

6 State of Housing / A Place to Live (2018)

There exists a longer and a shorter version of Sanjiv Shah's 2018 documentary (41:34 min and 100 min respectively). In the following, I will refer to the 41 minute version which was shown under the title *State of Housing* as part of the exhibition of the same name, jointly curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote and Kaiwan and presented in Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Bengaluru between 2018 and 2020. However, *A Place to Live*, the long version of the film, was also screened in Bengaluru once when the exhibition was shown there in September and October 2020.

In several respects, this commissioned work for the context and framework of an exhibition was a novelty for the director Sanjiv Shah, not least because there was funding available for this film (through Tata Trusts; the film was produced by Urban Design Research Institute and the Architecture Foundation), which was unusual for him as a predominantly independently working and self-funded documentary filmmaker. Furthermore, in order to not focus only on one local context, the filming had to be done simultaneously by two film crews in different locations in India, given the very tight shooting schedule. Just a few weeks before the first opening of this traveling exhibition in Mumbai, it became clear that the form had to be reworked once again to accommodate as much as possible the viewing habits or possibilities that viewers have in the context and space of an exhibition. For this reason, the decision was made in favor of an episodic structure of the film which allows viewers to watch the individual three to four minute episodes, instead of the entire film. Each episode is announced by a black slide with a short title, brief information on the topic and some conceptual associations. Instead of the slide, I will quote only the titles and brief information before every section in the following chapter. Many of the episodes initially take statistical data from the surveys conducted as part of the Census of India 2011 as a starting point. They contextualize these in the concrete lived realities of marginalized people and, above all, let them speak for themselves. Another focus, which at least in the shorter version of the film could be perceived as slightly overrepresented vis-à-vis the 'peoples' perspectives', is on the statements of experts and activists.

The film begins first with a prologue in which we look through the camera and window of a slowly moving train as well as a thick layer of smog at residential

buildings in Mumbai, while hearing the voice of Rahul Mehrotra who introduces the topic of the contemporary shortage in affordable housing in India. His central argument, as stated by Mehrotra in a wide variety of other formats too, is that this problem cannot be solved by an “absolute solution” (00:49 min) “that is either propelled by ideas of mass housing or political ambitions by the state represented by statistical hubris” (00:49 min).⁵¹ Instead of focusing primarily on the construction of new housing, upgrading, restoring, retrofitting and improving what is already there should receive much more attention. More rental housing for mobile urban dwellers is also badly needed, as well as a wide range of solutions that could strengthen sustainable communities in the emerging urban-rural continuum.

6.1 HOME

home
dwelling
apartment
shelter
housing
BHK

The census in India defines a household as a group of persons who normally live together and take their meals from a common kitchen...

The first episode starts with an aerial view of an informal settlement in Mumbai and captures voices and images of people from different cities who are describing in their own words what ‘home’ means to them. As Ranjani Mazumdar writes, especially in the context of visualizations of slums in Mumbai, “(t)he aerial view popularized since the experience of flight is now a widespread form that has deeply affected the way we understand geography and territory (Boyer 2003; Kaplan 2018; Morshed 2002). Since this form of looking is distinctly different from ground-level perception, there is a quality of abstraction that comes into play in any high-angle view of the world. If the expansion of aviation led to the proliferation of the aerial

51 Mehrotra is not only critical of the state’s prevailing view on ‘permanent’ or ‘absolute’ solutions in the field of housing, but in general of a ‘very arrogant architecture’ which “assumes it can solve issues for the next two hundred years.” Instead, he prefers to think of architecture in cities as “transitory moments” and argues that they “can be imagined to be built incrementally”. See, for instance, this article by Vladimir Belogolovsky published on Nov 29, 2022 at *stirworld*: “Rahul Mehrotra: For us, architecture became the project of resistance”, available at <https://www.stirworld.com/think-columns-rahul-mehrotra-for-us-architecture-became-the-project-of-resistance> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

view in the 20th century, the entry of the drone in this century has introduced another dimension to this perspective from above” (Mazumdar 2021: 158).⁵²

“I have no connection with the community here”; “we should have a home befitting a human being”. As the quotes from the documentary clearly emphasize, the provision of living space alone is by no means the basis for it to become a home for its inhabitants.

