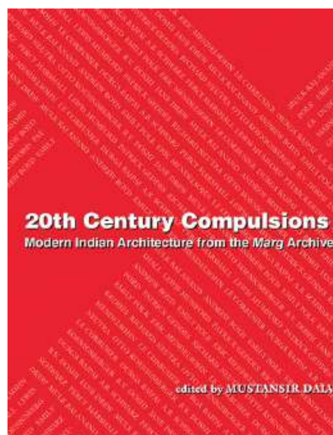
BOOK REVIEW

Annotating Legacies

Nancy Adajania



20th Century Compulsions: Modern Indian Architecture from the Marg Archives
(2016)

Editor:
Mustansir Dalvi

Publisher:
The Marg Foundation, Bombay

Pages: 156
Price: Rs.690

Tekton
Volume 3, Issue 2, September 2016
pp. 112 - 117

Long before Mulk Raj Anand became the founding editor of *Marg* in 1946, he had achieved renown as a writer whose sympathies lay with the subaltern. Anand's novel *Untouchable* (1935), which traces a day in the life of the sweeper and scavenger Bakha, remains as relevant today as it was in the early part of the 20th century. The apartheid of caste continues to rule Indian society; under the ministrations of electoral identitarian politics, it assumes new and ever more grotesque forms. A few months ago, seven members of a Dalit family in Una, Gujarat, were tied to a car and brutally flogged for skinning a dead cow. *Untouchable* ends at the crossroads of three choices that could enable Bakha to throw off the curse of untouchability. The first two – to become a Christian, or to follow Gandhi's path of living within the fold of Hinduism while peacefully persuading upper-caste Hindus to give up their discriminatory ways – perplex Bakha. He is uncomfortable with the idea of a god who died for the sins of human beings, the concept of sin being alien to him; nor can he wholeheartedly embrace the Mahatma, who wants the untouchables to continue scavenging while keeping the caste status quo more or less intact. The third option is the introduction of a "flush system". This, Bakha finds bewildering but not implausible: at least it holds the potential to emancipate the sweepers from their humiliating

routines, and could lead to a casteless and classless society.

As readers, we recognise that Mulk Raj Anand's own convictions were squarely premised on the third choice: the promise of a modern machine age that would overrule superstition and act as the harbinger of social equality. This technocratic dream became a reality in the Nehruvian republic, which valorized the engineer as a national hero. It is not surprising, then, that the advertisements in the early editions of the *Marg* magazine publicized the building materials and accoutrements for a modern nation.

The debates that animated Anand's work as a writer and activist for various causes were formative for many members of his generation, and shaped the institutions they founded or developed. These debates concerned the civilizational past, as it lingered in the present: Was it a hindrance to the project of modernity; or could it be integrated into a uniquely Indian vision and practice of the modern? Related to this was the tension between the nationalist and the internationalist worldviews. The impact of these debates on Indian architecture is foregrounded by the architect and academic Mustansir Dalvi in an anthology of essays that he has edited, *20th Century Compulsions: Modern Indian Architecture from the Marg Archives.* By harvesting and annotating essays published over three of the most formative decades for modern Indian architecture – 1946 to 1972 – Dalvi has produced an extremely valuable and indeed essential pedagogic resource. It will undoubtedly instruct and edify generations of students. Importantly, he has deliberately eschewed *Marg's* signature coffee-table format in favour of a handy demy octavo format. Punctuated with discreet illustrations and historically relevant facsimiles, this volume is both accessible and portable for the student and layperson.

The occasion of the publication of this anthology is significant. Early in 2016, the curators of the exhibition-conference constellation, *The State of Architecture: Practices and Processes in India– Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote and Kaiwan Mehta* – put together a large display of architectural practices in India since Independence, replete with Eamesian timelines and elaborate infographics, at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bombay, up the street from the Army & Navy Building, historically the editorial headquarters of *Marg*. In keeping with their ethic of producing broad-based didactics for the study of post-Independence architecture, the curators of *State of Architecture* proposed the idea for such an anthology. Under Dalvi's deft editorial baton, we now have at our disposal crucial evidentiary material that allows us to map the curve of late-colonial and early post-colonial discourse on architecture in India.

Marg borrowed its acronym, the Modern Architectural Research Group, from the eponymous MARS Group, which was founded in Britain in 1933 by architects such as Wells Coates, Maxwell Fry and F R S Yorke. While the magazine was influenced by MARS' utopian socialist ideas concerning urban planning, it also aimed to craft an independent 'path' (the Sanskrit meaning of the term) for itself. The founding team of *Marg* in 1946 included Anand and his assistant editor Anil de Silva, who was one of the founders of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Association), as well as the art historian and collector of miniature paintings Karl

Khandalavala, who acted as the art advisor. The panel of contributing editors for the first issue comprised, among others, Otto Koenigsberger, M J P Mistri, Hermann Goetz, Rudy von Leyden, and Anil de Silva's sister, Minnette De Silva, who was the first trained Sri Lankan woman architect.

