

## Architecture Discourse: Claiming New Zones of Exchange

Conversation with  
Kaiwan Mehta

Smita Dalvi

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Born in Mumbai, **Kaiwan Mehta**, is a theorist and critic in the fields of visual culture, architecture, and city studies. Mehta has studied Architecture, Literature, Indian Aesthetics and Cultural Studies. In 2017 he completed his doctoral studies at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS), Bengaluru, Manipal University. He has now published as well as exhibited his research work and ideas internationally. He has authored *Alice in Bhuleshwar: Navigating a Mumbai Neighbourhood* (Yoda Press, 2009) and *The Architecture of I M Kadri* (Niyogi, 2016). Since March 2012, he has been the Managing Editor of *Domus India* (Spenta Multimedia). He is also Professor (adjunct) and coordinator of the Doctoral Programme at the Faculty of Architecture, CEPT, Ahmedabad since 2017. He was the Charles Correa Chair professor, Department of Art and Culture, Government of Goa for the academic year 2017-2018.

Mehta co-curated with Rahul Mehrotra and Ranjit Hoskote the national exhibition on architecture – ‘*The State of Architecture: Practices and Processes in India*’ (UDRI, 2016); and recent exhibition, ‘*The State of Housing - Aspirations, Imaginaries, and Realities in India*’ in 2018. He has been elected as the Jury Chairman for two consecutive terms (2015–17 and 2017–2019) for the international artists’ residency programme across 13 disciplines at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany. He has been curating the Urban Design and Architecture section of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, Mumbai since 2016.

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Kaiwan Mehta whom I have known for a long time, is a friend, a sounding board and my first editor. In his innings as the editor of *Architecture: Time, Space and People*, he encouraged me (any many others likewise) to write. I realized as a teacher and a quasi-researcher at that time the importance of writing and the sheer hard work it demands. Kaiwan is one of the rare architects I know who have consistently and productively engaged with history and theory of architecture vide his multi-faceted education, pedagogical practices and his role as a public intellectual shaping a certain discourse in several exciting ways.

In this conversation, I provoke him to reflect on many of his pursuits to draw out the thought processes as well as speculate on the very nature of our discipline we call architecture. He graciously delves at length on each aspect of his practice, shares memories, lays bare rationale, voices opinions – which demand attention regardless of whether one agrees or not. This is a rich offering for anyone interested in alternate ways of engaging with architecture.

#### **DALVI**

**What are your views on practicing architecture as a discipline today considering that you have engaged with it in multiple ways – as a teacher, researcher, curator and editor?**

#### **MEHTA**

It is a difficult question to begin this interview with, especially since the role of the architect is seriously under question today. The architect is not perceived within a wider perspective of culture and social imagination, but is seen largely as a lifestyle-designer or a handmaiden to client and real-estate demands. In this context to recover the role of the architect, not only within a socio-cultural perspective, but also within the fraternity and profession has become an important task today. In that sense to be a teacher, editor, critic, curator – you hold the mirror to the profession and the architect. The architect in India is a lost soul in a floating world – her/his recovery is very important.

A discipline is shaped when other jobs and actions within the arena of architecture begin to reflect and produce a discursive space for the practice and the profession; these other jobs demand their own education and training, as well as protocols of practice. So as much

as spaces of education, spaces of research and journalism, spaces of institutions of public display are opening up and shaping the arena – the very nascent stage of this discursive arena in India is creating its own problems. Well, it is also not that critics, educators, commentators on architecture were missing in the past. No, they were there, but we have never been able to collate and understand that space and its history, we always saw it as sporadic and very much based on individual acumen and temperament. The disciplinary arena of conversation and critical reflection has not been given its due recognition, and that is necessary for a healthy and productive arena.

