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The Politics of Acknowledgement: Exploding the Male Architectural Canon

Nancy Adajania

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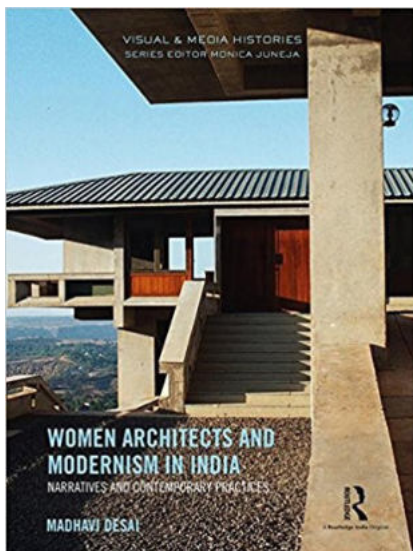
ABSTRACT

This review-commentary analyses and annotates two pathbreaking publications authored by Madhavi Desai and Mary Woods. The authors have retrieved and contextualised the practices of Indian women architects who have long remained invisible in the architectural canon dominated by the patriarchs of modernism. The received wisdom is that the male architect, usually in lonely Roarkian splendour, has a great macrocosmic vision. In truth, women architects have been driven by great visions too as designers, policy makers, pedagogues, conservationists and activists, but their visions have not been codified in readily recognisable formulae. Theirs is not the Ozymandian obsession with the singular building; rather, it is a continuing and often mutating, shape-shifting engagement with people, labour, and ecology.

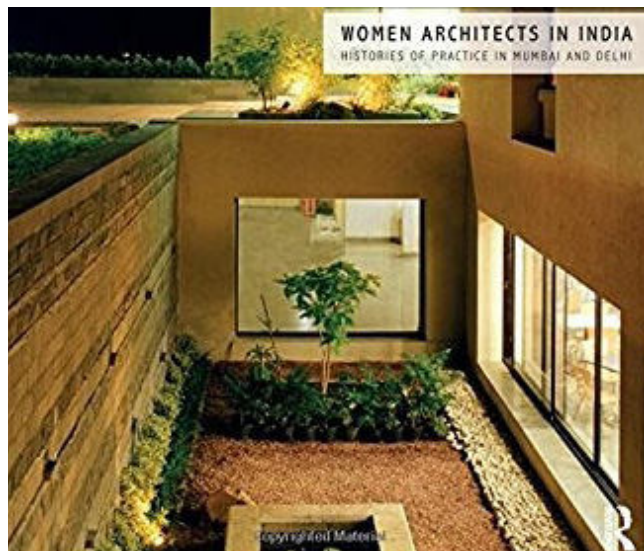


Nancy Adajania is a cultural theorist and curator based in Bombay. Since the late 1990s, she has written consistently on the practices of four generations of Indian women artists. Her book, *The Thirteenth Place: Positionality as Critique in the Art of Navjot Altaf* (The Guild Art Gallery, 2016), goes beyond the mandate of a conventional artist monograph to map the larger histories of the Leftist and feminist movements in India. Adajania was Joint Artistic Director of the 9th Gwangju Biennale (2012). In 2013 and 2014, she taught the curatorial practice course at the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts. She edited the transdisciplinary anthology 'Some things that only art can do' (Raza Foundation, 2017) and is currently working on another anthology 'Totems and Taboos: What can and cannot be done'.

✉ nancyadajania@gmail.com



'Women Architects and Modernism in India: Narratives and Contemporary Practices' by Madhavi Desai (Routledge, 2016).



'Women Architects in India: Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi' by Mary N. Woods (Routledge, 2016).

“For women’s equality to become a reality today, we need to rectify the mistakes of the past. Help change history by demanding equal recognition for equal work.”

With these words, Women in Design, a student group at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, demanded in 2013 that the prestigious Pritzker Architecture Prize, given to Robert

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Venturi in 1991, should retroactively also be given to his partner and wife Denise Scott Brown, to recognise her contribution.¹ Not only was Scott Brown an equal contributor

to the couple’s long-term practice but she was also the co-author, with Venturi and Steven Izenour, of the seminal publication *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) – a historic postmodernist manifesto that questioned the uncommunicative, ornament-phobic tendencies of modernist architecture.

