Searching for an Indian Identity: Contemporary Architecture of India

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Postmodern architecture in the West is characterized by a distinct nostalgia for the past whose references to history are openly and candidly ahistorical. Bright color building facades, pasted columns and pilasters, broken Greek pediments and arbitrarily chosen building ornamentation adorn the so-called "Po Mo" buildings. This approach to embrace history (while mocking at it) emerged as a critique of the earlier banality of modernism of the 1960s. Buildings such as Michael Graves's Public Services Building in Portland, Oregon, Philip Johnson's AT & T Building, and Charles Moore's Piazza d'Italia exemplify such a stylistic revival. Proponents of postmodernism claim that through a return to the decorative and scenographic, buildings become more communicative. While this version of postmodernism manifests itself in the works of prominent architectural professionals in India such as Hafeez Contractor and others who use historical elements to create fancy housing estates with French and Continental Villas for India's nouveau rich, another tendency to Indianize has emerged that deserves serious consideration. Prominent architects, such as Charles Correa, B.V. Doshi and Raj Rewal, make claims for a serious search for an Indian identity buried under the layers of history. This rhetoric centered on identity has shifted the discourse of Indian architecture from the quasi-scientific social concerns of the early post-independence period to a culturally based search for "Indianness" in architecture.

This shift is coincidental with a shift in cultural policy during the 1980s, which broadly stated a desire to incorporate India's past into planning and architectural design at the national level. This included a conscious recognition of culture in all aspects of development such as preservation of cultural heritage, establishment of organizations such as crafts museums, organization of Festivals of India, an increased spending on tourism and so forth. By then it had come to be recognized that India's blind embrace of modernism had marginalized traditional modes of arts and handicrafts. The architectural profession in India (initially dependent on the Royal Institute of British Architects), by linking itself to the modern sector of production and construction had also come to marginalize the products of craftsmanship in the traditional sector. Under the guise of using modern technology, building construction had continued to be based largely on traditional labor-intensive methods, such as the use of bamboo scaffolding, and the manner of carrying cement to the highest stories on the heads of male and female laborers. In fact, the Indian cityscape is full of building forms derived from high-tech methods, the surfaces of which conceal traditional materials and building methods of an earlier mode of production.

The discourse on the building of a modern India prided itself it its mediation between the binary oppositions of continuity and change, traditional and modern, regional and international, handicraft and technology, and so forth. However, when prominent architectural professionals began their inner search for an Indian identity in the 80s, most of them (perhaps quite inadvertently) resorted to imagery of symbols, myths and magic diagrams culled from ancient Indian treatises. This imagery conforms not only to the stereotypical Western "orientalist" understanding, but also to postmodern eclecticism common in the West. In this paper, I analyze two architectural productions that exemplify this approach: *Vistara*, a catalogue for the exhibition on Indian architecture prepared for the Festival of India held in Britain, France, Japan and the US between 1983 and 1986, and the *Jawahar Kala Kendra*, the Center for the Arts and Crafts, Jaipur by architect Charles Correa.[1] The choice of these case studies allows me to analyze the formation of this Indianized Indian identity: first, through a critique of the textual and visual rhetoric produced in a context outside of India, and then study the influence of this rhetoric upon actual building production in India.

VISTARA: A POSTMODERN NARRATIVE

Vistara is the title of the exhibition on Indian architecture prepared for the Festival of India held in Britain, France, Japan

and the US between 1983 and 1986. The exhibition presented a narrative of a history of architecture in India. It invoked Indian themes, Sanskrit and Hindi titles, and it included traditionally neglected vernacular architecture and buildings from the colonial era in an unconventional, pluralistic approach. Well-known proponents of Indian architecture, in particular Charles Correa, Ashish Ganju and others, were involved in the creation of this manifesto.

The very title of the catalogue and the exhibition, *Vistara*, suggests a spiritual interpretation of Indian architecture as a series of epiphanies. The various epochs of Indian history are presented as a succession of myths – the myth of the Vedic period, the myth of the Islamic period, and the myth of the Modern period – *matched to underlying formal ideograms* which purportedly reflect the "deep structure" of the society of the time. For instance, the Vedic times are characterized by the world of the non-manifest: buildings generated by magic diagrams called *Vastu-Purusha-Mandalas*. The introduction of Islam is seen as having caused a fundamental shift from the metaphysical to the sensual and hedonistic, as represented by the *char-bagh*, the paradise garden. The coming of the Europeans in the 17th century is presented as bringing in reason, science, progress and rationality.[2] The parallels between these changing myths and Thomas Kuhn's shifting paradigms are obvious. Just as the idea of shifting Kuhnian paradigms questions a positivistic science progressing to a better knowledge of the world, the exhibition creates a historical narrative about Indian architecture that avoids being either progressivist or historicist.[3]

