

THE CONTEXT OF THE CONTEXT

Interview with Rahul Mehrotra



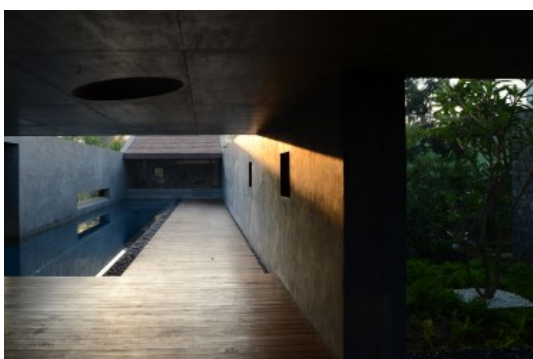
COEXISTENCE OF 'SLUMS' AND HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS, MUMBAI PHOTO: RAHUL MEHROTRA



THATCHED HUT USING PASSIVE COOLING TECHNIQUES TO KEEP DRINKING WATER COOL FOR PUBLIC SUPPLY PHOTO: CARLOS CHEN



VISITOR CENTRE AT CSMVS; MUMBAI, INDIA, 2011 PHOTO: RAJESH VORA



THREE COURT HOUSE; ALIBAG, INDIA, 2014 PHOTO: RAHUL MEHROTRA

JLLM The first question is about the dialectic between the terms identity and modernity. The typical understanding of modernity is the creation of a kind of layer that is added to a place. For instance, Rem Koolhaas's ideas about China twenty years ago again introduced this excitement about big new things that appear from the outside, like Le Corbusier in India and Brazil. There is a duality that has been present for a long time, but it is now taking a new form in contexts like China, highlighting the question of identity more crucially than years ago. Would you agree?

RM I think modernity is about new social formations. It has implications for production methods and standardisation, leading to homogenisation. The most effective modernity has been homogeneity, and now globalisation is forming the last layer. The construction of identity is beginning to challenge that. I think it is important to introduce the term culture into the discussion. For me, culture is a society's implicit rules. Very rarely is it a written rule: you might say it is qualified in music, but that then becomes a tradition; it becomes an art form. In some cultures, people move closer to each other when they are talking, whereas in America they step back, because they think you are attacking them. Body space is an implicit form of politeness, like respect for elders. Culture is always evolving. The formation of identity is the moment when societies want to express their culture. When the effects of homogeneity due to globalisation and modernity become very extreme, society reacts because it feels that its culture is being threatened. In the architectural discourse, identity is not about excavation or archaeology; identity is about construction. When we collectively identify with a set of values, identity is constructed.

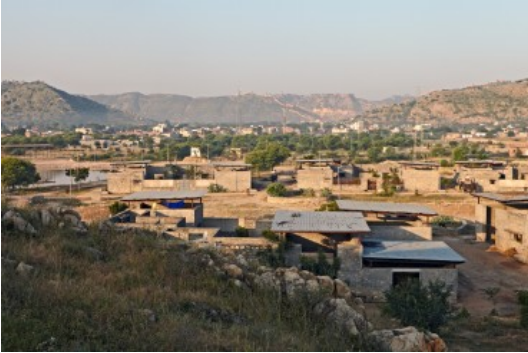
JLLM I would like to examine these terms at a more professional, architectural level. In many places, artisanship is seen as a positive energy, whereas modernisation fought against it. I think it is interesting to see artisanship as a tool for building identity in physical terms. Can you relate to that?

RM Absolutely. There are specific ways of redefining context with very tangible things like the climate, material, artisanship, and so on. It is not easy, but it is the most direct way to localise something, because people in different cultures do things in different ways. However, it is a challenge, and I think the trap of fetishising artisanship is an easy one to fall into. In our case, we use artisanship, but we also try to use new materials to extend the argument. Digital imagination opened up to artisanship is also a new form of artisanship. I think we have reached the point where we have to take artisanship and fold it into modernity and globalisation in order to create new forms of identity and expression. Personally, I am very excited about this idea of the context of the context. How do you remain local yet act global? I don't think this is being discussed enough. If we define only the context, we are in danger of fetishising the context, destroying its global resonance. This is why we have to think about the context but also about the broader context of the context, trying to see the local context within a larger socio-political, economic and global context.

JLLM I think your architecture is an example of working with tradition in our times, a possibility that postmodernism basically ended. What do you think about tradition?



KMC CORPORATE OFFICE; HYDERABAD, INDIA, 2012
PHOTO: CARLOS CHEN



HATHIGAON: HOUSING FOR ELEPHANTS AND THEIR
KEEPERS; JAIPUR, INDIA, 2010 PHOTO: RAJESH VORA



HATHIGAON: HOUSING FOR ELEPHANTS AND THEIR
KEEPERS; JAIPUR, RAJASTHAN, INDIA, 2010 PHOTO:
CARLOS CHEN

RM I have a very deep interest at a personal level in tradition and history. I look very carefully at the vernacular and try to abstract the lessons of tradition. For me, traditions also deal with identity and culture?traditions are the essence that we have to distil. Postmodernism made a caricature of tradition in a sense, and we reacted to that. The greatest strength of modernism was that it provided the instruments and devices that allowed us to abstract these meanings. What I learnt from postmodernism is that it challenged stylistic consistency. A house I finished two months ago I would have built in stainless steel five years ago. Stylistically, my work is very inconsistent, but the values and approach, and some vocabularies and sensibilities are very consistent.

Excerpts from an Interview with Josep Lluís Mateo

FURTHER RESOURCES

-> [RMA Architects, Mumbai / Boston](#)