

**KEY WORDS:**

Nation-Building, Place and Context, Building Culture, Building Language

# Charting a Future Building Culture

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Tekton

Volume 3, Issue 1, March 2016

pp. 32 - 45

## ABSTRACT

The recent exhibition 'The State of Architecture' held at the NGMA, the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai, from 6th January to March 20th 2016 offered an insight into the evolution of architecture in the country since independence - with a specific focus on the last two decades. What is evident is the diversity of expressions within the production of architecture over this period. The curators of the exhibition consciously avoided any kind of critique of the works exhibited - although one can say that their selection of the works of significance from the past twenty years in itself sets the tone of what in their minds the future of architecture in the country needs to be. Taking this as a trigger, this essay seeks to investigate the broad range of expressions evident in the projects displayed by exploring the 'tendencies' inherent, and through this, speculate on the possibility of a manifesto for our future building culture.



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## Making Sense of the Present

'The State of Architecture exhibition'<sup>1</sup> at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) Mumbai is an exhaustive and eye-opening account of the profession, three decades after any account of the discipline of Architecture within the country. As such it sets up a commendable challenge for itself - to make sense of and represent or document, the tremendous transformations the profession has undergone over the past three decades.

In the excellent and delightful little book *'What is Architecture? and 100 Other Questions'*<sup>2</sup> authors Rasmus Wern and Gert Wingardh, in one of the essays, set out to articulate the connotations of 'architecture' and 'Architecture'. The lower case denotes a general environment - the matrix so to speak - of housing, utilities, public services etc. that define most of the built environment - the necessity of the everyday. 'Architecture' on the other hand is the 'celebratory' - the source of 'pride' for a community, the spaces that enrich the everyday experience into moments of exhilaration and exultation. These spaces become the defining aspects of that community's building culture - those moments of spatial immersion that invoke in the members of the collective a sense of belonging that, in its most exalted state, can become a precious heart and an immutably rooted totem - like Alvar Aalto's hallowed Saynatsalo Town Hall, or in more recent times, Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals or Kengo Kuma's Asakusa Culture Centre.

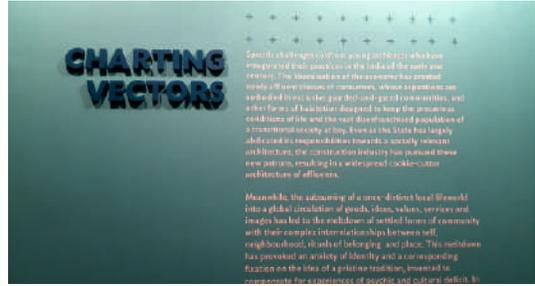
But perhaps is it misplaced to quote these two authors from Sweden here? Sweden has been more or less a Socialist state, with both architecture and Architecture driven by the

state - housing, infrastructure, cultural facilities, institutions, etc. India was a socialist state with Government investments in housing and public buildings that began to wean from the 1970s (the Emergency being a critical turning point) and a conscious divestment from public building that began with the policies of economic liberalisation in the early 1990s. In this setting, where 'building for the public good' is replaced by 'building for profit' one would be hard pressed to find an architectural culture that is not in a state of crisis of patronage which in effect has serious ramifications on the nature of production, and thus, the quality of that production in terms of its content and manifestation. As such there should be no surprise why the general built landscape of most of India's towns, cities and villages is in a dire state, in desperate need of a cohesive or even conscious engagement with the aesthetics and dynamics of inhabitation.

Couple this with an explosion of building activity over the past decade spurred by economic growth - and one is confronted by the curious situation of an immense volume of production that is not necessarily a suitable indicator for a fertile ground for architecture. As such, it reiterates the building-over-architecture debate - wherein 'architecture' as a resolution of a site's complex forces takes a backseat in the hurry to build buildings quickly enough and 'efficiently' enough.

