

Editorial**Towards Understanding ‘Other’ Cultures:
From Multiple to Multicultural Built-Environment ?**

By sheer co-incidence a substantial number of contributions to this issue seem to deal with upcoming, but to some extent controversial and sensitive, themes of the Global Built Environment, including racism, ethnography, diaspora and multiculturalism. As I was struggling to look for a clever and politically correct umbrella title to encompass these challenging but at times disparate concepts, ideas or thoughts, by an irony of fate the recent death of the noted all-rounder scholar and public activist, Edward Said has occurred. His relentless and uncompromising works come as the main source of inspiration. Said’s work needs no special reason to celebrate its value: it is always important and contemporary and relevant to the past and present contributions to this journal, but this volume particularly so. His classic publication ‘Orientalism’ (Said, E. 1978 and 1985) is particularly influential.



This issue starts with an article focusing for the first time on an eastern European country: Romania. Ruxandra Trandafoiu’s extract from her recently submitted PhD research at the University of Westminster (London) highlights overt ‘Racism and The Ghettoisation of the Gypsies’ in Romania. With the world’s highest Roma (or Gypsy) population (2.5 million around 10% of the national population), the anti-Roma sentiment seemed to have deepened since communism’s fall (Williams, N 1998:34). However, before examining the ghetto culture of the Gypsies, Trandafoiu discusses Romania’s current tension between creating a symbolic geography of a European nationhood and the cost of the ethnic minority’s homeland and lifestyle. The existing relationship between the ‘majority’ and the ‘imagined other’, along with the implied conflicts between state and minorities is illustrated through the notion of ‘political versus symbolic Geography’. Racism in Europe is by no means a new phenomenon but the discrimination and the plight of the Gypsies in the ghettos of Romania as Trandafoiu describes in a series of national press cuttings comes as a shocking reality. The commentary provides an important opportunity for stock -taking of other contemporary sub-cultures and built environments. Our frustratingly dated research on the squatters of Dhaka (Shakur, T and Madden, M; 1992) produced similar qualitative/attitudinal findings. More recently Bahre, E (GBER, Vol. 1, No 1 2001*) has charted a harrowing account of present day South African (Cape Town) shanty town violence. Although these comparative case studies are not intended to provide any consolation for the Romanian ethnic minorities the conditions they find themselves in tend to exist in all cultures, even in the present day “feel good factor” era of so called ‘Global Governance and Citizenship’.

I have no intention of painting a doomsday scenario for the present day built environment in this end-of-year bumper issue. Quite the contrary. Adam Hardy’s (University of De Montfort) up-beat commentary attempts to stimulate ‘multiculturalism through Architecture’. In a way Hardy suggests a series of radical curative surgeries of multicultural fusion through sincere and culturally well informed ‘architectural hybridised gymnastics’. In the absence of adequate recipes in the present day architectural curriculum he draws inspirations from daring but curious historical examples, e.g. the 18th Century Chinese-style mosques in Malacca or the hybridisation of the Indian temples between the 7th to 14th Centuries. Hardy

believes such attempts would ultimately provide resistance to current monopoly of industrialised buildings and foster cross-cultural collaborative community participation. These are not the views of one who is just a theorist, but someone who is a working practitioner also, illustrated by his institutional group efforts in e.g. the Mughal pavilion in Small Heath Park in Birmingham or the Clay shrines for multi-faith prayer room at the Leicester Royal Infirmary. While the vernacular traditions of Hasan Fathy are fast disappearing through aggressive global capitalism, academic and architect Adam Hardy's provocative commentary seeks a way forward towards a 'cultural architecture'. I am not sure that such an approach would give credence to the non-architect-built visually unusual forms of quasi-post modern mosque architecture appearing in the middle of many old Lancashire mill towns (Shakurt, T, 1999) but I suppose being an educator, Hardy is not given to 'cultural pastiche' but rather yearns for disenfranchised national cultural heritage to gain a better understanding of other cultures through learning other cultural designs while attempting to recreate them, even though the end results may not be perfect. The question is whether it is better to have some imperfect and improvised 'other culture' buildings, rather than diminishing vernacular traditions.

