992 and 93. If there was to celebrate something about architecture, and coming together of people as communities and migration histories, there was also something to worry about violence and hatred in the same spaces. These neighbourhoods were my laboratory for years to understand how we as human beings and we as citizens occupy space; architectural space, and also the space of life. History was palpable in every building façade I saw and attempted to decode and to read as a novel. Here, old buildings were my sites for evaluating the culture of people and the citizens that we are. History was the carpet I had to sit on and fly with to be able to comprehend the contemporary. The fear I had while reading time embedded in buildings (and the larger project of Alice in Bhuleshwar) was that it should not be construed as nostalgia or a revelling in the prettiness of the past (as many heritage walks do!) but rather I was interested in reading history as a live, vibrating, breathing, bleeding, growing, organism rather than a story of the past. It strived to rescue or at least make people think of what we have inherited as a contemporary society and culture. There was no plea to conservation but there was a plea to understand change. There was a plea to debate and discuss change; and there was a belief that understanding the history of our everyday lives will somewhere make us critical of how we change, when we change and why do we change, rather than ruminating on 'change' itself. In the process architectural form, its images, its materiality, its forms of construction, its repository of meanings; all of this emerged crucial to a project of history. Now for me conservation; if one wishes to engage with that format of architectural practice is either material conservation or through forms of archiving and documentation, or through debates on the shape of memory. If it is a project to be pursued then conservation has to be a way to understand the journeys of history, as well as our everyday lives – and so conservation will not be

about architecture, but it will be about life and architecture could be the medium through which life could be measured and reconstructed, and this architecture would be an ever-changing one!

Buildings look permanent, and they last long, hence, all recovery and renaissance projects play so closely with architectural objects. Buildings last and they live on in time but buildings are never the same, they only cheat us into believing that they are same. Architecture changes with the way cultures and societies perceive them and with them meanings, symbolisms, values also change. Every conserved building is a new building, as it interprets the past in the act of conservation. Conservation is contemporary for every building built to a standardised typology of form (dome to shikharas) or a building built with a revivalist tendency in pursuit of an 'original' or a truth-image are all both new and simply copies of our imaginations and beliefs in the pursuit of a wished-past or constructed truth. And so then, one could say that architecture and conservation, or revivalism or belief in the sanctity of form types (for example, that a temple should be built such, etc.) are intrinsic projects of history, where history itself is an ongoing and live project. It is in full a reflection of the contemporary sensibilities - be it chaos, or the uncanny unfolding of life and politics around us.

II

Let me rest these set of conversations here and move to another argument that has been brewing for a while:

In one's work with contemporary architecture as well as with cities and its people's very (such as the project *Alice in Bhuleshwar*), there has been a key moment one has always quoted; that of the 6 December, 1992, the day Babri Masjid was demolished (even if symbolically so). It must not be forgotten that besides the literary and mythological narrative of the Ramayana, the object around which the debate is constructed- is a piece of architecture that is a built object of brick and stone, and mortar. To witness this fate of history as a teenager was an iconic moment in one's life leaving an indelible mark on one's memory of what it means to be 'Indian'; and I fully realized the impression of this only the day I started working as a teacher of history of architecture. Every image and every visual plate (drawing) and textual description of old buildings in books

such as by Percy Brown or Bannister Fletcher or Christopher Tadgell reminded me of that image; a dome, a beautiful architectural element, a feat of structure and space-making destroyed in struggle for political supremacy (represented as a struggle for historical supremacy), make-belief and constructed religious imaginations and other such things that seem to matter more than civic health, primary education, or collective well-being. The image of men crawling a top a mute building, desperately trying to gnaw at its plaster and mortar, the building resisting through material strength and construction, the human hands and feet crawling and vibrating with an adopted vengeance. How was I then to read the Shikhara or the Dome beyond this point? One sure could not have read it simply as an element of architecture or history or structure! Then how does one teach these things to students in a classroom? What is the idea of India we are discussing in class through forms of architectural creativity and philosophies of engaging with the world, cosmos, and nature, because from discussing Sanchi Stupa (a dome-shaped structure again) to Khajuraho, to the demolition of Babri Masjid? Is it all about the ingrained nature of civilisation in architecture or is it only and simply the identity-clamour of place and religion that the architecture holds within its body? History changes meanings, and the newer meanings accumulate, changing the architecture that comes down to us from history itself. "Didarganj Yakshi" by eminent art historian and scholar of visual culture, Dr Tapati Guha Thakurta is one such work that has explained the relationship of research, art history, objects from history, the idea of history, and their contemporary values and imagination.