## The Exhibition as a Trigger

With this in mind it is no mean feat that the Curators of the three-month long 'The State of Architecture' exhibition conclude with a segment entitled '**Charting Vectors**' - a potent illustration of 200 projects culled out from a



vast list of buildings completed over the past fifteen years or so of architectural production. Amongst these, around 80 projects make it to a list of buildings completed by architects (still) under the age of 50 - the emerging generation so to speak - a selection that the curators hope will indicate the broad direction along which the practice seems to be heading - and perhaps needs to head, as is described in the curatorial note thus –

*“We have chosen to emphasize architectural practices that wrestle with these challenges, bringing intellectual rigour and technical sophistication to their projects. Some among them have developed vocabularies aligned with international architectural languages while remaining attentive to the patterns and behaviours of the site. Others have attempted to embed their work in a dynamic conception of the regional as a site of contestation and experiment. Yet others have staked out the ground of alternative practices, expressed through choices of material, technique, operational methods, scale, locale, and by improvising idioms of collaboration between architects and artisans.”<sup>3</sup>*

So while these are laid out as the apparent drivers for this emerging generation of practitioners - the selection of buildings reveal a

broad range of expressions - something that is hinted at in the exhibition in the section prior to this, entitled 'A Diversity of Directions' - which lays out the pluralist nature of production since the time of economic liberalisation - it is also useful to comment that there seems to be an undercurrent amongst these works that is pointed out by the curators. But perhaps it is also pertinent to examine the expressions that these projects seek in their resolution of the myriad forces of the site and program.

These 80 projects sit in the upper storey of the NGMA, under its sumptuous low dome, and this location allows for two conditions - the vast open spread of the circular floor plate (where these 80 projects are presented on a maze of low free-standing walls) - and the peripheral drum upon which the 120 other projects are represented on an animated wall (that the curators contend represents the dynamic temporal conditions within which architecture in the country needs to exist). The projects along the periphery of the drum reflect the approach followed by co-curator Rahul Mehrotra in his book, 'Architecture in India since 1990'<sup>4</sup> wherein four broad lenses (Travelling Images, Local Assertions, Alternative Practices and Counter-Modernism) become the





*Ryewood International School, Lonavala (2011), Nu.DE*

contract' - if not for the client - but perhaps of the architect's final intent. But perhaps more startling is the rather brazen presentation of the borrowed elements as something unique and exceptional.

This tendency though, can also begin to represent a curious<sup>5</sup> immigration of an ideological stance' that is as much a function of a new generation of architects trained abroad in the cutting edge institutions during the turn of the century, as it is about a sense of ennui amongst an increased 'everywhere-ness' within the built environment that is constantly challenging the notions of place and context. Of course, the argument is that by its very immigration, the ideological stance itself is weakened or even nullified as there is a space-time transposition - and thus what remains is perhaps merely the expression of the formal attitudes that the erstwhile ideology explored as a manifestation - which explains the sense of ennui in the Surat project - or in another unsuccessful attempt - the odd marriage between a generic spatiality and the appropriated skin - as is seen in Nuru Karim's Ryewood International School in Lonavla. However, at its best, this 'immigration' can begin to illustrate the architect's personal



*GMS Grande Palladium, Mumbai (2010), Malik Architecture*

struggle to reconcile theoretical/formal aspirations borne out of this training with the realities of building within a placeless context. One such example is Malik Architecture's dramatic 'Grande Palladium' office building at the edge of the stunted aspirational environment of what was supposed to be Mumbai's new financial district, the Bandra-Kurla Complex. Here, the building's aggressive gesture and volumetric poise is as much an evocation of the strained nature of the context (as it begins to crumple and writhe almost like a restrained animal trying to free itself of its harnesses - perhaps a commentary on the city's regressive and repressive building regulations), as it is an attempt to carve out an open spatial realm ensconced within the building's underbelly (and thus inverting the generic podium-tower typology) that could have created a strong response to the nature of the street while forging a connection with it (both visual and physical)- hijacked in reality by a dilapidated building upon a site that the developer could not acquire - because of which the building unfortunately is denied the spectacle that it could have become in this blight-filled setting.



*Dept. Of Aeronautics, Chennai (2015), architectureRED*

### **The Tendency of the Visual and Material Collage**

Herein there is an assertion of individual componential and spatial difference within a more or less homogenous or cohesive building volume strategy. These differences serve to illustrate programmatic elements - and hence tend towards being diagrammatic - though fall short, as the expression of difference is not necessarily synonymous with the hard programmatic delineation within. An exemplar of this would be architectureRED's spatially enriching Department of Aeronautics in Chennai wherein the singular mass of a large building is distinctly broken down into three volumetric components - each expressed in a different material as well as the articulation of its facade - which overshadows the expression of the building's real layering of programme in its vertical section.

