

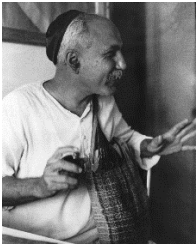
DIALOGUE

Nari Gandhi: A Man of Vision

Conversation with
Nari Gandhi

Adil Jussawalla

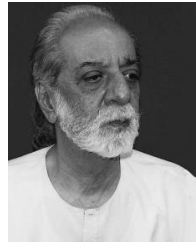
Tekton Volume 7, Issue 2, September 2020, pp. 76-83



Nari Gandhi (1934–1993) was an Indian architect known for his highly innovative works inspired by the philosophy of organic architecture by legendary Frank Lloyd Wright with whom he apprenticed for five years in his studio at Taliesin. He also studied pottery for two years before returning to Mumbai in early 1960s.

Gandhi was a maverick who eschewed conventional thinking about architecture and standard studio practice. He worked without an office and perhaps without working drawings. Rather, he preferred to work directly on the site where his ideas evolved in a slow process, working closely with the masons and craftsmen. He built a little over two dozen projects – mostly all private houses for the wealthy who commissioned him to create well-crafted innovative works of art.

Gandhi remains one of the most revered architects within the fraternity.



Adil Jussawalla is a poet, teacher, journalist, editor and translator.

He is one of the most influential personalities in the English Poetry circle in India. He has written two books of Poetry, *Land's End* in 1962 and *Missing Person* in 1976. He has edited a seminal anthology of new writing from India in 1974 and co-edited an anthology of Indian prose in English in 1977.

His more recent works are *The Right Kind of Dog* in 2013, *Maps for a Mortal Moon: Essays and Entertainment* in 2014 and *I Dreamt a Horse Fell from the Sky* in 2015.

He was presented the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2014 for his book of poetry, *Trying to Say Goodbye*.

jussawalla.adil@gmail.com

Editorial Note:

Here we feature a conversation between Adil Jussawalla and Nari Gandhi that was conducted in 1975. At this point of time, Gandhi had built five houses – Gobhai Mountain Lodge at Lonavala, Asha Parekh House at Vile Parle, Valia House at Juhu, Sheth Beach House at Manori and Daya Residence at Versova. He had also done interiors for the Sheths for their penthouse in a Malabar Hill high-rise.

This conversation in his early career gives us a glimpse into Nari Gandhi the man, his ideas about individual self and society, and his vision on good architecture. Over the years Gandhi became well-known for his unusual houses and quirky ways and assumed a mythical following among young architects. He has been hailed as Howard Roark from the novel *The Fountainhead*. This comparison is telling in the light of some of the views expressed by Gandhi. We can feel Jussawalla's unease then over those views and add our own dismay now. Over these decades, we know better than to admire Roarkian philosophy of egoistical individualism, particularly in an architect. And yet, Gandhi's genius is undeniable as his fine-tuned sense of beauty and an intimate understanding of land and materials which can only come from a sensitive soul. There is a need to throw a critical light on his oeuvre outside an overtly reverential gaze and put it in its context.

Author's Note:

A journal called Interiors was supposed to be published in 1975. Its editor C.H. Buch asked me to interview Nari Gandhi which I did. About a year later he sent me a letter which said, sadly, that Interiors never got off the ground; the publishers had killed it. He returned the interview to me. As can be seen in this interview, I was uncomfortable with what I heard Nari say about Town Planning and Socialism during the interview and my views haven't changed. His master Frank Lloyd Wright, whose work I continue to find inspirational, seems to have triggered such an extreme sense of individualism in Nari that it can't avoid being socially destructive when acted upon.

I greatly admire Nari for following the Gandhian principle of self-examination, of not expecting others to do the work you should be doing yourself, of teaching by example. But in the area of urban planning, I prefer the path taken by Laurie Baker and by those architects who think and work along similar lines.

What follows is a transcript of this unpublished interview which I would very much like to share with the community of architects.



Gobhai Mountain Lodge (1965)
Image Source: archnet.org

Nari Gandhi doesn't relish publicity. Nor is he willing as an architect and a designer, to reach the kind of compromises with his clients that lead to anything other than what he believes is right. This might explain why an awareness of his work has been slow to grow in professional circles, and why clients have been slow to come.

There can be no lukewarm reaction to his work. It either captivates or repels. The five buildings and four interiors he has worked on so far contain such pieces as a three-dimensional mural of cotton-reels on a stunningly simple fabric, magnificent doors made of wood and glass, and a controversial stairway seemingly designed to give its regular users a permanent limp.

