

Building an ugly India

GAUTAM BHATIA

TAKE a walk down a main road in any city, it's always the same story. Roads spit advertising. Between ancient monuments, excreta swims in garbage. Down the street, imitation western bars and French restaurants, granite halls and air-conditioned shopping arcades. Bitter German chocolate, coffee and warm croissants amid the odour of a market urinal. Move through the slime of an overflowing drain to lunch in an imitation London inn. Contrasting moments of utter dereliction and exaggerated delight. Can the human spirit reconcile the two extremes? Certainly. After all, it is the taste of the city, the new taste of urban India.

I don't know why I have begun to hate the city. Whenever I move out of the house, I am filled with a sense of dread. Everywhere you look, there are frozen moments of despair – growing numbers of people in a desperation to squeeze space: sidewalks for sleeping, railway lines for defecation, bungalows demolished to make apartments, servants quarters rented to students, garages to doctors, walls continually closing in, reducing houses to apartments, gardens to verandahs, markets spilling on sidewalks, side-walks on streets.

And a growing divide between people occupying the same space: park sites acquired for hotels, migrant families in sewer pipes, guard dogs and high boundary walls, security services and BMWs. Housing in industrial swamps, office facades blemished by commerce – D.K. Video Library, P.K. Enterprises, G.K. Housing Pvt. Ltd. Farm houses with no suggestion of farm or connection to land, Baroque villas with no links to Rome. Is it a surprise to be so repulsed by the places we make for ourselves?

If there is a professed spatial, humanist or aesthetic purpose to architecture it is difficult to experience it in the reality of the city. On paper architecture is that wonderful making of spaces, that sculptural massing of forms brought together in light. But the city displays nothing of that. What is noticeable is but a dreary mass of broken and smudged plaster – flagging in spirit, depressing, unsightly, blemished. The shops and offices and markets are like parasitic growths, spreading along the ground, smudging the sightline, slowly sucking the life around them, leaving the city a spluttering sick underbelly, a rotting concrete carcass. And leaving you with nothing. No remembrance of landmarks, no encounter with history, no cause for celebration.

On a recent trip to Rishikesh I realized in a flash why the hatred. For right there, on the river bank, two views of the place were firmly etched in the skyline. Across the turbulent splashing river I could glimpse Hinduism's benign skyline – a line of ghats lapping the river edge, mouldy temple silhouettes and repeating ashram windows set in whitewashed walls lining the streets. A simple life expressed simply. But on the side where I stood, the city gave a more

distressing contemporary view. Along the main highway lay the slummy standard North Indian town. Pink and yellow plastered buildings, incomplete pastel-shaded structures stained by monsoon, and paan and urine at the base blemished with signs of commerce at the top.

Like so much of the new architecture, jewels of thrift and austere beauty they were not. Pepsi signs, AC shopping arcades and hotels of Rajasthani sandstone, each with tinted windows curled at the edges giving that special ironic twist to its facade, that mild turn of architectural phrase, just to let people know that this was the Mughal Ganga Hotel, more beautiful than the Krishna Palace Lodge down the road. Each came with bar and open air restaurant. Each with the special river view. Each trying to outdo the other in design, colour, detail and advertising gimmickry. Meanwhile, on the opposite bank, the old stood a mute and saddened observer of the shifting architectural tide.

Should architecture, like other aspects of popular culture, reflect something of the taste and conditions of the present? If so, then eventually it will also highlight the despair of the streets, the dereliction of commercial plazas, the disconnectedness of public housing, all contributing to the sense of isolation that people experience in the city. Conferring a sense of positive identification with a place is the more difficult burden left to the old architecture: the ashrams of Rishikesh, the ghats of Vrindavan, the mosques of Delhi – buildings that not only make our imagined world, but create the placeness necessary, the history we need for ourselves.

The disconnectedness of the city, however, has had a long evolution. Rapidly increasing population, the growth of urban centres, chronic unemployment, a marginalised economy and unstable political situations have, during the last 50 years, set the tone for the built landscape of the city. Increasing urbanisation has necessitated large designed commercial zones within the uncontrolled sprawl of the old town. The expanding industry may have created burgeoning facilities for commerce and trading, but growing pressure on urban land congested city centres have led to enterprises that gave a new scale to public space and urban architecture. In tune with 20th century statistics, the government took on the responsibility for providing markets, housing, schools, universities, offices and other infrastructure.