But we may return to where this story began, the consciousness of a kind between one's person as a citizen, and one's role as a professional as an architect that came into play between witnessing an event of national shame and the space of a classroom where we teach texts, and hopefully ideas too. The classroom and the national space were in conflict. But also my understanding of the courtyard the quintessential motif in Indian architecture, celebrated for its bonhomie and people coming together. Yet, all was challenged when those same courtyards in the *waadis* of Bombay, or the *chawls* of Bumbai in 1993 or the *pols* in Ahmedabad in 2002 were used to harbour hatred and ammunition to be fired against an imagined 'other'. The courtyard was transformed into a place where the purpose of coming together was to destroy some other. Do I then celebrate the courtyard?

Or can I ever now look at the courtyard outside its own stories of love, care as well as hatred, and othering? Well, indeed architecture is a complex thing and to talk of its history and heritage, is now, even more complex. One's consciousness as a commentator on contemporary architecture in India or so-called historical architecture in India comes from these moments of dilemma where architecture eludes one's understanding of the built form image and space.

This idea of demolition seems very keenly close to architecture, including the spate of demolitions we continue in our city landscapes of built inheritance; razing slums to sanitize a messy city, wiping out shrines at crossroads in the name of traffic/ automobile preference (to state a few examples). We continue to demolish, assuming an imagination of a new world order that will emerge from destruction. Hence the ideology and act of demolitions become key markers for one's interest and research of urban neighbourhoods. It also becomes crucial in understanding the meaning of architectural form in Indian history through its transitions of colonialism and nationalism, regionalism and liberalization. I presented three lectures as a series at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2018 on the theme of architecture and design in modern and contemporary India. While the first lecture was on demolition of the Babri Masjid, the third and last lecture addressed demolition of the Pragati Maidan buildings, The Hall of Nations designed and constructed by engineer Mahendra Raj and architect Raj Rewal. In a sense then, contemporary architecture's history for me is in between these two demolitions – the Babri Masjid to the Hall of Nations.

The demolition of the Hall of Nations can be approached from two positions –not only is it an act of egoistic political battle, the more serious issue here, is that it has been the total disregard and ignoring of the architectural fraternity standing and sitting in a plea to not demolish this iconic structure of the 20th century and of significance in its engineering for the entire world. How has a profession and fraternity that at one point held immense influence in imagination of the national space, can today be so disregarded? Secondly, is this just a demolition of another old building (as many conservations debates make it sound out to be)? or can the demolition be analysed as an act of destruction and razing to the ground an edifice of an independent and emerging nation, now in shambles of debris? The demolition of the Hall of Nations in April 2017 forces us to evaluate the above

two issues. The historic survey exhibition, *The State of Architecture: Practices and Protocols in India* (UDRI and NGMA Mumbai. 2016) that Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote, and Kaiwan Mehta curated in January 2016 – a year before the demolition addressed the same. There were many issues and many discussions that led the three curators to work for over four years putting together a historical review as well as a critical reading of architecture and its practice in India since 1947. Yet, as the discussions and research matured, and as the curatorial content shaped up with exhibition put in place; one of key questions that emerged from the exhibition was the important question of the role of the architect.

What is the 'role of the architect' in society and culture today? Sadly in today's context, not much. As an editor across three magazines, including one for the Council of Architecture (India) or the India-edition of *Domus*, I have spent several years trying to make sense of architecture practice and its contributions in contemporary India. But as such on a wider and larger scale – considering architecture as a profession that deals with society and aesthetics, cultural imaginations and production of the built environment; the presence of the architect is next to nothing. On the streets you either know of architects whose work is driven by the real estate market and its aesthetic, or architects who are making homes for the rich and famous. While nothing morally wrong with these practices in itself, the crisis sets in when the imagination of architecture is limited only to these two typologies of practice. In such a world then, the architect is reduced to being a mere lifestyle designer, rather than an agent who influences and shapes social and culturally embedded debates in aesthetics, truth, science and society. The architect is a decoration rather than the necessary form itself! And hence the demolition of the Hall of Nations despite the protests (very sober ones since they were never roadshows by architecture schools, for example), indicates the state of the profession.

