Nadja-Christina Schneider

# Reimagining Housing, Rethinking the Role of Architects in India

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# 1 Reimagining Housing, Rethinking the Role of Architects in India: An Introduction

## 1.1 Reimagining Housing, Rethinking the Role of Architects in India

This book seeks to explore the societal role and self-perception of critical architects in post-independent and contemporary India. It takes particular interest in the role of documentary films and other media forms used by architects, or architectural design experts, to intervene in ongoing debates on affordable housing and to share different perspectives as well as their alternative visions on housing, spatial design and sustainable architecture. The primary reading audience I had in mind while writing was students of various humanities and social science subjects who are increasingly interested in these issues, as I have been able to observe with great interest in my own seminars and lectures at the Institute for Asian and African Studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Since students are very much affected by the severe shortage of affordable housing, it may not be surprising that the topic is attracting growing interest among them.[1] Of course, this also includes their awareness and keen interest in questions of sustainability as well as the future of living / living (and working) together in cities. It therefore seemed important to me to think about suitable teaching materials that can, based on a selection of documentary films and additional audiovisual material, provide more insights specifically on the Indian context.

1 In Berlin, like other cities in Germany, it has been increasingly difficult for students to find affordable accommodation for years. Long waiting lists for places in institutional student housing, the tedious search for a room in a shared flat and, for many, barely affordable rents. Living on the outskirts or outside of Berlin is not an attractive alternative for young people who are drawn to the big city during this particularly formative phase of their lives. Long commutes, sometimes poor public transport connections and the lack of other important infrastructures for daily life are also not something many people want to put up with.

Furthermore, unlike many of their male colleagues, it has so far rarely been the case that female* architects have been taken seriously in academic research as "actors of change", especially in my field of Contemporary South Asian Studies. However, this may gradually change and some of the exciting exhibitions on South Asian architects who are increasingly interested in sustainable, context-sensitive and cost-effective construction, such as Marina Tabassum from Bangladesh (exhibition at Architekturmuseum der TUM in Munich, 2023), Yasmeen Lari from Pakistan (exhibition at Architekturzentrum Wien in Vienna, 2023) or Anupama Kundoo (exhibition at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Copenhagen, 2020–2021), which are currently receiving increased media interest, will hopefully also lead to more academic research and publications in the coming years.

What exactly does 'affordable' denote in highly unequal societies? According to urban historian Robert Fishman, affordable housing can be understood as decent and appropriate accommodation that costs no more than 30 per cent of a household's income. However, because of the global rise in inequality and the failure of governments to intervene effectively in housing markets, Fishman argues that affordable housing is threatened everywhere, not only in specific regions of the global North or South. He sees the reason for this primarily in the neoliberal view of housing as a commodity like any other and the associated conviction that the capitalist market, if only it were freed from any regulation, can provide this commodity more efficiently than any government scheme.

> The very term 'affordable housing' denotes an emphasis on achieving a socially sustainable balance between household income and housing costs, while leaving open the means by which this goal is achieved. With direct grants from the state now drastically cut back, funding might come from tax incentives to developers; low-interest mortgages from foundations; special grants to replace or rehabilitate ageing high-rise towers; or programmes to support low energy use or the house the homeless (Fishman 2018: 29).

As David Madden and Peter Marcuse criticize in their co-authored book *In Defense of Housing* (2016), the notion of the housing crisis, often uttered in conjunction with a critique of neoliberalism, conveys that it is merely a temporary deviation from an otherwise far better normal state that could be restored with the right measures, as political rhetoric suggests. However, as the two authors remind us, Friedrich Engels had already recognized in his *Reflections on the Housing Question* (1887) for which social groups this 'crisis' actually represents the normal state of affairs at any given time:

> The so-called housing shortage, which plays such a great role in the press nowadays, does not consist in the fact that the working class generally lives in bad, overcrowded or unhealthy dwellings. This shortage is not something peculiar

> to the present; it is not even one of the sufferings peculiar to the modern proletariat in contradistinction to all earlier oppressed classes. On the contrary, all oppressed classes in all periods suffered more or less uniformly from it (F. Engels [1872]. *The Housing Question*, quoted in Madden and Marcuse 2016: 9).

The verb "to rehabilitate" in Fishman's quote above, as well as in the current debate on affordable housing, deserves specific attention. According to various dictionaries, to rehabilitate means to return *someone* to a healthy or usual condition or way of living, or to return *something* to good condition. In the post-World War II as well as the post-Partition era, millions of refugees who had lost their homes were considered to be in need of rehabilitation (Datta 2022). So are, for instance, the many ageing high-rise towers today that were built to provide low-cost or affordable housing after the Second World War and Partition of India. War-related destruction of housing and rapidly rising birth rates after the end of the Second World War also led to housing 'crises' in European countries, while suburbanization and segregation were only two among many more factors which posed major problems for the housing situation in the USA. It was precisely during this period, from the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, that a young architect from India, Charles Correa, went to the USA to continue his studies in architecture, first at the University of Michigan and then at the famous MIT, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

As part of his master's thesis at MIT, which he completed in 1955, Correa made a short, animated film called "You & Your Neighbourhood. The Story of Urban Rehabilitation". He was the scriptwriter, animator, photographer and director of this film. The Housing Association of Metropolitan Boston is credited as the producer of the short film, and Correa refers to a real project that he had worked on extensively in the framework of his MA studies in the 1950s. His animated short film starts with two initial considerations: what happens when a neighborhood develops to its disadvantage, for very different reasons, and the condition of the houses in it continues to deteriorate? And how can a development called urban sprawl be stopped or even reversed? Urban sprawl can be seen as a direct consequence of neighborhoods that have become unattractive and led to accelerated suburbanization in the United States at that time. Why this is a problem is explained by the narrative voice in the following half-minute excerpt from Correa's film:

> This is how a city grows. (Bild) But this is very wasteful. If we do want additional housing, why don't we rehabilitate some of the areas that are slipping right within the city? Instead of abandoning and moving on, we must stay and consolidate. We must reverse this cycle of waste.

Remember, this is 1955, not the 2020s. Correa's short film goes on to show an example of public participation in an urban neighborhood which had gone bad but successfully managed to reverse the cycle by refurbishing the houses, creating new

playgrounds for children and, the better things got in the neighborhood, the more people started to look after their houses as well as the neighborhood again.

Against the backdrop of the current global housing shortage, it is surprising how an approach as simple and as important as the plea for public participation and rehabilitation of existing housing could have been overlooked or underestimated in its effect in so many regions of the world and for so many decades. As is well known, the global built environment is currently responsible for a large percentage of all greenhouse gas emissions, and especially the reliance on building materials such as steel and concrete create large amounts of carbon dioxide during production. Therefore, many critical observers think that instead of building more, rehabilitating (or repairing, retrofitting) already existing housing or improving infrastructures, especially in areas where a very large number of apartments are currently empty because inhabitants can neither commute nor communicate and lack other services such as retail or medical facilities, should have the highest priority now. A particular focus in the current debate is also laid on the redesign of buildings and areas that were previously used for completely different purposes.

As a non-architect who is interested in debates on architects and housing, I take a special interest in the various forms and formats of knowledge communication that architects and designers have developed and use to give 'non-experts' better access to architecture and spatial design as a form of knowledge. From the perspective of someone who specializes in media and gender research and has always been interested in urban studies, I am convinced that these multi-modal and multi-media approaches – through exhibitions, documentary or animated films, public lectures, books, catalogues or podcasts – have the potential to extend a much-needed critical reflection and discussion on the built environment to many more participants than ever before. Charles Correa is certainly an outstanding example in this respect, for the cited animated short from 1955 was not his last film. I will discuss his documentary *City on the Water* (1975) on the planning of New Bombay in more detail in the following chapter on "Low-Cost Housing for the People – as Projected by the Films Division of India (1954–1982)".

As a heterogeneous group of social actors, many of them highly mobile, who as practitioners, teachers and theorists, develop and implement viable solutions at the intersection of extremely complex challenges and for very specific regional and local contexts, architects from India (and South Asia in general) deserve far more attention than they have received to date. This is perhaps especially true of my own disciplinary context, that is, Contemporary South Asian studies in Germany. Learning and understanding more about a field of knowledge for which I was not trained, but which interests me greatly and increasingly affects us all, was a central motivation for this book. As mentioned above, another motivation for me to write this book originated from my search for suitable learning and teaching material so

that this knowledge can be integrated more strongly than before into the curricula at our universities. Films certainly provide an excellent basis for this and enable non-experts (and experts alike) to gain new insights. Even if the compilation of relevant – and in some cases not so easy to find – documentaries on the thematic complex of architects, sustainable architecture and ideas about affordable housing in this book is far from complete (and does not claim to be so), I hope that this book will provide a good starting point for interested readers.

In media portrayals, a strong focus on so-called starchitects continues to dominate and they are sometimes represented in a way as if, on the one hand, they have a lot of power and influence and, on the other, they conceive and construct buildings almost single-handedly. Against this background, it was surprising for me to learn that architects currently play a rather subordinate role in such a central area as housing in India, which is of particular interest to me in this book. More and more houses are today constructed by contractors and civil engineers who employ a minimum number of architects to "reproduce a repetitive form", as Rahul Mehrotra put it in a podcast interview with the Bangalore International Centre (BIC Talks) on the "State of Housing in India" (2020). In general, architects contribute only a minuscule percentage to the world's built environment, as Gertrud Tauber highlights in her study on "Architects and Post-Disaster Housing" in South India after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 (Tauber 2014: 43). It is also important to note that their contribution is largely found in urban contexts, whereas "(t)o this day, formally trained architects hardly play any role whatsoever in rural housing" (ibid.).

Accordingly, how contemporary architects question and rethink their own role as social actors against this background, is a question that will run through the chapters of this book. To a certain extent, I am also concerned with the question of individual visibility vs. visibility as a professional group, both in India and in other regional contexts. Not only in media representations, but also, for example, in architecture exhibitions or documentary films, architects are rarely shown as a professional group or as belonging to a specific school of thought, but predominantly as individuals with their unique works and thoughts, similar to artists. At the same time, interest in certain architects also depends on specific trends, infrastructures, networks, locations, access points, and sometimes also on mere coincidences. Over the last years, architecture enthusiasts based in Germany, Austria or the United States could, for instance, see and learn a lot about outstanding architects such as Yasmeen Lari from Pakistan, Marina Tabassum from Bangladesh, Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi and Anupama Kundoo from India through several international exhibitions.[2]

2 Additionally, the much-discussed 2022 exhibition on "The Project of Independence. Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947–85" at the MoMA in New York provided

However, the situation is very different with regard to the two architect brothers Shankar and Navnath Kanade (chapter 8), or a self-taught architect named Didi Contractor (chapter 7): they more or less accidentally sparked the interest of filmmakers from India and Europe, and it is mainly through these documentary explorations that more visibility and interest in their works and thinking can now be generated.

