

## 7 The “Self-Taught Sustainable Architect” Didi Contractor: *Earth Crusader* (2016) and *Didi Contractor – Marrying the Earth to the Building* (2017)

Almost around the same time, two documentaries about the artist and self-taught architect Didi Contractor, who passed away in 2021, were released in 2016 and 2017: *Earth Crusader* (Films Division of India, 2016) by Shabnam Sukhdev and *Didi Contractor – Marrying the Earth to the Building* (independent production, 2017) by Steffi Giaracuni. Sukhdev is the daughter of legendary documentary film director S. Sukhdev, about whom she made an autobiographical film titled *The Last Adieu* (Films Division of India, 2013). When she showed this film at the Dharamshala Film Festival (DIFF) a few years ago, she met an old acquaintance from her childhood there with whom her father was very familiar at the time: Didi Contractor. Deeply touched by this reunion and impressed by the sustainable architecture Didi had been able to realize in the Kangra Valley in the North Indian state of Himachal Pradesh since the 1990s, Shabnam Sukhdev decided to come back and shoot her film *Earth Crusader*.<sup>57</sup> We see the director several times in her film as one of Didi’s visibly enthusiastic and attentive listeners.

Steffi Giaracuni’s first encounter with Didi Contractor was through the latter’s architecture which she encountered in the course of her backpacking trip through the Himalayan region she did after having completed her studies in media design at the Bauhaus University in Weimar. She was so impressed by both, the architecture and the person, that this motivated her to make her first independently produced documentary during another six-week stay in the Kangra

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57 Tenzing Sonam (2021): “Didi Contractor of Sidhbari & her architecture reviving traditional practices”. *The Tribune*, Jul 18. Online available at <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/features/didi-contractor-of-sidhbari-her-architecture-reviving-traditional-practices-284904> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

Valley. Although Giaracuni talks about her fascination with Didi Contractor in interviews, her film focuses by no means solely on her alone. Even more than Shabnam Sukhdev’s film, Steffi Giaracuni’s film opens the viewer’s eyes to the entire process as well as the manifold necessary activities of humans and animals that are required for the planning and construction of a sustainably built house. It also conveys rather impressively how many people are drawn exactly to this place where they hope to find answers to pressing questions and a deeper knowledge of possible alternatives in the midst of what is often referred to as a time of multiple crises.

Despite some parallels, the two documentaries pursue distinctly different focuses, and therefore complement each other well. They may both be considered to have added to Didi Contractor’s fame in recent years, although Steffi Giaracuni’s film surely circulated more widely in Europe. Moreover, Didi’s in-depth knowledge of and commitment to sustainable and cost-effective construction of homes from materials such as clay, stone, bamboo and slate, as well as the houses she has built over the past decades in the Kangra Valley, have been introduced to an interested audience in India as well as in Europe. Nevertheless, it is by no means the case that Didi Contractor was unknown before the release of the two documentaries; rather, she had already attracted a certain amount of media interest in the years before that, and she apparently embodied an alternative that was intensively sought by young, trained architects. In the words of Rohan Shivkumar, whose film *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* is presented in chapter five in this book, both her work and personality represent “the power of the sensitive amateur to challenge mainstream architectural practice, a resistance to the seductions of capital and a return to the local” (Shivkumar 2018).<sup>58</sup>

Didi Contractor was born Delia Kinzinger in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1929. Her father was the painter Edmund Kinzinger, who was born and raised in South Germany, her mother was the American artist Alice Fish Kinzinger. After Edmund Kinzinger had left Germany in 1928 for a first stay as an exchange teacher in

