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WHITE CHIC, BANGALORE

COLUMN ANTONINO CARDILLO & SUPARNA BHALLA
ON A NEW INTERPRETATION OF AN
ANCIENT PAST – ROME & INDIA



ARCHITECTURE: DESIGNER HOTEL, CHINA

IS HISTORY RELEVANT?

Two architects from the world's ancient civilisations—Roman & Indian—share their thoughts on the rites of passage in contemporary architecture. Does history validate a new vocabulary or is it a mere spectator? Antonino Cardillo takes cues from the Hadrian Villa (a Roman archaeological complex) while Suparna Bhalla questions the premise of an Indian identity

ROME AND HADRIAN'S VILLA: WHERE THE PAST MEETS THE PRESENT

In the history of man the more intelligent, ambitious and idealistic the vision of the powerful is, the more architecture is capable of cutting into the canvas of a city, enriching it. These qualities, which are first of all cultural ones, appear missing from the Italy of today and therefore it is foolish to expect a 'contemporary' Roman architecture. That said, the reader would be mistaken in the belief that the city and contemporary sensibility are two separate, disjointed entities, if not actually clashing.

But history, we know, is guided by chance, and this mediocre chapter in the tale should not distract us from the masterpiece that preceded it. It appears to us in the form of a paradox, but this complex, contradictory organism called Rome, even if it is devoid of skyscrapers, curtain walls, exposed concrete and other fetishes of modernity, offers the discerning reader a story that is exceptionally in line with contemporary feeling.

More than any other city in the world, Rome offers a fragmented narrative to the visitor. It reveals itself through a multiplicity of meanings presented in a disorganised and not very classical fashion. Visitors enjoy the city through ever-new sequences, since the route of each individual is unique. It thus sets off multiple relations in the perception of each person. The diverse perceptions of places and of urban episodes are realised in one's memory, following the brilliant intuition of William MacDonald and John Plinto on Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, "re-integration into collage-like images that resemble early Cubist compositions of Braque and Picasso." (MacDonald and Plinto, *Hadrian's Villa and Its Legacy*, 1995).

The 1978 book *Collage City* by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter identifies an alternative way in the fragmentary method for contemporary design that is pluralistic and democratic. In the authors' analysis, ancient cities are the result of an incessant process of fragmentation, collision and contamination of heterogeneous ideas, progressively stratified by different generations that have succeeded one another in the city. In the book, Hadrian's Villa is described as a "miniature Rome, a nostalgic and ecumenical illustration of the hybrid mix which the Empire presented" (Rowe and Koetter, *Collage City*, 1978).

Heir to an antique tradition dating back to the Persian parks and perhaps to the Egyptian villa-gardens, the Villa at Tivoli was constructed between two valleys on about 120 hectares of land. Conceived and built by the emperor Hadrian during his years of governance, it represents a complex and extraordinary compendium of the different cultures of the Empire. Hadrian, a relentless traveller, went from one end of the Empire to the other during his reign, gaining direct knowledge of the frontier provinces such as those of the Rhine, the Danube, Greece, Asia Minor and the near East. This extraordinary and versatile cultural exploration found a magisterial synthesis in his Villa at Tivoli, whose progressive rediscovery in modern times has decisively influenced the history of Western art and architecture.

Even Le Corbusier's *recherche patiente* was linked from the outset to the Hadrian site. In the autumn of 1911, at the age of 24, during his Voyage d'Orient, he visited the Villa, gathering impressions, lessons and suggestions, which, maturing through time, would come to characterise the mature phase of his artistic research. Again, William MacDonald and John Plinto, in their contribution on Hadrian's Villa, justly affirm that "Historians of modern architecture have overlooked the crucial role played by Hadrian's Villa in stimulating Le Corbusier's poetic vision of architecture", and identify a fascinating affinity between a structure of the Villa and the magical currents of light of the chapels of Ronchamp:

"Le Corbusier made several sketches of the Scenic Triclinium that reveal his fascination with the illumination of its axial extension. In one, he captures the dramatic contrast between the light streaming down on the terminal apse and the dark shadows of the vaulted corridor in the foreground. The caption suggests that he was attracted not merely by this play of light and shadow but also by the resulting quality of mystery. On the facing page, he drew an analytical diagram of this vertical light shaft, to which he returned forty years later in designing the pilgrimage church of Nôtre-Dame-du-Haut at Ronchamp. There the side chapels are illuminated by hooded shafts that rise to gather the sun's rays and direct them downward, suffusing the dark, cavernous interior with light." (op. cit., pp. 321-322).