Unlike the formats mentioned above, a book offers the possibility to show the direct and indirect connections between the now two or three generations of architects in post-independent India, who in their designs and approaches deal(t) intensively with questions such as context-sensitivity, affordability and durability. Many of them have also begun to experiment with 'alternative' or locally available building materials and methods long before terms such as sustainable building were on everyone's lips. In my view, these diverse connections in their thinking and work can best be viewed and understood through the conceptual lens of critical regionalism. It may be no coincidence that both, the redefinition of the societal role and influence of architects and an increased desire to effectively counter the perceived 'placelessness' of an increasingly uniform global architecture, are currently reviving an interest in the concept of critical regionalism. Initially, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the term was more strongly associated with the process of postcolonial identity formation of newly founded nation-states. In this specific historical context, a new generation of architects no longer simply wished to 'transfer' modernist architecture to a wide variety of regional and climatic contexts, but increasingly sought to emphasize a 'regional' identity as a central feature of non-western modern architecture. However, in today's discussions of the concept of critical regionalism, the local as well as regional scale and knowledge of specific building materials and techniques seem to come increasingly to the fore, whereas the quest for a national identity is not necessarily of central concern to architects. Once again, however, it is not a matter of rejecting 'global influences' altogether but rather of finding a sensible balance that serves the respective context, as will be explained in the following section.

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an extraordinary opportunity to learn more about this historical period and some of its most outstanding architects, and also about the vivid ongoing debate about modernist architecture in South Asia. Among others, MoMA exhibition also laid a focus on the housing question in the post-Partition context, as well as on the role of state patronage for low-cost housing architecture until the mid-1980s.

## 1.2 Critical Regionalism as an Approach to Affordable Housing in India

> *As an architectural approach, critical regionalism attempts to find the right balance between the universal lessons of science and locally rooted traditions of particular regions. It is essentially a variant of modern architecture that shows greater respect towards the climate, topography, local materials and sociological complexes of a place. Critical regionalism is vital in contemporary times as it resists the homogenising force of global capitalism by using contextual forces that impart a sense of place and meaning to architecture.*
> (Bahga & Raheja 2019: 1)

Critical regionalism can be defined as an approach that strives to counter the universalizing tendency or even homogeneity inherent in modernist architecture. As an architectural concept, the term critical regionalism was first coined by the architect and architectural theorist Alexander Tzonis and the architectural historian Liane Lefaivre in the 1980s and later elaborated more systematically by the architectural critic and historian Kenneth Frampton (see Frampton 1983; Lefaivre & Tzonis 2003). As Frampton writes, such an approach to regionalism is based on a connection between the "political consciousness of a society and the profession" (Frampton 1983: 148). One of the mainsprings of regionalist culture is an "anti-centrist sentiment – an aspiration for some kind of cultural, economic and political independence" (ibid: 149). As can be read in several articles, critical regionalists are also characterized by a strong rejection of an architecture which eclectically incorporates historical references into contemporary works without worrying about their appropriateness. Instead, they always critically examine the building traditions of a region and weigh up which solutions are suitable for the present. As Frampton explains, critical regionalism thus denotes a dialectic expression. On the one hand, it represents a self-conscious deconstruction of universal modernism through regionally and locally shaped ideas and values. On the other hand, critical regionalism recognizes that no living tradition can renew and develop without a synthesis with more modern procedures and approaches (ibid.):

> Any attempt to circumvent the dialectics of this creative process through the eclectic procedures of historicism can only result in consumerist iconography masquerading as culture (ibid.).

Similar to other previously colonized regions and newly established nation-states, critical regionalism has been an influential architectural approach in post-Independence Indian and South Asian architecture. One architect whose work and influence on earlier South Asian approaches to critical regionalism is currently receiving increased attention is Minnette de Silva from Sri Lanka who spent several

formative years in India.[3] Chapter 3 is dedicated to the question who, in the absence of a film on her, or an exhibition (at least for the time being), is currently creating an accessible archive of the so-called 'forgotten pioneer' of critical regionalism in postcolonial India and Sri Lanka, and by which means or media.

As some authors therefore argue, even before the term was coined and increasingly popularized in the 1980s, architects in and from South Asia had already begun pursuing the ideas of critical regionalism in designing their buildings. Misra, Chakraborty and Mandal explain that Indian architects were going to Europe and America to seek higher education and cultural inspiration. When they returned to India during the 1960s, they "commanded high positions as professionals as well as teachers. They taught, practiced and experimented with what they had learnt in the West against the harsh realities of India" (Misra, Chakraborty & Mandal 2018: 110). However, exactly this practical experience may also have led to the realization that they would have to develop their own methods and materials of construction as well as their own expression of progress. Consequently, "architects started looking in different directions for various answers" (ibid.). Under the government of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (1947–1964), modernism was initially chosen by the state as the preferred architectural approach with the belief that it could solve India's most urgent problems, including the acute housing crisis. As early as the 1960s, however, some architects in India recognized the limitations of modernist architecture. For instance, limited interpretation of 'function' offered by modernist architecture seemed inadequate to architects who also wished to fulfil the "social and cultural aspirations of their Indian clientele" (Bahga & Raheja 2018: 474). Well-known architects like Charles Correa (1930–2015), Raj Rewal (b. 1934) and Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi (1927–2023) therefore increasingly

> sought to overcome the dominance of modernism that they had themselves inherited through their Western education. They began incorporating the ideas of critical regionalism in their works to counter the homogenization of architecture resulting from modernism (ibid.).

Bahga and Raheja (2018: 475) name seven key criteria that a building should respect to be critically regionalist:

1) **Context-specific Architecture:** The architecture should be context-specific and respect the character of the surrounding in which it is situated.

3 Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis discuss Minnette de Silva's work in their edited book *Tropical Architecture. Critical Regionalism in the Age of Globalization* (co-edited with Bruno Stagno), specifically de Silva's important contribution to "critical regionalism / critical tropicalism" in the field of housing architecture (Lefaivre & Tzonis 2001: 29 ff.).

2) **Historical Knowledge:** The architecture should take the building traditions of the region into account – without resorting to literal reference or blind use of vernacular.
3) **Climate Responsiveness:** Does the architecture of the building respond self-evidently to the climatic conditions at the site where it is situated? The new building should benefit from the best solar orientations and minimize the dependence on mechanical means such as air-conditioning and artificial lighting for the functioning of the building.
4) **Materiality:** The project should predominantly use locally available materials for the construction.
5) **Ecology and Landscape:** The project should strive to minimize the impact of its construction on the ecology of the site and the surroundings.
6) **Social and Cultural Appropriateness:** Does the architecture of the building respond to the social needs and lifestyle choices of its intended users?
7) **Technology:** The design of a project should adapt modern technology in a sustainable way to benefit the building programme.

Based on these seven criteria, the two co-authors of the study identified about one hundred architectural projects of significance realized in post-independent India that integrate the ideas of critical regionalism in their design. However, critical regionalism as an architectural concept has never been embraced uniformly across different building types. It is also interesting to note that cultural as well as educational institutions and resort hotels which followed a critical regionalist approach have received greater patronage. Nevertheless, as Bahga and Raheja argue, critical regionalist projects of high merit have been realized in every building type, including, among others, cultural institutions, education and research institutions, religious institutions, offices and government buildings as well as, not least, housing.

In particular, the housing typology for the mid-rise, low-income to middle-income group proved to be the ideal ground for critical regionalists to "forge the lifestyle of traditional Indian villages into modern urban settings" (Bahga & Raheja 2018: 477). The predominantly rural population of India was moving towards urban centers for employment opportunities and by the late 1970s, more complex housing projects started getting developed through the critical regionalist approach. Particularly the public housing sector was in the domain of critical regionalist architecture until the economic liberalization of the 1980s and 90s. Especially Charles Correa's, Raj Rewal's and Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi's works of the 1980s acted as models for critical regionalist housing architecture in India in the decades to follow (Mehrotra 2011). Charles Correa's Belapur housing project in the 1980s in New Bombay or Navi Mumbai, also known as the Artists' Village, is an important illustration of his theoretical position on equitable housing in the global South. As architect and urbanist Rahul Mehrotra describes, the Belapur project

> (d)emonstrated how low-cost, low-rise housing could achieve extremely high densities of two hundred persons per acre (five hundred persons per hectare) while still allowing for open spaces, community facilities, schools, and a range of other amenities. Conceived as an incremental self-built housing typology, Correa's design stood in stark contrast to all other housing projects undertaken by the state as well as the Chandigarh model, in as much as it attempted to dissolve all class and economic segregation, which had become a norm within housing design and site-planning in India (Mehrotra 2022: 127).[4]

Low-rise housing instead of multi-storeyed buildings is a central aspect of the critical regionalism approach to housing architecture, for several reasons that Correa discusses in his essay on "Equity" (Correa 2012). He argues that an individual low-rise house can be "constructed out of just about anything, starting with bamboo and mud bricks" (ibid.: 201), and the construction can be improved and renewed over time. Multi-storeyed buildings, on the other hand, must of necessity use steel and cement – materials which are short in supply and expensive (ibid.). Related to this central aspect is the principle of incrementality, which means that a low-rise house can always grow according to the owner's requirements and his or her earning capacity. In addition, this also allows the inhabitants to adjust the available spaces to suit their personal needs and preferred lifestyles, hence they can design the house individually. Not least, a low-rise housing can be constructed much faster, as an individual who is building his or her own house is, in Correa's view, a highly motivated person. It is also much easier and less cost-intensive to maintain low-rise houses. Especially in combination with a policy of equity plots, that is, a distribution of urban space not according to income or social status but to the actual household size, Correa's hope was therefore that the kind of low-rise high-density housing that he envisioned could constitute a crucial step towards defining a truly egalitarian urban society (ibid.: 202).

Another widely cited example is B.V. Doshi's Aranya Community Housing Project near Indore in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh which was realized in the 1980s as a sites and services scheme explicitly for low-income groups. The project was commissioned in 1983 by the Indore Development Authority and co-funded by the World Bank and India's Housing and Urban

4 Accordingly, Correa expressed skepticism early on about building in heights, for which the argument of high residential density in cities is also currently being cited again. As Correa has pointed out, however, tall office towers are often taken as a model for this, whereas for residential buildings, additional space per inhabitant must be included for the necessary infrastructure as well as facilities (kindergartens, green spaces, hospitals, libraries, schools, etc.) and not just the mere living space. See also chapter 4 in this book on "Living Together in Vertical Cities?"

Development Corporation (HUDCO). *Sites and Services* means that only land and basic infrastructure such as plumbing connections were provided. Importantly, it also involved a demonstration cluster of about eighty houses that, in the words of Rahul Mehrotra, "set the tone and architectural vocabulary for an additional construction of allocated plots by the families, whose adaptations of the prototype brought an incredible variety to the ensemble as they individualized their homes" (Mehrotra 2022: 127).

According to Mehrotra, these two projects by Correa and Doshi can be seen as

> (e)mblematic of the evolution of the role of state patronage in housing delivery after Independence, from an all-encompassing production system run by the government in the early 1950s to a more nuanced partnership between the state, architects, and occupants by the 1980s. By taking account of both the limitations on resources and socioeconomic inequities across South Asia, such projects point to a future in which the state could facilitate the supply of land and infrastructure, while the architect could yet play a crucial role in facilitating sustainable housing design and site-planning (Mehrotra 2022: 128).