The presentation categories, which proceed more or less chronologically, are given Sanskrit titles such as "*Manusha*," "*Mandala*," "*Kund-Vapii*" which seemingly relate the entire structure of the exhibition to a coherent Indian philosophy.[4] Categories like "*mandala*," "*manthana*," and "Islam" further serve to accentuate the distinction between "Islamic" and "Hindu" architecture. This distinction is a legacy of the English historians who used it in an initial effort to come to terms with the bewildering variety of architecture in the subcontinent. The categorization of Indian architecture as Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist and so forth can be traced back to James Fergusson, who in his pioneering text entitled the *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (published in 1876) turned it from a merely stylistic description to an operative category.[5] Architecture, for Fergusson, was fundamentally a "racial art."[6] Structural clarity, simple rhythms, and large expanses of walls were not attributes of Islamic buildings but of the very races that built them. Similarly, a Hindu mind considered to be mysterious, metaphysical, and transcendental was supposed to have created the complex Hindu forms. Though the distinctions made stylistic sense, the attribution to religion fundamentally influenced the perception of architecture in India. For instance, any building that represents a mixture of elements from both the styles is necessarily seen as a confluence of two thoughts. *Fatehpur Sikri* near Agra is a case in point: a whole political history of the construction of the building complex is based on a simplified reading of its architectural styles.[7] Similarly, *Datia* Palace is projected as the mirror image of *Diwan-i-Khas*. For here a powerful Rajput king uses the architectural syntax of Islam (the domes, the colonnades, the structural clarity) to reinforce the classic *mandala* plan of Hindu mythology.[8] The point is that such a reading simplifies the complex political reality of situation, and ends up only reinforcing the Hindu vs. Islamic polarity.

It is important to point out that what was largely a stylistic confluence of two building traditions, a trabeated one with a plastic aesthetic from the Indian subcontinent and an arcuate one stressing surface decoration and simple volumes, developed in Central Asia, is given the status of a religious and political statement. It conceals the fact that almost all of the architecture of the present millennium is a product of that confluence, including such Mughal masterpieces as the Taj Mahal and the Pearl Mosque as well as later Rajput palaces. To call the architecture of such buildings as "Hindu" or "Islamic," is to reinforce an incorrect and anachronistic understanding of Indian architecture.

Furthermore, a negative effect of this traditional simplified distinction between Hindu and Islamic architecture has been the consistent depreciation of Hindu art and architecture in comparison to the Islamic within traditional western scholarship. Partha Mitter in *Much Maligned Monsters* (1977) points out that while Islamic art in the form of Mughal paintings and descriptions of Mughal architecture was acceptable to the Europeans and even found admirers, Hindu art still presented problems of accommodation to Western aesthetics.[9] Most particularly Mitter attributes the resistance of Western historians to Hindu iconography and to profuse ornamental sculpture of South Indian temples to a fundamental classical bias in the Western art historical tradition.[10] When *Vistara* picks up this classification for its representation of Indian architecture, it accepts the basic discursive classifications of Hindu and Islamic, the only difference being that the qualities of mystery and transcendence are given a positive value. For instance, in the introduction to the section entitled "*mandala*." Correa writes, "For us in India, the answer goes back thousands of years. To the Vedic seers, the manifest world was only a part of their existence; there was also the world of the non-manifest."[11] Despite the overt regard, the many references to our mythic heritage, with its attendant themes of timelessness and ancient wisdom that integrated all intruding civilizations, only help to reinforce the underlying reductionist image of the "Indian" mind as mystery-loving, non-materialistic, transcendental and so on. Furthermore, it is intriguing to note how the "non-manifest" phenomena have been transformed and commodified into consumable entities.

The misrepresentations embedded in the history of architecture in India can be attributed not only to the orientalist biases and interpretations of the English historians, but also to the discursive definitions embedded in the discipline of architecture in the nineteenth century. Much of the history of architecture in India is limited for the most part to monuments: temples, mosques, and palaces. *Vistara* falls into the traditional historiographic mold in its projection of a limited range of monuments in the narrative of shifting myths. A separate category is created for non-formal architecture, which is brought together in a first section devoted to housing and settlements. It is most intriguing to see that, while the exhibition presents the categories of formal architecture capable of tracing the shifts in the succeeding myths and paradigms – i.e., from Vedic to Islamic to Colonial – all of the "unselfconscious" architecture (i.e., the traditional and informal housing) is lumped together in an ahistorical category (*Manusha*) and is seen as timeless and unchanging. The result is that the round huts of Banni, Kutch, the squatter settlements in Bombay and the urban shrines in Jaipur are all lumped together incapable of forming a part of the larger argument of succeeding myths, and therefore continue to represent a marginalized front within the larger discourse on Indian architecture.