Architecture always expresses its true nature with the fewest of means. It is not made of gold, precious stones or fine fabrics;

ROME OFFERS A FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE TO THE VISITOR. IT REVEALS ITSELF THROUGH A MULTIPLICITY OF MEANINGS PRESENTED IN A DISORGANISED AND NOT VERY CLASSICAL FASHION. VISITORS ENJOY THE CITY THROUGH EVER-NEW SEQUENCES, SINCE THE ROUTE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL IS UNIQUE, SETTING OFF MULTIPLE RELATIONS IN THE PERCEPTION OF EACH PERSON



Domus Augustana, Domus Severiana and in the background the Baths of Caracalla, with a view of modern Rome beyond



Hadrian's Villa, Maritime Theatre, Villa on the Island

neither is it made of steel, cement or brickwork; nor, even, are cantilevers, shells, tiles, skins or great arches, architecture. The essence of architecture resides in its narrative, which structures time in space: great architecture, the city in fact, is like an endless novel, in which the personal experience of the protagonist, seen from his viewpoint, continually modifies the sense of the work of time.

The 1972 book *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* by Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, exchanging 'illusion' for 'allusion', compares the chaotic Las Vegas 'strip' to a Roman piazza. But Rome is much more than an assemblage of signs.

It is a labyrinth that climbs down through history, made up of real and perceived places. Sometimes the perception itself becomes the city, but the historic dimension of places means that the semantic confusion is not simulated as in Las Vegas. Rather it speaks, to those who know how to listen, of the passions, crimes, loves and betrayals of all the men who have experienced it and who have written and rewritten infinite times on the same stones their dreams and misfortunes. This cannot happen in Las Vegas, because there the signs are illusory and refer to lives already lived, surrogates of existence that nudge that visitor into reliving a life that is not their own.

It is probable that places without names do not exist, although memory is more truthful than physical space. Perhaps it is more real, and reality, therefore, is not merely physical space. But the memory of a historic city, as opposed to the 'illusory' one of Las Vegas, is, thus, also manipulation and alteration. Maybe the city is a gigantic pack of cards, a corrupt deck, and if history were linear, clear and intelligible, the art within it would have no reason to exist. Beauty always has a bastard quality and sometimes the most profound, truest art lies in the distortion of reality.

Thus, Rome is made up of original as well as altered places, yet one gets lost trying to distinguish the alteration from the origin, which perhaps has never been. Maybe Rome is just an immense alteration of the collective memory and in this decadent and perennial metamorphosis lies its fascination, its sovereign being, and equally its essence as a victim of time.



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INDIA—A LOOK BACK, A STEP FORWARD

Traditionally, the study of history in architecture is confined to the study of style. Periods and eras classify architecture into slices of type and vocabularies, much like books in a library. This leads one to question the premise of a structured typology or a linear chronology as a substitute for history and its subsequent relevance in architecture. Can history break out of this stereotypical role and emerge as what it is—a perspective view strapped with the bias of its time and the burden of its future? Can it be a tool for analysis, not a measure but a means to arrive at a real, sustainable and most importantly, relevant architecture?

Architectural history need not lie entombed or stilled in a freeze-frame of its moment. Its physical evidence is the culmination of the aspirations of its patrons, the wonders of material technology and the endurance of mankind. Some values may be quantified—statistics, materials, and elements—while others are left to evoke inspiration and imagination in the minds of the future generations. Some buildings were pivotal to understanding history, and revolutionised the processes that were used to engineer them. Some were cultural influences that left their mark for centuries to come while many others were erased by the hand of time leaving behind faint traces of their existence. Of these, few become monuments through association or public memory, while several humbler structures mutate with changes in use. Each of them form layers, some overt and some covert, layers upon which contemporary India as we know, is built.