Since some of us have taken up these roles – as educators, critics, researchers, curators, as full-time jobs and not something we do besides keeping our hands wet in practice otherwise – it is actually opening up the professional arena of the discipline. The architect cannot write or

do research as a hobby, or a flash of interest, or out of generosity towards the profession and colleagues; the various roles and jobs that make up the discursive discipline have to be acknowledged in their own right. It has indeed been a task sometimes to justify that what you do is unique to the act of making buildings, and has its own history and discourse and it is not something that one can dip in either over a weekend or when you have fewer projects in office, or at best when you have made money and feel like 'giving back to society or fraternity'. Disciplinary arenas cannot be born out of generousities, whims, or fancies, neither can they be simply produced for the sake of provocations, they are produced because you know and understand the field of your practice and you struggle to trace and retrace its needs, and build very carefully on reflections and criticisms.

We really need architects to focus and investigate the depth and expanse of their work - and they should do this, by actually

engaging with work – the act and task of shaping environments and making buildings. The architect has to investigate her/his role through the act of being an architect (and not the critic or researcher of architecture). At the same time acknowledge that research or criticism, or curation or teaching are full-fledged jobs in their own right that demand their own education and practice.

Education and journalism are spaces where the scattered history and learning, as well as new experiments in the shaping of this discipline and field can be collected, can be shaped, while research and theory will help us break new ground and establish new zones of exchange, and development of the field – the field of architecture, including beyond the arena of a discipline. Research and criticism, either in journals and magazines or in education and exhibitions, will have to be developed as structured spaces of thinking, while the practice of architecture will have to shape new ground through the acts of practice.

#### DALVI

**I agree whole-heartedly with you that teaching, research and other discursive acts are full-fledged practices. But why should we dismiss across the practice forays in this arena – assuming a basic level of seriousness and rigour on part of those who may engage whether full-time or as mixed practices. Surely, we are not dealing with an either-or situation here?**

#### MEHTA

Well, I rarely think in the either/or mode, and in this case I am speaking like this more to emphasise the point and be more purposefully provocative. My concern is when a practicing architect assumes her/his practice to automatically be the sufficient ground to think,

act, and behave like a researcher or a theorist. Let us take two examples here, two people I admire and respect precisely for the way they manage dual or multiple roles – Rahul Mehrotra and Mustansir Dalvi. Mehrotra is a practicing architect making buildings, also a full-fledged

academic teaching and setting up courses, as well as a prolific researcher and writer – now his practice is neither the automatic ground nor the obvious position from which he assumes his other avatars; neither he assumes his experience in the world as an architect – sufficient ground to research, write, and teach. He only recently, in a lecture in Mumbai, and more elaborately in an exhibition on his works at GSD Harvard does he draw connections between his different avatars; these parallel lives are no doubt connected and simultaneous, but each one is developed and nurtured as if a life and job in its own right. Similarly, Dalvi who works as an architecture historian, a researcher and an academic as well as a poet and translator – does not take for granted that his training and work as an architecture historian and researcher qualifies him to write poetry, or be a curator, and so on... he has again

nurtured and invested life as a poet and translator and operates beautifully in two avatars, both simultaneous, yet individual, yet connected also I assume! You do not become a cultural organizer, curator, researcher overnight! Some architects claiming to do research are actually not doing research – they are doing some collating of ideas and data, and some utilitarian analysis from it, often related to a project; if at times they are researching on a subject, they have not yet done what we in research language would call – literature review, nor have they developed a study of history and debates on the subject. Common sense is not knowledge! It is only a partial experience of the world around us; and so is practice an important contributor and player in knowledge production, but cannot be the route/ root to all of the knowledge in the field.

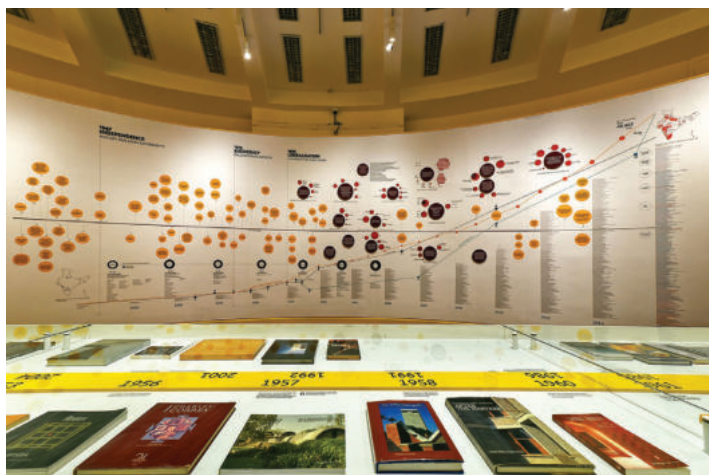
#### DALVI

You co-curated two major exhibitions on Indian architecture – ‘*The State of Architecture-Practices and Processes in India*’ and ‘*The State of Housing in India*’. Looking back, how do you assess they changed the discourse on architecture in India?