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58 In his review of a book of architecture photographs by Joginder Singh with original quotes by Didi Contractor, Shivkumar even refers to the emergence of an “icon of resistance” in recent years and explains that “Didi Contractor’s work has become a symbol of resistance of the local against the forces of global capital in recent years. Her sensitive, careful interventions in local materials and techniques in the Kangra Valley have been cited extensively by many in search of an alternative to the current manufacturing methods that seem to be ravaging the land.” Rohan Shivkumar (2018). “Book Review: An Adobe Revival: Didi Contractor’s Architecture. By Joginder Singh”. *Architectural Digest*, Feb 20. Available online at <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/book-review-an-adobe-revival-didi-contractor-architecture-photographer-joginder-singh/> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

the United States, he returned to Germany again with his family in 1930 to head a private art school in Munich as director. However, in 1933 they finally turned their backs on Nazi Germany. The then still very young daughter Delia, who early on was given the nickname “Didi,” thus only lived for a very short time in her father’s country of origin; she grew up in the US and was also trained as an artist there, although she never finished college in the United States (Narayan 2007: 12). Many years later, Didi Contractor worked as an interior designer in India where she lived with her husband, Ramji Narayan Contractor, a civil engineer whom she had met in the United States. They first lived together with his family in Nasik for eight years and then in Bombay, in Juhu. One of their five children, Kirin Narayan, an anthropologist living in the United States, wrote an autobiography titled *My Family and Other Saints* (2007) in which she vividly describes what it meant for her to grow up in a very cosmopolitan and multilingual environment:

Since we lived by the beach and near the airport, our home was a perfect place for city friends wanting to escape to the seaside and cosmopolitan travelers moving between destinations. On weekends, parties swelled out of the divans in the living room into butterfly chairs or cane *modas* (stools) under the pipal tree in the garden. There newspaper editors, musicians, physicists, documentary filmmakers, and other Indians from downtown Bombay mixed easily with the Westerners associated with universities, news agencies, consulates and the Peace Corps. Stories swirled around us in multiple languages and accents (Narayan 2007: 14).

In the words of independent documentary film director Anand Patwardhan, whose family was close friends with the Narayan Contractor family and who went in and out of their home in Juhu, their home was “a drop-in center for all hippies and intellectuals and seekers and Didi was the ever generous focal point and host” (quoted in Sonam 2021). After separating from her husband in the 1970s, Didi Contractor moved up north to settle in a part of Kangra district in the North Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Tenzing Sonam, film director, producer and co-founder of the Dharamsala Film Festival (DIFF, along with his partner Ritu Sarin) who lives in a house designed by Didi Contractor, characterizes this part of the Kangra Valley in the following words:

This once sleepy part of Kangra valley, close to the cosmopolitan centre of McLeodganj and blessed with the presence of the Dalai Lama, became home to a diverse group of residents drawn here by their shared interests in spiritual pursuits, environmental concerns and alternative lifestyles (Sonam 2021).

At her newly chosen place of residence, Didi Contractor devoted herself increasingly to the field of architecture and design – an interest that had been strong in her since early childhood, but which could not be realized for her as a young woman in the United States at that time, at least in the sense of professional training and

occupation. Especially Frank Lloyd Wright’s approach of an organic architecture, through which a harmonious coexistence of man and nature would be made possible, inspired her strongly as young child (Malviya 2021). In India, her acquaintance with the social reformer and freedom activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who sharpened her view of traditional Indian handicrafts, was one of the influences that shaped her own deep involvement with ecological construction methods. As becomes especially clear from Shabnam Sukhdev’s documentary film about her, Gandhi’s critical localist approach towards building technologies that, according to him, had to be appropriate to the respective context and rely on the usage of locally available building materials deeply influenced her. In her article about her, Satakshi Malviya also mentions Anant Kentish Coomaraswamy’s philosophical thoughts on the connection between art and independence as another major inspiration for her own work (ibid.).