Furthermore, biases in reading political content into stylistic choices are apparent in the section on colonial architecture in India. Buildings by architects such as Chisholm – who made explicit efforts to integrate traditional Indian elements into contemporary architecture in order to produce an "Indian style" – are praised, while the efforts of a talented architect such as Lutyens – struggling to redefine his classicism in the context of India – are denigrated. Lutyen's incorporation of Indian elements is described as a "an architectural pastiche involving superficial transfer."[12] Lutyen's racist rejection of Indian architecture has earned him criticism, but discrediting his work purely on those grounds with no appreciation of its architectural qualities points to inconsistencies in the criterion of judgment. Another point of interest is that the arrival of Europeans into the Indian subcontinent is venerated as the age of reason, science, rationality, and industrialization which quite ironically promotes the colonization hypothesis of an irrational and mysterious India brought to a new age through a contact with the Europeans.[13]

Vistara's pluralistic approach – the idea of using underlying myths and Sanskrit titles to capture and present the shifting discourses on Indian architecture can be interpreted on two levels. On the one hand it places the catalogue in the larger post-modern discourse on myths, memory, and identity in the West.[14] On the other hand, it represents a critique of the earlier universalist values blindly borrowed from the West and a renewed confidence (however, stylistic) in Indian values. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that rationality and modernity are classified as a "myth." This places the whole enterprise yet again within the larger post-modern discourse, with its criticism of positivism and rationality as universal values, and makes this catalogue more acceptable to a Western audience. The idea of historical progress is discarded; myths are shown to replace each other, with new ones born, assimilated, digested and internalized and, finally, being transformed into new architecture.

This critique has thus far focused on the contention that several stereotypes about Indian architecture have gone unquestioned in the conception of the exhibition: the distinction between Hindu and Islamic architecture is reiterated; the idea of Europeans introducing an age of reason appears as a major theme; the discussion on traditional architecture promotes the image of a timeless and unchanging India. On that front, *Vistara* emerges as an iconic representation of the manners by which "notions" and "images" of Indian built form have been perceived, categorized, and congratulated in recent years in the West. Making the catalogue as a part of the "exhibition" of India for the West ensured that it was structured to fit within a larger discourse, on architecture and on India, and helped promote stereotypes, biases and misconceptions embedded within it. However, the story that is presented is the very history that the architects have constructed to legitimize their architectural agendas within the profession in India.

JAWAHAR KALA KENDRA: NINE SQUARE HOUSE OF CULTURE

In the case of *Vistara*, the context of production is not just an overt one of the Festival of India, but also that of constructing a historical narrative that serves to legitimize specific architectural agendas in India. A case in point is the *Jawahar Kala Kendra*, a state sponsored institution, designed by architect Charles Correa, built in the city of Jaipur devoted to the preservation and promotion of traditional arts and crafts. In this building the agendas presented in *Vistara* are used to formalize theories about an Indian architecture. It is based on a theme of myths embodied in the nine-square plan of *Vastu-Purusha-Mandala* (with one of its squares wittily "misplaced"). The nine squares presumably also reflect the nine square plan of the city of Jaipur. Each square in the building is associated with a specific planet and myth. For instance, the northern square called the *Mangal Mahal* or the palace of Mars expresses power and houses the administration; the central square signifies the Sun and creative energy and houses an open-air theater.

Charles Correa claims that he derived the inspiration for the building from the cosmic diagram of the nine square, "*vastu-purusha-mandala*." Correa describes the mandalas as "square diagrams subdivided symmetrically about the center, creating series of 4, 9, 16, 25 . . . up to 1,024." Although they form the basis of architectural plans, Correa clarifies that, *mandala* are "not plans; but that they represent energy fields."[15] Further-

more, he explains that *Jawahar Kala Kendra* makes a very specific reference to Sawai Jai Singh's design for the old city of Jaipur.

