

The Agency of Architecture: In Conversation with Rahul Mehrotra

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Credit: RMA Architects

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Rahul Mehrotra is a practising architect and educator. He works in Mumbai and teaches at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, where he is Professor of Urban Design and Planning, and Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design as well as a member of the steering committee of Harvard's South Asia Initiative.

His practice, RMA Architects (www.RMAarchitects.com), founded in 1990, has executed a range of projects across India. These diverse projects have engaged many issues, multiple constituencies and varying scales, from interior design and architecture to urban design, conservation and planning. As Trustee of the Urban Design Research Institute (UDRI), and Partners for Urban Knowledge Action and Research (PUKAR) both based in Mumbai, Mehrotra continues to be actively involved as an activist in the civic and urban affairs of the city.

Mehrotra has written and lectured extensively on architecture, conservation and urban planning. He has written, co-authored and edited a vast repertoire of books on Mumbai, its urban history, its historic buildings, public spaces and planning processes.

He is a member of the Steering Committee of the Aga Khan Awards for Architecture and currently serves on the governing boards of the London School of Economics Cities Programme and the Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS).

It is inevitable that any interview with Rahul Mehrotra is going to be multi-disciplinary in nature. In his person and in his practice Mehrotra straddles several spheres with ease- architecture, planning, urbanism, history, conservation, research, social concerns, socio-urban activism, writing and pedagogy, all this with a critical eye on the present. He has been an initiator of the architectural conservation movement in Mumbai that set an example for the rest of India and (with Sharada Dwivedi) the primary narrator of the history of Mumbai. In his work, Mehrotra explores beyond the obvious, 'beyond binaries', as he puts it, making each project a transformative one for the users and the immediate physical context. He has been teaching fulltime for the past decade and his practice and research come together and are forwarded by his pedagogical interests. This conversation covers many of his interests and becomes a dialogue of ideas and possibilities.

DALVI

In your architectural projects at RMA, you have frequently gone beyond the conventional limits of site, even immediate context. You have tried to incorporate the intangible, addressed socio-cultural immediacies, and sought new significance, whether in projects like Hathigaon in Jaipur, the more globalized offices for corporate houses or even single-family dwellings.

MEHROTRA

For me understanding the 'context of the context' is the starting point. I think the physical excavations of a site are the more obvious parameters to extricate – climate, geology, materials availability, local craft and building practises etc. The more challenging, but perhaps far more nourishing excavation is making the relationships between this obvious set of excavations from the site with the more intangible, the deeper histories, implicit cultures, the broader contemporary flows etc.



Kala Ghoda Art District:
Constructing new significance for historic public spaces - the evolving Kala Ghoda art district.

credit: RMA Architects

DALVI

Could you describe the processes that allow you to, as you say 'localize the global and globalize the local'? How do these impact design?

MEHROTRA

This establishing of the 'context of the context' allows one to go beyond simplistic binaries and, sort of, invert categories in an exciting way. For me the questions of significance, identity etc. are not found categories – these have to be constructed and the only way one can do that as a designer is to situate the site and its reading within the larger, ever evolving context. In this same way the global and local as a binary is not productive and the challenge then is how we invert them, because by localizing the global you get these flows to be more invested in the local. Inversely, the local as a caricature of itself is less useful in comparison to when the local resonates globally or is at least networked globally. Thus for me the exercise of writing, research and teaching in that sense are completely part of the practice as they become the forum for this kind of excavation and research which becomes the basis for practice.



SPARC Public Toilet Prototype:
A prototype for public toilets in Mumbai slums - project for SPARC and SDI.

credit: RMA Architects

DALVI

Can you elaborate on the idea of 'inverting categories'?

MEHROTRA

At the urban level, an example of this inverting of categories to blur binaries is the case of the Kala Ghoda Art district. Situated within a historic district this zone was never an art district. If one had approached the problem using the narrative of the culture that created this environment – such as the canons that determine conservation practise in the UK – we would have frozen this space in time – probably written up its significance and been rather dogmatic about what we should allow there or not. However, when the custodians of an environment are another culture – we have to find other ways of engaging with this process – especially in the post colonial situation of Mumbai. By constructing a new significance of the Kala Ghoda as an Art District allowed the historic and contemporary to blur. The symbolic and ideological significance of the space was drained in a sense to allow the occupation of new use– ones that ultimate drove the process of conservation. In this condition the responsibilities that rest on the architect are even greater as they have to walk the thin line between constructing a new significance and keeping the illusion of the historic built form intact!