It is interesting to note that critical architects more and more came to realize the limitations of an approach to solving housing problems through the design of buildings alone and therefore began to focus more on aspects such as the redistribution of resources or provision of better employment opportunities. Increasingly, critical architects also became more involved in extensive research and experimentation in low-cost as well as low-technology solutions. In connection with a comprehensive reconsideration of 'repair cultures' or 'repair societies', renewed and intensified interest is currently being directed at the question of self-construction. In a recent article by Florian Hertweck and Markus Miessen on this question, the authors follow an argumentation according to which the reparability of architecture is generally increased with self-building / self-construction and the accompanying turn to the already existing building stock (instead of destroying and building anew) (Hertweck and Miessen 2022: 64).

## 1.3 Acknowledgements

Several chapters in this volume were first published in a similar or different form in the digital knowledge archive of the RePLITO research project. The longer title of the project is "Beyond Social Cohesion – Global Repertoires of Living Together". RePLITO takes marginalized and neglected repertoires of living together as its starting point to rethink social cohesion from a transregional perspective. Repertories of living together include, for instance, discourses of coexistence and cohabitation, as inscribed in intellectual and theoretical reflections and represented

in popular culture, art and literature; institutions and norms developed for (self-)governing living together in and with inequalities and differences, as well as social practices, observed in everyday life and within institutions. Although RePLITO started from different localities and regions, the project understands repertoires of living together as relational rather than pertaining to specific geographical units of analysis. Thus, the focused concepts and repertoires of living together[5] have been constituted and continue to be negotiated and transformed in the context of dynamic interactions beyond localities, nation-states and regions.

To think and look 'beyond' social (and cultural) cohesion, RePLITO argues, is necessary, as this normatively loaded concept continues to be closely linked to nationally or territorially defined societies or communities. This, however, inevitably raises the question of boundaries and exclusivity of community concepts as well as the cultural and historical narratives that promote – or counteract – them. Furthermore, the assumed sedentism that is likely to be reproduced through a focus, and even stress, on territorial delimitation in social cohesion measurement ignores the impact of multiple forms of mobility on preexisting ideas, imaginations, and practices of living together, which are not necessarily tied to a permanent physical co-presence in one place or country. If we only look at the prevalence of multilocal families who, thanks to the availability of digital and mobile media, practice new ways of 'doing family' and 'living-together-apart', it is important to bear in mind that a long history of repeated migrations, voluntary or forced, has already shaped the memory and lives of people and communities over many generations, notably in regions such as South Asia (Schneider 2022). Especially in cities such as Mumbai, which are also shaped by various forms of seasonal or temporal labor migration and, therefore, by the multilocal homemaking practices of many city dwellers, it becomes increasingly clear that critical architects can contribute significantly to a rethinking of what 'cohabitation', or 'neighborly cohesion' could mean in a situation of transient homemaking. As knowledge communicators and public intellectuals, they help us understand and see the city as 'kinetic', rather than static or permanent (Mehrotra 2021); as practitioners and critical design thinkers, they develop new models for spatial design in transient urban spaces.

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5 For an overview, see "Concepts and Repertoires of Living Together" at https://replito.de/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

peer-review process, for which we use the writing and community publishing platform pubpub. Authors, editors and reviewers can communicate directly through this platform and discuss every publication openly to improve the manuscript.

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# 2 Low-Cost Housing for the People – as Projected by the Films Division of India (1954–1982)

This chapter presents three selected documentaries on the question of low-cost housing that were produced by the Films Division of India between 1954 and 1982. By way of comparison, a fourth Films Division production, which was directed by the architect Charles Correa and released in 1975, will be discussed afterwards. The Films Division of India (FDI or FD) was established with its headquarters in Bombay in 1948, under the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. As mentioned in the self-description on the (no longer updated) homepage, the mission of the FD was,

> to articulate the energy of a newly independent nation. For more than seven decades, the organization has relentlessly striven to maintain a record of the social, political and cultural imaginations and realities of the country on film. It has actively worked in encouraging and promoting a culture of film-making in India that respects individual vision and social commitment.
>
> It is the main film-medium organization of the Government of India and is well equipped with trained film personnel, cameras, recording and editing facilities. This infrastructure is put to use to assist in-house as well as free-lance film makers and producers.[6]

According to its own data, the Films Division has produced 6474 films, including documentaries, shorts and animated films, and 2640 newsreels and news magazines over the past 72 years, often in cooperation with private production companies and filmmakers.[7] As Ravi Vasudevan writes in his chapter on "Configurations of Partition: The Indian Newsreel Archive in the 1940s":

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6 The FDI website can still be accessed but is no longer updated (https://filmsdivision.org/about-us.html, last access Jan 2, 2024).

7 For detailed information on the organization and production of FD between 1948–1975, see the excellent report on the website of the Hong Kong Baptist University (https://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/documentary-film/india.php#Ib1, last access Jan 2, 2024).

> (T)he newsreel is news, of the moment; the documentary may also have such topicality, but it is often deployed to present a narrative about institutions, practices, social, cultural and political references that are less datable in their reference and more durable in their exhibition value." Nevertheless, they two forms might also overlap and documentaries "might also have been very timely". In addition, documentaries "could also be made from pre-existing footage, including footage originally used in newsreels (Vasudevan 2021: 71–108).

According to Srirupa Roy, the Films Division of India has produced

> (a)n average of one new film every three days, making it the single largest producer of documentary films in the world. Until 1994, under the terms of a compulsory exhibition and licensing policy, owners of commercial movie theaters throughout India were required to screen a state-approved documentary film or newsreel before the start of any commercial feature film (Roy 2016: 383).

However, the ubiquity of these films, through which Indian audiences learned to 'see' India from the perspective of the post-colonial state, does not necessarily translate into a "meaningful reception of its visual texts," as Roy goes on to point out (ibid.). In addition to the visual practices, however, the sonic dimension should be considered too, since it contributed significantly to the immediate recognition of the Films Division formats by the audience and underlined the perception of what is conveyed as significant and relevant to Indian society. Especially since the (mostly male) voice-of-god narration was a central feature of state-produced newsreels and documentaries, it is perhaps also significant when the seemingly 'objective' and 'all-informed' reporter clearly has a British and no discernible Indian accent, as, for instance, in the case of Sam Berkeley-Hill, one of the most famous and widely heard voice-overs in FD productions in English.[8]

The FD's film production was divided into four categories: *Art and Culture*, *Citizenship and Reform*, *Miscellaneous*, and *Defense and International*. Between 1949–1972, for instance, most films were produced for the *Development and Planning* category (696) and the lowest number (139) for the *Art and Culture* category. Roy takes these interesting figures from Pramod Pati's *Films Division: Catalogue of Films, 1948–1972*, which was published by FD in 1974 (Roy 2016: 389). Within the extensive category *Development and Planning*, most films in Pati's listing between 1949–1972 were devoted to *agriculture* (137), followed by *transportation*

8 As Jag Mohan describes in his book *Two Decades of the Films Division* (1969, quoted in Roy 2016: 403): "The cold words written by the commentary writers turn flesh when the commentators take over. It is they, who convey to the 'captive audience' the importance and significance of the visuals. Sam Berkeley-Hill, the late Nobby Clarke, Romesh Thapar, Zul Vellani and Partap Sharma have done the salesmanship for the Films Division in the English language."

*and communication* (105). In contrast, the topic of *housing* formed the taillight in this period with only 10 films. Given that the housing shortage was seen as one of the most pressing problems from the state's point of view in the first two decades after Independence, this may be considered as rather surprising.

A curated selection of 27 Films Division productions on housing (up to the year 2015) was presented by Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskoté and Kaiwan Mehta in the context of their exhibition "State of Housing. Aspirations, Imaginaries and Realities in India" in 2018. They also include this selection, with brief summaries of every film, in the accompanying first of two exhibition volumes in a chapter titled "Housing as Seen by the State since 1947 to Today" (Mehrotra & Mehta 2018: 214–225). The 1975 film *City on the Water*, directed by architect Charles Correa in collaboration with Films Division, however, is not included in this compilation, possibly because it is primarily concerned with the question of spatial redistribution, urban planning conditions and mobility infrastructure required for settling more and more people in the Bombay metropolitan area that the film addresses. The aim of the large-scale restructuring that Correa and his team envisioned for a multi-centered future city of Bombay (including the newly built city of New Bombay / Navi Mumbai in the district of Thane in Maharashtra), was to decongest not only urban spaces of dwelling for the poor, but also to decenter the mobility flows of more and more incoming people every year that needed to live close to transport facilities to take them to their workplaces.

Precisely as it looks at the future of urban dwelling and coexistence through the lens of adequate housing, equal access to infrastructure and livelihood opportunities as well as a fairer distribution of space, Correa's film complements and enhances the perspective on low-cost housing as it is provided in the three other FD productions *Modest Homes* (1954), *Housing for the People* (1972), and *A Growing House* (1982) that I discuss in this chapter.

The state monopoly position in the field of documentary film production was softened and changed above all by the triumph of video technology and the simultaneous expansion of film collectives and other training opportunities which emerged all over India in the 1980s and 90s (see Battaglia 2014). This also gradually changed the perception and form of the medium of documentary film and its manifold possibilities, including experimental, more critical and activist formats as well as those characterized by a stronger self-reflexivity of occasionally 'visible and audible' directors.[9] Several years before this differentiation and gradual

9 Sanjiv Shah, whose film *State of Housing / A Place to Live* (2018) is featured in chapter 6, draws on his own experience as a mostly independently working film director to talk about how he personally found both, the advent of video technology and, later, the "digital

opening, however, there was also a phase in the history of the Films Division between 1965–75 in which new possibilities for innovative formats, film-technical innovations and experiments, as well as perspectives that were sometimes critical of the state, were opened up. This phase is primarily associated with the name Jean (Jehangir) Bhownagary, as well as a constellation of (predominantly male) filmmakers such as Pramod Pati, S. N. S. Sastry and S. Sukhdev (see Kaushik 2017, Sutoris 2016 and Dixit 2015).

Since January 2023, however, the Films Division no longer exists as an independent institution, but has been merged with the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) in Mumbai. Both the "didactic" understanding of state-controlled media production, and specifically of the medium of documentary film, which was strongly pronounced in relation to post-colonial society, and the central aspect of public communication and documentation of government measures consequently receded further into the background vis-à-vis the now much more strongly weighted focus on the development of the film industry as an important branch of the Indian economy. The question what will become of the extensive archive of the Films Division was also raised with critical concern in this context (see, for instance, Patwardhan 2022 and Kishore 2021).