As can be occasionally read about Didi Contractor, her parents were close to the (partly exiled) Bauhaus movement in the United States and she absorbed many of these influences in her childhood and youth. This fact apparently resonated particularly with film director Steffi Giaracuni who spent some years of her childhood and youth in Weimar and also studied media design at the Bauhaus University there. As Giaracuni explains in a conversation about her film, it was especially an unexpected déjà vu experience she made in a village called Rakkar in Sidhbari in the Kangra district when she encountered a formal language she had known very well from Weimar and the Bauhaus context. This experience led her to the idea for her first and independently produced documentary film *Didi Contractor – Marrying the Earth to the Building*. On her backpacking trip through the Himalayan region, Giaracuni met the founder of the Nishtha Rural Health, Education & Environment Centre, Dr. Barbara Nath-Wiser, a medical doctor of Austrian origin, and she stayed at this place for a month. This gave her the opportunity to study the architecture and design of this clinic very closely and intensively:

Giaracuni came across a hospital in a nearby village whose clear-cut shapes and structures, and the aesthetics of the design itself, reminded her of the familiar Bauhaus architecture of Weimar: ‘But the houses were built of mud, bamboo and river stones,’ Giaracuni says.<sup>59</sup>

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59 Translated from the German original version of an article written by Oliver Joliat (2017): “Ton, Steine, Scheiben: Steffi Giaracuni filmt eine Bau-Pionierin in Indien” (“Clay, Stones, Discs: Steffi Giaracuni films a construction pioneer in India”). *TagesWoche*, Dec 09. Online available at <https://tageswoche.ch/form/portraet/ton-steine-scheiben-steffi-giaracuni-filmt-eine-bau-pionierin-indien/index.html> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

The Nishtha Rural Health, Education & Environment Centre was the first institutional assignment of Didi Contractor in the 1990s. At that time, the self-taught architect was already over sixty years old, a particularly fascinating fact for national and international audiences, as can be seen from reviews and articles about her. In addition to a few other institutional buildings, such as the Sambhaavna Institute of Public Policy and Politics in Palampur or the Dharmalaya Institute for Compassionate Living in Keori, the focus of Didi Contractor’s numerous other commissioned works in the following two decades was predominantly on private residences. Chitra Vishwanath, a well-known architect working in Bengaluru, who appears several times in Steffi Giaracuni’s film, attaches special importance to this fact and emphasizes the “feminine” influence that, in her view, is important for the planning and designing of residential buildings.<sup>60</sup>

From Shabnam Sukhdev’s film *Earth Crusader*, and numerous other sources, one can gain the impression that Didi Contractor, with her deep interest and knowledge in houses built of dried, stamped adobe bricks, drew exclusively on a locally rooted tradition that hardly existed any longer in Kangra Valley in the 1990s and was consequently revived by her. Largely due to her influence and the successful training as well as sharing of knowledge with many young architects, designers and artisans interested in alternative building methods and materials, this has now changed. Currently, there is a new willingness and growing interest especially in clay as a building material, which is perceived to enable a particularly pleasant living feeling for the inhabitants and can be recycled at any time. In addition, clay can compensate very well for temperature differences, so that it has a cooling effect in hot temperatures and a heat-storing effect when it is cold outside. In addition, unlike concrete-based construction, adobe houses are not only easier to repair, but they are also modifiable, so that the houses can also be redesigned according to the needs and tastes of the residents.

However, it is interesting to learn from Steffi Giaracuni’s film that Didi Contractor did not first become aware of clay as a building material in India or the Himalayan

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60 In her work as an architect based in Bengaluru who has realized projects throughout India and Africa since the beginning of the 1990s, Chitra Vishwanath specialized early on questions of ecology and sustainability. As part of the locally available building materials that she and her team use, rammed earth and compressed mud blocks have been a major component. She describes her approach and practice in a chapter titled “Degrowth. A Perspective from Bengaluru, South India”. Anitra Nelson and François Schneider (2019) (eds.). *Housing for Degrowth. Principles, Models, Challenges and Opportunities*. London: Routledge, 133–144.

region but had apparently already been interested in it much earlier in her life. She mentions that she had learned a great deal from her native American friends about their traditional clay building methods as a young woman. After emigrating from Nazi Germany, the Kinzinger family moved to Waco in Texas in 1935, as Didi’s father Edmund joined the Art Department of Baylor University and worked there from 1936 until the early 1950s. Clay houses not only have a long history in Texas, but are also currently experiencing renewed interest, largely motivated by the same concern for sustainable, resource-conserving construction methods that are particularly well suited to local climatic conditions.<sup>61</sup>