Another example is the Slum Dwellers international (SDI) where its very local experience through its international networks

resonates globally in terms of lessons, approaches and attitudes emanating out of something that is such a specific condition - life in a Mumbai slum! One could have fetishized and caricatured the local as it is seen as specific, but the moment it is 'globalized', in this case through a network, its resonance amplifies in productive ways.

DALVI

The millennium is now almost a decade and a half old now. Do you see trends/tropes in Indian architecture that will have a long-term impact on design, beyond quotidian practice?

MEHROTRA

The kind of architecture we are seeing perpetuated by an infusion of footloose capital is resulting a hardening of the disparities that exist in our society. The built form manifestations of these inequities actually create deadly polarities. Perhaps these inequities have always existed but were less evident in the past. Sometimes the just the illusion of equity is perhaps more productive in the long run in terms of how different parts of society slip into each other's domains in space. But when architecture begins to play a role in dissuading and perhaps even preventing that blur, that transgression- I think we are setting ourselves up for a highly polarized society.

It is a condition where architecture becomes the instrument to create forms of exclusiveness. In this condition, as architects we have to be mindful of how we create expressions of form and spatial arrangements that don't get co-opted in a process that is exclusionary. If we have to maintain our relevance to society as practitioners we have no choice but to press architecture to the service of society in more rigorous ways. I think questions of inequity and the role of architecture: place making and dealing with orchestrations of the built environment more generally will have to once again become the focus of both the teaching and practice of architecture.

DALVI

Are you optimistic about our architectural futures, or has 'impatient capital' overtaken us completely?

MEHROTRA

The architecture of Impatient Capital is brittle – its fault lines are already becoming evident – its obvious detachment from place and its unsustainable consumption of resources. Surely as human being we are more intelligent than to be seduced by this paradigm.

I think the greatest role architecture can play in the coming decades in India is to resist strategically the remaking of our cities and built environments in a singular image (like China has done). Instead I think architecture will and should remind us in our daily lives about the richness in India of the pluralistic society we live in.

DALVI

We seem to have opted for this singularity ourselves, as in this current election. Overwhelmingly, or so it seems, those aspiring impatiently for capital, or those impatiently wishing to express themselves through their capital have elected a government that will attempt to re-jig Indian plurality into a single image.

MEHROTRA

Thank you for this- an incredibly important as well as complicated question!

Whether we have opted for a singularity or not only time will tell. In our system even a majority like this in terms of seats in parliament does not indicate a popular vote of more than 35 or 40%. But yes, it does indicate a singularity of power and its deployment. How this power will be manifest in the built environment we can only speculate about for now. Clearly the rhetoric of the elections has caught the imagination of the vast portion of the country – where aspirations of stability and an increased role of the state in delivering services is clearly what created such a majority for the new government. I think this is more pointedly driven by middle class aspirations for more

stable and predictable services – all the way from education and healthcare to mobility and employment.

Thus as a response to this, I believe in this case, with a BJP majority, it will be the deployment of centralized forms of infrastructure- which will support the creation of these crucial services that people aspire for in their daily lives. Completion of ongoing highway projects, perhaps railways and other modes of communications, hospitals, Universities etc. It will be the Chinese model of centralized power structures and the infrastructure that supports that kind of operation.

The effects of this will be two fold. Firstly, the destruction of many existing urban fabrics and also the natural landscape. This will perhaps make cities efficient in terms of mobility and basic infrastructure like water and sanitation but will create many social disruptions. The second will be through the new networks that will open up the vast hinterlands of our many urban centres in the form of small towns growing rapidly and new towns which will be fuelled by the rampant liberation of capita deployment through real estate development in the these fragile locations. This sort of development model can be transformational for a majority of the country's population but has some obvious disruptive tendencies – the trade-offs and the contestations that involve these tradeoffs is what will characterize our politics in this coming decade.

DALVI

Do you think architecture has a role of resistance in this current dispensation? How should it function?