#### MEHTA

The ‘*State of Architecture*’ or the SOA exhibition is the only survey and review exhibition in the field of design and built environment in contemporary India and the post-liberalised economy. From the responses we received from architects – it was clear they all felt a certain ownership of that exhibition and felt it did shake up the profession. SOA gave a lens to view contemporary practice – without any usual laments, without any large claims, without any claims to angst, without playing around with some broad abstractions of theory – it presented a documentation, and

the neutrality of poise and posture adopted as the curatorial standpoint actually became the lens. It did not take colonial history or orientalist binaries as its framework, but it worked with the idea of a modern nation shaping its destiny and struggling through time – without employing either the usual idealist tone of a new or consolidated nation, or using the tone of consistent disrepair with the current state of affairs. These were some key aspects that we can say, made SOA refreshing as well as important. Prof. Srivathsan in a larger thematic essay on



A glimpse from 'The State of Architecture- Practices and Processes in India', exhibition held in Mumbai in 2016; curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Kaiwan Mehta and Ranjit Hoskote.

'Architecture in Contemporary India' for the London-based magazine, Architectural Review, comments how SOA defined architecture in India on its own terms without borrowing timelines or stylistic developments or theoretical propositions from other (read Western) canons of architecture history. For the first time did Emergency feature as a key moment in architecture history, for example; for the first time we were able to tell a story without reading icons and iconic architecture, or using the typologies provided by few popular and influential architects.

SOA also did something that is difficult on many counts – review the profession and its production in the absolute contemporary, as it exists today – featuring works of architects living and working today, across a cross-section of generations. We could identify a generation that struggled through changing times and constantly missed being acknowledged in canonical histories or accounts; or we could present critically the works of architects who

set up practice only 20 years ago. In that, we decided not to present private homes and 'lifestyle architecture' such as vacation homes, thus a set of architects remained unrepresented in the exhibition. These raised many debates and questions amongst students of architecture and journalists, as well as some of the architects themselves. We welcome this debate but it should take place in the light of the curatorial decision as well as our debate on what the profession stands for, the role of the architect, rather than be based on personalities!

This exhibition, through much debate amongst the curators, decided to recover architecture from urban studies, sustainability debates, conservation conversations, etc. It was a turn to the architectural object, clearly aware that the object hangs in no mid-air but sits within complex sets of contexts and our proposition had to play the act carefully and well.

Now "State of Housing" exhibition was a different proposition; it shaped out of SOA



*A glimpse from 'The State of Housing - Aspirations, Imaginaries, and Realities in India', exhibition held in Mumbai in 2018; curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Kaiwan Mehta and Ranjit Hoskote.*

where a key question that emerged was – the role of the architect today. Housing is an area of architecture that directly connects with life, people, and social aspects of a culture and nation. This exhibition really stretched our curatorial and research capacity to explore ideas of design and their relationship with history, politics, economics, and everyday life. The timeline structure we developed for SOA

developed into a new avatar with SOH, and our model of case studies, which we called chronotopes, explored a new dimension to read design and practice models, beyond the conventions of typology, exemplars, and 'best practices'. These curatorial decisions and exhibitionary modes opened up new possibilities to talk about Housing beyond professional circles.

#### **DALVI**

**What kind of impact do you think they created among the viewers and also for future debates?**

#### **MEHTA**

SOA was visited by about 20,000 people during its run in Mumbai, and it included not just architects and others from related professions, but also common people – non-architects who were generally interested in the built environment. Large numbers of students came from all across the country – Guwahati,

Coimbatore, Bangalore, Jaipur, Pune, in most cases self-organised trips. Many teachers brought in students and conducted a class session within the exhibition. The best we heard, was that school children were brought in by a group of mothers to introduce them to architecture as also India's modern history.

