

DIALOGUE

Bombay: a city as a living entity

Conversation with
Kamu Iyer

Mustansir Dalvi

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Kamu Iyer (1932-2020) graduated in Architecture from Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay, in 1957.

In practice with Architects' Combine since 1960, he built extensively in Bombay and the rest of India. His practice covered a wide range of projects like low-income housing, educational and institutional buildings and campuses and research facilities etc. He was associated with teaching at various schools of architecture.

Iyer had an abiding engagement with Bombay, where he grew up, studied, taught and practiced architecture. He wrote extensively on its architectural and urban history. He was the editor and author of the book, *Buildings That Shaped Bombay: Works of G.B. Mhatre*. He co-authored *4 From the Fifties- Emerging Modern Architecture in Bombay* as well as *Build a Safe House with Confined Masonry*. His book, *BoOmbay: from Precincts to Sprawl* recreated the city's genealogy through its built form and spaces. Just a year before his passing, he wrote an incisive and graphical account of his own architectural practice in his last book *From Diagram to Design*.



Mustansir Dalvi is Professor of Architecture at Sir JJ College of Architecture, Mumbai.

He is the Chairperson of the Board of Studies in Architecture of the University of Mumbai and a member of its Academic Council. He played a central role in reshaping the architecture syllabus, contemporizing it and giving it a critical edge. He is on the Board of Governors of the MMR- Heritage Society, and a trustee of the NGO Art Deco Mumbai.

He is the author of *The Romance of Red Stone: An Appreciation of Ornament on Islamic Architecture in India* and *The Past As Present: Pedagogical Practices in Architecture at the Bombay School of Art*. He is the editor of *Twentieth Century Compulsions: Modern Architecture from the Marg archives*, a book of essays from the early modernists on the architecture of India in the mid 20th Century. In his talks and writings in several journals, magazines and newspaper columns, Mustansir Dalvi critically observes Mumbai's urbanity and charts the semiotics of its contradictions.

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Editorial Note:

Here we feature a conversation between Mustansir Dalvi and Kamu Iyer, conducted in 2014. We reproduce the main excerpts from the author's blog as a way of paying tribute to Mr. Iyer whose works, writings and teaching have inspired many generations of architects and students.

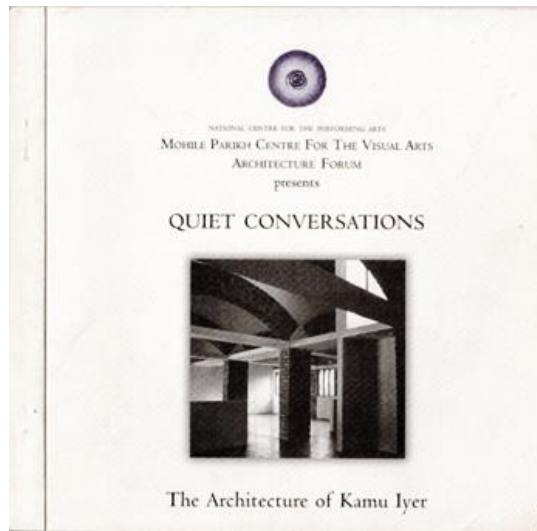
Author's Note:

This is an interview I conducted with Kamu Iyer shortly before the publication of his now seminal book *BoOmbay: from Precincts to Sprawl* in 2014. While the book was the occasion for this conversation, I took the opportunity to engage Iyer on several subjects close to his heart, centered on the evolution and urbanity of Bombay, Iyer's *karmabhoomi*.

His abiding love for the city allowed him to chart its progress, as he put it 'from precincts to sprawl'. His architectural career started at the end of the Backbay developments that gave the city a fresh new Art Deco character and continued well into the millennium with its post-planning sprawl. In parts nostalgic, critical and prescient, Iyer talks about growing up in the city in the 1940s, studying architecture in the 1950, and of his six decade long architectural practice.

His observations on the rise the Modernism after Indian independence give us a first person account of architectural imperatives in the nascent Nation State. His particular appreciation of the changing modes of housing in the city is still relevant. "Gentrification", according to Iyer, "distorts social balance ... gentrification does not fit in Bombay's ethos ... neighbourhoods should be inclusive and segregation of people into income or social groups should not be encouraged. Planning should provide for mixed housing in neighbourhoods". Given the way the city is changing, Iyer's views hold several lessons for future practitioners

This interview has been edited for relevance, and is an excerpted version of the one first put on my blog.



DALVI:

What are your earliest memories of Bombay? We take a lot of its urban fabric, especially the developments of the thirties and the forties for granted. Even today, they form the backdrop of our lived experience. Was that also true for your growing-up years or do you have memories of the city 'filling up', as it were?