At a smaller scale, this tendency can be seen in the exceptional house and studio- 2 DC, built by Flying Elephant Studio in Bangalore - here the architect as client - within a tight lot that is articulated into a handful of volumes with the material delineation of the overall facade an indication of the sectional interplays. A similar approach can be seen in the rehabilitation of an earlier factory and warehouse into a design



*2DC, Bangaluru (2001), Flying Elephant Studio*

studio for Zanav by Bangalore-based Matthew & Ghosh. Here, the former reinforced concrete structure becomes a matrix upon which new elements or surfaces are grafted upon while previous layers are removed or cut into - with surgical precision - to repurpose a generic building frame into an exciting sectional study of light, shadow and structure. DCOOP resorts to this strategy in their 'Generator House' project at Veraval - where the different conditions of inhabitation (one for humans - the other for the generators) becomes a potent trigger for material and spatial exploration.

### **The Building as a Collation of Fragments**

Perhaps not stemming from the rigorously theoretical and cerebral as are the fragmentary exercises witnessed within the international architecture scene in the 1980s and 90s (with differing intentions and triggers), but definitely an off-shoot of the later 'post-modern' or scenography-driven works of Indian masters such as Charles Correa and (to a decidedly lesser extent) B V Doshi - is a stream of practice that has a tendency to play with disparate building volumes and elements expressed as a 'play of parts' within the larger whole of a 'sculptural composition'. Where it perhaps



*Shrujan Campus, Kutch (2004), Indigo Architects.*

makes a distinction from the earlier notion of the building-as-collage - is the non adherence to a singular building volume - the spatial construct thus devised as a set of parts within a whole that may or may not have any unification strategy (as that is not necessarily considered of primary importance or a chief aspiration).

This seems to be a dominating tendency for architecture today, as it allows for a set of idiosyncratic expressions that can have an immediate and resounding impact, as well as offering enough 'variety' and 'diversity' within a project (from a visual-formal-perspective) with the corresponding claim of sculptural ambitions that seem to offer some kind of a connect to the pretence of 'architecture-as-a-visual-art'. What it also allows for is the dissolution of the body of the building into a set of parts or aggregates that serve the reading of the 'building-as-townscape' - which again links us to the scenographic ambitions described earlier. As a counterpoint, this strategy also may, in certain contexts, exhibit an inability of attaining a sense of urban visual and formal cohesiveness (wherever it may be desired or needed - in the absence of any administration-driven regulations guiding the insertion of building volumes within a built fabric).



*Student Hostels, Kadappa (2008), DCOOP.*

The Capitol Masterplan and Administrative Buildings of Naya Raipur by the office of Uttam Jain and Chirag Jain is one such example - of course here with the advantage of being the first buildings upon a *tabula rasa* - as such not requiring any need for responding to any pre-existing urban condition - although one can investigate how the buildings respond to the landscape, as are the remarkable buildings by Indigo Architects in the Kutch region - a collaboration between Uday and Mausumi Andhare - that were built after the devastating 2001 earthquake. Here, a singular chromatic strategy washes the collection of buildings into a powerful evocation of place and culture - with the strong colours of desert traditions suitably interpreted into a contemporary spatial idiom and experiential narrative. Less successful is the school in Warangal by Nuru Karim of Nu.DE, where the gestures tend to the idiosyncratic. The concern with this strategy of expression, as noted earlier, is that in less accomplished hands, this design strategy tends to further the sense of the displaced and of the torn and frayed nature of our villages, towns and cities. Where our urban environments and habitats are in an urgent need of strategies of cohesion, these buildings need to fight hard to bring in that sensibility.