## 2.1 *Modest Homes* (1954) (dir. K. L. Khandpur, b/w, English, 10 min, DVD)

*Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.*

The voice of commentator Sam Berkeley-Hill introduces us first to the acute problem of the housing shortage in India, for which the three reasons of population growth, rural-to-urban migration of workers as well as the "reshuffle in living due to Partition" (01:09 min) are named, while we see moving streams of men in an unnamed Indian city. The unifying 'we' in this early phase of FD productions is interesting to note: "So acute is he problem now that many of us are forced to live in slums" (01:16 min). The second thing that stands out already in the second

revolution", to be "liberating" for his own critical film practice. In an interview with IIHS (Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru) in 2019, he also mentions that he lacks any form of nostalgia towards celluloid, even though he had been trained on celluloid as part of his film studies. For Shah, however, the impression filmmaking is a "tool" prevails, even if he still considers it a "craft" that should be learned and not seen as dispensable, merely because of today's digital possibilities and therefore much easier access to the medium (The interview is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQQ86I-685A; last access Jan 2, 2024).

minute is, that the problem of "planning" is addressed immediately, in order to prevent "chaos", but the focus is not on a (fair) distribution of space or (urban) planning, but only on the construction of cheap houses and the lifestyles made possible by this (01:24 min). This is followed by the introduction of the actual topic, about which the film wants to inform its audience: the International Exhibition in Low-Cost Housing which took place in Delhi in the same year, 1954. About 74 model homes were built on the exhibition grounds, none of which cost more than 5,000 IRS, some of which were even much cheaper, excluding the price of the building land.

Architect Habib Rahman was entrusted with the conceptualization of the exhibition, as one of his first major projects after being appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru as Senior Architect of the Central Public Works Department in Delhi in 1953. As Rahman's son writes:

> One of the first projects he was asked to undertake was organizing the International Exhibition on Low Cost Housing, held in Delhi in 1954. The exhibition brought together architects and engineers from across India, who built actual sample structures and published details of plans, materials and costs. Nehru had realized that housing was going to be crucial in the new nation and it was up to the government to take the initiative. The Indian government was the largest builder in India till about the mid-60s and Rahman was inspired by Nehru's vision to build for the newly independent country that was striving to become a modern, secular and democratic state. He remained a 'government servant' through his entire career unlike many other architects who left and started private practice (Rahman 2019).

Starting at minute 02:15 min, the international aspect of the exhibition is first highlighted, emphasizing through visual references to Austria, Germany, Finland and Italy that "housing shortage is not an Indian problem alone but a problem facing many countries in the world" (02:25 min).

Subsequently, an important feature for the conception of the exhibition is pointed out, namely the diversity in design, since the construction of residential buildings had to be oriented towards the modes of living, climatic conditions as well as available building materials (03:00 min). These three points are important starting points for conceptual considerations of critical architects, which were later systematized under the term modern regionalism or critical regionalism. Currently, critical regionalism in affordable housing is receiving renewed attention, especially in light of climate change, scarcity of building materials, renewed interest in local building techniques, and changed awareness regarding the sustainability of building materials used.

In the following minutes of the film *Modest Homes*, some selected buildings and their special features are presented in more detail. These affordable homes made of renewable building materials such as wood or bamboo are also remarkable

from today's point of view, as both materials are currently considered as particularly climate-friendly and resource-saving building materials 'of the future'. *Modest Homes* also presents reusable building materials using the example of plywood, compressed wood as well as bamboo chips, which in this case can even be used for the interiors and production of low-cost furniture: "Materials which would otherwise go waste, they're used for the interiors too" (07:13 min).

From minute 08:33 in the film *Modest Homes*, specific attention is given to the topic of rural housing, which was a particular focus of the exhibition in Delhi in 1954. Here, too, the importance of locally available building materials that allow housing to be built in several stages is emphasized. In the visualization, we see a thatched roof of a village dwelling – something that is explicitly rejected nearly thirty years later in the film *A Growing Home* (1982), presented below, as a potential danger to the residents due to its easy combustibility.

Remarkably, the exhibition also included a life-size replica of Gandhi's hut at Segaon (Maharashtra). As the commentator points out, the use of "indigenous materials" was a top priority for Gandhi in order to keep building costs down (09:00 min). The next half minute of the film is devoted to other aspects of the 'model village' on display, which was apparently particularly popular with the public as part of the exhibition. A multi-purpose school is shown, which also functions as a training center for village arts and crafts (09:08 min) as well as a central location for village panchayat meetings (09:13 min). The 'model village' also has its own health center and cottage industries; gas for cooking can be made from cow dung, so the principles of resource conservation and reuse are fully applied here as well (09:30 min).

It is interesting how Venugopal Maddipati in his book on "Gandhi and Architecture: A Time for Low-Cost Housing" (2020) describes the close association of village life itself with the national 'father figure' Gandhi in the context of the exhibition:

> 'As you see the village,' the text in the exhibition souvenir booklet declared emphatically, 'you think of Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the nation.'
>
> That, in 1954, an experience of a village community center could be so predictably expected to trigger people into thinking about Gandhi was perhaps an indication of how inextricably the space of the village and notions of that non-violent revolutionary as a parent of the nation may have become intertwined in the popular imagination. (…) Apparently, in 1954, people still inhabited the present moment of Gandhi's embrace, in the mid nineteen thirties, of the village as the space of community life and improvement (Maddipati 2020: 63).

Towards the end, the film *Modest Homes* mentions the miniature buildings, which seem to have been a huge success with the young audience (from 09:49 min). Less as a walk-in playground, but rather as a place of learning for India's growing

citizens, who in the future will share responsibility for their country, the film comments: "Our youngsters saw good housing in miniature, thus they will appreciate better housing no matter how modest when they grow up. Good houses build a good state."

## 2.2 *Housing for the People* (dir. Pratap Parmar, 1972, b/w, English/Hindi, 11 min, DVD)

Slightly unsettled and with a clearly recognizable sense of alienation, the young reporter in the sari moves with her microphone and recording device to an unfamiliar residential area in an unnamed city, where she is about to interview a poor family about their living situation (see figures 1 and 2).

The male voice of the commentator (or 'voice-of-God-narrator') begins with a 'matter-of-factly distanced' intonation which is so characteristic of newsreels:

> One doesn't need a second look in an Indian city or village to spot its slums. Yet people must live somewhere, one must have a roof over one's head, even if it is to be shared with a crowd.

In Hindi, the reporter now asks first the woman, who continues to do her work on the side, and then the man, with other family members surrounding them. "How can you all live together in this one room?" she asks the woman first. "Bahut mushkil se" – "with great difficulty." And her husband elaborates, while the reporter avoids direct eye contact with him and instead looks at her notepad, "this is where we eat, this is where our children study, and this is where we sleep."

Cut. The next scene begins. (01:39 min) The first thing we see now is the ceiling fan in a spacious vacant apartment, which is apparently being viewed by a young couple. As they leave, the wife resolutely tells her husband (in English) that this apartment is out of the question for them because the rent is too high. The man replies nothing and walks silently down the stairs behind his wife. Next, the voice of the non-visible commentator is heard again:

> For people of all classes and income groups, housing has become an insoluble problem. In a welfare state, even the poorest family should have a self-contained abode, reasonably neat and comfortable (02:21 min).

Meanwhile, the camera pans to a group of young middle-class women sitting together on a porch, discussing the current high rent prices. As we learn next, to address the housing shortage in India at the beginning of the 1970s, 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

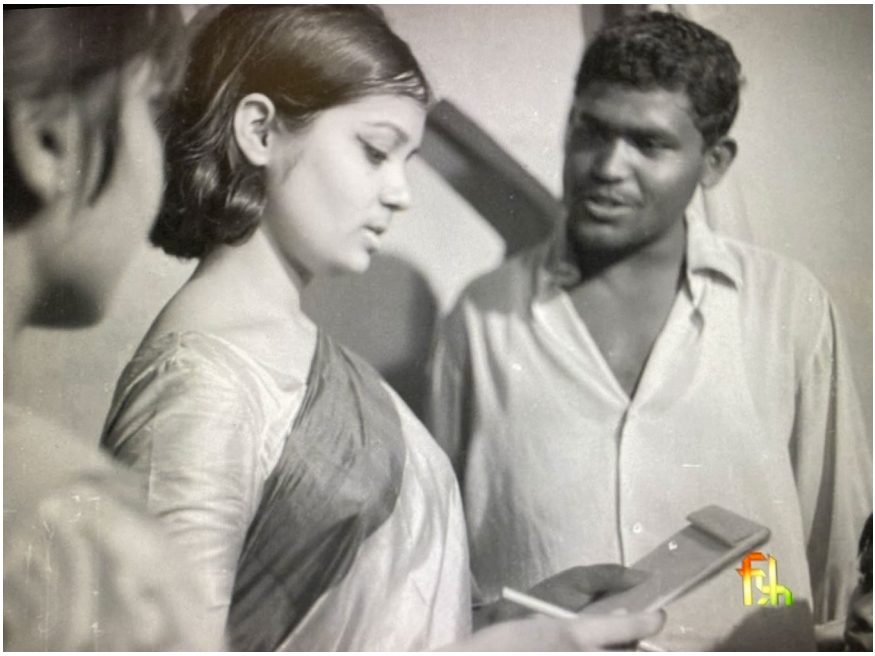

**Fig. 1 and 2.** Stills from the documentary *Housing for the People* (Films Division of India, 1972, DVD).

urban areas. This breakdown may be surprising, since the housing crisis could be assumed to be a primarily urban problem at that time, due to continued migration from rural to urban areas and because of the generally much greater representation of urban-related issues in the media.[10] The voice of the commentator informs us that the construction of so many new dwelling units would require an investment of Rs. 33,000 crores – more than what was allocated by the Indian government for the public sector as a whole in the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969–74). The housing shortage is therefore presented as "a problem of alarming proportions." In view of population growth, scarce building materials and rising construction costs, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the government, private construction companies and society as a whole to cope with the problem, which was becoming more complex every year.

Such is the inventory of this short documentary produced for the Films Division of India by the production company Pratap Production in the early 1970s. However, from minute 03:35 on, the film unexpectedly strikes more positive and hopeful notes and the music in the background, sometimes also in the foreground, becomes peppier and more cheerful. The reason for this is immediately revealed by the commentator's voice: "Research and experimentation, however, are dependable weapons against such vexing problems." Important state institutions are now shown, such as the Central Building Research Institute (CBRI), which was established in 1947 in Roorkee in the present-day state of Uttarakhand and which "has been continuously engaged in evolving new and cheaper building technologies and materials" (03:52 min). We learn that engineers and architects are familiarized with new concepts in the field of low-cost housing at CBRI, for which a combination of basic needs of comfort with an "austerity of design" and the possibility of rapid construction are imperative. The key to achieving this, as the voice-of-God-narrator mentions, are low-cost yet robust building materials, such as "indigenous amphibole," which can take the place of asbestos for low-cost roofing. Machines that can produce a higher number of bricks more quickly are also beneficial, as are new methods for producing manufactured precast concrete units for roofing and intermediate floors in multi-storeyed buildings, or partial pre-fabrication, which makes house-building easy (06:51 min).

Again, the music changes to emphasize the importance of the next statement: ideas developed by research must now go into mass production, "if they are to fulfill mass requirements." Then the Hindustan Housing Factory (Hindustan

10 I will revisit this problem of a starkly underrepresented housing crisis in rural India – in relation to the current situation in the country – in chapter 6 where I introduce the film *State of Housing* (2018), which director Sanjiv Shah made for the exhibition of the same name curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Kaiwan Mehta, and Ranjit Hoskoté.