It may still be too early to speak of a new globally perceptible wave of enthusiasm, but interest in clay as a building material is growing in Europe as well. From a western, Eurocentric perspective, earthen buildings may initially still be perceived as a “building material of the past”, which is mainly used in “emerging and developing countries”.<sup>62</sup> In the course of a gradual change in thinking about sustainable construction, however, this view may be changing slowly, as can be seen by a change in media perceptions on the one hand and recent initiatives for networking and knowledge exchange about contemporary earthen construction on the other.<sup>63</sup>

At this point, it makes sense to reflect briefly from a critical gender and media perspective on existing notions of ‘femininity’ and their association with ‘natural’ building materials, especially earth. On the basis of a hetero-normative perspective, that is, predominantly through the idea of two genders only (male and female) and associated assumptions of either biological or socially mediated, typically ‘female’ or ‘male’ characteristics, women in particular are often associated with an attitude and way of acting that is more inclined towards respecting and preserving nature and its resources.<sup>64</sup> Intentionally or unintentionally, both

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61 See Teresa Palomo Acosta and Christopher Long (1952, updated Feb 25, 2021): “Adobe”. Texas State Historical Association. *Handbook of Texas*. Online available at <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/adobe> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

62 Dorothea Heintze (2022): “Erde und Wasser” (“Earth and Water”). *Chrismon*, May 19. Online available at <https://chrismon.evangelisch.de/blogs/wohnlage/lehm-baustoff-der-vergangenheit-warum-nicht-auch-baustoff-der-zukunft> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

63 For instance, a specialist conference on earthen construction will be held in Weimar in September 2024, organized by the Dachverband Lehm e.V., which is based there. In Switzerland, for example, the Zurich based trade association IG Lehm is very active. See <https://www.iglehm.ch/> (last access Jan 3, 2024).

64 This corresponds with highly gendered media representations and an extensive focus on female icons of environmental and climate movements. Fritzi-Marie Titzmann argues that this can also be seen as “part of a current trend to stage women as icons of a (new)

film titles may evoke close conceptual associations of ‘earth-mother earth’ and clay as a central sustainable building material, for which Didi Contractor has now become known far beyond the borders of India, therefore invariably linked with certain ideas of gender. One problem that I see in this is that precisely the aspect of a meaningful and contemporary synthesis of traditional and regionally anchored knowledge with modern approaches, which is central to critical regionalism, could be overlooked as a result of a certain media framing and view of ‘nature’ and ‘the feminine’. Didi Contractor’s experimentation based knowledge and innovative practices could be pushed into the background or primarily understood through the lenses of the ‘traditional’, ‘vernacular’ or, potentially, as ‘rejecting everything modern’. Indeed, this impression might well be reinforced by Didi Contractor’s own and in part strongly generalizing statements, especially in Shabnam Sukhdev’s film, in which the architect lapses into a downright ‘rant’ against cities and their ‘ugly’ buildings. In several scenes of the film, it almost seems as if Didi allows herself to be carried away in the presence of the camera during some of her lecture tours at various architecture schools and events, on which Sukhdev accompanied her as part of her shooting for the film. Furthermore, the architect leaves no doubt whatsoever that she completely rejects the urban construction method of residential buildings that is now increasingly spilling over from the cities into regions such as the Kangra Valley, as well as the associated aesthetic preferences, for example with regard to brightly shining colors that she perceives as disturbing and inappropriate in the context of the local landscape. In Giaracuni’s film, however, the title quote “marrying the earth to the building” does not primarily refer to the building material clay, but to the necessity of landscaping. For Didi, a design perspective and sensibility in which the future building fits harmoniously into the respective landscape and does not visually stand out too much from it, is indispensable.

