

Book Review

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An Emancipated Place

The Proceedings of the conference and Exhibition

“**Women In Architecture 2000 Plus**” held in Mumbai, February 2000.

Brinda Somaya (chairperson), Urvashi Mehta (organising secretary)

Sean Mohaney (editor), Gita Simoes (design)

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An Emancipated Place is a collection of the works of women architects from South Asia. The main purpose of the book, however, is not to explore gender issues, but to discuss the practising, and especially the *praxis* of architecture. This is confirmed by Minette De Silva’s statement “I am an architect” on being asked whether she is a woman architect. Similarly, Meena Mani, on her experience as a woman states: “I *don’t* think there’s a male point of view or a female point of view. I think everyone brings to a job their own set of experiences and their own baggage.... I never think of myself as a women architect.” It becomes less artificial and more sincere to speak about a female point of view, when what you’re talking about is really about the inherent and natural qualities of women’s way of doing architecture; like Brinda Somaya’s attempts (not merely ideas!) on “upgrading the work that women do on construction sites”, and like when she is talking about taking care of the inhuman conditions of labour camps. But when it comes to identifying women’s work with creating more space for the children and women, it turns out to be a bit naive... I felt this tone in Fauzia Qureshi’s speech, when she says “... as women we think like women. We ought to. It comes naturally.” Readers may dispute the truth of this if they take a look at Beng Kiang Tan’s work or listen to Namita Singh’s speech.

The only male figure in the book, Prof. P.G. Raman, presently our colleague here in ITU, has produced a fine study with his essay on the *Emancipated Place*. In his essay, what women architects have accomplished towards an emancipated place is discussed in many respects, and the issue of gendered space needs no further emphasis here. One last word on women before I continue. The sensitivity of Asian women to issues of architecture, more than to issues of gender, can be an alternative way of empowering women in the world of architecture. A lot of work might have more effect than one theory, or rather these experiences, once started to be talked about, could act as a source for a theory.

This book has more to say about architecture than about women. It implicitly reveals a questioning of the different ways of defining architecture and the role of the architect, depending on different conceptualisations of space and of the world, which do not derive from being a woman but from a different geography. *One* way of interpreting the discussions that take place in this book is that these speak with an “outmoded” past discourse, which had

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hit its highest point back in the 60s and 70s, when architectural design theory was talking about advocacy planning, participation in design, about support and infill systems, and about similar issues – the “good old days” of Davidoff, Turner, Mangin, Habraken, and others. Then, suddenly, where did all this politicisation go? It “melted into” the abstract realm of the theory done in some other way. Yet there are intellectuals who insist on speaking about the politics of space, such as E. Laclau, F. Jameson, and D. Massey. I do believe that we are also well aware of our practices, which are not devoid of politics. How politics can change the design of space is clearly seen in Hiranti Welandawe’s buildings, where walls are placed between the public and the private, and where the buildings have started turning their backs to the street, since the private is under threat with terrorism and violence. Also, Ben Kiang Tan’s “intelligent” office building, reminds us of the “a-political!” technology oriented ideology and of the “placeless” space of the global. Today, we are at a very different state where we have the means of discussing politics, culture, space, and place in a more profound way, with the contribution of both these past experiences and the experiences of different people living in different places. This will open the way for *another* way of interpreting the discussions that take place in this book. From here on, I will try to highlight some of the elements that may form the basis of such an interpretation.

Contemporary discourses on architecture put *space* at the centre of their debate, which was used to be *time* a step earlier. Our knowledge about space in general owes itself to our conceptualisation of the world. Similarly, our architectural knowledge is constructed on its *praxis*, its *theory* and its *discourse*, praxis is one source of knowledge, it is not merely concerned with the practice of the profession, it involves another kind of knowledge. This knowledge is woven intricately with the background practices of people and their experiences of specific places throughout time, and with the theory and discourse shared by all. This is the source where we derive our notion of space and how we conceptualise the world in general. Hence our conceptualisations may differ, based on our background practices (meaning culturally and ideologically) as opposed to the “single reality”- that single (seemingly multiple) reality - syndrome of the Occident. By saying this, I by no means declare a preference for one over the other. On the contrary, I think the theoretical instruments of thinking dichotomies in a dialectic manner are becoming available today; I mean the mind-heart, rationale-feelings, existence-nonexistence, matter-energy, theory-practice, inside-outside, traditional-modern, in short “one involving the other” kind of approaches. Hence, confrontations may end up with new conceptualisations.