Anand declared his activist predilection from the very inception of the magazine, describing the first issue as a "manifesto…to spread the knowledge of the ancient and contemporary principles of architecture in our country and abroad." (p.10) And indeed, this first issue carried an actual and extraordinary 10-page manifesto of intent and historical purpose shaped in the finest spirit of the avant-garde. Titled 'Architecture and You', this fascinating document – which has been reproduced in facsimile in Dalvi's anthology – works its spell through a combination of strategies including the line drawing, the diagram, the plan, the rebus, the photographic chart, and the assemblage of quotations. Uncompromising in its ideological stance and rhetoric, it makes no bones about abhorring an architecture that is based on either a "spurious antiquity" or a "vulgar modernity" (p.82). The ideal architecture, according to this manifesto, is one that marries superior engineering skills with an understanding of social needs (p.78); it extols the virtues of the machine as "the new and wondrous tool" of freedom (p.78). It heavily underlines the need for a context-specific architecture that is sensitive to the climate, material and topography and favours a socialist distribution of wealth as being truly expressive of a productive contemporary "national character" (p.85) while condemning an empty "nationalism" that invokes historical symbols and vocabularies that are mere fetishes or fossils in the present. The manifesto cautions architects against producing such a bogus "Indian Style of architecture" based on the arbitrary grafting old architectural expressions on new forms; one of the illustrations of the Taj Mahal emphasizes this point with a blunt caption: "Railway station or Mogul palace?" (p.83) These caveats remain powerfully relevant even in 2016.

Viewed at a distance of 70 years, we admire the authors of this bold manifesto for their ability to wrestle with paradox. While acknowledging regional specificities and invoking a "national character", they yet repose their faith in the machine as a means of breaking down "the old regional and social barriers [to produce] an expression of life common to all the peoples of the world". [p. 86] Unsurprisingly, the manifesto opens with the cardinal Vitruvian principles of utility, stability and beauty in architecture and traces an arc to conclude with a paean to what seem like the contemporary incarnations of Vitruvius: the unornamented, internationalist approaches of Erich Mendelsohn, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright.

Such an intense life of the mind, such a commitment to sustain a relay between ideas and practice, distinguished the work of the contributors to *Marg* whose writings appear in Dalvi's selection. Here we find the legendary Scottish sociologist and town planner Patrick Geddes, forerunner to the ecologists of a later generation, writing on 'Trees and Open Spaces'. In turn, the American sociologist Lewis Mumford pays tribute to Geddes. The German-born architect and planner Otto Koenigsberger critiques the Greater Bombay Scheme as early as 1947, pointing out the absence of

clear terms of reference, and indicating concerns related to housing and traffic that to this day afflict Bombay's suburban sprawl. Distinguished international presences, drawn early into the ambit of *Marg,* live again in *20th Century Compulsions*: the poet and painter Emily Polk, who, with her husband, the architect Benjamin Polk, wrote an account of Nehru's India; the major modernist architect Jane Drew, who developed social housing projects in the UK, Africa and India, and who worked with her husband Maxwell Fry and Le Corbusier's cousin Pierre Jeanneret, on housing projects in Chandigarh in the 1950s. And there is, of course, that foundational figure in the narrative of postcolonial Indian architecture, Le Corbusier, represented in this anthology by two texts, 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow' and 'Urbanism', as well as by a note on him by his acolyte and future eminence of Indian architecture, B V Doshi.

It is interesting to follow the itineraries and affiliations of the Indian architects who wrote for *Marg* during the first three decades of its existence; Dalvi's selection includes two practitioners – Durga Bajpai and B V Doshi. I would particularly like to focus on Bajpai, who studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), worked with the Finnish architect Alvar Aalto, and gave Bombay its first public art space, the Jehangir Art Gallery, which opened in 1952.

In his article, 'Co-operative Housing' (1951), Bajpai sketches out the socialist housing schemes of Scandinavian countries as possible templates for newly independent India. This essay resonates with the influence of Aalto, who taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) during World War II. A number of his students were subsequently involved in conceptualizing and devising inexpensive social housing in his native Finland, which had been devastated by the war. Since obtaining land was the biggest hurdle for cooperative housing societies in Scandinavian countries, it was acquired by municipalities and given to people at a very low rent. The idea was to enable people to lead productive lives of dignity, rather than to treat them as permanently stigmatized victims of abjection. Bajpai specifically celebrates the 'self-help housing' scheme in 1920s Stockholm, through which the tenants or owners of houses could assist in their construction, thus allowing them to participate in the city-building process rather than leaving them feeling distanced and alienated.

Bajpai hopes that Indians will stop complaining about their government's ineptitude and adopt the Scandinavian ethic of 'self-help'. The hope sounds a plangent idealism to our cynical ears. We know that, even as early as the 1950s, the unwieldy and inflexible bureaucratic machinery was unwilling to adapt itself to a citizen-oriented ethic, geared as it was to serve a resource- and rent-extractive colonial state. Land that was promised to the tiller remained with landlords in all but four districts in the country; rentiers and tenantry in the city were left locked in a violent embrace defined by arbitrary property ceilings, frozen rents, and a myopic refusal to take urban design seriously.