In contrast to Shabnam Sukhdev’s film, everything “ugly” in Didi’s view is completely visually faded out in Giaracuni’s documentary: we only see beautiful landscape images from the Kangra district as well as Didi Contractor’s almost inconspicuous looking houses, which indeed fit very harmoniously into this landscape and never seem to disturb it at all.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, it would certainly fall

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protest culture”. Fritzi-Marie Titzmann (2023): “Between Chipko Andolan and Fridays for Future: Global media practices, local repertoires and the gendered imagery on youth climate activism in India”. *RePLITO*, Apr 27. Online available at <https://doi.org/10.21428/f4c6e600.79b3dcde>.

65 On first viewing Giaracuni’s film, this seemed to me to correspond to a tourismified regime of looking at a region that is thus preserved, if only in the visual imagination, as a “fairy-tale landscape against the backdrop of the Himalayan mountains” (quoted from

short to consider Didi Contractor exclusively as a ‘guardian of a tradition’ or to overlook the influences of modern architecture and design principles on her work as an architect. Giacomini’s above-mentioned déjà vu experience regarding a formal language that was very familiar to her from the Weimar and Bauhaus contexts and that she recognized in the Nishtha Clinic, already give us a first important indication of this. However, the director mentions this in interviews and conversations about her motivation to make this film, while it is not addressed in the film itself.

What we can learn from watching both films, on the other hand, is that the houses designed by Didi Contractor and her students do indeed tie in with local traditions and knowledge in terms of construction methods and building materials. Nevertheless, they do not represent a mere reproduction of earlier forms, even when viewed from the outside, but carefully modify and develop them further according to contemporary criteria. Srabanti Dasgupta describes this as follows in her thesis at the Faculty of Design, CEPT University in Ahmedabad (Gujarat), for which she interviewed Didi Contractor 2020 personally:

Didi uses the vernacular language to build, learning from the traditional technique, and age-old practices. Though the materials she uses are the same, the traditional vernacular house looks rather different, featuring small openings, no skylight, and no gables. The traditional vernacular is rather dark in the inside. The spaces are simple with smaller divisions of spaces which is not so in Didi’s work.

(...)

She has derived a method of using traditional building materials to create modern spaces with all the facilities of a contemporary dwelling. This modern space is free-flowing and more open in the inside. It draws in much more light from the numerous openings and skylights, however small they might be (Dasgupta 2020: 96).<sup>66</sup>

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the announcement of a 2021 documentary about the Kangra Valley Railway, see <https://www.3sat.de/dokumentation/reise/auf-schmaler-spur-durch-indien-folge-2-100.html>, last access Jan 3, 2024) for the (western) viewer. It seemed problematic to me to film a place for a documentary without showing how it “really” looks or has changed in the past years. In a film discussion in Basel, Giacomini was asked by the moderator why the contrasts were missing in her film and whether it is not also the task of documentaries to always show two sides to convey a more complete picture. The director replied to this question that she wanted to avoid a direct comparison between the new buildings made of cement and the Didi Contractor’s adobe buildings, nor stimulate this through her film. The interview can be listened to online (in German) at [https://www.stadtкинobasel.ch/galerie/0/steffi\\_giacomini/229](https://www.stadtкинobasel.ch/galerie/0/steffi_giacomini/229) (last access Jan 3, 2024).

66 Srabanti Dasgupta (2020): “Makers dwelling in self created homes. An alternative approach”. Undergraduate thesis. School of Interior Design, CEPT University. Available online at [https://issuu.com/srabantidasgupta/docs/the\\_thesis\\_print](https://issuu.com/srabantidasgupta/docs/the_thesis_print) (last access Jan 3, 2024).



Thirdly, regarding the actual ‘mix of materials’ used, it makes an important difference whether media reports state that Didi Contractor builds with ‘mud, natural stones, bamboo and slate’ or whether it is also mentioned that, in addition to the modern aesthetics mentioned above, she sometimes adds some cement – albeit always very sparingly – to increase stability, as she describes in Sukhdev’s film. One question that both films leave equally unanswered, however, concerns the seemingly endless availability of clay as a resource, which is critically addressed in Sanjiv Shah’s film *State of Housing* (2018), for instance (see chapter six in this book).