6.2 HOMELESSNESS

displacement

homelessness *migrant*

eviction

refugee

*Displacement due to infrastructure projects, natural calamities,
civil unrest and war is the major cause of homelessness.*

In addition to many refugees from other nation states, India has a very high number of internally displaced persons, but they are not really visible to the public. Environmental disasters and, to a large extent, also large-scale infrastructure projects are mainly responsible for this. The fiercely controversial Narmada Valley Project can be considered as an exemplary case. The project included a large number of major, medium and minor dam projects, among them the two major dams Sardar Sarovar (Gujarat) and Indira Sagar (Madhya Pradesh), with the aim of supplying water and generating electricity. The construction continued for over three decades, and opposition to it has existed for just as long. Along with this, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (*Save the Narmada Movement*) forms a pivotal moment in India’s independent documentary movement in the 1980s and 1990s. For this reason, they are referred to as the two “activist decades” in Indian documentary film (see Hariharan 2021: 68–70). However, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi formally inaugurated the Sardar Sarovar dam in 2017, he spoke of a “massive disinformation campaign” by activists of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in reference to the countless families, many of them Adivasis, and more than 40,000 individuals who were at risk of losing their homes due to the flooding of the Narmada River.⁵³ The episode titled *HOMELESSNESS* draws

52 The film offers mostly ground-level perceptions and makes only sparse use of such views from above.

53 Michael Safi (2017). “Indian PM inaugurates Sardar Sarovar dam in face of activist anger. Narendra Modi hits out at ‘misinformation campaigns’ as environmentalists warn

on two film clips from earlier documentaries, one clip from the documentary *A Narmada Diary* (1995) by Simantini Dhuru and Anand Pathwardan which was made between 1990 and 1993, and the other from the Prakrit Media Collective's documentary *Famine '87* (1988), which used the example of the pastoral Banni community in the desert region of Kutch in western Gujarat to highlight the environmental impact of misguided modernization and development policies. The famine of 1987 in Gujarat, especially in the regions of Kutch and Saurashtra, had devastating consequences for people and animals.

After Sanjiv Shah dropped out of his architecture studies, he became actively involved in the field of refugee housing and eventually took up film studies, as he was looking for an effective way to communicate and inform about the issues that were important to him and hardly represented in the media at the time. For this reason, he decided early in his film studies to pursue documentary filmmaking as a suitable medium. The personal experience of collective filmmaking and supporting each other in this process, as Shah experienced himself in connection with the film *Famine '87*, was formative for him, as he explains in an interview with the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS).⁵⁴

Through these brief but impressive references to an alternative archive of the documentary movement in the 1980s and 90s which was highly critical of the state and its understanding of modernization, we are made aware of the many complex and closely interwoven causes of a permanent or temporary migration of millions of people to the cities. As viewers, we also understand the long-term repercussions and existential consequences for subsequent generations. This, of course, also applies to the long history of migration resulting from the partition of India as well as the creation of Bangladesh, which have left many people and their families not only permanently homeless, but in many ways stateless, "because they don't belong anywhere" (07:59 min). Many of the refugees from other countries who are either 'legally' or unregistered in India, are also included in this category of 'stateless' people in India, not least, many Rohingyas.

that 40,000 families' homes are at risk". *The Guardian*, Sep 18. Online available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/18/indian-pm-inaugurates-sardar-sarovar-dam-in-face-of-activist-anger> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

54 The interview can be watched online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQQ86I-685A> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

6.3 STATE OF HOUSING

India's housing needs
Urban: 18.78 million, as per the 2011 census
Rural: 43 million, as per the Working Group on
Rural Housing for the 12 five-year-plan⁵⁵

In this episode, Rahul Mehrotra's voice is heard once again, broadening the concept of housing, which according to him can be seen as only one, albeit central, component of the culture that is created, just like the spaces of inhabitation and relationships that are forged between members of other groups and communities. In the same spirit, the film addresses the problem again in the concluding episode, arguing that the focus on (affordable) housing is too limited and that in terms of relationships and emerging forms of coexistence, we should actually be talking about dwelling and homemaking. A second argument in this episode is that in the imagination of an increasingly neoliberal landscape of cities, everyone is locked into a very static notion of habitat, and the houses or apartments in which we live increasingly take on the character of mere commodities.

