

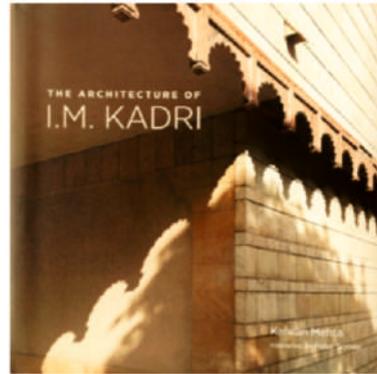
An Ode to the Craftsman

Richa Sharma

The noted historian, Ramchandra Guha during a lecture in Mumbai said while highlighting the lack of documentation of the contemporary, post-Independence history of India: “The history of the fifties, sixties and seventies, the decades in which the nation was shaped is absolutely crucial”.¹ This is especially true of architecture. It is rare to find critics' commentary on architects of post-independent India besides just a few.

'The Architecture of I.M. Kadri' by Kaiwan Mehta, an architecture and art theorist and critic, attempts to renew the sense of not only archiving the recent past but also reading it in a relevant and objective context. The book is a thoughtful insight into the body of work by Iftikhar M. Kadri, whose practice is responsible for many landmark buildings, particularly in Bombay. And in spite of a noteworthy career, Kadri has received scarce attention. Indeed, the book brings out a much needed appraisal of Kadri's significant contribution.

The book opens with a foreword by architectural historian and critic Peter Scriver. Mehta himself refrains from the conventional methodology of chronological project documentations. Rather, he structures this expansive body of



The Architecture of I.M. Kadri (2016)

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work into thematic chapters that analyse various aspects of an incredible architectural journey which spans over fifty years now, also capturing facets of his evolving professional and personal life. The chapters are crisp and short and have a generous spread of well captioned illustrations both as drawings and photographs. These not only support the text but go on to define the book as a visual narrative of the IMK practice. One can flip through these images alone to get a complete sense of the book's contents/arguments. The author describes and deconstructs the work as an emerging and evolving architectural style of its own, its elements, its determinants and the context it is set in; and this was only possible through the eye of a critic. The book concludes with a chronological project listing- works ranging from residential, commercial, official, hospitality, religious and institutional.

The initial chapters, 'Five Decades of Change' and 'A Convergence of Architectural Idioms' describe the background in which Kadri began his career. They detail his early exposure to history, his upbringing in Ahmedabad and Delhi. Here, one learns that while schooling in Delhi at Jamia Milia Islamia, young Kadri was immensely inspired by the Austrian architect, Karl Malte von Heinz, who later became his mentor and guide. This profound influence instigated Kadri to pursue a future in creating buildings. He trained as an engineer in Pune and after a brief sojourn to foreign lands, a chance meeting sowed the seeds of his architectural practice in Bombay.

Mumbai, formerly Bombay was as much in the making as was Kadri's practice, trying to find its feet in the new emerging financial centre of

the country. Through chapters, 'Building Life in a Metropolis' and 'Designing the Urban Home', Mehta delves into Bombay in particular. The political, economic and socio-cultural canvas of both the city and nation posed new demands and entailed prudent interventions. Kadri's architecture not only addresses the challenges of housing, building vertical and experimenting with material but also creatively stacks spaces with a sense of inherent aesthetic in the city's context. Most significant projects – The Nehru Centre, Happy Home and School for the Blind, Shivsagar Estate, Brighton, Islam Gymkhana, CEAT Bhavan, Haveli House, Otters Club, Swapnalok, to name a few, adorn the urban landscape of Mumbai and are in many ways seminal. His exemplary contribution to urban Bombay proves that not only did Bombay shape the architect in Kadri but so did Kadri shape the city as well. Further on, Kadri became a pioneer of hotel architecture in India having to his credit landmark hotels for the Taj and the Oberoi groups. He has also done off-shore assignments in South-east Asia and the Middle East.

The 'Question of Beauty' explores visual character and scale in I.M. Kadri's architecture; both meticulously defined and well executed. Ornamentation skilfully brings out an engineered beauty of material and design. It is never forced or pastiche and so well harmonises historic references in a modern setting. The façade is an integral constituent of imagery. It is the transgression of the private to the public and Kadri masters the art of creating one through the use and repetition of versatile elements, motifs, *jalis*, textures, solid and void compositions. Landscape, in the form of gardens is another vital element that manifests itself in many parts

of his buildings, such as the balconies, terraces, podiums, foregrounds. Green extensions and connections are indeed indispensable components; in a way his architecture may be referred as 'set in a garden'.

The book is an outcome of an intense research of a practice that has been well documented and preserved; perhaps the last of a remaining few offices that created architecture from the drawing board. The drawings, in particular the 3D views/perspectives also showcased in the section '*Portfolio of drawings*' are nostalgic of an era gone by. These intricately detailed renderings, mostly in black and white reveal a clarity of architectural thought, wherein the elements of *firmitas, utilitas, venustas* come together as a unified whole.

One would rather look at I.M. Kadri as a craftsman; so skilfully does he blend the genius of the two - his training as an engineer, thus the confidence in dealing with structure, and his practice as an architect with an innate sensitivity to site and context and a yearning for beauty. There isn't a particular school of thought or architectural philosophy that one can associate with IMK's oeuvre. In a recent interview to a newspaper daily he said, "Whatever the style of architecture, four rules must be met – fulfil the client's requirement, visualise in a way your client has not envisaged, assign at least one element to make the building noticeable on the cityscape and do not repeat the design."² Perhaps, it is this unburdening of an 'accepted narrative of history' that architects are habituated to align to that allows him his ingenuity.

Kaiwan Mehta presents a refreshing and inventive outlook to an architectural appraisal and consciously stays clear of burdening architectural theory. The book is a delight to read and behold, making it suitable to all reader profiles; something which only the works of I.M. Kadri could have allowed. ■

Notes

¹Dr. Ramchandra Guha speaking on "The Challenges of Contemporary History" at the 11th Annual Lecture organised by Godrej Archives in Mumbai on 19th January, 2016. Details can be found on <http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/major-gaps-exist-in-historical-understanding-of-post-independence-india-ramachandra-guha/>

²Interview of Architect I.M. Kadri, 'I don't like to name my buildings', published in DNA, Mumbai, 03.04.2016, p.10.

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