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New Architecture in India: A Landscape of Pluralism

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That last panel of *The Future of South Asia* symposium brought to stage Rahul Mehrotra, Professor of Urban Design and Planning at the Graduate School of Design, along with Mary Woods, Professor of Architectural history at Cornell, and Sudhir Jambhekar, Senior Partner of FXFOWLE Architects of New York. Under the title *New Architecture in India: A Landscape of Pluralism*, Mehrotra led the panel by presenting an overview of architecture in India since, roughly, 1990. At the heels of the liberalization of the nineties, India saw the inflow of investments to the region, which greatly impact architecture aesthetic and function. Mehrotra, the Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design, discussed four types of architectural practices that have emerged in India. He cited these as Global Practice, Regional Modernism, Alternative Practices, and Counter-Modernism.

According to Mehrotra, the landscape created by Global Practices is spurred directly to foreign investments and the corporate culture engaging with the process of globalization. Having the most influence on the public realm, Mehrotra noted that vendors and products influence the buildings within this genre. Mehrotra conceded that this form is about making India more familiar to outsiders, rather than for Indians themselves and is largely about making India feel and seem it is a competent place for global capital to land and manifest itself! Showing an example of the new Mumbai airport, which is to be completed by 2014, Mehrotra discussed this form as predictable and detached, although having merits of rigor, competence and delivering a product for which capacity most often does not exist in the country.

Moving to a discussion of regional modernism, Mehrotra determined this landscape as the “counter point for the model of global practice.” Maintaining aspects of modernism, this movement moves towards a rejecting of internationalism, instead aspiring to express modernism through the Indian landscape. The key to this mode for Mehrotra seems to be the sensitivity and respect to context played out in the development of this architecture. He cited the example of a shopping mall that utilized outdoor spaces, invoking a bazaar, where form fits with the culture of those who inhabit it. Similarly the choice of local materials and textures characterize the work that is produced within this genre.

Calling the next landscape the “barefoot architecture model,” Mehrotra discussed the merits of what he calls Alternative Practice. Sustainability, low costs, and social connections seemed emergent themes in this model. Mehrotra noted that in this type of architecture form is often looser and sometimes clumsy, as the reduction of materials and use of what is available are the paramount concerns for builders. Because of this, the product is sometimes not considered on the aesthetic map of the West but, according to Mehrotra, is critical for India. To exemplify this movement, Mehrotra noted buildings that use less concrete and often source local material and engage in recycling of material etc.

Finally, Mehrotra pointed to a reemergence the Counter Modernism Landscape. Delving into a discussion on the importance of Vastu Shastra, likened to the Japanese notion of Feng Shui, Mehrotra notes that he consults with experts certified in the Hindu tradition before beginning a project in India. This movement harkens back to the past by utilizing only traditional methods of building. No steel or glass was used, for example, in the construction of the Aksharadam Monument in Delhi.

Finishing his lecture using a slide depicting the cityscape of a generic emerging city in the globalizing world, Mehrotra warned that as society we should be careful that differences yet exist even if things begin to start looking alike. When we are consumed by the similarity of architectural expression we don't necessarily express the inherent pluralism in our societies.

The discussion turned to comments from Mary Woods and Sudhir Jambhekar, each focusing on aspects of Mehrotra's overview. Jambhekar, an architect with over 40 years of experience, noted the inevitability of globalism's impact on architecture, noting the need to capitalize on globalism to improve the lives of people all over the world. Recalling Mehrotra's discussion of the Counter Modernism landscape, Jambhekar noted that designers have an obligation to represent their own time and so as not to get trapped in the visual cliques of the past. Sustainability and concern for the environment must be forefront in the proposal of a new project.

Mary Woods, who brings a historian's perspective, mentioned that 30 years ago the discourse on architecture in India would be quite different. In the first decades after India Independence, Indian architects, trained in the West, would return to build something for the nation state. Now, what is being built is so diverse. She questioned how to merge the pluralistic landscapes of architecture in India and around the world, citing this as a challenge for designers.

Through Mehrotra's exquisite slides and lecture, and the bolstering of Woods and Jambhekar's expertise, the panel concluded the symposium and guests were released into the Cambridge sunshine. As participants navigated among Harvard's diverse buildings, they surely brought to mind the contrasting nature of the university's own pluralistic architecture and the richness it brings to our lives!