IYER:

My earliest memories are from 1938 when I was six years old. I lived in Hindu Colony at Dadar till my ninth year after which I lived at the northern end of Parsi Colony. Both areas were part of a planned neighborhood. The areas I lived and studied in were planned but many parts of Bombay that I saw from an early age sitting in a tram appeared crowded and disorderly. Buildings were close to one another and there was little or no space between them. The streets were sometimes winding and buildings were higher than in my neighbourhood.

In contrast both Hindu and Parsi colonies had houses and spaces between them placed regularly. Houses stood on individual plots and there was space outside the house to play in. This made me feel that the city was not the same all over and there was more to it than what I was used to in my locality. What Bombay might have been before the thirties is, for me, a matter of speculation.

DALVI:

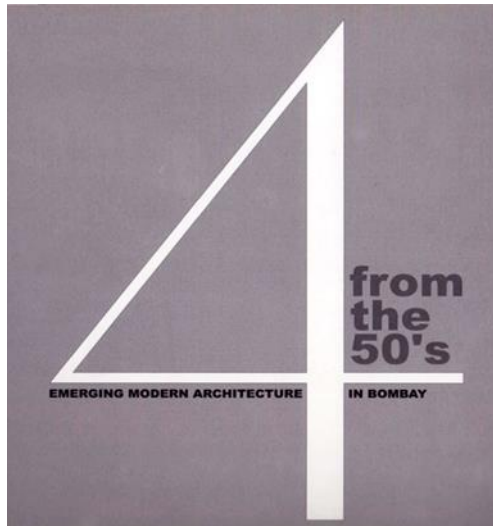
You studied architecture in the Sir JJ School at a time when the most prolific and significant architects in Bombay were also its faculty and driving force. There has perhaps never been a time in the city when academia and practice were so synonymous. What do you think has been the lasting legacy of the Sir JJ School?

IYER:

In the 50's, when we were students, the school of architecture itself was small and it was a part of the Art school. The number of professionally qualified architects was also small- there were more engineers practicing as architects, because you needed only a surveyor's license from the Bombay Municipal Corporation to sign building plans for approval. I read many years later that the school was always short of teachers and Foster King, during his tenure as (acting) head of the school, encouraged senior students to help their juniors in their studies. He also sought the help of professional architects to teach in the school. Whether it was for survival in a profession inundated with engineers or love for architecture, most felt duty bound to teach.

The profession, represented by the Indian Institute of Architects, also took interest in students because most of its prominent members were teaching at the school. The Institute also had its nominees in the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) examination board. The institute's concerns were largely with the profession, unlike the present day when the emphasis is on conference jamborees.

As students, we got the benefit of the experience of the practicing architects of the city. The school, from its inception, had luminaries like George Wittet, Claude Batley, Foster King and in later years G. B. Mhatre, Durga Bajpai, Jehangir Billimoria and a host of others. The situation in other professional colleges was similar, especially the medical colleges attached to hospitals. The best doctors were 'honorary' in public hospitals and their services were available both to students and patients who could not have otherwise afforded it. Over the years the custom of having practicing professionals teach ceased but fortunately the school of architecture continues the tradition of inducting professionals in design studios, juries and lectures. This is good for the school.



DALVI:

Was Modernism taught by default when you were in architecture school? It certainly was when I studied in Sir JJ in the eighties. The Modernist agendas and processes, fuelled by the works of the Modern masters and their manifestos had got normalized by then. Was there debate over what architecture was appropriate when you were a student?

IYER:

When I was a student, the Beaux Arts system adapted to Indian conditions by Claude Batley was prevalent. Teaching was centered on the study of classical and Indian orders, their proportions and details and drawing them up skilfully. There was also study of historical styles. For instance, there was a subject called composition in which you composed on sheet elements of a style and rendered it to make an attractive drawing. The emphasis was on drawing and rendering and little else which was frustrating to most of us. We found it easier to understand what we were drawing only when we actually saw the building. We could understand the Doric Order only when we saw the Town Hall.

We realized that drawing had limitations and there was more to a building than what appeared on its front. In the design studios elevations carried more weight than plans and if there was mismatch between the inside and outside it did not matter as long as the elevations were attractive. The elevation had to have 'elevation features', which meant embellishment. This system was done away with in my second year at school.

By the time we came to the third year, though the earlier method of teaching was discontinued, the approach to design continued in which the plan and elevation of a building were different elements designed separately. We also had a studio in the third year called Specialized History in which you had to design a building for a modern use but adapt and modify, if need be, a traditional style of architecture for the design of the facade. This was a dichotomy difficult to comprehend.