Prefab Ltd., HPL) is shown, which was built in the early 1950s on the orders of Jawaharlal Nehru to counter the then pressing housing shortage caused by the influx of refugees from West Pakistan. We learn (07:03 min) that the Hindustan Housing Factory is the first factory in India specializing in the production of low-cost building components and prefabricated houses. The narrator also informs that in addition to traditional building materials, the factory uses new methods to produce prefabricated components. For instance, industrial wastes like fly ash from thermal power stations (07:30 min) are used for the production of building materials.

While lively music plays in the background, we hear the sounds of the machines. Next, the National Buildings Organization (NBO) fades in from minute 08:00. According to the organization's homepage, the National Buildings Organization

> … was established in 1954 as an attached office under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (the then Ministry of Works and Housing) for technology transfer, experimentation, development and dissemination of housing statistics. In the context of formulation of Housing Policy and Programmes, study of socio-economic aspects of housing issues and the increased need for housing statistics, NBO was restructured in 1992.[11]

In the film *Housing for the People*, we learn about a permanent exhibition at the NBO that incorporates the latest trends, both from India and internationally, on construction methods and materials and informs engineers, architects, and the general public about them so that this can help them "to put up clean and decent low-cost housing" (08:40 min).

The scene seems particularly informative in light of the Indian state's then-prevailing notion of how knowledge transfer should occur through government initiatives and institutions (Mehrotra & Mehta 2018: 213). As is predominantly the case with documentaries commissioned by the Films Division of India, the focus here is not only on documenting and informing about government institutions and policies, but also on persuasion and an educative approach of the medium. There is an explicit appeal to viewers on behalf of the government to actively participate in improving housing conditions themselves. The citizens are addressed directly, and they are given co-responsibility for how the Indian nation is perceived in the world, when a rather authoritarian voice of the commentator says:

> A nation is known by the way its people live. A people living in clean and neat houses are a clean neat people (09:38 min).

11 See http://nbo.gov.in/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

Towards the end of the film, the role of the government is described as a "catalytic" one and it concludes by describing an optimistic future scenario, apparently already considered almost inconceivable at the time, in which "every Indian family will live with dignity in a separate, self-contained unit" (10:00 min).

The focus on the family unit is noteworthy here – notwithstanding the fact that, for instance, countless seasonal migrant workers need temporary housing in cities – as well as the state's normative idea of orderly, planned and standardized housing for less privileged groups of society.

> (T)he Delhi Development Authority, Housing Board of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, and others, have done pioneering work in the field of housing and slum clearance (08: 45 min)–
>
> Large colonies to house low-income groups have come up in many areas (09:21 min).

Statements like these leave little doubt that neither the self-declared needs, perspectives nor construction skills of the residents are taken into account or even asked for. Throughout the film, an urban perspective and imagination prevails in which only engineers, architects and other 'experts' are supposedly capable of building houses sustainably and cost-effectively, supported by the latest 'scientific findings'. Although the housing shortage in rural regions is at least named, the film does not mention that these professional groups were and are to date hardly involved in housing construction in rural regions.[12]

## 2.3 *A Growing House* (dir. Mohi-ud-Din Mirza, 1982, b/w, Hindi, 10 min, DVD)

The third selected short FDI documentary film presents the concept of the gradually growing (incremental) house with the involvement of the future residents. Depending on their available financial means and with active participation in the construction of the house, after the allocation of a piece of building land, first the ground floor with its outer walls is built. In the next step, interior walls can be

12 As mentioned in the introduction, architects, for instance, contribute only a minuscule percentage to the world's built environment in general, as Gertrud Tauber highlights in her study on *Architects and Post-Disaster Housing* in South India after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 (Tauber 2014: 43). Furthermore, it is important to note that their contribution is largely found in urban contexts, whereas "(t)o this day, formally trained architects hardly play any role whatsoever in rural housing" (ibid.).

built in the house to separate individual rooms. Finally, windows and doors follow. Nevertheless, it is not a matter of designing the houses individually according to the needs and aesthetic preferences of the future residents. Instead, the state's vision is undoubtedly an orderly, standardized settlement of similar-looking row houses as the imagined ideal form of housing for less privileged families – quite different, for example, from the designs of architects like Charles Correa who conceived individual residential buildings around connecting courtyards, as these support communal living within the housing estate.

Thus, on the one hand, the active participation of the residents, which was not considered at all in *Housing for the People*, clearly comes to the fore here, but on the other hand, *A Growing House* leaves no doubt either that the state and its institutions, represented here primarily by the National Buildings Organization, know exactly how the construction techniques and building materials must be conveyed and used: plastered walls and masonry as a guarantee of hygiene, health and safety, especially for women and children ("स्वस्थ और सुरक्षा", healthy and safe); windows for ventilation and lighting of the interiors.

A second aspect that is clearly visible in *A Growing House* is the gender and family ideology which is aligned with normative ideas regarding Indian middle-class nuclear families. The fact that women are actively involved in the construction work is only shown very briefly in minute 02:30, but from the following scene on we only see women as housewives and mothers in this documentary, whose sphere of action seems to be exclusively the domestic sphere and who devote themselves to the family care work (cooking, caring for the children), while the men do the wage work outside and return in the evening after their work is done to the housing estate (possibly far away from their place of work) to their wives and (no more than two) children. It is also remarkable how strongly the impression of a necessary privacy of the nuclear family is visually emphasized in *A Growing Home*, where the children can be raised and the fathers / husbands working away do not have to worry about the safety of their wives and children (04:33 min).

At the same time, the idea of home ownership comes to the fore, as the idea of dignified living seems to be closely linked to it: "यह घर हमारा है, यहाँ सुरक्षा है" ("This house is ours, here we are safe", 04:44 min). Significantly, the loving father is shown wearing a suit, which may even be meant to convey the conceivable prospect of upward social mobility and steady employment.

From minute 05:12, the background music changes again, becoming less dynamic and thus announcing that a much more serious and worrying topic is now being dealt with. The camera focuses on thatched mud houses in villages where the "majority of our population lives" (05:30 min), whereupon we look head-on at a woman stepping out of her dwelling in a stooped position with two children, while we can see that the outer walls are slightly crooked and cracks have

appeared from heat and drought, which immediately triggers an association with fires with regard to the thatched roof. Supported by the slow overcast music, the camera now moves into the interior of the unventilated, dark mud house, while the male narrative voice announces that the government has already worked out a solution to the untenable housing situation in Indian villages. Again, masonry houses are to be built, with roofs protected against fire, windows to ventilate the interiors, separate kitchenettes, and even electricity (06:02 min).

The state's preference for plastered walls again finds its visual and literal expression here. To be able to build their own house, the narrative voice says, they need the support of the Indian government and the latest research from the Central Building Research Institute (06:35 min and 07:23 min). In contrast to the documentary *Housing for the People* published ten years earlier, which clearly expresses hope for solutions to social challenges through scientific research on the one hand and skepticism about overcoming it in view of the enormous dimension of the problem of affordable housing on the other, *A Growing House* ends with the image of the aforementioned men strolling back to the housing estate after their day's work, conveying confidence. At the same time, this once again manifests the idea of a geographical separation of home and work as a desirable way of life, which is apparently taken for granted.

## 2.4 *City on the Water* (dir. Charles Correa, 1975, color, 16:34 min, DVD & available online)

Charles Correa, an architect with a pronounced interest in the medium of film[13], not only directed this highly interesting documentary, but also wrote the text and screenplay for it. *City on the Water* is dedicated to its producer Pramod Pati, who died in early 1975. Among other things, Pati gained fame as an experimental filmmaker in the field of animation, for which he was also responsible at Films Division. Apart from several clips from older films, this is a color film and a second

13 Exactly twenty years earlier, in 1955, Charles Correa made a short, animated film titled *You and Your Neighborhood. The Story of Urban Rehabilitation*, as part of his master's thesis at MIT in the US. As mentioned in the introduction, Correa was the scriptwriter, animator, photographer and director of the short film which draws on a project he had worked on extensively in the framework of his MA studies in the 1950s. *You and Your Neighborhood* discusses what happens when a neighborhood develops to its disadvantage and the condition of the houses in it continues to deteriorate. The film further raises the question how urban sprawl can be stopped or even reversed. It can be viewed online at https://charlescorreafoundation.org/2020/07/30/you-and-your-neighbourhood-the-film (last access Jan 3, 2024).

aspect which stands out in marked difference to the three films previously discussed is that we alternately hear a female and a male voice as narrators / commentators (Pearl Padamse and Gerson Da Cunha). Overall, however, they speak significantly less text than the commentators in the other films, and it seems that they deliberately leave pauses for reflection and entering into dialogue with their audience by asking them direct questions. This immediately creates the impression that they do not communicate the state's view in a 'top-down' manner, but rather seek to convey the impression that this is an exchange of ideas with the viewers at eye level. Seen from a critical gender perspective, it can also be immediately noted that the distribution of roles seems very clear: the female voice communicates the strongly atmospheric impressions of the city, supported by very interesting shots of everyday life in Bombay; she thereby allows an emotional and reflective access to the city, formulates many, sometimes rhetorical, questions and also invites the audience through the inserted pauses to let the images and thoughts to sink in. This is supported by a reduced and artful sound in the background which is in no way comparable to the rather obtrusive background music in the other three FD films.

> I love Bombay. I love its setting, the beaches and the fishing villages of the Konkan coast (02:12 min).

The male narrative voice, on the other hand, seems to be primarily responsible for conveying the fact-based knowledge (history, present of the city of Bombay, statistical data etc.) and, in particular, the vision of New Bombay which is envisaged in this film as a multicentric urban region, whose dynamic development could even have a positive impact on the entire state of Maharashtra. Provided that the unique opportunity is seized boldly and decisively to realize Charles Correa's, civil engineer Shirish Patel's and architect Pravina Mehta's[14] vision for the expansion and restructuring of Bombay, bringing the city out of its crisis in the 1970s and into a bright future that recalls its glorious past while reaffirming its prominent economic role in the national context.

*City on the Water* was produced for the City and Industrial Development Corporation and the Government of Maharashtra, both can therefore be assumed to be the main addressee. For this reason, all the arguments that could be seamlessly applied to a perfect city branding campaign are very well chosen, as they are obviously focused on the main objective of persuasion. The core ideas of this

14 For a detailed account of Pravina Mehta's contribution as a "woman architect in India", see the chapter on her in Madhavi Desai (2017). *Women Architects and Modernism in India. Narratives and contemporary practices.* Routledge, pp. 64–69, and Mary N. Woods (2017). *Women Architects in India. Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi.* Routledge.

vision for New Bombay are presented and justified in the last six minutes of the film. At the time *City on the Water* was filmed, office jobs were already growing faster than factory jobs, causing land prices in southern Bombay to rise sharply. At the same time, more and more people were commuting daily from the north to the south, continuously increasing the pressure on available space and transportation.