As curators we were touched when historians, researchers, and architects – all felt this exhibition shaped hope, a sense of positive criticism and encouraging criticism. I remember the last two days before we de-installed the exhibition, I got calls from many architects, wondering if the exhibition could be preserved at least in part as a permanent show somewhere – as a reminder, as reflection, we all so much need today. The SOH as I said used different exhibitionary modes around the issue of housing; at the same time, many young architects working on many kinds of residential and housing projects, felt they got a sense of history and direction as designers from the exhibition.

SOA had an immediate influence within students, fraternity, and a lot of non-architects

interested in the profession and architecture, especially with nearly 100 speakers during conferences, discussions, and lectures. SOH, we feel attracted a lot of professional attention – architects, planners, policy-makers, but the subject and space of action is so complex, that articulating the experience of viewing the exhibition, engaging with its propositions, and understanding all this in the context of the everyday and pressing politics, will develop with time. We are actually putting together a two-volume compilation on the subject, which is not a catalogue documenting the exhibition, but actually a set of books triggered on the history and experience, as well as research on the subject of Housing in India, from the exhibition.

#### DALVI

The SOA created a panoramic overview about Indian architecture since independence, and a focus on young practices. As the editor of *Domus India*, you also have your finger on the pulse of the contemporary scene in Indian architecture. This must give you a unique perspective on the trajectory of Indian architecture. Do you see any patterns in the way Indian modernity might have been shaped? And do you see any patterns in the current practices?

#### MEHTA

There is truth in what you say – last few years working on *Domus India*, the two exhibitions, as also curating the Urban Design and Architecture section at the annual Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in Mumbai, has allowed me certain exposure and exchange with what shapes the field and practice of architecture in India today. I had two occasions to collate these learning – first, presenting a Keynote Lecture at Cornell

University when they organised a seminar on contemporary architecture in India, and then, presenting a three-lecture seminar at Centre Pompidou in Paris. My own research on the ‘idea of Indian-ness’ in design and the visual arts, the history of visual culture, combined with these other experiences of exhibition and *Domus India*, has allowed me to constructively review many debates in our understanding





*From 'A view from Ornament: Design Debates Indianness' curated by Kaiwan Mehta as part of a larger exhibition on 100 years of Bauhaus curated by Hans Christ and Iris Dressler at WKV, Stuttgart (4 May to 23 September, 2018), titled 50 Years after "50 Years of the Bauhaus 1968".*

of modernity in India. The debates on what is Indian and what is not, or what is Indian and what is Colonial including the question – if this binary is at all useful anymore and why should we hang around with this simplistic Colonial and pre-Colonial division of history. Then, there are other areas such as reflections on fantasies about craft and Indian-ness in design which I can today very easily deconstruct. Our modernity was not shaped with the binaries we so much cling to; and I have to acknowledge learning much from the work of many senior colleagues such as Annapurna Garimella, Nancy Adajania, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, besides many other scholars I read and worked with as well as my education in the area of Cultural Studies at Centre for the Studies of Culture and Society in Bengaluru.

The 'modern' in India shaped via Colonialism and Orientalism, but on the way, it shaped a unique history specific to the subcontinent, and

yet nothing essentially 'Indian' about it.

The trope of Indian-ness we have constantly used to talk about twentieth century and modern as well as contemporary architecture has to be much revised. Our conversations on design and design history in India is practically non-existent, and what exists is locked in debates on Indian-ness and craft, or a modernism of a particular kind, very limited to certain ideas of form and colour, geometry and material; there is much work and research to be done in these areas.

As for contemporary architecture – it is shaping a completely new discourse on its own terms and we have to observe it through a lens where an Indian (post-Independence) history and flows of globalisation and liberalised economies come together with politics of the land and region. In a recent exhibition I curated on Design Histories in India, in the context of 100 years of Bauhaus, I tried to map a set of projects that can help



us articulate a unique present through a nuanced reading of the Colonial and Modern experience of India.