Indian architecture in the past few decades has been accused of being plagued by the incoherencies of form and vocabulary, of thoughtless imitations and senseless ad-hoc-isms. The search for postcolonial Indian identity has often led architects to define the built form through historical references, such as Charles Correa's British Council, Doshi's Aranya and Raj Rewal's Parliament library to name a few. History, be it as a concept, form or element, is used to transfer the past to the present. While this is valid, isn't this using history merely as a tool of representation, and does it render the 'Punjabi Baroque' and 'Gupta Gothic' historically invalid? Here I would go as far as to suggest that history is but a perspective—one that may be 3,000 years, 30 years or three minutes old. Each is a valid perspective, but only one is suitable, dependent on how many layers one chooses to excavate, and on why and how one draws upon the energy of the past. Thus if architecture is seen as a mere reflection of the aspirations of society (and no aspiration is without historical roots), then are the buildings that dot India's

contemporary landscape and stem from a desire to be a Grecian villa or a Petronas tower, as valid as those that visibly emote to the distant past?

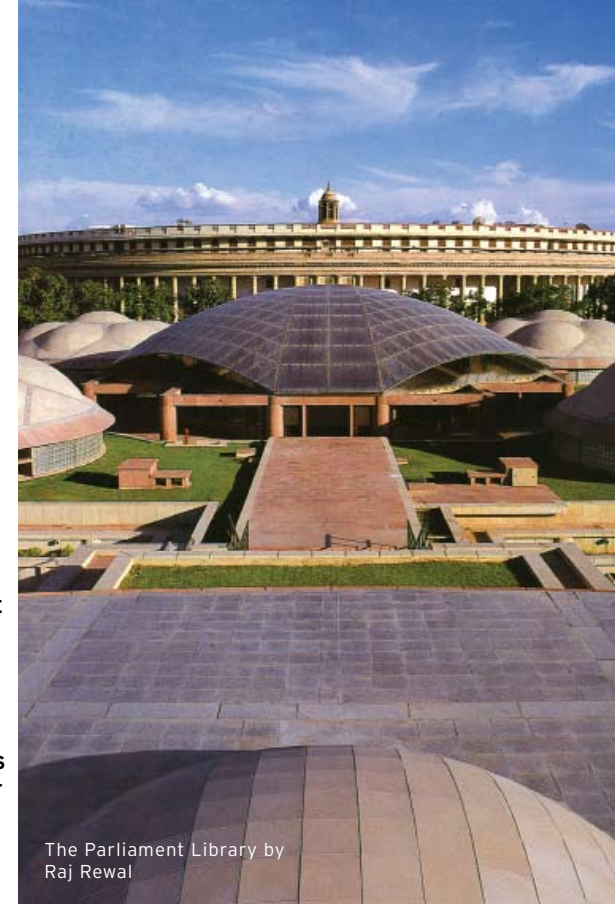
Contemporary Indian architecture is not removed from history, nor is it presumptuous enough to lay claim to creating it. In fact, in a country of over a billion people, there are perhaps a billion Indias that exist, each one producing an architecture that lives simultaneously with the other. Far from being robotically uniform in style, it extends its arms into the realm of variation. It is easy to decry the chaotic mosaic that Indian urban centres and towns display, the pastel-shaded pastries of French renaissance vintage with a hint of romantic classicism and a dash of colonial aplomb, holding their own against the stark, concrete modernists, aligned alongside the flamboyant steel-and-glass reflectives. Which one is Indian and which isn't? Which successfully transfers India's rich cultural heritage forward and which buries the past to build a new one? It depends on which India the beholder lives in.