MEHROTRA

Naturally, the question for us is- what is the role of architecture in resisting or facilitating this process? It is here that the role of education becomes critical. Erasing the plurality of our landscape can be resisted at many levels – local and national. So more than ever before we are going to need the profession to simultaneous play many roles: of practitioners, of well organized large scale practitioners, of activists, of community organizers, of inter-disciplinary facilitators, etc. Pluralism can

only be reinforced through architecture by encouraging multiple modes of the practices of architecture through a spectrum of scales across the nation. The several hundreds of small town across in India, for example, don't have architects even living and working there– if at all we have any influence currently on these places, it is through professionals in our megacities – this will have to change if architecture has to have any agency as an instrument to resist the rampant remaking of our cities in one image.

DALVI

You have lived, researched and practiced out of Mumbai for several decades now. You continue to be Mumbai's foremost architectural and urban chronicler. In our complex and complicated present, is it possible to effectively preserve its urban integrity, and to function as a cultural custodian of our city?

MEHROTRA

It is. I think the challenge is to not worry about the parts of the city but focus on how one facilitates connections between the parts – makes the adjacencies of disparities and of plurality to cohesively coexist. It is this in between spaces of connections that will lie the most fecund possibilities and potential.

These spaces also become the site of the construction of new cultures and this where the role of architecture and that of the construction of new cultures, new significances in our society and finally identity is formed.

The spaces that I am alluding to more particularly in Mumbai are the post-industrial landscapes, the public spaces that we are reclaiming and safeguarding (all the way from the green spaces in the city and waterfronts to the spaces around our railway stations and public institutions) and more importantly in the interstitial spaces that approximately half our populations resides.



Hathigaon- Home

Image from Hathigaon - Project for Elephants their Keepers. The intimate relationship of the elephant and mahout drives the scale and layout of each home. One of the many considerations to balance was to accommodate the elephant's requirements, while providing a safe environment for children.

credit: Rajesh Vora

DALVI

Where is the place and relevance of memory in the post-industrial city?

MEHROTRA

It is scattered and fractured, but it does exist. The form and space takes in this post-industrial condition in Mumbai is at two levels. One where the fracture becomes more acute – work and living gets situated in multiple locations and this is not a neat category. Memory takes on a more temporal form in this condition– not necessarily through architecture only. That's why I believe festivals have now an amplified role in the life and identity formation process of the city of Mumbai. The second (and probably polar opposite) is the creation of exclusive gated communities in the city, sometimes in the form of extreme imaginations that have been facilitated by the cluster development idea and at others just as vertical gated communities in the heart of poorer neighbourhoods. In both cases, it is about the occupation of interstitial space within the city, not at the perimeter.



Hathigaon- Elephants and keepers

Image from Hathigaon - Project for Elephants their Keepers. View showing a mahout arriving home to his family after a day of work with the elephant.

credit: Rahul Mehrotra

DALVI

Your current research is focused on evolving a theoretical framework for designing in conditions of informal growth. In a city like Mumbai, which seems to be slipping into a 'post-planning' phase, what strategies emerge to deal with such conditions?

MEHROTRA

I believe the State cannot absolve itself the responsibility of planning. Planning in fact is intrinsically a state subject. Having said that the question is how can state reengage and at what scales? Naturally the obvious scale for the state's involvement would need to be infrastructure and facilitating the governance structure that make possible urban form at local levels.

However the state's imagination about what the city should be limits any effective intervention at any scale. Essentially our narratives about the city set up non-productive binaries – the rich and poor or formal and informal city etc. These force us as designers to ally with one or the other imagination. I think for design to be effective it must consciously dissolve these binaries and I believe design can play a crucial role in doing this.



Ganesh Immersion in Mumbai

Architecture is not the 'spectacle' of the city nor does it even comprise the single dominant image of the city. In contrast, festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi shown here have emerged as the spectacles of the Kinetic City.

credit: Rahul Mehrotra

DALVI

Has your research given fresh directions to address issues of inclusivity, and to redress the polarization that is the consequence of the state outsourcing those processes that we traditionally associated with welfare or socialist governance?

MEHROTRA

My current research looks at this condition of dissolving or blurring these binaries and I describe the current condition of urbanism in India as the Kinetic City. This Kinetic City framework has the potential to allow a better understanding of the blurred lines of contemporary urbanism and the changing roles of people and spaces in urban society.