In the articles section we have two papers on the same theme as the commentaries. Ian Jackson comes first with his article entitled 'Separate urban development in a racially divided northern UK town of Oldham'. I wrote about the racial violence and tensions in Oldham some time ago (GBER, Vol 2, No 1, 2002*). A year on, Jackson reviews the current and the future development plans with a reflection on the 'sustainability of such urban centres'. Like many European cities in some areas the ethnic population is as high as 75% with a substantial proportion (around 30%) living in critically overcrowded conditions. In Oldham, unlike the rest of Britain, the market value of these properties is suffering a severe drop in prices. Comparisons with third world slums are obvious here. Jackson investigates the tough choices the local council have to make, which may involve demolition. The role of urban design and planning comes under scrutiny as Jackson makes comparison with regeneration schemes in Liverpool. Some readers may recall Karen Leeming's thought-provoking account of such new development for the Irish population at the Eldonians in Liverpool (GBER, Vol 1, No 2, 2001*). In the Netherlands, Bijlmermeer (near Amsterdam) is another good example where Le Corbusier designed a 'modern functional town' in the 1960s which is now being pulled down as it has become dysfunctional for the immigrant communities of the Surinamese and other ethnic communities who settled there since the 1970's in the neighbourhood. What is more interesting about Bijlmermeer is that the 21st Century design is carried out by Ashok Balotra, an Indian born architect practising in Rotterdam. There are other examples of culturally based designs in other parts of the Netherlands, carried out by architects from Africa where the residents are overwhelmingly African themselves. These are certainly challenging and innovative regeneration programmes yet to be experimented in the UK towns and cities. Ian Jackson discusses the issues related to poor housing, riots and recommendations for the future. Experiencing the poor existing conditions in Oldham, Jackson's article has an air of despair when one considers how this one time thriving textile town might regain its sense of identity and dignity. More than two decades ago when I was a post-graduate student in the Sheffield Town and Regional Planning department, I still remember vividly the run down slums of Glasgow (The Gorbals) and the innovative new town of Kilmarnock. I hope that the riot-torn northern towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford do not become case studies for present-day planners.

The second article by Noha Nasser (University of Central England) focuses on the 'Changing cultural ethnoscapas of British Cities'. Nasser examines the intervention mechanisms of

South Asians in relation to British multiculturalism. Nasser digs deep into her social anthropological study through her explanation of 'Biradari' (extended kinship and village ties) through which the South Asians establish and extend their trans national network. The research zooms in on the evolution of architectural representation, which is delineated to have moulded itself around the changing ideologies of British multiculturalism and planning systems. Here the author seeks to answer some of the issues raised by Adam Hardy but more from an ethnographic perspective. The improvisation of traditional layouts to serve the purpose of South Asian religious houses should be of interest to contemporary urban designers. The phenomenon is quite similar to my own study of Lancashire (Shakur, T op cit, 1999). Nasser stresses the shift of multicultural policy in the 1980s and the repoliticisation of South Asian identity. The process is defined as 'the adaptive re-use of the industrial buildings to the creation of the new cultural forms'. Theoretically, this process could be a comparative study of the 'self help' housing in the third world where the housing forms tend to reflect and adjust to either 'hostile' or 'assimilative' policies as they changed over time from the 1960s onwards.

The last two articles look into the impact of late capitalism and trade liberalisation on the development and architecture of India and China. Sharing similar size and economic bases but having diametrically opposed views about the role of the state in terms of intervention and development policy, these are two important case studies.