But do the results of the last half century of planning convey something of the aspiration of people that occupy these places? Do the places we make reflect something of the sort of places we would like to live in?

Architecture affects the public realm in numerous ways. It controls what we experience in the public life of a city, how we move between buildings, how indeed that movement is perceived in sights and sounds, how it may be altered or modulated by intervening things and landmarks – parks, buildings and hoardings. How these come together, whether in a consciously designed way or as accidental encounters, their physical appearance and their consequent perception, distance and proximity, are all part of the scenarios called city life.

Is there a consciously cultivated sense of the public place in India, the space beyond our house, or do we have an intuitive perception of how to design and occupy the city? Is there in fact an Indian identification with public places – a sense of ease and occupation that is distinct from the recorded norms of public life in the West?

Just look at Nehru Place. It was conceived in the '60s as a raised plaza that offered arcades and pedestrian links to the shops and offices it housed; the open frontage was meant to recall the great piazzas of Europe – San Marco's, perhaps Piazza Navona. People were meant to gather in the open spaces, surrounded by clean modernist landmarks, open air cafes spread across tarmacs, and street musicians strumming in autumn light. There it was, outer space idealized in social and class terms, and in a wholly urban western, middle class conception. Was there a discrepancy between the ideal and the real? Or was the Nehru Place conception flawed in the first place?

Perhaps this is too harsh and unfair an indictment of the architects of Nehru Place. After all, all buildings in India suffer the fate of Nehru Place. However ugly, ordinary, mean and spiritless Nehru Place is, it is an intrinsically Indian commercial phenomenon. It happens every day in every city in India. Leave any building on the ground, free to be inhabited – Taj Mahal, Connaught Place, Victoria Memorial, anything. Stand back and watch. Watch for a week, a month, a year. People set up paan shops on window ledges, xerox centres in niches intended for firefighting equipment, restaurants in windowless basements, kitchens under staircases.

The abundant and ambiguous use of public space defies borders and makes the architect's task difficult. Laundry dries on road dividers, people sleep on sidewalks. Offices enclose balconies as their own. The urban Indian reclaims as his own all that is in the public realm. That public space belongs to no one is a strangely western belief; that it must be preserved and paid for by everyone is an entirely alien idea.

Is our loss of identity then linked to the physical loss of identifiable and familiar places and landmarks? Perhaps. Part of the sense of loss has to do with the heroic nature of architecture itself. There is among architects an irrepressible urge to be 'original', to develop an individual style of their own. It is a tendency often difficult to curb. Against this background, the propagation of the individual's stamp on the structure has often given rise to confusion and confrontation on the urban scale, creating settings, so to speak, where buildings do not speak to each other.

Much of the story of architecture in the city is the story of conflicting aspirations – where personal, national, regional and international identities clash with each other. Chandni Chowk Chippendale, Tamil Tiffany, Early Halwai, Akali Folly, Marwari Mannerism, Punjabi Baroque, Bania Gothic and Anglo-Indian Rococo among others, are all part of the permanent collection of architectural canvases on public display. Unconcerned with the environment

from which they have sprung, such houses spread out across the expanding suburbs, devouring valuable land, lending a certain self-conscious charm, and appearing with remarkable regularity in places as diverse as Delhi, Madras, Bangalore and Lucknow.

Desperate and unflattered, such architecture is merely the frightened response to the surrounding blight, to the slowly encroaching conditions of despair – the mud shanties, the sewer pipe houses and sidewalk encroachments that appear in every neighbourhood in every city. Reality, after all, is depressing: so architecture is designed purely to create distance.

Fearful of the surrounding poverty and insecurity, buildings must make appropriate separations, between them and us, between abject poverty and unaccountable wealth, between their imagined misery and our apparent comfort, between 80 men at a hand pump and one on an 80-acre golf course. If, for some reason, the sanctity of this exclusiveness is infringed upon, the architecture merely accommodates. If security is threatened, the boundary walls rise; if status is questioned, newer, fancier symbols appear on the facade. When municipal water is not enough a tube-well provides; when power supply is cut an inverter takes over. Police, water, electricity, who needs them? Who needs the city? The good life is insular, and architecture must help to keep it that way.