To nobody’s surprise, the Pritzker committee rejected the petition; the architectural profession has largely been an old boys’ club. However, in recent times, women architects globally have begun to gate-crash the club, insisting on a well-deserved place at the high table.

In 2016, two path-breaking Routledge publications – Madhavi Desai’s *Women Architects and Modernism in India: Narratives and*

Contemporary Practices and Mary N. Woods' *Women Architects in India: Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi* – have made a salutary effort to remedy the gender imbalance in

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the discourse around Indian architecture. Each author, in her distinctive way, has contextualised the personal and professional lives of those who have been invisibilised for far too long. Women architects are for the first time able to articulate their side of the story – with or without reference to the patriarchs of modernism.

Both these books address the entrenched asymmetries that women architects have to fight against in a patriarchy. Such asymmetries, the result of centuries of regressive social conditioning, can ambush them both from above and below. If they sometimes find themselves contesting the misogyny of male peers and seniors, they can also find themselves contending with the sullen refusal of male crew to take orders from a woman. We read, in these accounts, of a woman architect who was forced to climb a bamboo scaffolding in her sari, to dare the contractors and masons on site into cooperation. It is against such challenges that women practitioners must claim their right to belong and thrive in the profession.

Nor is this all. While reading Desai and Woods, we also become aware of the enormity and scale of the discursive violence that women architects in India have suffered: their work regarded as marginal, their access to large-scale project commissions often constrained, their archives scattered. Their absence in the architectural canon speaks volumes.

The authors represent two different locations, and to that extent, their emphases differ. While Desai, a member of the faculty of architecture, CEPT (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology) University, Ahmedabad speaks from the vantage point of a critical insider; Woods, a member of the Department of Architecture in the College of Architecture, Art and Planning, Cornell University, plays the role of the empathetic outsider. They cover the same historical terrain – often citing similar bibliographical references – while framing the narrative of several generations of Indian women architects. They begin with the pioneers of the late-colonial period, moving on to practitioners who faced the pressures of working in the post-independence period with larger-than-life male exemplars like Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, B. V. Doshi and Charles Correa; they conclude with women who operate in the era of globalisation.

This, it turns out, is not coincidental. As Desai informs us, the two authors began their research together, but then at some point decided to go their separate ways. Whatever the reasons may be, this has liberated the Indian academic-architect from the inevitable role of the native informant *vis a vis* the privileged American academic. Desai mentions

the collegial manner in which they have shared documentation and interviews that fed into their respective books.

Both books present India's women architects in their multiple, self-renewing roles as builders, pedagogues, conservationists, policymakers and activists; eschewing hierarchy, they have designed everything from a spoon to a residential complex, to a township. Woods

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chose to retrieve the lost histories of women architects working in the Bombay-Delhi spine (Bombay, as the commercial capital, has witnessed successive bursts of building activity from the late-colonial period, corresponding to growth cycles in the mercantile and industrial sectors; and Delhi, as the political capital, has expanded itself through a series of architectural commissions from the 1930s to the 1980s).

By contrast, Desai has chosen to concentrate on the work of 28 architects from all over India, drawing a long arc of practices from Chandigarh to Kochi, mapped chronologically from the work of the pioneering Perin Mistri (b. 1913) to that of Shilpa Ranade (b. 1973), the youngest practitioner documented here.

Woods, wary of hagiographic accounts, chooses to maintain a delicate balance between the figure and the ground, between the architect's professional strategies and the socio-political

and cultural history of the period under study. Desai presents quick potted biographies of each architect under review; since she has to pack in a large number of practitioners, the texts are more in the nature of encyclopaedic entries than complex narratives of an artistic quest punctuated as much by epiphanies as failures. This is not to say that Desai's book lacks historically informed frame narratives – both authors have worked hard to formulate these – but that she might occasionally miss the telling detail because of the breadth of her chosen material.