We were a group of friends who felt differently though we did not quite understand Modernism. But examples of early modern architecture in books then, reading about the Bauhaus, Howard Robertson's books and seeing Frank Lloyd Wright's work in magazines convinced us that we needed to understand Modernism as a movement. We realized soon that a movement becomes one only when people also think similarly in their respective fields. We looked around us. In the Art section of the school some students were moving away from pictorial art, a set of artists formed the Progressive Group and exhibited their work in the city. T.S. Eliot was a departure from the romantic poets on whose works we grew up and J. Krishnamurthy, who used to give public lectures in the school compound during winters, was telling us to set aside all gurus and their teachings and instead find out for ourselves.

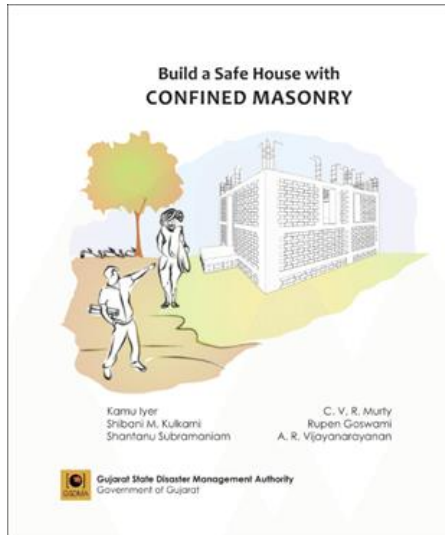
DALVI:

You were witness to Le Corbusier's buildings coming up in Chandigarh. What kind of influence did his work have on students in Bombay?

IYER:

The biggest impact was Le Corbusier. His design of High Court stunned us all because it was a major departure from the 'box' and the modernism of the Bauhaus which we had by then become familiar with. We argued among ourselves whether a building can be seen as an object by itself or as a part of a larger picture of the street and the city. To find out we spent time walking around the city and cycling in the suburbs looking at buildings and streets, market places and other commonly used places and discussing in the canteen. This taught us more than making drawings in the studios.

There were debates but these were more between those in favour of Frank Lloyd Wright's organic architecture and those supporting the International style. Le Corbusier appealed only to a few and his work was a topic for discussion among them. The transition in the school was gradual. At the same time, modern architecture was also emerging in the city.



DALVI:

There has not been an adequate assessment of the architecture of the sixties and the seventies. The influence of architects in Bombay as a dominant force nationally was already in decline by the end of the fifties. Delhi and Ahmedabad had become the new capitals of modernist expression.

IYER:

On the contrary, Bombay in the sixties and seventies saw a boom in building activity. The high-rise buildings in Nariman Point, industrial complexes with sophisticated buildings for advanced processes and apartment and office buildings for ownership were all coming up at a brisk pace. The typologies of the apartment building and the high rise towers are 'Bombay Firsts'. Delhi and Ahmedabad appear as leaders of modernist expression but buildings that came up there were mostly institutional, built for the government and public bodies. Most architects were heavily influenced by Le Corbusier at first and Louis Kahn later. The buildings that came up were monumental, each vying with the other for attention.

In Bombay, the situation was different. Clients were demanding. They insisted on strict adherence to programme, cost and time schedules. They also said that a building had not only to be good to look at but also to live in, the latter being more important. In other words their demands were

exactly what modern architecture exhorted- the rational use of space, structural clarity and no mismatch between interior space and external expression.

DALVI:

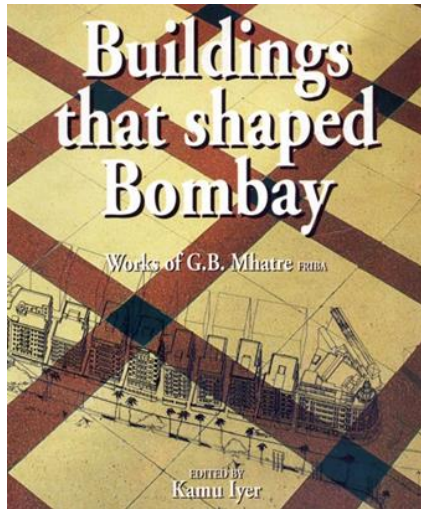
These decades also witnesses the withering of the post-independence/republic euphoria. Your practice was already into its second decade by then. How do you remember those times, and in retrospect today how do you assess their influence?

IYER:

The spurt in building activity in the 60's gave young architects work. Clients recognized the need for an architect's services in a project. That itself was a departure from the past when an architect was appointed only to 'beautify' the facade. Young architects got projects for designing interiors or industrial buildings or for apartments promoted by developers. As young practitioners we got industrial projects which instilled in us a discipline of keeping to time and cost schedules. We also did some houses in Ahmedabad and Bangalore as also a residential school and many small projects. The variety of work and interaction with clients added to our 'experience bank'. We discussed our work in the studio and we learnt soon enough that every project, regardless of its size, had its own complexities and no job was too small for the office to handle.