Thus, the daunting question is, what is the architect doing today? It also raises the question as to why the older and important buildings are being separated from contemporary practice (through framings such as heritage and conservation), rather than viewing all practices as practices within architecture and all structures as a stock of buildings and neighbourhoods without being trapped in debates of old and new, dilapidations and aspirations, meanings and icon-making. The

debates are reduced to economic or political debates without any critical review of material markets and engineering technologies. Seldom moving beyond the buzzwords such as 'smart' and 'sustainable', the discussions lack discussions of creativity and philosophies where architecture is a route of engaging with everyday living, collective and shared existence, reducing all to deliberations to debates of identity wars.

The profession and practice is in desperate need to engage with this important question of the expanded role of the architect, one, where within the professional imagination of architecture the architect is a cultural contributor. We have often lamented, but never protested and hence the pertinent question remains, what is the politics of the profession? Does the profession have a political basis or a set of varied political bases? If there is no politics, can there even be design, or architecture? Was the demolition of the Hall of Nations simply an issue of newer imaginations, a careless set of agendas in the corridors of power, decisions of ill-informed people in positions of power or was this demolition of an iconic structure expose deeper issues of a politics of architecture, one where unfortunately the profession has no language or tools to handle the crisis. There is a politics of architecture and there is a politics of nationalisms in this demolition and this needs to be understood from the perspective of history and the imagination of architecture as shaped in all our practices today.

The three axes – one has been trying to develop in the course of this essay, would then be, history, the languages of discourse and practice of architecture, and the role of the architect. Architecture is not dealing here simply between old imaginations and new aspirations – but we are in a fierce battle of politics and meanings, markets and ideologies. If not us, surely the objects of our affection, the building, the architecture is today in the midst of a storm of politics of meaning, the argument of materials, and markets of aggressive economics, bazaars of fierce politics and in this situation we, as architects, have decided to withdraw (consciously or subconsciously), decided to merely lament over beauty and patronage rather than engage with those who have snatched away the object we as architects once shaped!

As we collect, and conclude for the moment, with some of these key debates, there are many more pending questions and forking paths to explore in this garden of politics and our world of built and designed objects; only to be picked up in future conversations, encounters, classroom or the pages of a magazine, Instagram or the streets we walk through everyday. In the closing section of this essay, I would like to consider, between a personal and professional note, the engagement with one particular building, or campus- the Gandhi ashram. While we debate aggression and creativity in architecture, the next section makes a plea for humility and humanity in architecture.

III

A visit to Ahmedabad, for an architecture student, has always been a tour of the sites of modern architecture. The raw brick and concrete, and then a visit to sites of tradition and heritage –Teen Darwaza, Rani Sipri Mosque, Sarkhej, the Calico Museum, and then finally it is one of the urban centers we have celebrated in twentieth century India as the city of ‘Indian-ness’ (allowing multiple possibilities within these few letters) and one of patronage from industrial accumulation. At a later point in time, my research in *Bhuleshwar* and *Kalbadevi* neighbourhoods of Mumbai led to an exploration of Gujarati literature and they brought in some new connections to Ahmedabad as a centre of Gujarati literary activity. At all of these points, the glimpses of the city as a political centre, and the base for Gandhi during the freedom movement keep recurring. But events in the state of Gujarat in 2002 also make us uncomfortable and distance us from this city, making our familiar relationship, a difficult one, or even uncomfortable one. A state torn apart by some of the cruelest riots, arson, looting, murder, and worst brought many understandings of a place and its culture in question. Where did that liberal ethos one read in literature or modern architecture go? Had it not penetrated into the society that could have avoided and controlled the violence it allowed? How did the society violate the principles it nurtured in the form of national heritage , the Gandhi ashram?