Let us consider and compare their accounts of Pravina Mehta (c. 1925-1991), a figure common to both books, and whose name is often recounted in the context of the New Bombay Plan, which she conceived with Charles Correa and Shirish Patel in 1965 (New Bombay was supposed to create a 'counter-magnet' to the mainland by creating a politically autonomous new city across the water). Both authors mention Mehta's affluent yet Gandhian upbringing, her participation in the nationalist struggle – she even faced incarceration in 1942 – and her rebellious temperament. Educated at Bombay's J.J. School of Art and at the Illinois Institute of Technology under Mies van der Rohe, her buildings were inspired as much by the Bauhaus design approach as by concepts of Indian philosophy and classical music and dance. "Mehta was socially committed and as an urban planner was very conscious of the disparities between classes, especially in the provision of housing. She would design community buildings for very little remuneration." (Desai, p. 65)

Mehta's egalitarian ethic was matched by a passionate poetics. Her design for Uma Patel's Kihim house (1962), which was "anchored like a miniature ocean liner to its coastal site" (Woods, p. 34), opened to a breath-taking view of the sea. It was, for its time, a great example of passive energy design – using thick walls and recessed windows, harnessing

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convection currents, and deploying other ventilating techniques to cool the house naturally. Mehta's design for the façade of the new administration wing of the Advani-Oerlikon Factory in Chinchwad (1972-1975) "recalled the asymmetrical compositions of Mondrian". (Woods, p. 36) As compared to Desai's condensed, matter-of-fact account, Woods conjures up the magic of Mehta's diverse design methodologies, reading them in detail. Even where she is critical of Mehta's occasionally overwhelming design elements – which, for instance, dwarfed the building she was commissioned to create for the NGO Avehi in Bombay – she evokes the multiple personal challenges that prompted such a decision. Mehta's sister was the founder of Avehi, and she clearly wished to be at her best. At the same time, she was attentive to the historical and aesthetic shifts of the period – the postmodern turn in Indian architecture in the 1980s made her look back to the Art Deco buildings of her childhood for citations. Also, Mehta was quite ill by this time (her

last building, Kirtan Kendra, would be built posthumously) and Woods leaves us with the architect's last cry, her fevered imagination sensing the end of the journey, but not ready to give up yet.

Sadly, even a fiercely independent personality like Mehta – a visionary in her own right – could be eclipsed by the aura of a male contemporary. She collaborated with Charles Correa on the revolutionary New Bombay plan; brought him in as a collaborator on Kanchanjunga, one of Bombay's most memorable landmarks; and worked closely with him on 'Vistara', an exhibition for the Festivals of India cycle in the mid-1980s.

Yet, it is Correa who is invariably credited with an *auteur*-like creative monopoly over these projects. Mehta's role is rarely, if ever, acknowledged. Here, again, Woods digs deeper; she quotes the editor Carmen Kagal who worked on the exhibition catalogue of Vistara to set the record straight: "[Correa] trusted Mehta's instincts and her knowledge of Indian tradition. She knew Sanskrit and the *vastu shastras*. Her surviving office files have typescripts along with drawings and photographs of Hindu temples and shrines that provided some of the background material for Vistara. Mehta conceived of, Kagal claimed, the different sections of the exhibit." (Woods, p. 39) This revelation makes us reconsider what we know of as the authorship of Vistara's core concepts of *manusha*, *mandala*, and *manthana*.

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portraits of Urmila Eulie Chowdhury (1923-1995) and Madhu Sarin (b. 1945). The former is mentioned *en passant* in Woods' book and the latter not at all. Like Mehta, the Anglo-Indian Chowdhury was polymathic: she had studied architecture and music in Sydney and ceramics in Englewood, New Jersey. She built, painted, taught, designed furniture and wrote for architecture journals – but, unlike Mehta, she had the opportunity to hold official positions in the government from the 1950s to the 1980s. She was, at different points in her career, chief architect for Chandigarh, Haryana State and Punjab State. Her decision to work with Corbusier in Chandigarh in the 1950s propelled her into what was at that time India's most ambitious modernist project.

While she followed Corbusier's 'modular' style and choice of materials, she developed

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her own modernist vocabulary, which was bold, stark and exuded a sophisticated brutalism, clarity of materials and sharp elegant geometric proportions. Chowdhury's design for the Hostel Block of the Government Home Science College, Chandigarh, built in 1961, is remarkable: the rhythmic dance of its triangular balconies, with their jutting dynamism, is met and balanced by the columns producing a classical stillness. She was

immensely prolific, designing rural hospitals, a polytechnic for women, townships, and fire stations. As Desai points out, "[Chowdhury] has made a great contribution to the landscape of modernity in Chandigarh." (Desai, p. 57). Is it not instructive that the roll call of Corbusier's Indian disciples and collaborators with which we are all familiar is entirely male; and that Chowdhury's name does not carry instant recall?