Conceptualisation of the world involves conceptualisation of man / women him / herself. Ayesha Noorani explains this very elegantly by referring to the Islamic world view. But it is nonetheless the same in non-materialistic philosophies throughout the Orient. She says, “The modern viewpoint is based on a materialist philosophy where the existence of man is the primary reality and all ideas are a reflection of that reality. Its focus is man himself, and it rejects anything higher or ‘pre-ordained’. On the contrary, the traditionalist believes in the existence of a higher reality and that his own existence is secondary and has to serve a purpose.” This purpose, here, observed in most of the works of women, turns out either to be acting as a community developer or as organisers of a participatory process (e.g. Yasmeen Lari, Brinda Somaya, Afroza Ahmed, Gita Balakrishnan), or creating “a balance in life” (between nature and architecture) (e.g. Meena Mani, Namita Singh, Anupama Kundoo, Parul Zaveri), or conserving heritage settlements and buildings (e.g. Yasmeen Lari, Sandhya Sawant, Abha Narain Lambah) and crafts (e.g. Minnette De Silva, Parul Zaveri). Anuradha Parikh Benegal names this differentiation of conceptualisations in a different way, when she comments on the values “that are holistic and inclusive rather than didactic and

exclusive...that we should design inside-out rather than outside-in". John Berger had previously looked into these different "ways of seeing" in his article *Seker Ahmet and the Forest*. In it, he looks at this painting of Seker Ahmet and finds himself both in the forest and also out of it, in which the forest would be seen as a "scene" by one form of conceptualisation of space (the Occident), and as a "thing taking place in itself" still by another form of conceptualisation (the Orient).

Another dichotomy lies in the confrontation of the present archetypes (of architecture, in particular) and the new archetypes that are thought to be on their way (images that derive from the artificial world, from freeways carved on the earth, communication lines travelling all around, airplanes flying, dams constructed on rivers, etc.). The artificial and the natural seem to have been dissolving into each other for some time, creating another kind of input into our memories. A new challenge for theory will derive from here. Hence, so much is imbedded in the binary concepts of Eli Giannini: congestion and comfort, modernity and memory, technology and nature, banality and desire, instability and identity. There is no need to talk about the confrontation of the new with the old; almost in all speeches here, naturally lies this concern for the modern and the traditional. A new sense of place may arise from these discussions on space and place.

Finally, a few words on the role of the architect. Architecture is about people and the places they make. In a society where the norms are set around the "liberated individual" myth, the "prima donna" architect takes stage. *The Fountainhead* (both the book and the film) is about that kind of a story. Dana Cuff, in her Ph.D. thesis *Negotiating Architecture* remarks on a change in the role of the architect, to the death of a myth – the solo designer – and a negotiation process is contended. In fact, a radical change in the profession had already occurred then, when the architect turned from a solo designer to a business person. The efficiency of construction and economy had gained importance, hence leaving all the mistakes to be taken care of at the design stage with all the resources available. In *An Emancipated Place*, we are met with the reality of the South Asian architect, which is stated by Brinda Somaya as "a professional concern for the environment and the improved quality of human life for all Indians, and hence the need to train a new kind of professional who can intervene and be effective within our poverty-stricken framework in both the rural and urban areas." Most parts of the world are poverty-stricken, even the very developed parts of the world; and there needs to be something done about it. In addition, a great percentage of the buildings on the world are constructed not by architects, or further, not by "qualified" architects, and buildings designed by prima-donna designers get strangled within unqualified environments. The beauty of past buildings lay in the quality of the environment as a whole that they were located in, and we probably have to define a new role for the architect for that kind of a new sensibility.

My hope is that what is implicitly revealed in this book will be discussed further, connecting the practices of architects with alternative theories, and that the second book in the Hecar Foundation series will be a theoretical account of the different ways of doing architecture.