The sixties and seventies were still idealistic and euphoric though it started waning towards the late 70's. Cynicism crept in when some architects saw architecture more as a business than as a profession. Developers were largely responsible for this perception. Architects who looked at their projects as a search and introspected on them when they were completed could not reconcile with the commercialization of architecture that was getting rampant.

Modernism took different forms. In Delhi and Ahmedabad architects educated at CEPT and SPA did serious work though most of them adapted the language of Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn. In Bombay, commercially oriented architects blindly copied western models without thinking about the suitability of such buildings to Indian conditions while the others plodded on, attempting to create architecture that evolved from past understanding of materials and ways of handling them, construction methods and forms suitable for the context in which they were situated.



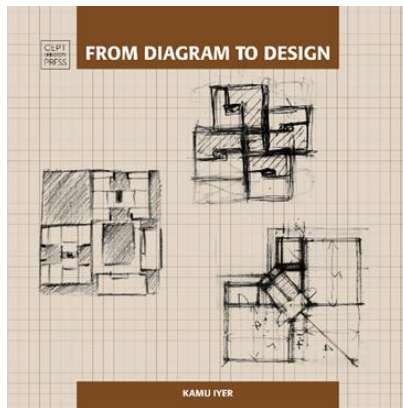
DALVI:

The constant clamour today is that the housing stock in the city is inadequate. But there have been mass housing projects in the past, generated by the state accommodating all levels of housing. You have designed mass housing projects in New Bombay as well as in Karnataka. Is there still a future for projects of this kind?

IYER:

Housing is generally affordable if it is done by public bodies because developers and their architects are not interested in housing other than that for the affluent. Their argument is that land costs are high due to scarcity and it does not make economic sense to construct smaller flats. Architects who are on the bandwagon argue that since land is scarce FSI has to be high and buildings tall. This puts those needing affordable housing out of the reckoning. So it becomes the responsibility of government and public bodies to supply housing for the have-nots.

Unfortunately the housing authority does not have enough land since almost all land is owned privately. Despite that there is a future for public housing, cooperative ownership and self help groups. But for this to happen there must be concerted effort and political will. Providing affordable housing is a daunting task but it is not insurmountable but the political class and bureaucracy need to know that just as a society is only as strong as its weakest section, a city's quality depends on how its poor live.



DALVI:

How do you assess the decline of both the rental paradigm as well as the cooperative movement on housing in Bombay?

IYER:

Affordable rental housing is nonexistent and is not likely to revive even if the Rent Act, which is always unfairly blamed for the shortfall, is repealed. Today cooperative ownership of property which, again, is a Bombay First, is a viable solution. In this system either a cooperative society is formed before a site is purchased and a building is built on it or is formed after a developer hands over a building to individual buyers of flats in the building. Flats become more affordable when a society is formed before a building is constructed because it eliminates the developer's profit margin. Moreover he bases his price on the current cost of land which keeps varying all the time. Forming societies before construction has declined in recent years because all land in the city is cornered by developers and getting approvals is time consuming and cumbersome.

DALVI:

How would you address the symptom of swift gentrification that seems to affect inclusive growth in the city? I see aspiration fulfilment through ownership and the inevitable influence of the developer/ speculator as the main factors. Would you agree?

IYER:

Gentrification is a recent phenomenon.

It is a part of a vicious cycle of inflated land prices, a typology of housing that is inherently expensive to construct, maintain and live in and a marketing strategy that lists exclusivity as one of the unique features of a project.

Gentrification is built into the way housing projects are designed, which basically are gated communities containing stand-alone, high-rise towers with large floor plates. The open space in these gated communities is developed as gardens for the exclusive use of the community. The contrast between these high-end towers and Dadar/Parsi Colony is palpable. In the Parsi Colony most of the apartment blocks are exclusively for the Parsis. Yet segregation is imperceptible because the streets, gardens and spaces around the buildings are for all. In earlier developments gated communities were for people belonging to a caste or religion or a sub culture group but within the wadi or Baugh there was no class division. The rule was "you are welcome to stay here if you belong to my caste or religion" now the rule is "you are welcome to live here if you have the money".

Gentrification distorts social balance. Bombay, unlike New Delhi, was not stratified. It was more egalitarian than most cities and gentrification does not fit in Bombay's ethos. Interestingly, when the Greater Bombay Plan was being drafted the British Government appointed a panel to advise on housing. The panel, in which Claude Batley was a member, stressed that neighbourhoods should be inclusive and segregation of people into income or social groups should not be encouraged. Planning should provide for mixed housing in neighbourhoods. The suggestion has been overlooked; instead, distorted land prices and investable surplus funds with a few have resulted in ample built space for investors but not for housing the majority of the people living in the city. ■