Erica Liu's account of 'Architectural Fairyland' of China in the post-liberalisation period of 1984 and after presents an almost surreal scenario of post-modern architectural extravaganza in mainland China. Liu highlights the fast developing stylised Western architecture and the mismatch of Mao's institutional practices. The article argues that the copy cat style of architectural practice is leading to a number of pressing problems, including intellectual property rights, malpractice and lack of institutional development. After two visits to China in the recent past, I gained the impression that the country was certainly a paradise for late post-modernist architecture, dazzling with shiny steel and glass. However, what Liu presents us with here could be a potentially serious problem in the near future, particularly in relation to aspects of institutional development. I am not sure if I would agree with the author when she debates the 'tradition versus modernism' concepts in generalising the development of modern Chinese architecture. I am aware that many of us in the West are quick to point out the 'Cultural Revolution' being a deterrent to modern development, but looking into the speed and quality of architectural development in the present day China, I wonder whether such revolution was an asset to embrace economic reforms with similar vigour of the past. The ongoing debate over 'tradition versus modernism' is meticulously exemplified by Liu and sprinkled with the views of celebrated western architects like Benjamin Ward and I M Pei. Some fifty years ago modernist architects such as Le Corbusier and Louis I Kahn had profound influence in post-colonial South Asia (see Ayyub Malik's report on post-colonial capitals of South Asia Conference in GBER, Vol 3, No 1 2003*). Today however, although the Chinese are busy producing architecture, inspired and designed by a host of western architects, it is refreshing to note that a few of them do place emphasis on the importance of preserving local traditions. No wonder they are widely praised for their sensitive development of neighbourhood and traditional houses in Shanghai. In conclusion, Liu finds consolation in China's 'multiculturalism' in architecture. This is slightly different approach to Adam Hardy's yearning for 'multi cultural architecture'. Is this the mantra of modern day master class architecture, or is it 'old wisdom revitalised'?

The final article is by Gurshaminder Singh Bajwa (JNU, Delhi), who looks into the similar impact and consequence of liberalisation on ICT policy in India and its subsequent implications for the country's overall built environment. With the strong assumption that sophisticated ICT development will upgrade India to the status of a developed nation, Bajwa provides a comprehensive review of the development of technology in India and how it is shaping the society backed up with the slow and sluggish development in certain key areas. Unlike in China, in India we find a happier collaboration between the State and multinational companies. What is more interesting to find is how technology has been scaled down (i.e. hand-held computers) to empower the health workers. These are some of the positive developments of introducing ICT in rural development contexts. Thanks to the phenomenal development of the state of Karnataka which has emerged as the 'Silicon Valley' of the East - one of the forerunners of ICT has now resulted in snatching jobs from UK (see Monbiot, G, 2003) . The research rightly points out how the skewed development towards the privileged higher education sector causes the majority of the technical institutions (including primary and secondary education) to suffer from lack of adequate infrastructure. This is where we encounter a typical problem of third world poor capitalist nations—something different from other similar, but different, political economies like China.

In recommendations Bajwa stresses the need for appropriate water, health and education development policies.

Ayyub Malik's book review on 'The Walled Arab City literature, Architecture and History' raises the age-old problem of the lack of representation of scholars from the 'South', particularly in relation to scholarship focusing on present-day built environment. This gives me the perfect opportunity to pay homage to Edward Said's rich contribution to the continued notion of 'Culture and Imperialism' (1994). As many of you might remember, to redress this notion was one of the main objectives of GBER, which I might add, is growing from strength to strength with increased contributions and free subscriptions. Complimenting increased contributions on Architecture in this issue we have an extended listing section with an inclusion of 'Buildings Projects'. Readers are once again reminded to send such items to us.

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- Said, E (1978, 1985), *Orientalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, Penguin
- Said, E (1994), *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Book
- Shakur, T and Madden, M (1992), 'Resettlement Camps in Dhaka: A Socio-economic profiles of squatter settlements in Dhaka', *Habitat International*, Vol 15, No 4, Pergamon Press.
- Shakur, T (1999), 'Growing Muslim Community, Islamic identity and the development of Mosques in a European setting: A Case of Lancashire, UK' published in Eben Saleh M. E and Feda Aljojanie, A (eds) refereed volume *Symposium on Mosque Architecture*, Vol 3B pp 133-248, published by KSU
- Williams, N (1998), Romania and Moldova, Lonely Planet Publications.

*All GBER back issues are readily accessible through the journal's web based archive section.

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