Current architecture practices are intuitively very alive to the cultural and social politics in India. They need a structured lens to be reviewed and discussed; and we also need to develop a framework to articulate what

architects are feeling, and responding to intuitively. So, in *Domus India* while we review various ideas from history, new and emerging archives, or new readings of existing archives, we constantly try to construct an armature that is neither lost in rehearsed canons of modern and postmodern or craft and technology but develop new terms of engagement and reading.

#### DALVI

**How do you view the culture of publishing and the current scenario of publications and periodicals on architecture in India? In your previous and present role as an editor what have been your main challenges?**

#### MEHTA

Our influence as editors is limited, but I can safely say it is growing wider and much more importantly, it is getting deeper. Publications that flaunt glamour and lifestyle behave like they are discussing design and they spend half their time announcing lists, giving awards – and funnily in 2-3 years most architects we know are listed in these lists and every office you visit has one of those awards! These are what I call the ‘Baywatch’ of architecture and design, they confuse and mislead to make their profits. But rest assured none of these will stay on a table for more than few days and never reach a bookshelf. While magazines such as A+D, earlier IA&B, and now say a *Domus India* or what you are doing, *Tekton* will sit on bookshelves and in library archives for long.

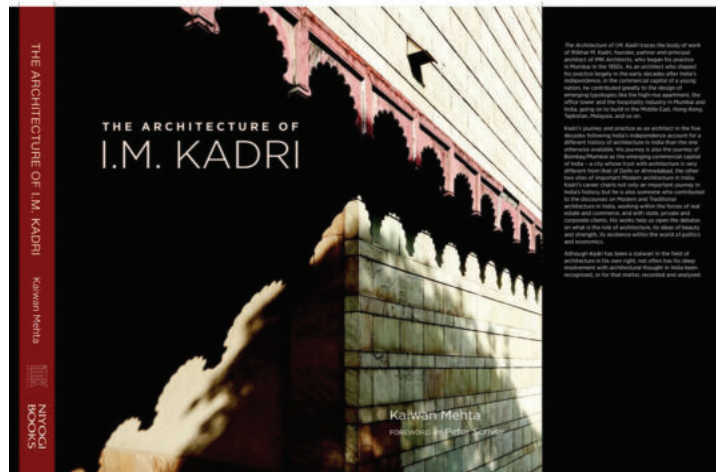
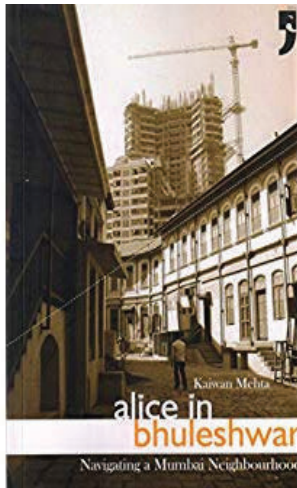
I had an interesting challenge when I began working with the magazine of the Council of Architecture – *Architecture: Time, Space and People* – it had a mandate to not feature any projects, so it automatically became an essay-

oriented publication. One could have simply featured documentation projects, but for me that mandate was a blessing in disguise, an early attempt to establish conversations on Architecture – not just historical documentation or rehearsed debates on education or ethics, but debate the nature and shape of professions, explore what are the boundaries of the discipline, what can actually define and extend the definition of architecture.

And when I started working with *Domus India*, everybody said, where will you get the projects, there is nothing good happening in India, it is all a mess and you will have to get projects from abroad only. Thankfully, I believed in exactly the opposite; I just confidently knew there is much interesting stuff happening here, and what was needed was a new set of lenses and ideas to read and present this work, and I just took that belief ahead. I had a thesis, even in my own research work about the shape

of India and design in India since 1990s and Domus India was the platform to explore that – by reviewing the contemporary, calibrating the contemporary, but also revisiting History again and again with new ideas and new experiments.

what keeps a magazine going – not flashing professionally shot decked up spaces (specially for photoshoot), not posing architects dressed in black and smiling out at you, not circuses of award functions, but reviewing and presenting critical content always in a state of flux. Finally, we have an atmosphere where architects are smiling when you frankly discuss their work with them or when you as an editor refuse to talk about their work on their terms, but present to them your own mathematics and thesis on it; at the same time it is also now possible to structurally argue against something, show failures and your clarity of argumentation and theoretical armature helps you deal with others' unhappiness at your criticism.