Here I do not advocate the promotion of chaos as a means of 'true' representation, but would like to point out two factors that attribute to it. The first is the clear disarray of policy that dictates the built environment of our cities, the very grid that sites our architecture. It clearly disconnects itself from its ability to create a coherent and responsible image of a city. The inability to see the city as a collective notion is the prime reason for the dysfunctional

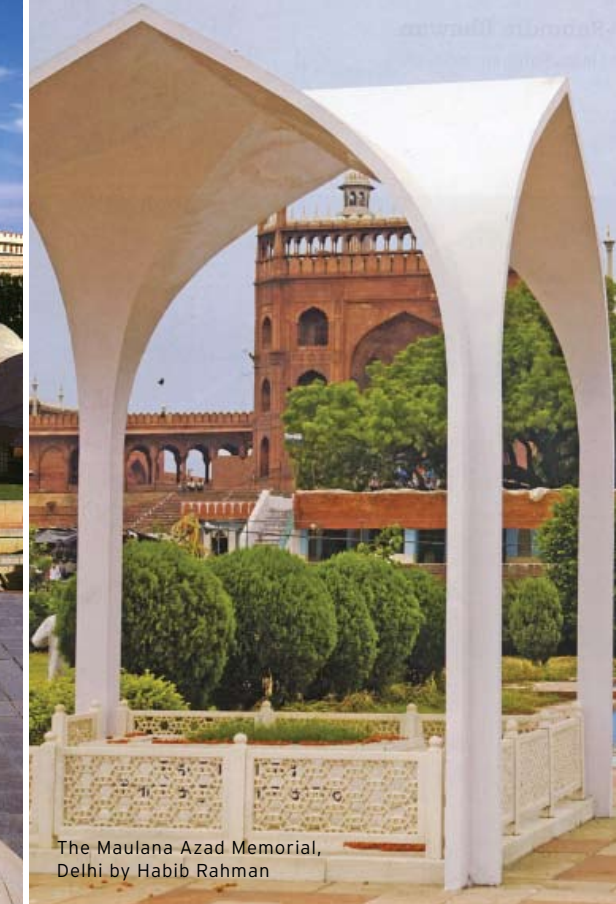


The British Council, New Delhi by Charles Correa

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ARCHITECTURE TOO IS A PRODUCT OF THESE VALUES, SOME REINCARNATED, OTHERS REMIXED VERSIONS OF THE OLD, SOME COMPLETELY BREAKAWAY TECHNOLOGIES AND SOME ADAPTATIONS OF THEIR WESTERN COUNTERPARTS. ALL IS INCONSISTENT YET VALID



The Parliament Library by Raj Rewal



The Maulana Azad Memorial, Delhi by Habib Rahman

nature of our skyline. Jaisalmer, for example, is a living medieval city where the built manifests itself in different types, scales and times, to be bound together by material and craft. Here, it's not the variable architecture that is invalid, but the image it unites to create something that remains valid. The second is off-course—the shift in our social fabric from a 'we'-centred to an 'I'-centred society. The craving for individual identity and growth is so dominant in our contemporary psyche that the resultant architecture can be no different, or rather indifferent. Thus as Kublai Khan in Xanadu did decree, did Mr Singh in Lajpat Nagar build! It speaks both of an empowered society that has the ability to decide based on free will (whatever the reasons) and of one that has changed rapidly leaving obsolete remnants in its wake.

We in India, live in a paradoxical moment where the contemporary and historical past are connected by a shared set of cultural assumptions and dichotomies used to differentiate them—the progressive West vs the static East, developed vs undeveloped, active vs passive, creative vs mimetic, thereby creating, criticising and later impersonating Chandigarh—to become the image of Modern India. An aspired dream of a British-educated Prime Minister brought to India by a French man! Yet it became the champion of modernity in India, pivotal to the sensibilities of design that followed.

Just as in life we acquire several sensibilities from our environment, both past and present and along the way, change them to remain relevant and discard what we consider obsolete, contemporary Indian architecture too is a product of these values, some reincarnated, others remixed versions of the old, some completely breakaway technologies and some adaptations of their Western counterparts. All is inconsistent yet valid!

Finally, to revisit history in order to make a relevant architectural future, one that is rooted in its culture, is certainly myopic and incomplete without accommodating the parameters of the future, predictable or otherwise. One can look at the past to give meaning to the present but one must also perceive the future to do the same. For Indian architecture to remain historically true, it needs to be perceived as a means of fulfilment, of an aspirational society that is rooted in disparate histories.



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