With a further population increase expected within the next decade, from more than 6 million in 1975 to over 10 million residents of Bombay in 1985 (09:56 min), the central vision of the film is to move away from a north-south structure and associated massive problems of the congested city to an east-west structure and geographically more widely distributed multidirectional flows of movement by relocating large portions of the office jobs from south Bombay to the opposite bank of the emerging New Bombay (13:52 min). Not solely via land transport routes, but by making water the focus once again, as it had been in the long history of the seven islands from which Bombay emerged as a major port city, "providing communication between the various centers – a multicentred city around the harbour" (14:21 min), the mobility of the future envisaged by Correa and his team is made possible.

The future of housing also lies on this land, where "even the poorest must have a space and a place to live" (12:23 min).[15] An example of this is Vashi, where housing for 50,000 people is to be built, illustrated by Correa's typical terraced units, each of which offers families of different income groups their open to sky space "to grow plants and sleep out at night" (13:05 min).

What's captivating about this is not least the vision, quite early for the 1970s, of a city that doesn't depend on automobility and therefore doesn't lose unnecessary space to parking lots and car roads, as all the apartments in Vashi were to be within walking distance of a mass transportation station, "so you won't need a car to get around the city" (13:29 min). Interestingly, women's envisioned participation in the industrial labour process in New Bombay / Navi Mumbai is shown in a short scene which depicts them as seamstresses at sewing machines in a textile factory.

Newspaper reports published after Charles Correa's death in June 2015 address the high importance that the New Bombay project held for himself – but also the fact that the ambitious project ultimately failed due to a lack of 'political

15 Because it is not differentiated further in the film, 'the poor' are more or less presented as a homogenous class of people in the film, perhaps as many assumed at the time that caste-based identities and forms of discrimination would cease to exist in cities, or failed to see / acknowledge the role it continued to play in the distribution and design of urban space as well as in the coexistence of different communities in cities.

will'.[16] In a 2013 interview with the *Mumbai Mirror*, Correa commented on this in the following terms:

> We thought the government and its various offices should move out and to open the eastwest axis to create jobs there. If Bombay's population was four million in 1965, it was going to be eight million in the next 20 years and so on, but the government was not doing anything to plan for this. I think because cities were colonial creations, governments became passive (…) but when your population is doubling, you need dynamic responses. People don't come to cities for housing, they come for jobs which is why they are willing to sleep on the roads. But then they also need water, healthcare, eventually education for their children. But we have failed to provide for any of it.[17]

In the following, I would like to go into more detail about the first ten minutes of *City on the Water*, in which a general audience which is interested in the city is addressed and another level of the film emerges: urgent questions about a more equitable distribution of urban space, access to livelihood opportunities and important infrastructure, especially means of transportation, as well as the claim of every human to affordable housing and a basic supply of drinking water as well as sewage facilities are addressed.

Especially in direct comparison to the film *Housing for the People*, which was released only three years before *City on the Water*, but also in relation to the other two films presented on the topic of low-cost housing, it is striking that they pay almost no attention at all to context or to the actual infrastructure and livelihood needs of the residents. Instead, 'slum clearance' is explicitly named as a necessity in *Housing for the People*, whereas *City on the Water* goes into detail about why people looking for work in the city and their families inevitably always settle near places where they either have immediate access to transportation or are already close to where they work.

Another standpoint of the film, which again has lost none of its topicality, refers to the question whether the vertical city or building in height is the

16 See, for instance, Mahesh Vijapurkar's article titled "Navi Mumbai was Charles Correa's dream: Here's how it turned into a nightmare". *Firstpost*, June 18. Online available at https://www.firstpost.com/india/navi-mumbai-was-charles-correas-dream-heres-how-it-turned-into-a-nightmare-2301976.html (last access Jan 3, 2024). A detailed analysis of the background to this generally perceived failure of the New Bombay or Navi Mumbai urban planning project can be found in Annapurna Shaw's 2004 book, *The Making of Navi Mumbai*, published by Orient Blackswan.

17 Meenal Baghel, Reema Gehi (2013). "Master class with Charles Correa". *Mumbai Mirror* (June 9), available online at https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/others/sunday-read/master-class-with-charles-correa/articleshow/20499060.cms (last access Jan 3, 2024).

appropriate solution for the housing issue, a question that has once again moved to the fore in recent times and will be explored further in chapter 4.

> As the land prizes climb, the buildings grow taller and if they grow taller, they cost more, not only in money but also in things that we as a nation cannot afford, like steel and cement and high-speed lifts (08:14 min).
>
> But don't tall buildings mean more homes for everyone (08:33 min)?

The answer to this question is provided by the male narrative voice: no, because if more and more people were crammed into even higher buildings while housing space remained the same or shrank, this would inevitably lead to a sharp drop in costs, which would ultimately throw the poor back onto the pavements (09:05 min). This is illustrated by a particularly drastic animation showing stick figures falling out of a high-rise building. The articulate rejection corresponds to another of Charles Correa's principles. He was firmly convinced of the possibility of high-density settlement through sophisticated low-rise construction of residential buildings, which could even be connected by a connecting courtyard, as he had demonstrated in his Belapur Incremental Housing project (Navi Mumbai) in the early 1980s (see the image in the introduction).

*City on the Water*, like the other three Films Division films presented here, is carried by the firm conviction that central planning is necessary and can be successful in addressing the severe housing shortage. Unlike the other three films, however, Correa's documentary does not address an abstract national scale; rather, it conveys very clearly that a local perspective and search for solutions has to be based on the specific context and can only come from those who know both the history and identity of a city and its concrete problems very well. Nevertheless, *City on the Water* is not about the possibility of democratic participation or co-design in such a large-scale urban restructuring, but above all about conveying an understanding that the distribution and organization of urban space is central to the solution of the pressing housing issue, and not the question of building technology or materials used for it. In addition to the role of the visionary planner, it is the role of the architect as a knowledge communicator and representative of the interests of those population groups that are permanently marginalized and who "cannot compete for the space and services they require" (05:21 min) that is particularly noteworthy here.

It is precisely this approach that Charles Correa's son-in-law, Rahul Mehrotra, has consistently developed further in recent years in many of his own books, lectures, and not least in the form of the exhibition he co-curated on *The State of Housing* (2018). Mehrotra argues that architects can play an important role as bridge-practitioners, bridging communicative gaps and negotiating on behalf of less empowered and marginalized groups on the one hand, and mediating between

more powerful forces and interest groups on the other. Moreover, architects should direct their skills particularly to the realm of urban imagination and how space itself can be organized and reconfigured so that the "static city" (built of concrete, steel, and bricks) and the "kinetic city" (built mainly of recycled materials) in Mumbai and other metropolises in India can better coexist and a participatory form of planning can be realized (Mehrotra 2012: 344). To achieve this and to generate a new debate on the question of meaningful housing for all Indians, it is first necessary to deconstruct the rhetoric of "universalizing solutions" and notion of universal housing that the central Indian government continues to adhere to (Mehrotra & Mehta 2020).[18] Accordingly, the three curators – Mehrotra, Kaiwan Mehta and Ranjit Hoskoté – of the exhibition *The State of Housing* also critically questioned the state's imagination of the low-income house which is limited to a uniform idea of the basic house unit that can measure "up to 30 q.m. as a single unit or part of a multi-storeyed apartment building across all urban areas in the country" (Mehrotra & Mehta 2018: 347).

At the same time, the context and central aspects that form the ecology of housing (transport infrastructure, mobility, livelihood, location, social networks) are completely ignored (ibid.: 248) – and this is exactly the impression that the three selected FD films *Modest Homes*, *Housing for the People* and *A Growing House* create, as they suggest that a focus on housing alone can provide the solution. Beyond the "dogma of the state to deliver housing for families", Rahul Mehrotra therefore argues that the focus should instead be more on housing as dwelling and homemaking, and in the many cases of seasonal or circular migrants within India, the challenge of multi-local dwellings also needs to be considered (Mehrotra & Mehta 2020).

> Circular migratory patterns show that the labourers treat the city as a temporary place of residence, a place where they earn money and leave. But their precarious housing conditions is the most important reason why workers can never belong in the cities. Finding a somewhat permanent shelter is crucial to finding one's foothold in unknown places and making them into homes (Pati 2020).

18 In 2015, the Indian government introduced the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) to provide affordable housing to all citizens by 2022. Through this credit linked subsidy scheme (CLSS), the government aimed to provide its beneficiaries an interest subsidy to avail loans to purchase or build a house. The scheme was launched to aid the middle-income community, economically weaker sections (EWS) and low-income groups (LIG). Depending on the areas it serves, the scheme is divided into two sections, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Rural) (see https://pmay-urban.gov.in/, last access Jan 3, 2024).

When the COVID-19 lockdown began in March 2020 and the Indian government halted public transportation, it was estimated that 30 million people walked or cycled home / reverse migrated within two weeks, many of them facing extremely adverse conditions. It is important to bear in mind that a large percentage of the approximately 13 million internal migrants who at present work for daily wages in Indian cities are farmers who must "pay off debts or earn money for seeds and farming equipment for the next agricultural cycle" (Babu 2022: 52). Analyzing the situation of migrant workers in the state of Tamil Nadu, M. Suresh Babu describes how difficult it is to estimate their number or employment status, as they are not registered with any government body and do "not receive any welfare provision from the local / state government" (ibid.: 53).

# 3 Minnette de Silva: the 'Forgotten Pioneer' of Critical Regionalism in Postcolonial South Asia

I first came across Minnette de Silva (1918–1998) in the course of my reading and learning about critical regionalism in Indian post-colonial housing architecture. As mentioned in the introduction, this concept is currently associated with the names of Kenneth Frampton, Alexander Tzonis as well as Liane Lefaivre, and in the Indian context particularly with famous (male) architects such as Charles Correa, B. V. Doshi or Raj Rewal. However, an extension of the geographical lens points to a much earlier contribution of this mobile actor from Kandy in Sri Lanka to the conceptual pre-history and architectural practice of critical regionalism in South Asia.[19] It is precisely in this context that Liane Lefaivre and Alexander

19 As Da Hyung Jeong mentions in the publication for the exhibition on the *Architectures of Decoloniziation in South Asia, 1947–1985* at MoMA in New York in 2022, Minnette de Silva was, among others, inspired by architectural writer James Maude Richards who presented his ideas at the 6th International Conference of Modern Architecture in Bridgewater (CIAM) in 1947 (Minnette Silva was the only woman architect from Asia who participated in CIAM 6): "Decades before Kenneth Frampton's discussion of 'critical regionalism', the critic J. M. Richards took a similar line at the conference, and aspects of (Minnette de Silva's 1953 article, published in the Bombay-based magazine *MARG*) 'A House at Kandy' reveal a keen interest in Richard's ideas. Richards insisted on the existence of specific 'conditions of climate and social custom…in particular localities' and recommended the use of 'local materials' and the incorporation of 'traditional forms'" (Da Hyung Jeong. 2022. "A House at Kandy, Ceylon". *The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947–1985*. Ed. by Martino Stierli, Anoma Pieris and Sean Anderson. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 178).