Books authored by Kaiwan Mehta

## DALVI

Your book *'Alice in Bhuleshwar: Navigating a Mumbai Neighbourhood'* set a tone about your research direction quite early in your career. It also remains a well-loved book among students of architecture. Tell us about your research journey, your enduring interest in the culture of the Bombay metropolis and engagement with the space of public discourse. Do you see Bombay as a unique setting for cultural exploration as compared to other cities?.

## MEHTA

This question at first appears like we are now changing gears, but on second thoughts it is not so. *Alice in Bhuleshwar* or AIB is as much about architecture, as much as it is about cities, as much as it is about the people that occupy our buildings and cities. And I am happy to learn that the book continues to be popular, and it is, I believe, now a recommended reading, or a key text for some courses at different schools of architecture.

The method of research came out of everyday life and everyday experience – I worked/researched the way I lived and worked in the city, and the way I struggled to deal with architecture in books and schools and politics in India of the

1990s. Architecture I felt was much more about life and how you dealt with it, rather than some banal debate about form versus function, or depth versus surface. I explored the surface of buildings, and simultaneously I explored the lives of people through walks and oral interviews; while understanding certain characters from biographies and literature, that helped me give the needed space and depth to architecture. Cities were more complex than geography and history – even the idea of palimpsests did not satisfy me – I wanted to read *Time* in the fabric of architecture, Meaning in changing fabrics, and see if I could read and hold a mirror to the organic nature of cities; as I often say, to be able to read architecture and cities like a novel! My

training in Indian Aesthetics at the Department of Philosophy at Bombay University, as well as my continued interest in the experience and theories about cities helped me here.

In all this, Bombay to Mumbai presented a unique and vibrant location. Mumbai is *karmabhumi*, *anubhavbhumi* and *manchitrabhumi* – it is all! It is an intrinsic interest in life and people around you – neighbours and strangers – that brings my interest to the city and to Bombay, to Mumbai. I am not trying to be philosophical here – but I grew up in a Parsee colony in a very middle-class area such as Tardeo, and it is in the same area I saw shops looted, and people chased with choppers during the riots in January, 1993. The same hair cutting salon I went to was looted for a whole day till they pulled out every electrical wire from the wall, or the shop where I stood every morning to get into my school bus watching it being set up to repair stoves, it was looted as if it was some kind of treasure – a few stove parts, a shop as poor as that was looted with vengeance. My training as an architect, my job as a teacher came to life the day I could connect what I had seen (and hidden in some deep recesses for some years) and what I knew about places, spaces, and buildings, and streets and roads, where people lived and ‘played games’!

The study of the city was an investigation of one’s own life and state of being in this life. This investigation may have died after some

time, but then I went on to live in other cities – Bengaluru, Stuttgart, Budapest, London, Abu Dhabi, and travelled much to Paris, Vienna, Lisbon, Porto, Dubai, Sharjah, Venice, and staying away from home, I rediscovered my home-city... a new engagement with Mumbai emerged – my city, and ‘not my city’!

Also settling in a residency programme (Akademie Schloss Solitude), far away in Stuttgart, where I could slow down and continue my research, as compared to being in the thick of things and conducting research from the hot ground of action in Mumbai, was important, and helped me graduate this early research in many newer, more nuanced, and deeper questions and propositions. AIB graduated over time into my doctoral research where ornamentation on architecture became my register to read urbanity and urban experience.

As an intellectual ‘of the floating world’ I have found ‘homing’ in Bombay and Mumbai again and again – a city where spaces of different kinds allow you to shape discourses of different kinds. Often institutions have hated that about me – belonging to many spaces at the same time – but they all have enjoyed the fruits and advantages of exactly that, drawing from the waters of many locations.

I would not say Bombay/Mumbai is absolutely unique - but it is indeed special!