In most Indian cities, the increasing concentrations of global flows have exacerbated the inequalities and spatial divisions of social classes. In this context, an architecture or urbanism of equality in an increasingly inequitable economic condition requires looking deeper to find a wide range of places to acknowledge and commemorate the cultures and environments of those excluded from the spaces of global flows. These don't necessarily lie in the formal production of architecture, but often challenge it.



Inequalities in Mumbai

As can be seen in Mumbai, architecture and urban design can heighten inequalities that exist in society.

credit: Rahul Mehrotra

Here the idea of a city is an elastic urban condition, not a grand vision, but a grand adjustment. The Kinetic City obviously cannot be seen as a design tool rather a demand that conceptions of urbanism create and facilitate environments that are versatile and flexible, robust and ambiguous enough to allow this kinetic quality of the city to flourish. Architecture and design more generally play a massive role in how this happens.

In fact we should not use the word 'inclusive city' – what we should ask is how through design we can make our cities less exclusive or excluding of people and especially the poor. I am hoping to capture and articulate these observations and approaches in a way that it might be useful for the next generation to intervene in these spaces more effectively.

DALVI

The state seems to abhor elasticity, and, as you say, is comfortable within binaries. Will architects therefore have to go beyond their current limitations as interveners in the urban landscape, and establish new roles for themselves?

MEHROTRA

Absolutely! Architects will have to find new modes of engaging with influencing the built environment. Naturally this will depend on if architects are motivated to change the polarization that might occur with the state perpetuating the binaries. It will

depend on how idealistic we want to be. In a boom economy architects can also get very comfortable with lots of easy projects and a general affluence which is seductive. So as a community we have to construct the correct narratives that will keep us engaged, responsible and connected to the realities that will evolve around us. I believe society invests in us to safeguard and imagine the best spatial possibilities for a society to exist and thrive in. So it is contingent, if we are concerned about our relevance, to not forget this essential role we play in society.

DALVI

Could you give us a brief history of your career as an academic? What are your main concerns in architectural pedagogy today?

MEHROTRA

I entered academics rather accidentally through a chance meeting with the Dean of the University of Michigan who offered me the opportunity to come teach for a term. I loved it! Essentially could not believe I had not done this before and I subsequently returned a couple of years later to the University of Michigan and one thing led to the other and brought me to my current position.

In retrospective my 11 years of teaching have been the most satisfying moments in my career as an architect. In some ways I am glad I went into the academy after a good 15 years of practice as this besides giving me some experience to talk from also allowed me to reflect on a body of work. And in fact this has been the single most valuable thing for me – that is reflect on my practice as I teach. As a teacher you have to make your talk walk.

But more critically, coming from India after 15 years of practice also gave me a different perspective on pedagogy. Coming from a highly pluralistic conditions where many cultures, ways of doing things and many times exist simultaneously, made me think critically about the simultaneous validity of this difference. The way this extended itself into my approach to teaching was to think about different models of engagement and practice and how one might actually build that into a curriculum.

Of course this is a complicated and an ongoing project and I do hope I can share this when it's evolved a little more.

DALVI

How do you approach the teaching of architecture and urban design in India, as opposed to teaching abroad, as in the Harvard Graduate School of Design?

MEHROTRA

In today's world I think we see similar challenges whether it's in India or the USA. In fact in India, you see the same conditions in extreme form and thus testing these Ideas in India would actually create better or at least more extreme conditions. I believe theory comes from action on the ground and it is in places like India, China, Latin America and Africa that the action is today. ■

Mustansir Dalvi

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Mustansir Dalvi has lectured, read and published several papers on architectural education and architectural history and heritage. His research is published in 'New Architecture and Urbanism: Development of Indian Traditions' (INTBAU), 'Buildings that shaped Bombay: the Architecture of G. B. Mhatre'(UDRI), 'Quiet Conversations: the architecture of Kamu Iyer'(MPC/NCPA), 'Mulk Raj Anand: Shaping the Indian Modern' (Marg), and is the author of 'The Romance of Red Stone: An Appreciation of Ornament on Islamic Architecture in India' (Super Book House).

In his writings and talks, Mustansir Dalvi critically observes Mumbai's urbanity and charts the semiotics of its contradictions.