Another major inspiration for Minnette de Silva (and her parents) which is mentioned in other articles, was the art historian and philosopher Ananda Kentish Muthu Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) who, among other things, stressed the importance of preserving local arts and crafts in Sri Lanka. See, for instance, Florian Heilmeyer (2022). "Spotlight on Women Architects – Minnette de Silva". *Stylepark*, Sep 26. Online available at https://www.stylepark.

Tzonis have also introduced Minnette de Silva in their publications, writing about her, for example, in their book *Tropical Architecture in the Age of Globalization* (co-edited with Bruno Stagno) in 2001:

> Da Silva returned to Sri Lanka from the Architectural Association in London where she had studied architecture in 1949. She had started her architecture career working for one of the three persons who would become the most important tropical architects of the post-war period, Otto Koenigsberger, and she remained on intimate terms with the two others, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. Yet she broke with their approach (…). For her, practice in Sri Lanka was necessarily linked to broader questions of regionalism and national identity. This is hardly surprising. Da Silva's father was a leading figure in the anticolonial movement of the then Ceylon and in the post-colonial government which gained independence in 1948. Her mother, an early Ceylonese suffragette, campaigned actively for the preservation of the traditional Sinhalese arts and crafts. And her sister, Anil, founded the most important Bombay-based, post-colonial Indian cultural magazine *Marg*. As early as 1950, da Silva was conscious of her highly original position. She coined a phrase to describe it: 'modern regional architecture in the tropics' (Lefaivre & Tzonis 2001: 30 f.).

The two authors also quote Minnette de Silva from one of her own texts, about which de Silva states in her posthumously published autobiography *The life and work of an Asian woman architect* (De Silva 1998) that she had written it in 1950, though she does not cite a source for it:

> Ceylon, like much of the East, emerged after the second world war from a feudal-cum-Victorian past and was exposed to new technological influences from the West. A veneer of modernism was acquired at second hand, ill-digested and bearing no relationship to Ceylon's traditions or to the region. No attempt was made to synthesize the modern and the traditional. It is essential for us to absorb what we absolutely need from the modern West, and to learn to keep the best of our traditional forms. We have to think *understandingly* in order to develop an indigenous contemporary architecture, and not to lose the best of the old that has meaning and value (De Silva 1998: 116).

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com/en/news/minnette-de-silva-spotlight-on-women-architects-architecture-stylepark (last access Jan 3, 2024).

However, in Deepthie Perera and Raffaele Pernice's view, Minnette de Silva's approach to architecture in Sri Lanka displayed Otto Koenigsberger's "thinking of being responsive to local climatic, economic and social needs" (Perera & Pernice 2022. 'Modernism in Sri Lanka: a comparative study of outdoor transitional spaces in selected traditional and modernist houses in the early post-independence period (1948–1970).' *Journal of Asian Architecture and Building Engineering*. p. 5.).

Here, Minnette de Silva sums up important principles of a modern or critical regionalism in post-colonial architecture, which at the beginning focused in particular on the question of a national identity and expression of cultural difference vis-à-vis the former colonial powers. Accordingly, she sees the post-colonial societal role of architects and a primary task in undertaking a fundamental review and reorientation of their imagination and ideas in relation to architecture as well as urban planning. In her view, the goal must be an architecture that enriches the lives of all and includes all aspects of creative expression, or in short, "the art of living beautifully and joyously" (ibid.).

Fittingly, the following description from 2019 can be found about Minnette de Silva (1918–1998) on the homepage of the *Architectural Review*:

> Expressive, unapologetic, and ahead of her time in ecological and participative design, the Sri Lankan architect is considered a pioneer of what she called Modern Regionalism – later to be known as Critical Regionalism.[20]

The wording and the essay itself is noteworthy, as it was written by Shiromi Pinto, author of a novel based on the 'true life story of Minnette de Silva' entitled *Plastic Emotions* (2019).

When architectural historian Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi pointed out in her important academic article "Crafting the archive: Minnette De Silva, Architecture, and History" (Siddiqi 2017) that there is still no monograph[21] on this exceptional Sri Lankan architect, she probably did not have in mind a fictional novel to be published two years later. Shiromi Pinto's novel, however, leaves the reader in uncertainty throughout as to which passages, characters, and relationships are actually based on 'historical facts' and what is solely the author's fantasy.

Minnette de Silva's own autobiography, on the other hand, is very difficult to obtain, as it has not been reprinted since 1998. I had the great fortune that Maria Framke agreed without hesitation to photograph page after page of this book for me with her cell phone during an archive stay in London, thus giving me access to it.

As with cinematic biopics, which can gain far more visibility than scholarly research or journalistic investigation, an initial question might be what contribution a fictionalized biography such as Shiromi Pinto's novel *Plastic Emotions* can

20 See https://www.architectural-review.com/author/shiromi-pinto (last access Jan 3, 2024).

21 According to Siddiqi's website at Barnard College, Columbia University, she is currently working on such a scholarly book entitled *Minnette de Silva and a Modern Architecture of the Past* or may in the meantime have nearly completed it.

make to the archive and memory of a 'forgotten pioneer' or 'architect forgotten by history', as exactly this has been a primary motivation of the author. Precisely because historical novels can be very well researched and written, the point here is not so much to deny or question in principle that they can make such a contribution, quite the contrary. However, as I would like to illustrate with the example of the two published books about Minnette de Silva – her hard-to-access autobiography, and the already widely circulating fictional novel about her – there clearly exists a mismatch between readers who 'already know' and who can verify what is fact and what is fiction in Pinto's novel and those who hear about de Silva for the first time through the book or the lengthy reviews about it.

On the one hand, Pinto only hints at many real people and encounters from Minnette de Silva's life (as well as from Le Corbusier's biography), so that their classification basically requires quite a lot of prior knowledge. On the other hand, many acquaintances and friends are added who did not exist, while the names or life dates of close relatives have been changed very freely. Hence, readers who do not already know Minnette de Silva's biography that well may not become aware of this at all. Only at the end of her novel does Shiromi Pinto mention in her succinct "Author's note" that

> (t)his is a work of fiction. (…) I have taken many liberties with the facts….I have introduced numerous anachronisms…In real life, Minnette's father died before her mother, and neither passed in the manner I've imagined. There are plenty more examples of these disparities throughout the novel. An assiduous reader might have fun uncovering them (Pinto 2019: 421 f.).

However, as some indignant reactions to the freedom Pinto takes to fictionalize Minnette de Silva according to her own wishes and ideas suggest, especially readers who still knew her personally or are currently making a serious effort to inscribe her in the archives of knowledge in which she has long occupied a marginal role, cannot relate to this kind of 'fun'. Nevertheless, in addition to critical reactions,[22] there are also several positive reviews that recognize precisely in this unprecedented visibility the achievement of the novel, or at least emphasize that it invites further study of de Silva.[23]

22 See for instance Priyanka Lindgren's critical review titled "Resurrecting a forgotten architect. Does the fictionalised retelling of Minnette de Silva's story do justice to her life and work?" (*Himal South Asian*, Oct 7, 2019), available online at https://www.himalmag.com/resurrecting-a-forgotten-architect/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

23 See for instance Shahidha Bari's positive review titled "Plastic Emotions by Shiromi Pinto review – an architectural romance". *The Guardian,* Jul 20, 2019. Online available at

Shiromi Pinto's novel *Plastic Emotions* covers a period of more than fifteen years (1949–1965) and presents the (supposed) romantic relationship between de Silva and Swiss-born architect Le Corbusier on the basis of a few described encounters and numerous letters written by the two in diary form, as if it had been central and formative for both their lives.

## 3.1 Post-Pinto Perception of a Photo?

> They are mid-conversation: he is talking, smart hat perched on his head, a coat casually slung on his arm, while she clutches papers close to her chest, the tail of her sari wound over her hair in the traditional way. She gazes at him intently. Looking at the photograph, it seems unsurprising that this real-life encounter and the exchange of letters that followed should have provided Pinto with the bones of her story (Bari 2019).[24]

This is how Shahidha Bari describes a photograph showing De Silva and Le Corbusier at the 1947 Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (photographer unknown, dated 1947). A friendship between the two is assured, as is the great respect that Minnette de Silva felt for the much older world-famous architect. An affair could also be possible, but who would care about such personal matters – and why should it be hyped up to such a formative relationship that it could even, as Pinto's novel seems to suggest, explain de Silva's not being married and her childlessness?

> She never married, had no children. The student thinks of her, drawing up plans while dreaming of the man she loved. 'Le Corbusier was a tall man,' the architect has once said. And as she takes a last look inside the house, the student glimpses a younger architect, designing, building, creating – holding her lover behind her eyes until the very end of her days (Pinto 2019: 15).

As is well known, there always needs to be some concrete 'reason' or 'misfortune' in the biography of a woman that comprehensibly, and also in an acceptable way, justifies why she eludes her 'natural' destiny as a wife and mother, doesn't it?

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https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/20/plastic-emotions-by-shiromi-pinto-review (last access Jan 3, 2024).

24 Another interesting photograph showing an exuberant Le Corbusier and amused Minnette de Silva can be found at https://www.ciam6.co.uk/project/on-this-day-in-history-friday-12th-september-1947-ciam6-comes-to-bridgwater/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

This ironic remark brings me to the question that actually concerns me here: What role do gendered perceptions and representations play in the scholarly, literary as well as journalistic examination of Minnette de Silva's (as well as other 'female pioneers') life and work which has been gaining momentum for some years now, and consequently, for the knowledge archive based on it? It is interesting to note in this context that Tariq Jazeel not only critically observes a deeply gendered "public speculation" about the emotional and personal life of the architect, but also in general the fact that "de Silva's considerable and foundational influence and genius is often refracted through the male figures that in reality her work inspired," as he mentioned in his online presentation at the Womxn in Design and Architecture Conference on Minnette de Silva in 2021.[25] Here Jazeel refers specifically to the much better-known Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa.[26]

## 3.2 A 'Difficult Woman' ... ?

Much has been written about the extent to which de Silva's conceptual reflections and practical implementation of a modern regionalism influenced Bawa, not least mediated through their mutual acquaintance Ulrik Plesner, a Danish architect. In Plesner's autobiography entitled *In Situ – An Architectural Memoir From Sri Lanka* (Aristo Publishing, 2012), the author does not leave a good hair on Minnette de Silva's head and at the same time diminishes her importance as an architect. This may have contributed to her reputation as a 'difficult woman', which Pinto also likes to pick up on in her novel and – even worse – allows her fictional "Corbu" to articulate in the very same words.

