

A Quilt of Many Colours

Suprio Bhattacharjee

“*A Quilt of Many Colours*” – these are Brinda Somaya’s own words, from her note of acknowledgment in the book’s starting pages, as she describes this monograph that carries her name. In many ways this quoted extract is reflective of her practice as well, shaped by myriad circumstances and situations, each project as a (truly) unique response to that site and setting – it would be difficult, almost impossible to pigeonhole the practice within stylistic or attitudinal silos – and thus representative of her seamless weaving of the multiple forces that shape a setting into a specific architectural outcome. At the same time, the power of her persona and presence is well-known within architectural circles, and in many ways, this presence also defines the output of her practice – more than mere objects, these are quiet yet deeply entrenched assimilations of their context without any predilection for the latest fads or ‘trends’. As such an overview of her work has been long coming.

The first thing that caught me off guard was the sheer size of this monograph, and its rather unadorned, minimal envelope. Like a volume on the exploits of a daring figure carrying the name of its eponymous heroine, the architect’s name is splashed boldly across the front cover with an accompanying sub-title, and below are the words



Brinda Somaya: Works & Continuities

Editor:
Nandini Somaya Sampat

Curator:
Ruturaj Parikh

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– ‘An Architectural Monograph’ – where the publisher’s name (or logo) usually appears.

This unusual and ‘makes-you-want-to-do-a-double-take’ front cover begins to give one an inkling of what to expect, or not to expect. As far as monographs go, this one combines aspects of a memoir with that of a documentary of projects with critique or commentary. As an amalgamation of diverse ways in which monographs have been produced, it initiates a new type so to speak – one in which various forms of representation of an architect’s works are brought together seamlessly. That is perhaps the biggest achievement of the book’s curator, Raturaj Parikh, who correctly side-steps being called the book’s author, preferring to be seen as the person responsible for ‘bringing it all together’, to create a meta-narrative or meta-structure if you like – through a perceptive and critical eye of course.

Within these cover pages, one finds essays in the form of commentaries on Somaya’s work by historians Jon Lang and Mary Woods, a heartfelt essay by Porus Olpadwala, as well as a critical look at her work in the context of contemporary practice by Raturaj Parikh. There are also intriguing and insightful conversations between Brinda Somaya and fellow practitioners and academics from diverse fields – mirroring her own inter-disciplinary approach towards architecture – Arun Shourie (yes!), the always enthralling Kamu Iyer, Mary Woods and Saryu Doshi. Notes by her international collaborators – James Polshek and the hallowed New York-based duo Tod Williams and Billie Tsien (the partnership with whom has led to the remarkable TCS Banyan

Park) book-end the entire volume. Somaya’s daughter Nandini Somaya Sampat is credited with editing the book, and Tina Nussirabadwala for the book’s remarkably spare, clear layout, typefaces and design.

Most importantly though, in the book, Brinda Somaya speaks to us through her project narratives – a welcome, earnest voice, that acts as a guide to the history of how the projects have shaped up, and what she finds special about each. As each narrative unfolds, core ideas that shape the studio’s works become clear, and one can begin to see these ideas take shape in the resolution of built actualities. She also does not shy away from using this canvas as a space of critique of contemporary practices and attitudes as experienced through her projects – and in many ways this relives the experience of having heard her speak on multiple occasions at multiple venues over the years – an articulate, eloquent voice, firm and yet gentle, extremely measured yet rich in what it conveys. As she writes on her projects, one can also begin to assess how thoughts and ideas have matured over the years, and the manner in which similar ideas have borne fruit through different projects across geographies and time.

Recently, there has been quite a wave of monographs on Indian architects hitting the shelves – most of them self-initiated (by the architect), and this is no different. While this does cast doubt on the very intellectual and critical merit of the monograph itself – one is relieved to state that this book joins other recent monographs (the ones on Mahendra Raj and I. M. Kadri come to mind) on the Indian architecture scene that are deservedly well

researched and well published – with insightful narratives and writings within a studied meta-narrative or meta-structure. Additional highlights include copious recent photographs of buildings to honestly represent their current state, their adaptation of use, and their age – filled with things, the marks of weathering and people and the imprints of occupation (a welcome change from sterile, people-less photographs of ‘perfect’ buildings shot when they have just been freshly completed) printed in large format. I spent quite some time looking through these generous depictions of the state of these buildings in the present – yes, they have aged beautifully and if I need to pick a favourite, it will be the series on the reconstructed Bhadli school and village. There is also the persistent presence of crisp and well-represented drawings – made specifically for the book. Some of these drawings are accommodated in foldouts inserted like sudden surprise finds – which, within this massive tome, open up enticingly to reveal a record of a building’s anatomy. Quite a thrill this turns out to be, and at the other extreme, from the disappointing quality of representation and reproduction of drawings and images in the recent monograph on the seminal work of Achyut Kanvinde.

The book in many ways also heralds a change of guard – after 40 years spent in the production of around 200 projects, Brinda Somaya subtly mentions about ‘entrusting the future of the office’ to her daughter Nandini – who also authors an introductory biographical text on her mother and her work. While the book does not give a complete account of the output of the practice, there is a chronology at the end of the book for those who wish to find

out more – and one will be looking forward to another volume where her entire oeuvre is published to the same level of detail. Most importantly though, this book is an account of a practice led by a trail-blazing individual who’s belief in diversity, inclusivity, her roots and the cause for building for the greater social good and the public is at the heart of her work. That she is a woman architect in a (still) male-superstar-dominated profession will ring out loud and clear in these pages – and that perhaps the empathy that comes with it has shown her the path to projects (or led those projects to her?) that make for a fulfilling and varied typological repertoire. In her own words, “...I am an Indian and all what I am comes from my heritage. It is an intrinsic part of my being and will naturally reflect in my work in many ways. The architect’s role is that of a guardian, he or she is the conscience of the built and the unbuilt environment...” ■



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