*Jaisalmer Airport, Jaisalmer (2013), Studio VanRo.*



*RAAS, Jodhpur (2010), The Lotus Praxis Initiative*

### **The Building-as-Diagram**

An idea that has taken hold in the international architectural discourse over the past three decades is the unapologetic resolution of the building as a programmatic diagram wherein the expression of the architecture allows for a direct and 'objective' reading of the building's inner function. This can be seen as an effort to 'rationalise' the design process and its manifestation into an objectively-guided formal disposition - as well as accommodate often conflicting and incongruous programmatic elements - or contrarily, expose and celebrate these very inconsistencies as a formalisation. This can be distinguished from a collage or from fragmentation with its inherent restraint over wilfulness or self-indulgent object-specific formal exercises - and one begins to see the building as an honest resolution of programme and its insertion into a specific context - although we still need to witness an example here that takes this diagrammatic ambition into the theoretically challenging and experientially complex territory of spatial fields or topological investigation. The Student Hostels at Kadappa University by DCOOP can be seen as one such example, as is the accomplishedly direct and unapologetically forceful expression of the building's inner

workings and its relationship to its immediate buildings in the Department of Life Sciences in Chennai by architecture RED. Opolis Architects' Symbiosis Institute building is one such example as well - with its layered programme of hall, institution and student residences within a vertical block - much like the idea of 'superposition' professed by architects such as Rem Koolhaas in the 1980s.

### **The Monument**

The sudden spurt of building activity for institutions of higher learning has resulted in a number of buildings that resort to the well-worn tendency of the monumental within spaces of higher learning - an idea that goes back to Classical times - with the assertions of institutions as Repositories or Disseminators of Knowledge, unshakeable and founded on a set of solid principles - of course ideals that have over the course of the past half century been questioned and reshaped into a contemporary quest for inclusivity and open-ness within the milieu of the institution. The opaque institution is no longer deemed to be a welcome notion - one can trace back this shift-from-the-insular to the seminal Free University Berlin project by Candilis, Josic and Woods from the late 1960s, exemplified in contemporary times by



*Triburg Headquarters, Gurgaon (2010), S.P.A. Design*



*Volvo-Eicher Headquarters, Gurgaon (2012), Romi Khosla Design Studio*

buildings such as the extraordinary new School of Architecture in Nantes by the French studio of Lacaton & Vassal, the Ørestad College by 3xn in Copenhagen, and the exemplary Workshop at the Kanagawa Technical University in Tokyo by Junya Ishigami. However, it seems that, for a culture such as ours still trapped deeply within the mired notions of the past of what a space of instruction entails as well as the conduct therein, the monumental image continues to be read synonymous with the notion of 'discipline', 'instruction' and 'discourse' - as much a connotation as a place of 'formal education' can have (remnants of an inheritance from our adherence to the British educational system) - and as such, the institution as a place of exchange and teeming energy is being forced into parochial architectures that embody a classical sensibility of 'indoctrinating discipline' as well as profess a certain preponderance and 'effort-to-impress' - that lies at odds with the systems of education currently being propagated as necessary for an agile and versatile mind. One only needs to look at the campus of the CEPT University or the National Institute of Design built decades ago, both in Ahmedabad - protractors may say that these are 'design' schools' - but that is perhaps the point - that the processes of

exchange and learning need to happen within a boundless spatial environment - that encourages the mind to wander beyond the rigid confines of the classroom-as-the-space-of-instruction - an experiment successfully engaged with by Rabindranath Tagore in his Vishwa Bharati University at Shantiniketan prior to independence.

### **The Appliqué of the Local**

Another growing genre is that of many design practices resorting to a strategy that involves the clothing or wrapping of (often generic) building volumes with a skin of 'screens' or 'jaalis' that begin to portray a semblance of context-responsiveness and climate mediation through the use of its material or through the use of motifs. Often the screen or lattice sits at odds with the dominant structural frame, like in M:OFA's ITM School of Business in Gwalior, where the screen becomes no more than a ham-fisted trope - as it becomes in the Jaisalmer Airport by Studio VanRO where the incongruity between the appliqué infill skin and the preponderous structure becomes a point of conceptual and visual conceit - thus amplifying the contrivance of place - with the polycarbonate domes an apologetic finial. At its most successful, like the RAAS Jodhpur by The



*Healthcare Centre, Dharmapuri (2011), Flying Elephant Studio.*

Lotus Praxis, it can transform into a compelling idea for a scenic and placid architecture that smoothens the possible discord between the existing situation and the new implant. Of course it needs to be actualised with exceeding skill and rigorous attention to detail for it to fulfil those intentions of a singular material presence - that the RAAS does manage to achieve - and in its case, is even technically proficient with the appliqué stone screen actually designed as a remarkable concertina-like shading device (thus no longer a static visual element, but a performative skin) that can be operated manually, transforming a set of sober building volumes into an alluring and graceful display of analogue dynamism through material and tectonic invention.