Both documentaries about Didi Contractor impressively convey that she was able to flourish and realize her ideas in a local context which is characterized by very diverse mobilities and transcultural flows. Instead of seeing it through a local-global binary or as a “return to the local” (Shivkumar 2018), it is therefore perhaps more fitting to understand it as an emerging form of or cosmopolitan localism or cosmopolitanism.<sup>67</sup>

Overall, Shabnam Sukhdev’s film allows much more ambivalence and contrast in her film, not only regarding the above-mentioned changed landscape and not always context-sensitive new architecture in the Kangra Valley, but also in relation to the perception of an impressive architect and designer who is very convinced of her own findings and perspectives. The strength of Steffi Giaracuni’s film, on the other hand, lies in its emphasis on the aspect of living, learning and working together/collectively, as this clearly is a way of life sought after and shared by many. Sustainable architecture and design principles which serve humans but do not necessarily center them, are essential points of reference (see also chapter ten in this book on the question of designing for multispecies cohabitation). Giaracuni’s film conveys in an interesting way that there is always more than one central actor or figure, and in this case, it seems to be a whole network of people with common interests and ideals, who enter a productive exchange with each other and share their knowledge. The film also displays a keen observation of details and materials as well as the physically demanding work of the people and animals who, apart from the architect and designer herself, are involved in the planning and construction of a sustainably built house, and without whom this process could not take place.

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67 Drawing on Wolfgang Sachs, Schismenos, Niaros and Lemons (2020: 677) write that, “(c)osmolocalism retains ‘placedness’ linked with locality, while at the same time projecting it globally, without risking its particularity. Hence, cultural and communal diversity flourishes in a context of universal networking. (...) Contrary to glocalisation, cosmopolitanism moves from locality to universality, acknowledging the local as the locus of social co-existence and emphasising the potential of global networking beyond capitalist market rules.” Alexandros Schismenos, Vasilis Niaros and Lucas Lemons (2020): “Cosmolocalism: Understanding the Transitional Dynamics towards Post-Capitalism”. *tripleC*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, 670–684.

In chapter four in this book, I quoted the architecture journalist Dirk Meyhöfer, who had stated in a radio feature from October 2022 that he had “never heard a ‘no’ to the question to an architect whether he would like to build a high-rise one day”. To his knowledge, it was the desire of every architect to design “a church, a theater, or a high-rise sculpture one day” (Meyhöfer 2022). As problematic as I continue to find this quotation in many respects, I had to smile in memory of it when I read in media reports about Anna Heringer, currently the best-known architect in Germany who builds with clay, that she actually dreams of erecting a high-rise building made of clay, in addition to the clay buildings she has already realized in Bangladesh and elsewhere (see, for instance, Heintze 2022 and Weißmüller 2022). In an article published in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Quarterly* about the changing role of female architects in a professional field that has so far been strongly dominated by their male colleagues, which was published under the deliberately ambiguously worded headline “Die Haus-Frauen” (playing with the two possible meanings in German of ‘housewives’ and of ‘women who build houses’), Heringer’s wish – and the *cosmological* social and economic vision associated with it – is expressed in the following words:

Heringer is convinced that clay can also make a big difference in Western metropolises. Her dream is to have a mud skyscraper grow out of the ground in the middle of Manhattan. Anyone who looks at pictures of the imposing old desert city of Shibam in Yemen, where mud houses up to nine stories high stand, will realize that this idea is not so far-fetched. The biggest problem with clay is its image: old, muddy, sticks to the shoe. Yet you can build just about anything with clay. (...) The construction budget flows directly into the hands of local people, they gain confidence in themselves and their own work, and the transfer of knowledge means that almost anyone can build simple houses out of clay. If clay were used on a large scale, it would have enormous ‘social explosive power’ in their view (Rudolph 2020).