'Up the Down staircase' is how he himself described his seven years in Bombay after his return from the U.S. He studied under Frank Lloyd Wright between 1956 and 1961 and then studied Craft – pottery, weaving etc. – at Kent, Ohio, where he also became a part-time vegetable farmer. For the first five years after his return from the States, Nari Gandhi hardly had clients.

This hasn't made him bitter. Though thoroughly non-conformist in his views, he states them with the mellowness and throwaway authority of a much more successful person. He is totally without pretension, and smiles a lot. With his long hair, his stoop, his noiseless walk, his habit of dressing in white and his reluctance to push himself forward in company, I thought that outside professional circles, Nari Gandhi would be everyone's favourite uncle.

We were on the eighteenth floor of a relatively new block of flats in Cuffe Parade, Bombay, in fact, the flat I lived in. From over the decaying bungalows on the seafront, the chawls, the tarred terraces, we could look across the waters to where New Bombay had been promised. Nari Gandhi wasn't pleased at the prospect.



S.H. Daya House (Moon Dust) at Versova, Mumbai (1969)
Source: archnet.org | Akhil Kapadia

‘I don’t believe in planning a city. A way of life should lead rather than follow. Our basic values must change, otherwise we are going to repeat the same mess everywhere. What are you going to do with New Bombay in the first place? Proper planning would at least have left us with more open space.’

He looked down at the city. ‘As long as you have tenement living, you can’t have open space. The individual should be allowed to have a large lawn to himself.’

I was more surprised, no longer mildly. ‘But how can you solve Bombay’s housing problems without some kind of tenement living?’

‘Housing is not such an important problem,’ he said. I held my breath. As he didn’t elaborate, I asked him if he was against tenement living on principle, or if he didn’t think imaginatively designed tenement buildings were possible.

‘practically everything’s possible,’ he said. ‘I need not subscribe to tenement living but if it has to come, we should be prepared to change some of our ideas first. People talk of slums but there are some they don’t even see. Poverty of thought is a slum. The whole of *Sachivalaya* is a slum. Look at the people who work there. They don’t have vision.’

I thought we had got to the essential Nari Gandhi very quickly. Both having a vision and a respect for the individual were, to him, qualities vital to our very existence. He had both. The vision enabled him, among other things, to carve circular spaces out of the tedious rectangles of most flats, to echo the sweep of a balcony in the furniture inside, to fill up the spaces of an interior with the heavy stubborn creations of what, at times, seems to be an imagination wilfully at odds with the function – alien of our times. His

respect for individual, on the other hand, was responsible for his hatred of all kinds of authority and something he dislikes greatly – socialism.

I asked him what he had against socialism.

‘I hate the idea that individuals should be given anything. I would much prefer them to fight for it. I am for a robust kind of individuality, not this levelling down for the so called good for all.’

I asked him to elaborate a bit more on this ‘robust individuality’.

‘Well, Mahatma Gandhi had it – and Thoreau. When I was with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin, what impressed me greatly was his fight for the survival of the individual, the fight so that the individual could live with grace. He had a philosophy – which is something not many architects have. If you have philosophy, technology will catch up with you. Here we are doing it the wrong way round.’

He looked out over the old city. A few people were walking desultorily down the seafront. A boy began chasing a dog, then stopped abruptly to join a group of people smoking round a stall.

‘This is drudgery, living in a kind of quiet desperation. Why do so many people come here? When Frank Lloyd Wright said as early as in the 1920s that our cities would destroy us, he was told to shut up as a stupid farm boy. Who is right now?’

He suddenly stopped speaking to stare in amazement at a form far to the right of us.

‘What on earth’s that?’ he asked.

It looked like a ship that had accidentally backed into the coast and stayed there. In fact, it was a building. I said it belonged to the Navy.

‘Then the Navy should turn its own ships on it and blow it up,’ he said. He continued to stare at it in amazement. ‘Do you see any reason for putting up something like that?’

I said I didn’t and that he must be aware Bombay was full of such follies. Then, judging from the groups of high-rise buildings already put up, we tried to imagine the future development of the area we were in. The prospect was forbidding. I said a hundred- and twenty-foot-wide road had been planned to pass in front of the building we were in.

‘By the time you get your hundred- and twenty-foot-wide road,’ Nari Gandhi said, ‘you won’t have any cars. You’ll have Socialism.’



S.H. Daya House (*Moon Dust*) at Versova, Mumbai (1969)
Source: archnet.org | Akhil Kapadia

I wasn't very satisfied with the way he had dealt with what after all was a fundamental right in any society – the right to shelter. I asked him if he had any ideas for providing alternative accommodation to slum dwellers.