### **A New Iconography**

A set of new buildings explore the penchant for iconography in a decidedly refreshing way - using structure and program - rather than mere ornament or appliqué - as a driving force. Chief amongst them is the work of Delhi-based Stephane Paumier - who in two projects in Gurgaon - first the Tarun Tahiliani Headquarters and next the Triburg Headquarters, uses the structure and materiality of brick and reinforced concrete to such resounding and one can say



*Atali Ganga, Rishikesh (2012), RLDA Design Studio.*

original effect that the work begins to draw comparisons to Louis I Kahn's seminal explorations into the monumental and the iconographic - an architecture that, while stemming from the experience of the individual, is also intrinsically linked to the art of building. Here, forms of construction offer one newer 'motifs' and 'symbols' and a new language of interpreting the art of building through the structure-as-ornament. One can look at Romi Khosla Design Studio's office building for Volvo Eicher, also in Gurgaon, as another example of this use of the building's construction (in this case steel) as a visual language.

### **The Quest for the Frugal**

In this instance, one can decipher a consciously judicious approach in the use of materials and their detailing that makes the building express a certain sense of 'refined and articulated everyday-ness'. Downplayed or simplified design gestures, an evident pragmatism, a certain inarticulate-ness that is perhaps less accidental and more determined (perhaps because of economy or programme), can be observed as strategies to evolve an intently meditated insertion within a setting that distinguishes this as 'designed' rather than organic.



*Khaj International Artists Association, Delhi (2013),  
Studio Lotus Praxis Initiative*

Two projects that stand out (and are as different in programme and location) are a Healthcare Centre in Dharmapuri by Flying Elephant Studio (built with remarkable economy) where a simple metal sheet roofed pavilion encases a generic single storey building within verandahs shaded by pivoted reed screens, and the Atali Ganga project in Rishikesh by RLDA Design Studio, where local building practices define the materiality of the simple pavilions that seem to nonchalantly caress the powerful landscape. Another project that by its sheer atmospheric singularity binds a fragmented pre-existing condition is The Khaj International Artists Association in Delhi, by Studio Lotus. Here, through a set of interventions that tie two adjacent former townhouses together into an Arts Centre, one will find an almost transcendental approach to an everyday condition that begins to instil a set of experiences to the user shaped by the simplicity of the spatial construct. This project in many ways overcomes the limitations of the 'object' and the 'formal' - aided perhaps by the fact that the new interventions required were a few - but it is in the nature of their making and their integration into the previous matrix where one finds a promising way to deal with ageing building stock within our dense inner



*Mewar Complex, Udaipur (2008), Arya Architects.*

city contexts, in an age of rampant raze-and-build - where the frugality of operation succeeds in a certain 'celebration' of the previous and of the repurposed - the preservation of memory - not necessarily as a palimpsest as much as perhaps a unified and singularly expressed entity where juxtaposition as a strategy (that highlights the differences) is consciously eschewed.

### **The Quest for a Unique Language**

While these are a handful of tendencies that one can see amongst others (and I do not wish to assert that these are the only ones that can be observed - there would be others as well), it would be pertinent to observe (less perhaps in the last few examples stated above) a predominantly 'object-centric' approach to architecture - wherein the 'crafting' of the building and the organisation of programme take precedence over the primacy of individual experience or the thorough spatial quest for an indescribable 'immersion' - tactile, perceptual, cognitive, kinaesthetic, psychological - within a built spatiality<sup>6</sup> that leads to an environment where the crafting of the building-as-object develops as a result of the conception of experience, perception and atmosphere as a response to place and context rather than the



*GKD Charity Trust Crematorium, Coimbatore (2014), Mancini Enterprises.*

other way round. The Khoj project comes close to this quest in many ways in the manner described earlier - especially in its favouring of the experience of the whole rather than its consistent parts. This is an extremely cerebral task, and requires an often internalised design process or a steadfastness and rigour of theoretical and thus spatial conception.