*A glimpse from 'A World in the City: Zoological and Botanic Gardens' an exhibition curated by Kaiwan Mehta in Stuttgart for IFA (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations) in Germany.*

#### **DALVI**

You were invited to curate an exhibition in Stuttgart by IFA (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations) in Germany – ‘A World in the City: Zoological and Botanic Gardens’. Here you invited some acclaimed artists to participate. Tell us about your experience of interacting with the art world and being a mediator (as a curator) with the public.

#### **MEHTA**

This was indeed a unique experience – absolutely not something I did on a daily basis; but even in this situation (of being invited to curate an art exhibition) I worked more as a researcher (something I usually do) than as a curator. I maybe the curator and the job I did would fit that description, but in my head my work was that of a researcher. And I think this approach has helped me structure interesting relationships with people I invite to collaborate and be part of the exhibition.

I saw the invitation to curate an exhibition around Zoos and Botanical Gardens as an extension of my interest in the 19th century, Colonialism, and Orientalism and

the shaping of ideas and knowledge in that mode. At the same time, I have had much discomfort with the recent mania regarding health, physical fitness, related ideas on nature, ecology and sustainability, food-habit wars (vegetarian-terrorism and the new religion called Vegan-ism). I saw this exhibition as an opportunity to research the Human-Nature relationship as well.

With my teaching interests in theory and criticism – I have always equally dealt with architecture, art, and literature, and my interest in visual culture always also brought me to art in a certain way. So, the world of art and artists was something that



*Detail from 'A World in the City: Zoological and Botanic Gardens'.*

I grew within and hence the comfort to work with artistic material. I was clear that a poet would be invited as one of the artists, and a text (mostly a poem) would be one of the exhibits. I also imagined the show at two scales – a set of key-works that hold the show, and a set of works at another scale that provided a parallel skin of conversations. The curator was also part of the show presenting his own 'cabinet of curiosities' based on collecting in the process of research.

All the links I wanted to present in the exhibition would not be easily available to the audiences – but again, it was for me working like a researcher, assembling my research ideas in three-dimensional space rather than on paper or through a keyboard – so all details need not be apparent to all; surely they could be read if one spent

time with patience or listened carefully. An exhibition is a viewing experience, no doubt, but it cannot be only that; the exhibition has to be carefully viewed, spent time with, take walks within it, build relationships with the works – this kind of experience is what I am interested in. Also, the works were so selected that the audiences would oscillate between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and leaving the audiences with this sense and experience was important for me. From the beginning, the artists felt convinced about the way the exhibition was curated and to be presented, and so was the organising and producing institution and gallery, and the viewers discussed their journey in the show as one of a struggle – exactly between the familiar and the unfamiliar or challenging imagined notions. So, I think it worked all in all!





*Mehta's library of books and objects*

#### **DALVI**

How have your experiences as a teacher of architecture changed over the years, from the time you were a teacher in undergraduate programme to presently overseeing the PhD programme in a prestigious college of architecture?

#### **MEHTA**

This is a difficult one to summarise here, but will try. Teaching is an important space because you encounter the struggle between popular perceptions of architecture, life, and society, that students come with, and the more critical imagination of life and architecture we profess as thinkers from the field. To be a scholar in the field and be a teacher, makes teaching more exciting but also at time difficult, because then what you teach is a combination of basic knowledge and substantiated perspectives. Teaching undergraduate students gives you very good space to keep engaged with a large number of students who are also varied in their interests – as to what they want from education. And I do not feel any expectation from education is more valuable than some other – as long as you keep one standard, that education

in a professional course like ours is more than training someone to earn money in life. Then you can engage with the variety of needs from students, and still channelise what you feel they should know and think about architecture. In a research programme that maybe easier, but in an undergraduate course where much basic knowledge has to be imparted, to also make learning a critical experience, one of inquiry and debate, is actually more exciting!

As I am consciously working on developing teaching material and course structures for either Masters or Doctoral programmes – one encounters the question – how do you shape specialisation of knowledge, as well as the shape of a professional beyond basic undergraduate education. This again goes



back to our questions about architecture, its knowledge base, and its practice – how do we get critical about practice in deeper ways, and how do we collate and challenge notions of discourse around the discipline and practice. How would these shape into the classroom exchange between students and teachers? You here are more responsible toward deepening debates and challenging students to engage with the discipline and profession on more difficult grounds.