'Do you know,' he said, pointing out a man who was selling fruit on a street corner, 'that *fruitwallah* earns eighty rupees a day? He probably lives in a slum. Slum dwellers often don't want to get out from where they are. I know of a building site in Vile Parle. A fellow asked permission to put a small canteen for the workers and the builder let him. A few months later he demanded twenty two thousand rupees to move out. And the builder had to pay! I don't blame the slumdwellers for this state of affairs but there are a lot of people instigating them.'

We began talking about his work. He often spoke in Gujarati. I told him I hadn't seen him work with any traditional Indian forms. Was there nothing in them that interested him as a basis for his designs?

'We have a wonderful tradition,' he replied. 'I don't think anyone can question that. But I am more interested in using local material – certain kinds of wood and stone, rather than repeating the shapes of yesteryears.' He thought a bit. 'I don't give much importance to this or that form. Light and air forms an interior. The air itself should come to life. Of course, certain basic assumptions about form need to be questioned. Does a chair have to have legs? Can't there be a saucer with a hole in the middle to hold the cup? People don't question the basicity of things enough. They just copy. When asked to design a shirt, they copy something from vogue. Do you know Mrs. M, chairman of a big shipping company, wants arches on her ship? Like the ones on Air India's Jumbos? But can anything be more absurd than having painted arches on ships and aeroplanes? If Mr. Tata had any sense of formal dynamism, he would scrap them all. And what's the

point of saying they're something Indian? If they are something Indian then India doesn't amount to much. And take a look at the interior of the Jumbos, horrible. I mean, they call the plane Emperor Ashoka and have a Krishna Leela inside. Where's the connection? The inside and the outside of any form or structure should be one overall whole, a one-purpose organism.'

I asked him how he managed to get his designs made by carpenters who were notorious for not working to specification. 'I sit and do it myself,' was his answer. 'The first house I built in Lonavala – I literally lived there and built the damn thing stone by stone, otherwise it would never have been built. Mind you, some carpenters are much more intelligent than architects. But I agree, getting work done to specification is still a problem.'

He peered over the balcony, his huge jaw resting on the railing. He had spotted a tree he liked.

'It takes sixty years for a tree to grow like that. It takes sixty minutes for someone to knock it down. I like trees, but there is nothing worse than seeing a mutilated tree. There it is, growing beautifully, when someone cuts a branch off for a goat, someone for the BEST, someone for his wife. In the meantime, the poor tree...' He became very serious. 'We have only one life and we throw it away so thoughtlessly.'

The city lights were coming on as we continued looking out over the balcony. I pointed out some of the landmarks in the area. I said the building a little way from the displaced 'ship' was a fire-temple.

He was delighted. 'Then I can go and finish my prayers there,' he said, smiling.

'Do you go to the fire-temple every day?'

'Yes,' he said beaming broadly.

'You don't have any regrets coming back to India?'

'No regrets at all.'

'What's the most rewarding work you have done after coming back?'

'Teaching. I taught at Baroda University and at the JJ school of architecture. But I left JJ as I didn't want to pass someone whose father was important. But I am very pleased I may soon be teaching at Baroda.' At that moment Nari Gandhi seemed very content.

But he is leaving Bombay. He plans to build a house for himself at Lonavala, where owing to its situation on the edge of a sheer cliff, he will be virtually inaccessible. The house will also be his workshop. He will farm there as he

did in Kent, Ohio, and occasionally commute to the city. He said he preferred the old idea of workshops to offices.

It all fitted. Putting down 'roots', farming, a many-sided organic development rather than a single-minded rush to get to the top of his profession. His philosophy and a certain moral conviction about the rightness of his work, has perhaps kept Nari Gandhi going in an environment that does its best to destroy originality and block the non-conformist.

'We are the form givers – that is the basis of being an architect,' Nari Gandhi said, as he looks out over the city once more. 'A lot can be done here. It's just a matter of time. If I don't succeed, others will.'

It was time to go. We descended to the ground level, from where it seemed more than ever that most of the forms should not have been given at all. As people prepared to sleep in their corners and crowded buses went by, I wondered whether, in a city whose citizens seemed forever to be reaching new lows of indifference and apathy, Nari Gandhi's ideas would not be dismissed as those of a crank. The vision was surely there. But even allowing for political differences, it was difficult to see many of the middle class accepting this vision as something that filled the gap in our architectural practice – the moral vacuum in which speculating builders who passed off as architects, and unscrupulous adventurers who exploited every scrap of available land to put up ill-conceived monstrosities. ■