6.4 RURAL

rural agrarian
 village
 pastoral
 folk

India's population
1951: 17% urban 83% rural
2011: 31% urban 69% rural

This episode addresses another fundamental problems which occurs increasingly in rural regions: on the one hand, that freedom of movement is subject to increasingly restrictive conditions, even in rural areas; among many other problems, this also restricts the search for suitable building materials for houses. At the same time, the resources for this are becoming less and less: after the wood suitable for building has become scarce, the focus in the desired construction method of

55 Just for comparison, the FDI film *A Growing House* (1972), which is introduced in chapter 2 in this book and address the housing shortage in India at the beginning of the 1970s, mentions that in total, 83.7 million dwelling units would need to be built, the vast majority (71.8 million) of them in rural areas, while just under 12 million dwelling units would need to be built in urban areas.

6.6 GENDER

gender equality
 livelihood
 empowerment
 decision making

The democratization of city governance, and the political inclusion of men and women migrants in decision-making processes, are important steps for building cities based on the principles of freedom, human development and gender equality.

Gender-sensitive planning simply does not seem to exist for poor and marginalized people, so that this episode first argues for seeing and acknowledging the specific needs of women and enabling solutions for them. In this episode, the feminist architect Neera Adarkar (Mumbai) reports on different interventions and concrete measures to bring about effective changes here, for example through a crèche, the establishment of women shelters or bathrooms for women. However, since a critical gender perspective should not be limited to the idea of two genders or ‘women’s issues’ only, this episode and call for gender friendly cities could serve as a basis for including trans and queer feminist but also intersectional perspectives that take multiple and often intersecting forms of discrimination (based, for instance, on caste, class, religion, gender, sexuality, disability) into account.

6.7 DELIVERY

delivery state
 private
 self-help
 markets
 facilitate
 supply

Under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana the government has promised to deliver 20 million houses by the end of 2022.

Following on from this, Amita Bhide (School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai) criticizes the state for recognizing the need for housing on the one hand, but not the problem of poverty and the associated vulnerability of people. As the most significant intervention, the Urban Land Ceiling Act of 1976 originally aimed at a more equitable distribution of land and housing in the city, while at the same time limiting the maximum amount of land that could be disposed of. However, as it turned out in the following decades, this did not benefit

the poor, but only the non-poor classes (25:08 min), so that private developers now have de facto access to slum land, of which only 10 percent is used for the development of housing for poor people.

At the same time, there is a lack of infrastructure and good transport links, while marginalized groups are pushed further and further into the outskirts, where the land is cheap, but not serviced land, and thus hardly contributes to the so-called rehabilitation of the poor population.⁵⁶

Shah's film offers an excellent approach to this complex issue, as it also shows the impressive range of activism and critical knowledge production in the field of housing and urban/spatial design through the interesting selection of experts. This also includes the legal level, where Bilal Khan, for example, has been campaigning for many years for the recognition and enforcement of a right to shelter as an integral part of a right to life (26:31 min).

6.8 SELF-HELP

self-help *incremental*
 collaboration
 participation
auto-construct

A large part of the population in India is still directly engaged in the building of their own homes.