India is today the largest construction market in the world, with an estimated work worth Rs 50,000 crore currently in progress or in the pipeline. Just last year, 80 post offices were built in the country, 120 railway stations were established and 160 bridges constructed. In Delhi alone, 140 bus stops were set up and a corresponding 12 new depots. Of course, all 120 post offices, whether in the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh or in the snow-clad mountains of Ladakh, were of standard government designs; whatever the peculiarities of site, climate and vegetation they all looked the same. Court houses looked like fire stations, schools like hospitals and hospitals like court houses.

Does standardisation stunt creativity? A mere glance down the East River in New York is a confirmation of the immense creative power of bridges. At 181st St. in Upper Manhattan, massive stone portals of the Washington Bridge cross the river; the High Bridge on 174th Street is an ancient Roman aqueduct, the Queensborough Bridge a delicate iron trellis. In Lower Manhattan, the Brooklyn Bridge, considered by many to be the greatest piece of 19th century architecture, is a hybrid of Gothic towers and advanced cable technology. The Verrazanno Narrows, the most recent 20th century construction, spans the East River in a gigantic sweep of steel. In one simple glance the eye takes in seven bridges, in each bridge is a history of its construction, in each succeeding bridge an expression of advancing technology.

In an age of mimic styles, of instant acceptance, boredom and rejection, little effort is spent in making public structures memorable places characteristic of local situations and resources. If a particular bridge design has worked successfully once, it will be repeated across every culvert, every ravine and riverbed in the country, regardless of size or location, till everything looks the same.

We are left with nothing of sustainable architectural value. Nothing that has evolved locally, made by today's hands, within the perimeter of our own life and times, was created in a moment of pride. Every time BBC's Mike Woolridge stands before India Gate to file his report, it fills me with quiet dread. Not because here's an Englishman standing before an English landmark in my city. No. Only because it gets me wondering how in the 70 years since India Gate we still haven't produced an architectural symbol worth standing in front of. Something that may generate civic pride.

If anything comes to mind as a new icon for Delhi, it is the acres of housing projects, self-financing schemes, decaying, peeling, chipping and staining, yellow citadels that stretch indefinitely on undeveloped wasteland to the far horizon. It is they that define the new public face of India. And it is they that will remain in memory.

To what extent does the environment of India endorse the identity of a young nation, and an old culture? Does architecture have a place in the collective identity of a people? Do buildings have a stake in fortifying our self-worth?

Just look at the cinema hall. No longer the faded pastel coloured Art-Deco structures, of Eros in Delhi or Regal in Bombay, its design now closely follows on the heels of its American counterpart. Coloured to the exuberance of cinematic dreams, red white and blue, Marilyn Monroe on the facade, Hollywood Boulevard on the ground, little America in miniature. For a short while in the dark, popcorn in hand, it is possible to believe, that yes, India is far away.

When did the Indian dream sour? Was there ever an Indian dream? Or was our architectural culture always one of borrowing? From Mohenjo Daro and Fatehpur Sikri to New Jersey is a long way. But we have arrived, perhaps a little tired after the long haul, a little weary at crossing continents and centuries – but it has been worth it. Every new shop in the city – whether Ahmedabad, Delhi, Bombay or Bangalore – now employs a glittering granite facade – a sheen that immediately does away with a century of PWD pastels and monsoon stains. The brand inside must make a statement outside. It must compete with other brands and be tested in the salubrious confinement of a shopping mall. The American suburban dream is realized and the Third World has become the First.

Big Mac has become the Maharaja Mac, pizza has got a tandoori topping, the dosa a chicken filling. Pranayam has gone on the Internet. But who cares. After all, for leisure and entertainment there is no better choice but to freely plunder the symbols of suburban America. To walk listlessly and aimlessly in an air-conditioned mall in Sunday bermudas, children in tow, Softy cones in hand, lulled by Musak, is the new desired ideal.