Gandhi is a complex political figure in India’s modern history; and today we are much aware of critical readings of Gandhi as a human being, as a political figure, his methods of operation, and his philosophical beliefs. My engagement with

Gandhi, and the complex figure he is, began with a study of his classic text, *Hind Swaraj*. It was a text that perplexed me, and compelled me to engage with it, argue with, but impossible to discard or deny. It remains a key text in many seminars I teach, and I continue to quote from it, discuss it, and recommend it to young researchers and students. And every time that I now visit Ahmedabad I feel the urge and compulsion to be at Gandhi Ashram, walk around, look around, think as I stare at its buildings new and old, and at some point force myself to walk out. The Navjivan Press has become another site one feels the need to visit, look and peer through its book cases, in spite of possessing all the literature that it houses. It has taken some time since 2002 to start feeling comfortable or at home in Ahmedabad once again, and going to Gandhi Ashram has been part of this perplexed and vexed relationship with a city after one of its crucial historical moments, of 2002 violence. I had never taken to non-violence or *Ahimsa* very naturally, except as an abstract and ethical concept, very necessary for a civilisation, but not really as an automatic value of everyday life. But going to Gandhi Ashram was as if finding some haven of ethical safety in a shrinking cocoon of ethics and values. To me it became a space where values were not totems, neither were they rituals, nor slogans, but where practice produced the reality of an idea and its civilizational role in the everyday lives of people. It was some where there that I was trying to purge myself of a burden; the burden of witnessing and participating in a violence, much as did every citizen of this country that lived somewhere in the subcontinent in those days when Gujarat and cities like Ahmedabad burned and reeled in the fire of hatred and an imagined-adopted revenge. That burden is too much, and the only place that helped me was Gandhi Ashram, and the figure 'Gandhi', that not only allowed me, but invited me to argue with him, instigated me to debate with him. It became a conversation where 'Gandhi' respected and engaged with everything I said, and helped me learn in everything about him; that I in fact rejected.

Gandhi Ashram, as every time I talk about it, is not simply the site and location, but the campus of buildings and spaces between a fairly busy road and the calm flow of the river (now at the centre of a crucial planning and urban beautification debate). Confronted with perverse questions such as the aesthetic value of the new buildings v/s the old buildings, or which ones come closer to the ideology of Gandhi, the old ashram or new or the one designed by Charles Correa? The

old buildings have the simplicity of a local life that was regional, and global, and cosmic ; all at once. The new building is that which tries to understand a man (Gandhi) that was politically and philosophically complex, but always extremely direct and clear in his message and all of this in an India that was now free from colonial rule for the last about 25 years (when the Gandhi Smarak and *Sangrahalaya* was designed and built). Within the Gandhi Ashram, I think about politics and anxieties, located within ourselves and abstracted in our everyday relationships with people and places. As I stare at the buildings; Charles Correa's design for Gandhi Ashram, stands out as the most important building of modern and twentieth century India. It is where architecture meets people. It brings, through the experience of spaces and studied emptiness (that key notion of *shunyata* as the calmness at the centre of an abyss) the notion and belief of a man (Gandhi) in the potential and strength of simplicity, the power of truth, and key need to cleanse the self in the sense of emptying the vessel of ego, hatred, and dissatisfaction. Charles Correa produces an emptiness of great value in this building he designs. The core of the inner self is not different from the turmoil of the outside, the two have to merge in the process of cleansing and thinking, and in the design by Correa, that is what precisely happens; the inside walks out to meet the outside and the outside enters to talk with the inside. It is that one piece of monumental, iconic modern architecture, which with great humility hugs the very ground it grows tall and bold form. It's a piece of architecture that allows you to simply be - but not be there without thinking. There is a warmth in this building, but not the nostalgic warmth of conspicuous affection, rather the warmth of intellectual strength, the invitation to think of a life and work in which there are many hidden journeys. These journeys are accompanied by clarity of thought and the pertinence of a message that someone like Gandhi truthfully believed in. As one learns from Gandhi, if there is one place we really need to 'clean' the nation ; it is within ourselves. Correa's design is that one rare occasion where architecture is cleansed of ego, it is neither iconic (in its self-expression), nor symbolic as a building; it is cleansed architecture.

My tryst with contemporary India will continue with further intensity with every passing day, but in Gandhi Ashram, and especially Charles Correa's building I have a calm but intense friend who I can rest with and argue along! That is the power of architecture, and a place beyond ego and iconicity. It is in its meaning and value that we discover what one could term as the ethics of space, the ethics of form, or *rupa/arupa* or *rupa- sabda-pramana!*