Desai's portrait of Madhu Sarin demonstrates the other side of Corbusier's exclusionary modernism, which kept poorer people out of the planned city. While Chowdhury took Corbusier's legacy forward in a confident manner, Sarin, a resident of Chandigarh, questioned it tenaciously and became a life-long advocate of need-based planning. She saw in Corbusier's work, in his obsession with artistic grandeur and boldness of design, a lack of connect with the needs and "material reality of the people".

Desai plots Sarin's journey, from her days as a girl student facing "subtle male aggression" at the Chandigarh College of Architecture, to apprenticing briefly with Corbusier's collaborator B.V. Doshi, to working at the Public Works Department in London, to joining the Architectural Association's Post-graduate diploma in Tropical Studies, where she was sensitised to the hubris of urban planning that left the poor out of planned development. She has not only worked on urban planning issues and the rights of squatter settlements, but also on rural development. She has been part of the movement that has demanded the recognition of the rights of forest-dwelling communities which "resulted in the enactment of India's historic Forest Rights Act." (Desai, p. 81).²

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As Woods asserts, women architects are not simply known for producing “iconic buildings”. Think of Madhu Sarin, who has worked at the policy level to raise questions about the housing rights of the disadvantaged

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and the landless. Or of Revathi Kamath, who has worked with indigenous communities to explore the traditional knowledge of building materials, forms and design and integrate these into the contemporary building process. Or of Neera Adarkar, who has researched the typology of mill-worker housing and advocated the rights of the industrial proletariat. Or of Brinda Somaya, who could deftly switch roles from pursuing a corporate practice to being a ‘facilitator’ committed to helping villagers affected by an earthquake rebuild their homes and improve their infrastructure. Or of Sheila Sri Prakash, who apart from being a mainstream architect also has several patents

to her name for developing designs for rural and urban sanitation.

While Indian society is indeed almost unapologetically patriarchal, the fact is that Indian architecture has also inherited, in full measure, the unquestioned patriarchy implicit in Modernist architecture as imbibed from the West. The received wisdom is that the male architect, usually in lonely Roarkian splendour, has a great macrocosmic vision. In truth, women architects have been driven by great visions too – but they have too often been distributed over detail and process, and not been codified in readily recognisable formulae. Theirs is not the Ozymandian obsession with the singular building; rather, it is a continuing and often mutating, shape-shifting engagement with people, labour, and ecology.

Both Woods and Desai note that, in the course of their extensive interviews, the women architects they spoke to tended to disclaim the label of feminism, and denied that the women’s movement had had any effect on them. This may well be the result of the peculiar suspicion that several generations of Indian women in the 20th century have displayed – even as they broke with social norm and custom, they appeared wary of being caught up in what they felt was a Western ideological import, unfortunately and prejudicially identified with the cliché of the ‘bra-burner’.

This deficit in consciousness could also be the result of the blithely apolitical nature of much architecture education in India. In truth, though, many Indian women architects – in the act of negotiating the circumstances of their practice – have achieved a feminist standpoint

and practice. Whether they acknowledge it or not, this has in many cases engendered a transformative politics of the self, the practice, and the environment.

So it is comforting to find Shimul Javeri Kadri, one of those few women architects in India who does not fight shy of being called a feminist, arguing that “feminism is the most misunderstood word in the dictionary. It is not

² Instructively, for Brinda Somaya, Nalini Thakur, Revathi Kamath, and Neera Adarkar, Corbusier and the Chandigarh experiment were not a decisive or even particularly relevant point of departure. Woods quotes Somaya as saying, with acerbic precision, that she “was not ‘an empty vessel’ waiting to be filled by Western influences”. (Woods, p. 67)

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about bra-burning or chest thumping, but it is about valuing the natural characteristics of being nurturing and sustainable – in practice as well as in life.” (Desai, p. 269). Javeri Kadri’s valorising of the nurturing qualities of a woman could be seen as essentialist by some feminists and liberating by others. There is no consensus in the country of women. Intense self-doubt and the constancy of debate keeps them alert to all forms of injustice. Thus they are able to renew themselves at every turn and risk everything to start afresh. ■

Notes:

¹ For the Women in Design petition, see: <https://www.change.org/p/the-pritzker-architecture-prize-committee-recognize-denise-scott-brown-for-her-work-in-robert-venturi-s-1991-prize> (accessed 29 April 2018).