One such project is the new Crematorium in Coimbatore by Chennai-based Mancini Enterprises<sup>7</sup> - an exceptional and seminal building that actually, amidst the myriad voices, has the sheer power to stand out as a unique work within the 80 represented in the last section of the exhibition. For me, this work represents a kind of synthesis of the challenges that one is confronted with today - and with a process of conception that stems from an investigation of the country's 'pre-modern' architectural heritage, it also side-steps the clichés and scenographic dispositions of the romanticised or fanaticised look at 'heritage' - articulating that investigation into a profound narrative of personal experience and phenomenal resolution that not only creates a distinct language, but also offers a new take on the typology of the pavilion, the relationship of the built within that which is not, the tectonic

invention of its roof frame and bounding walls drawn from an interpretation of traditional ways of building, plus a material singularity that is compelling. As such it is able to offer something 'new' and genuinely unique that does not necessarily seem to have obvious predecessors or precedent.

This project, one may also note, expands a previous building - as such it falls under the typology of 'redevelopment' - a much maligned term today that is synonymous with profit and the destruction of the fabric of memory in all our cities - compounded by the lack of any kind of building regulation or aesthetic/ spatial determinants that encourages a creative re-engagement with the historic city. Here, fittingly for a crematorium that celebrates the cyclical nature of life and death and the singularity of beings within the universe, the rejuvenation of the site and its former buildings becomes a stark reminder of the necessity for invention that stems from a non-struggle of seeing tradition and revolution as forces in conjunction and not in opposition. As a project that through its intellectual and tectonic rigour celebrates the continuity of existence, the Crematorium becomes this

affirmative voice of a continuity through invention, through a deeply meditated stance. Another building that offers us a unique language of expression is the Mewar Complex in Rajasthan by Ahmedabad-based Arya Architects - placed as it is with a strong symbolism through a solid, robust stance that marks its sense of calm within the harsh semi-arid conditions.

### **A Manifesto for the Future?**

The attempt to search for a unique language is perhaps an ardent necessity if we are not to be washed away by the tide of pervasive and placeless image-making that much of architecture has been turned (or condemned) into being. Perhaps for a country such as ours - with its diverse histories and vast geographies, one would have expected a greater attempt at conscious and cerebral engagement with a site's history or the embodiment of a place's specificity. For that to happen however, one may need to consciously challenge the wave of 'images' within which much of architectural discourse seems to be rooted (or trapped). Perhaps this would mean a greater engagement with the Humanities and disciplines outside of 'Architecture' for it to be enriched - and for architects to be able to ask questions beyond those of the formal/visual that will find their resolution in space-form anyway.

If architecture schools are unable to evolve a structure of discourse that broadens the discussion within the institution, it is perhaps left upon the practitioner to adopt investigative strategies that offer one an opportunity for spatial constructs filled with an inventive attitude to the articulation of the contradictions and complexities of our time. And whether this articulation can find its resolution less as a

scenographic exercise that much of architecture has become (our ubiquitous shopping malls and hotels are no different) and more of an experiential engagement with the myriad forces that shape the site and the insertion of the building programme upon it.

This will hopefully lead us away from a predominantly form-heavy attitude to one of consciously creating experiences - a transformation of seeing architecture from the inside, far removed from image-making - and thus offer us a more liberating mental construct within which to practice architecture. Perhaps that is the biggest take away from the exhibition. And we have the craft and the skill, as many buildings displayed in the exhibition show - to pull off the actualisation of any such cerebral quest in material form. ■

### **Acknowledgements:**

Images of the exhibition by Tekton team.  
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### **Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>The State of Architecture: Practices & Processes in India'- an exhibition on post-independence architecture India curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote, Kaiwan Mehta- held at the NGMA, Mumbai between 06 January and 20 March 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Rasmus Wern & Gert Wingardh, 2015, What is Architecture? and 100 Other Questions, Lawrence King.

<sup>3</sup>From the curatorial note of the SOA exhibition.

<sup>4</sup> Rahul Mehrotra, 2011, Architecture in India: since 1990, Hatje Cantz.

<sup>5</sup>For an exploration of this tendency, see my critique of Malik Architecture's Alibaug House in DOMUS India, DI 18, May 2013, pg 48-57.

<sup>6</sup>One can look at OASE#91, Building Atmosphere, 2013.

<sup>7</sup>See my critique of the building in DOMUS India, DI 21, September 2013, pg 44-51.