As the early Films Division documentaries on low-cost housing show (see chapter 2 in this book), the state in independent India at most envisaged the participation of the residents in the construction of the house but had little confidence in their craftsmanship or creativity in finding and using suitable building materials for their temporary or permanent housing units. This was all supposed to be centrally planned, controlled and above all based on the latest scientific research by the state and its institutions. Accordingly, it is hardly known that the majority of

56 As already mentioned in the introduction, it is interesting to keep in mind that the verb 'to rehabilitate' as well as the noun 'rehabilitation' can refer to human beings as well as to the built environment. Following Partition in South Asia in 1947, rehabilitation referred to the urgent need for housing for millions of refugees who fled from the territories of today's Pakistan and Bangladesh to today's India, while the same term was used for 'displaced persons' during the Second World War. The semantic link between refugees who lost their homes and were thus considered to be in need of 'rehabilitation', and ageing high-rise towers, for instance, that were built to provide low-cost housing in the post-war era, is interesting to note.

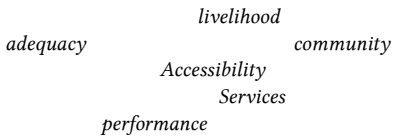
dwellings in India continue to be built by the inhabitants themselves and expanded by them according to need and financial possibilities (in other words, they follow an approach of incremental housing), not only in the rural regions, but also in the cities of India (28:05 min). To overlook this as a “core mode of production” means at the same time not to recognize it as a cultural process.

Under the term TECHNOLOGY, the one-sided focus and use of environmentally harmful and expensive building materials, especially cement, is again pointed out (30:12 min). An interesting reference is made here to the fact that in the 1930s and 1940s, there was still an awareness of the large palette of building materials, through which at the same time a variety of construction methods and house types could be realized. Indeed, the early Films Division films from the first decades after Independence convey an awareness of the use of more diverse locally available and cheaper materials in low-cost housing (see chapter 2 in this book). However, they simultaneously advocate for their industrial production, whereas this section in Shah’s film also raises the issue of preserving craft traditions and skills in working with materials that would nowadays be considered as ‘alternative technology’ (30:35 min).

With the term TRANSITIONAL, the film, as well as the co-curator of the exhibition *State of Housing*, Rahul Mehrotra, in many of his public speeches and publications, stresses the need to move away from a fixation on notions of housing based on ownership and permanent duration. Not only the circular migration of a high number of migrant workers from rural areas to cities, but also other mobile groups (“mobile populations,” 33:02 min), such as students or single women, need temporary solutions. In many cases, they do not plan to stay in the same place or city permanently. Consequently, a larger part of the affordable housing in cities of India would have to be made available as rental housing, which so far is not the case (34:19 min). However, this in turn raises the pertinent of un/equal access to urban rental housing markets where Dalits and Muslims very often experience forms of caste- and religion-based discrimination (Banerjee et al. 2015).

Particularly in Mumbai, but also in other cities in India, housing types such as the famous chawls, the four to five storey buildings in which apartments were rented to mill workers, are now considered an example of affordable rental housing and could be used as a model for appropriate planning for the future.

6.9 ADEQUACY



Adequacy in housing implies security of tenure, availability of infrastructure, affordability, habitability, access to livelihood and cultural adequacy.

In the final episode of the film, the one-sided focus on health and safety in relation to low-cost housing that has prevailed for a long time (see chapter 2 in this book) is criticized again, specifically as no attention has been paid to infrastructure and livelihoods, but also to the question of living together in difference as newly emerging urban communities. In this sense, *adequate* housing encompasses much more than just the criterion of affordability and needs to take numerous other dimensions into account. All this could be conveyed much better by the term *dwelling* instead of housing (39:27 min).

Although somewhat “compressed” in this shorter version of the film which was made for the purpose and context of the exhibition titled *State of Housing*, the documentary nevertheless offers important insights into current debates on the complex topic of (affordable) housing, homemaking and multilocal dwelling. One of its strengths is that people affected by extreme forms of spatial injustice and multiple forms of marginalization describe their situation in their own words. Their experiences and perspectives are complemented by an impressive variety of critical knowledge actors and activists who have been working for solutions and an urgently needed paradigm shift in this field for many years. As Sanjiv Shah’s own long-standing experience and active engagement is not mentioned at all in the film, I would recommend to also watch the interesting video interview with IIHS on this documentary which is referred to several times in this chapter. *State of Housing* communicates the central concerns of the exhibition very effectively, but the film also works very well without this framework and context.