Teaching across different stages of education challenges you constantly to develop a variety of teaching agendas and pedagogical frameworks specific to specific urgencies about the field and profession, as well as the proposed development of the student concerned. Being an academic – you are constantly playing between scholarship and task of teaching – bringing scholarship to the classroom in a possible teaching format, but also taking the more valuable reflections and discussions from students sometimes back to scholarship – and this is across undergraduate to doctoral stages; in fact the fire of debate is always more vibrant at the undergraduate

level, although at that stage the fire is a bit more crazy than one can easily tend to; while at doctoral stages you wish for the fire to be more violent and vibrant than it actually is. Doctoral research in India, on architecture and cities, I think I can safely say, needs to be much more risk-taking, jumping deep into challenges, wrestling full-bodied with history and the profession, and much more intellectual. At least in some good institutions, our undergraduate programmes are much more challenging, than most of our Masters (obviously with some exceptions) or Doctoral programmes.

The institutional framework I am currently working with at CEPT University for the Doctoral programme is actually gearing up very strongly for establishing doctoral research that challenges critically, and shapes structurally new knowledge, and maps important experiences carefully through theoretical inquiries, in the field of architecture and city studies. A large part of the work lies in shaping pedagogic content and framework at the institutional level, which the university is supporting with full strength!

#### **DALVI**

**Academic research in architecture is in a nascent state in India.**

**What are the avenues of research in your view and what would your advice be to those wanting to take up PhD studies?**

#### **MEHTA**

Thanks for asking this, although I am not sure there is a clear answer here, as of now at least. Research and especially doctoral research is not a well developed field in India

today, precisely because we have relied in the past on some architects writing intelligently or theoretically well or conducting some good research – these are sporadic and we

relied on individual acumen and strengths of a few. Today we are nearly at scratch in developing a history and framework for research and research-pedagogy. For long, documentation obsession has masqueraded as research, and writing has relied on the good command over English language by some architects. Architecture research and criticism will need training specially a set of people to precisely do that; and being an architect does not make you an obvious candidate for being either an architecture journalist or scholar or researcher. And today the field-ground of architecture has expanded like crazy, the boundaries of discipline have become porous, practice is going through times it cannot completely comprehend – in such times, journalism, theoretical enquiries, and academia has to act and come into action very importantly and actively. But for all the above proficiencies we need education structures, and that is something we need to work on. In my current role as co-ordinator of the PhD programme for the Faculty of Architecture, at CEPT University, I am working on precisely this – the models of pedagogy and education that will allow the discipline to shape itself through other required proficiencies, besides the act of making buildings, but actually being able to think about and through build environments and objects.

#### **DALVI**

**Indeed. Thank you for taking us through that journey, I am sure in it many will find more than one direction to steer their own journeys. ■**

Often doctoral research is seen as an end in itself, and that can never be fruitful. Doctoral research always has to be part of a person's continuous engagement and work in research questions (as theoretical enquirer or as practice of making buildings) and in scholarly teaching (as against doing teaching as a day-job).

Universities and academies, as well as various governmental and non-governmental agencies and organisations are housing and investing in research – and doctoral scholars can be players in these research programmes, collectives, or set-ups. Teaching needs a big boost and quality improvement today, research scholars can genuinely contribute here and critically review and alter teaching models and contribute to pedagogic debates. At the same time, many architects' studios can benefit in research from trained scholars, since most of them today are working on random research models, unqualified methodologies, and so a research scholar with precise training and education can actually drive research that is concerned with the enquiries in the studio/office as well as research for architectural projects. This question in many ways ties up with your first question and my answer there.

This interview has been some journey...

Thanks much!



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Her research areas are in Architecture, History of Art & Culture, Urban Heritage and has read and published papers and essays in conferences and several architectural and cultural journals. In her research, she explores syncretism and intersections in art, architecture and society. She is an avid traveller and photographer.

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