Finally commerce and architecture meet in a global setting. It could be Cairo or Rio or Delhi; only the faces are browner, and there's red spit in corners, a glaze of dust on the granite. But really, who cares. Architecture is only a minor player, countering the sterile face of building with its own culture of distraction, conforming to desires, fulfilling short lived, often mistaken identities.

When I was growing up the city was a different place. I lived in a bungalow spread low along the ground, set back from the road in a private compound. Its garden, faded patches of dry earth, was tended by a slight man on his haunches, forever arranging and rearranging the clods of earth within borders of inclined whitewashed bricks. The house was an inseparable though innocuous presence within the scheme of the garden he tended. Its structure – the yellowing pastel shade of plaster stained by monsoon rain – was shielded by a jaffrey of creepers. In the shadows stood a cream-coloured Ambassador car.

Behind the car porch, there was another green painted jaffrey, fluffed white with jasmine; you could hear the quiet hiss of a summer lawn on a hot day. There was a sameness to things, a kind of colourless homogeneity, which made you aware of ordinary things around. If my sight held a tree in wonder, it was only because the neutrality of things left the senses free to roam and to focus on natural surroundings. Where the differences appeared was in the trees that lined the road, in the perception of patterns in a monsoon sky. The grass, when it was green, was really green, when yellow, it was good as dead. Sometimes, when I walked on the road after the rain, I saw the grey-blue light reflecting in puddles so shiny they were like broken sheets of plate glass left there on the ground, so that people could notice all the special tints and colours of the sky by just looking at their feet. When old men in dressing gowns came into the park early morning to rub their soles in the dewy grass, I knew it was winter.

Nostalgic reminders of the past are but few these days. Certainly, there is a gratification in the gloom of a Mughal tomb, and pleasure still in the sequence of gardens that surround it. But now the experience tantalizes by contrast. The urban fabric that surrounds the old garden is like parasitic concrete growth, suffused in its own failures and incapable of providing similar experiences. When the irony strikes, as it does so often now, the Mughal presence becomes a caricature. A whiff of greatness in a choked, doomed place. The past, the history of earlier Delhi, enacted not on a living stage but in a frame of stagnation, as an aspect of tourism. Effectively distanced by the people who preserve it into walled enclosures, remembrances of old architecture are like the scent of a forgotten time still lingering in bed – but between soiled sheets.

For a greater part of the two decades that ended the century, Delhi's residential and commercial architecture has overwhelmed the urban interests and allegiances of its predecessors. From the unifying styles of Mughal Emperors, to the axial urban sequences of Imperial Delhi, the new face of the city speaks an incoherent language. A babble. A theatre of surfaces. An insolence of architectural behaviour, that collectively signals a shrillness without method.

The new city is a place of momentary temptation, not of lingering pleasures. There is space in it for the fast food restaurant, but not the scented Mughal garden. The enclosed cinema, the hermetically sealed restaurant, the basement bowling alley, the florescent commercial centre, the air-conditioned flat. Quietly, almost without fuss, they have replaced the bungalow, the

open arcade of shops, the sunlit sidewalk and the tree-lined avenue, the courtyard and the winter roof terrace.

Of course, it would be foolish to suggest a return to the values and spaces of the past. And indeed there is little to be gained by questioning or rejecting of the country's present state of misdirected affluence; the few materially rich are not looking for change. But given the conditions of poverty, misapplied technology, and under-utilization of existing facilities and resources, perhaps a more rational programme should influence the thought process of design that leads to the making of public places.

Architecture's message becomes all the more critical when seen against the backdrop of these extremes: the ceaseless condition of rural poverty, urban migration, homelessness, blight. In fact, the extreme state of things encourages a radical position, the unimaginably wide disparities in living situations, the stranglehold of building laws, the condition of crowding and overpopulation, all force imaginative solutions to the design of places for living, working, play and entertainment.

What would the environment of the city or countryside have been like had we adopted a different course? Had different ideas and attitudes been expressed in building, planning, urbanism and design, would we be living a different life? Is it possible to learn from mistakes and to reorient now, to change our perceptions of the city, the public places within it, the individual buildings within that? Or is it too late?