> Maharaja Jai Singh, who founded the city, was also a renowned astronomer . . . In the planning of Jaipur, he embarked on a truly extraordinary venture. He sought to combine his passion for the latest tenets of contemporary astronomy with the most ancient and sacred of his beliefs. The plan of the city is based on a nine-square mandala corresponding to the navagraha or nine planets. The void in the central square he used for the palace garden. (Because of the presence of a hill, a corner square was moved diagonally across).[16]

Similar to Sawai Jai Singh's plan in which one square is slightly shifted, Correa dislocates one of the nine squares of his plan (even though there is no hill in sight). By shifting the north-eastern square (which houses the auditorium) diagonally, he allows for a space for the entrance. Correa claims that these design gestures are not mere transfers of imagery, but are transformations of a deeper order. Much like the references in *Vistara*, the story of symbolic references is meant to impart "Indianness" to the design.

At a very basic level the correspondence between the mandala and the plan of *Jawahar Kala Kendra* is very evident – they both have nine squares.[17] It is known that Hindu temples are based on *mandalas*, but the relation between the mandalas and the actual plans of temples is that of approximation. If the *mandalas* represent the ideal, non-manifest order of cosmos, the temples are particularized, manifest embodiments of mandalas. As material manifestations of an order that must by definition remain ideal, the plans of the temples are derived by geometric displacements that ensure that the walls of the temple do not occupy the ideal geometry of the *mandala*. The idea is that they will only approximate the ideal plan. Thus the correspondence between the temple plan and that of a *mandala* is not easy to establish.

On the other hand, Charles Correa's reference to the *mandala* functions just the opposite way. By making a literal reference, Correa's plan easily corresponds with the nine square diagram. It is easily readable, comes with a simple message and is up for display – much like a Robert Venturi's billboard. Identifiable stereotypical "Indian" elements such as *jharokhas* and Jain paintings, decontextualized from their original sources, are recontextualized in the Indianized postmodern interiors of the building. Furthermore, its bright Indian colors and over-sized billboards make it a very photogenic building – literally designed for the camera.[18] The design is based on the same calculus as advertising – its fundamental focus is imageability, playing the game of grafted simulation – a game that allows it to be completely oblivious to the real needs and traditions of those who inhabit and are displayed in it. The Museum of Indian Culture becomes a classic theme park building. Without having to interact with the complexities of Indian cultural history, the building design allows its visitors to consume all aspects of Indian culture in one visit.

Another aspect of the search for Indianness, and a condition of post-modern thought in architecture in general, has been the latent theme of the autonomy of architecture.[19] In the *Jawahar Kala Kendra* it is very evident in the stress on the formal aspects of architecture. Most particularly, the singular emphasis of the building on displaying its names – its semantics and syntax, and its lack of interest in social, economic and functional issues, make it an ideal case for postmodernism.

AFTERWORD

From the above two analyses, it is evident that the history presented to the West in *Vistara* is the very story architects have constructed to legitimize their architectural agendas within the profession in India. From this angle, the perpetuation of the stereotypes that underlie the exhibition *Vistara*, and that surface in the images of *Jawahar Kala Kendra* are no longer simplifications that makes the narrative more contextual for the West, rather they become evidences of appropriation of history to "create a tradition" as Eric Hobsbawm has discussed in *The Invention of Tradition*.[20] The theme of myths as a criterion for describing and evaluating buildings is an illustration of one such "invented postmodern tradition." In colonial histories it has been seen as crucial to discuss paradigms and stereotypes, which help legitimize the ideological and political positions. One finds that even in a post-colonial revisions the same stereotypes are used to pave the way for new ideological landscapes – new *vistaras* – that appropriate the past to create a program for the future.

This critique is particularly pertinent in the context of contemporary debates about the impossibility of representing the "Self" and the "Other." Both the modern and postmodern representations of Indian architecture are invariably tainted with ideological agendas. Both undo the very premises they claim to seek. There is nothing that can be claimed to be truly Indian or truly Western – both legitimate the Other through unequal power relationships. What happens when we begin to accept the integral nature of these binary categories? Can we ever undo their politics? Can we ever grasp anything called a pure "authentic" tradition? Or, are all references to tradition bound to be mere "inventions"? In an insightful piece entitled, "Traditions of the Modern: A Corrupt View," Ananya Roy offers the possibility of discussing the modern through the trope of tradition which she claims is inherently inauthentic. She argues for an epistemological framework in which we shall learn to accept the categories of the modern and the postmodern as always incomplete and always contested. In doing so, she claims future will be made possible through the impossibility of

remembering an authentic past.[21] If so, the questions that surface are these: Can Indian architects indeed draw upon their past (however impossible it might be to remember it?) Would it allow them to make claims to their cultural heritage without falling into the traps of legitimating stereotypes? Do we have an epistemological framework that will allow us to distinguish a more appropriate embrace of history and tradition from an inappropriate one? In answering this question, one might have created a space for a new *vistara* for architecture in India.