Whether in Bajpai's writing or in Anand's, the emphasis, in these early years, was on questions of social justice. Dalvi foregrounds Anand's editorial for the first *Marg* issue ('Planning and Dreaming', 1946), which

envisaged planning as a holistic process that regarded the villages, towns and cities of India as a continuum, rather than adopting a model that articulated the dominance of the city over the hinterland (which, unfortunately, remains to this day the Indian State's default position). More significantly, for Anand, *homo ludens* (the human being as player) was as important as *homo faber* (the human being as maker). "[P] lanning… does not mean what it is superficially supposed to mean, a mechanized, regimented life," he wrote. "On the contrary, planning is like dreaming… of a new world." (p.15) *Marg's* strong advocacy of the plans for Le Corbusier's Chandigarh and Charles Correa, Shirish Patel and Pravina Mehta's New Bombay were to have a concrete influence on policy.

"Le Corbusier, of all the architects from the West, featured most prominently in the pages of *Marg*," writes Dalvi in his Introduction. "Mulk was both an advocate for the great master as an architect as well as for his proposal for Chandigarh." (p. 15) I find it ironic that Anand, who had fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and was a committed critic of Fascism, could also be a great votary of Le Corbusier. Anand, apparently, did or would not recognise the 'regimenting', proto-fascist implications of Corbusier'sapproach to urban planning. As early as 1925, in his megalomaniac Plan Voisin, Corbusier had proposed to bulldoze central Paris and replace it with 18 cruciform glass office towers, each 60 stories high, constructed in a rectangular grid of green space. In a sweeping, authoritarian gesture, Corbusier decreed that the technocratic elite and artists would inhabit the city centre while the workers would be shunted to the urban periphery. Fortunately for Paris, the Plan Voisin was junked by France's politicians.

We often repeat – and in repeating endow with the force of proverbial wisdom – Nehru's remark that the Chandigarh plan was a salutary whack on the head for Indians, which would jolt them out of their fossilized ways of living and being. But we forget that Corbusier served on the planning committee of the conservative Vichy regime during World War II, a regime that was distinguished for its anti-women and anti-Semitic attitudes, and which placed labour unions under tight surveillance.

This reviewer has long been perturbed by the fact that the ideological underpinnings of Corbusier's thought and work have not been subjected to critical analysis in India. This is not surprising, considering that he gave postcolonial India its first planned city and was a mentor figure or exemplar to an entire generation of Indian architects who were influenced by this iconic architect-as-artist. To many Indian practitioners, his advent opened up imaginative horizons beyond the limited purview of a British-colonial architectural paradigm, and a way of connecting themselves with truly international tendencies. I would surmise that the key reason why Corbusier's role in the Vichy regime – and the authoritarianism of his urban planning and housing models – goes unexamined in the Indian architectural world is because architectural discourse is generally isolated from politics in this country. That, and the need among some Indian architects to spiritualize the Master's ideas and working concepts, especially that of "Modular Man". But unfortunately, this abdication of critique and espousal of enthusiasm and veneration begins with Anand, who should have known better.

We are, admittedly, armed with the magic weapon of hindsight. But an anthology such as Dalvi's allows us to transmute the wisdom-after-the-event of hindsight into the more sober, engaged, and productive stance of retro-prospection. We look back in order to look ahead better; looking back over these essays from just before Independence to just after the Bangladesh War, we find a juxtaposition of sometimes rival possibilities and choices that are achingly urgent to us: economic expansion or ecological sensitivity; social housing or spectacular urbanization; the austere predilections of architectural modernity or the sumptuous consolations of sculptural tradition?

With this anthology, Mustansir Dalvi has taken on the challenge of reversing the scourge of amnesia that afflicts architectural history in India, as it does cultural history at large in the subcontinent. He has cleared the ground for us, his readers. Through such welcome archival initiatives, we may yet learn to annotate our legacy with precision and intensity – not to raise this reputation or tear that reputation down, for that is the work of gossip not history, but to see our still-present past with all its complexities and contradictions. ■

Nancy Adajania is a cultural theorist and curator based in Bombay.
Her latest book, The Thirteenth Place: Positionality as Critique in the Art of Navjot Altaf (The Guild, Bombay, 2016) combines an art historical perspective with a politics of culture approach. Adajania has written extensively on media art, public art, the biennial culture, transcultural art practices, and the relationship of art to the public sphere.

Adajania was Joint Artistic Director of the 9th Gwangju Biennale (2012) and has curated a number of exhibitions including 'No Parsi is an Island' (National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi, 2016), which retrieves artistic positions that have been marginalised from canonical accounts of Indian art history, and a cycle of video art for the Jewish Museum, New York (2015).

✉ nancyadajania@gmail.com