NOTES

[1] Also see, Ritu Bhatt and Sonit Bafna, "Post-Colonial Narratives of Indian Architecture," *Architecture + Design*, Journal for the Indian Architect, Vol. XII No 6 Nov.-Dec., 1995, pp.85-89.

[2] Charles Correa, "Introduction" *Vistara*: The Architecture of India, Carmen Kagal, ed. (Bombay: Tata Press Limited, 1986) p.8.

[3] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[4] *Vistara*: The Architecture of India, p.5.

[5] James Fergusson, *History of Indian and Far Eastern Architecture* (London: J.Murray 1876) however, later recognized the simplification that such classification entails. In a lecture given to the Royal Society of Arts entitled, "On the Study of Indian Architecture," Fergusson said, "I learnt that there was not only one Hindu and one Mohammedan style in India, but several species of class; that these occupied well-defined local provinces, and belonged each to ascertained ethnological divisions of the people." Reprinted in James Fergusson, *On the Study of Indian Architecture* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1977), pp.5-6. However, it was not long before architectural historians were casually writing about two fundamentally different architectures in India, each identified with a religious community. See, for example, Bannister Fletcher's *History of World Architecture on the Comparative Method* (London: Scribner's sons, 1899), pp. 889-909.

[6] Fergusson, "Introduction." *On the Study of Indian Architecture*, pp.3-49.

[7] *Vistara*, pp.80-83. The tradition of studying *FatehpurSikri* as a confluence of Hindu and Islamic styles was criticized in an issue of *MARG*,v.38, no. 2, entitled "*Akbar* and *FatehpurSikri*," Bombay, 1986. This approach was found to be too simplistic to define the profusion of styles in Akbar's palaces. *FatehpurSikri*'s eclecticism was attributed to several factors: the formative character of the Mughal court, Akbar's support for experimentation in the arts, and his fascination with his Timurid ancestry. Furthermore, some authors have suggested that the British projection of *FatehpurSikri* as a representation of the Akbar's religious tolerance was politically motivated. Its role was to legitimize British rule over India. See, for example, Thomas Metcalf *An Imperial Vision* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989).

[8] *Vistara*, pp. 84-85.

[9] Partha Mitter *Much Maligned Monsters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).

[10] Partha Mitter "Western Bias in the study of South Indian Aesthetics," *South Asian Review*. Vol. 6 (Jacksonville, FL: South Asian Literary Association, 1973), pp. 125-136.

[11] *Vistara*, p. 33.

[12] *Vistara*, pp.105-106.

[13] *Vistara*, p. 94.

[14] This is particularly true of the architectural discourse of the late seventies and eighties in the West, which was dominated by Aldo Rossi, Robert Krier, Leon Krier, Robert Venturi, Charles Jencks, Charles Moore and so forth. See, Aldo Rossi, *The Architecture of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982; Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-modernism?* (London: Academy Editions, 1987); Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

[15] Charles Correa, "Public, Private and Sacred," *Architecture + Design*, vol 8, no.5, 1991, p.92

[16] Charles Correa, "Public, Private and Sacred," *Architecture + Design*, p. 96

[17] In 1978 Kulbhushan Jain, a professor at the School of Architecture, Ahmadabad, proposed that the plan of the city of Jaipur was significant because it was based on the nine square mandala. He also stressed that its importance because in practice it embodied a secular adaptation of the underlying cosmic principle. Kulbhushan Jain, "Morphostructure of a Planned City, Jaipur India," *Architecture + Urbanism* (August 1978), pp. 107-20.

[18] Vikramaditya Prakash, "Identity Production in Postcolonial Indian Architecture: Re-covering What we never Had," *Postcolonial Space(s)* G.B. Nalbantoglu and C.T. Wong eds., (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), pp.45-50.

[19] It may seem paradoxical to assert that the recognition of the autonomy of architecture is an aspect of the postmodern discourse and a search for Indianness. It must be pointed out that this awareness for the "cultural" has replaced the earlier emphasis of the sixties on the "social" role of architecture. Most architects today are concerned with addressing issues of cultural meaning, which manifests itself in a pre-occupation with visual and iconic aspects of architectural form. It is this emphasis on the visual that has led to an increased autonomy of the architectural object.

[20] Eric Hobsbawm "Inventing Traditions" in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrance Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[21] See Ananya Roy," Traditions of the Modern: A Corrupt View," *TDSR* Volume XII number II, pp.7-13, 2001. Also, see other articles published in the same issue. These papers were presented at the IASTE 2000 conference held in Trani, Italy organized around the theme "The End of Tradition?"