David Robson, architect and author of many architecture books, cannot find anything to like about either Pinto's novel or Plesner's autobiography, calling the latter "spiteful":

25 The recorded presentation can be viewed at https://vimeo.com/577285337 (last accessed Sep 23, 2023).

26 A rather interesting perspective on this is also given in the short entry on Minnette de Silva to the database of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies: "While Geoffrey Bawa (next section) has been heaped with praise for his 'critical regionalist' incorporation of internal courtyards, verandahs, and iconic roofs, Minnette de Silva was the originator of these ideas, even calling herself a regional modernist. And while Bawa's politics were unvocalized and ambiguous, de Silva – like her parents before her – was candidly outspoken in her views, and threw herself into the project of a search for a national cultural expression." See https://www.aisls.org/teaching-about-sri-lankan-architecture/minnette-de-silva/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

> Plesner apparently viewed his sojourn in Ceylon and his collaborations with de Silva and Bawa as the high point of his career and, half a century later, he wrote about it in a fantastical, semi-fictional autobiography in which he sought to inflate his own role at the expense of his two employers and erstwhile friends. His spiteful book catalogues his various sexual exploits including his alleged seduction by Minnette, though he goes out of his way to disguise the nature of his relationship with Bawa. He also seeks to belittle Minnette's architectural achievements and subjects her to cruel character assassination, demonstrating the sort of prejudice that she faced as a woman architect in the 1950s (Robson 2020).

The short preface to Plesner's linguistically unambitious autobiography may suffice to be convinced that Robson's criticism is fully justified, as Plesner mentions his own name first and erases Minnette de Silva's significant contribution to a modern regional architectural style in post-colonial Sri Lanka:

> In Situ. An Architectural Memoir from Sri Lanka. How Ulrik Plesner and Geoffrey Bawa, with a spirited group of architects, artists, and craftsmen, created a new architecture for Sri Lanka based on a fruitful fusion of Western, colonial, and local building traditions (Plesner, *In Situ*, 2012).

Ulrik Plesner's autobiography is another book that many people obviously know exists, but which is also not very often available in libraries and therefore not really accessible.[27] However, when the book is mentioned in connection with Minnette de Silva, one sometimes gets the impression that Plesner is talking about her to a great extent. Therefore, it should at least be mentioned here that the third chapter in his autobiography, which is simply titled "Minette" (her name is only written with one 'n' in this book), is actually only 15 pages long (pp. 54–69, while the book itself has 441 pages), and the text is even interrupted by several full-page illustrations. However, the few text pages of this chapter are indeed full of a form of misogynistic nastiness that is not worth quoting or discussing further.

Notwithstanding his critique of Pinto's and Plesner's books, even David Robson considers it important enough to confirm, in light of his personal acquaintance and experience with Minnette de Silva, that she was indeed a "difficult person":

> It is true that Minnette was a difficult person who didn't suffer fools, but she was bright, charismatic, brave: an iconoclast who thought 'outside the box' and continually generated new ideas (ibid.).

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27 Since I did not want to buy it myself, my only option from Berlin, for example, was to order the book via interlibrary loan from the university library in Cottbus. It does not seem to be available at any other publicly accessible academic library in the states of Berlin and Brandenburg.

## 3.3 … or a Feminist and Secular Icon?

Another remark in Robson's angry review of Pinto's novel seems to me no less interesting regarding the question of gendered perceptions and representations:

> There has been a recent flurry of interest in Minnette, largely from women academics who seek to laud her as a feminist icon. Whilst this is to be welcomed, it should not be forgotten that Minnette saw herself essentially as a pioneering architect and not as a champion of women's rights (ibid.).

The choice of words here is just as remarkable as the somewhat limited understanding of the relevance of feminist history, which (fortunately) is by no means carried out exclusively by "women academics".[28] Nevertheless, it is an interesting question to what extent not only the gendered perceptions and representations of Minnette de Silva 'as a woman', in word and image, should be critically examined, but perhaps also the recognizable desire of some knowledge actors to unreservedly celebrate their just discovered 'heroine' and, quite deliberately, not to view her too critically.[29]

Although it is hardly mentioned in the many reviews, Shiromi Pinto attaches extraordinary importance to presenting de Silva as an undoubtedly secular actor who in no way even remotely sympathizes with the Sinhala-Buddhist majority nationalism that becomes a determining political-ideological force in the 1950s. Herein can be seen the essential 'function' of the two artist-friends invented by Pinto for her novel, Siri and Laki (i.e. Sri Lanka), for Siri's increasing radicalization not only destroys his relationship with Laki but also leads to a break with Minnette, who despises his stance in the novel. If it is the case that a – rather loose – inspiration for the character of Siri was de Silva's famous painter friend

28 The discussion about the question whether feminism and feminist attitudes can be separated from political commitment or rights-oriented approaches is currently ongoing (for instance, with regard to so-called 'lifestyle' or 'corporate feminisms'). It may never reach a final conclusion, precisely as it has to be debated and negotiated anew for each epoch, context and social situation. Nevertheless, the struggle against oppressive systems is always about much more than rights or the question of legal equality, and feminist thought and action is not limited to this alone. Especially since equal access and opportunities for all do not automatically follow from equal rights. Furthermore, feminist research is not least about rethinking possible alternatives and ideas, which can be introduced into broader societal debates.

29 For example, the podcast episode produced about her in the series *She Builds* (episode 17, 2022) conveys this impression, even though it certainly provides an interesting approach to Minnette de Silva (available online at https://www.shebuildspodcast.com/episodes/minnettedesilva, last access Jan 3, 2024).

George Keyt, then the production of unambiguity endeavored here prevents precisely the differentiating consideration of what Tariq Jazeel in his article "Tropical Modernism / Environmental Nationalism: The Politics of Built Space in Postcolonial Sri Lanka" (Jazeel 2017) names and critically examines as ambivalence. Without question, he also seeks to add to de Silva's late appreciation and recognition of her outstanding achievement as a Sri Lankan architect. Nevertheless, Jazeel problematizes in his article that de Silva's growing up in Sinhala Buddhist Kandy in Sri Lanka contributed to the fact that in her "particular mobilization of tradition and history" as an architect working there, she also identified Kandy as the cultural center of a postcolonial national identity grounded in its precolonial heritage (Jazeel 2017: 146). Decidedly, Jazeel does *not* want to portray de Silva as a "Sinhala Buddhist chauvinist" with his critical view (ibid.: 136), but with regard to the "Sinhala Buddhist striations of de Silva's new Ceylonese tropical modernity" he pointedly asks the question:

> What space is made available for post-independent Ceylon's non-Sinhala Buddhist others? Tamils, Muslims, and Burghers[30], for example (ibid.: 148)?

However, to complicate Jazeel's question, a reference to the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme near Kandy in the 1950s may seem useful, precisely as it is considered a pioneering approach to peaceful coexistence and successfully living together in diverse communities. On this, Chanaka Talpahewa writes:

> The building society itself had varied and a mixed set of members. Although being Public Servants, the membership consisted of those hailing from different professions, grades and levels, ethnic groups, religions, social strata and political and ideological affiliations. As a result, Minnette faced the challenge of housing a varied group of individuals (households) within the same development while minimizing the costs. The planning was done adhering to the stipulated rules, standards, regulations, controls and laws (Talpahewa 2020).

Among the notable innovations that set Minnette de Silva's approach to planning this housing project apart from those previously used in Sri Lanka is her inclusion of the wants, needs, and daily practices of future residents. By means of questionnaires, she sought to gain information on this, as well as on the income situation and socio-economic status of the families. On this basis, she developed different types of houses and community amenities to facilitate successful community life. In the course of Minnette de Silva's recent 'rediscovery', the Watapuluwa Housing

30 Minnette de Silva's mother, Agnes (née Nell), who actively campaigned for universal suffrage in Sri Lanka, came from a Christian Burgher family with Dutch roots.

Scheme has also received more interest and recognition as an outstanding social housing project that actually worked, unlike many other approaches of low-cost housing planned top-down and ignorant of the needs of the residents.

In her novel *Plastic Emotio*ns, Shiromi Pinto has Minnette de Silva speak about this project in a letter to Le Corbusier in the following words:

> Finally, Corbu, I'm working on a social housing scheme! I have been wanting this for years – and now it's here. I have 200 units to design and build. It's a huge challenge: so many different people – different religions, ethnicities.
>
> How can one build for all those variables? You must have had similar challenges in Chandigarh – greater ones, in fact. For me, the answer is to start with a series of questionnaires. It seems to me that rather than force a person to live a certain way, we should listen to their needs and try to serve those needs, all the while introducing small innovations that coax the individual towards a more harmonious way of living. I'm sure you agree (Pinto 2019: 318 f.).

In view of the fact that the majority of Minnette de Silva's buildings no longer exist, authors of academic works as well as writers of novels and journalists inevitably have to stick closely to de Silva's autobiography (or on sources based on it). *The Life and Work of an Asian Woman Architect* (1998) contains numerous letters, newspaper clippings, photographs, and drawings – in addition to her own text passages – , and therefore functions as an essential primary source *and* material artefact. In addition to her own brief description on the Watapuluwa Housing Scheme, her autobiography also includes letters, a newspaper article, a photo of the general view of the housing scheme as well as the questionnaire she used for this project (De Silva 1998: 207 f.). This, of course, also raises pertinent questions regarding an emerging knowledge archive that can no longer rely on surviving buildings, but primarily on descriptions and illustrations of them. In the framework of the online WDA (Womxn in Design and Architecture) Conference 2021 which was dedicated to Minnette de Silva, some of the speakers expressed that her portfolio had not been very extensive, and that overall, she had also pursued (too?) many different interests. By what standard or norm is the size of this portfolio measured, I wondered as I listened, and isn't it precisely our job as academics to challenge this 'perceived norm'? Doesn't the fact also deserve attention and appreciation that Minnette de Silva saw herself as an architectural historian as well as an educator, and that she practiced both, notably during her time as a lecturer in architectural history at the University of Hong Kong in the second half of the 1970s – not to mention her deep interest in arts, textiles and handicrafts?

As a recently published call for papers for a workshop on "Mobile Actors in Global History" rightly mentions,

> (s)tudying mobile actors has given scholars a new understanding of connectivities across national and regional borders and tools to challenge commonly

> accepted demarcation lines and, all in all, explore new and exciting horizons in our craft.[31]

Even during periods of her life in which she couldn't travel a lot, Minnette de Silva surely was a highly mobile actor, especially if our understanding of (invariably gendered) forms of im/mobility is not restricted to physical or geographical mobility alone, but also includes aspects of emotional, imaginative or media-communicative mobility, as well as (up-/downward) social mobility, among others. Moreover, beyond transregional connectivities and international networks, in Minnette de Silva's case it also seems relevant to understand her many travels, especially between 1959–69, as an integral element of her architectural research practice.

As Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi describes in her insightful article:

> During that period, she travelled widely (which later penury prevented). Her passport, stamped from 1959 to 1969 for India, Greece, France, Syria, Cambodia, Thailand, Pakistan, Iran and the United Kingdom (…). This travel-based research led to her writing chapters for the eighteenth edition of Sir Banister Fletcher's A History of Architecture (published in 1975), on the architecture of Ceylon, Afghanistan, Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, China and Japan (Siddiqi 2017: 1321).

De Silva also collected nearly two thousand slides of cities and heritage sites that she saw as important pedagogical tools for use in lectures (ibid.).

The point of reflecting on the role of gendered perceptions and representations of 'forgotten pioneers' like Minnette de Silva is the consideration that it has become a matter of course for researchers using ethnographic methods to reflect on the situatedness of their own perspective as well as on the multiple positionalities interacting with each other in interview situations or participant observations, and to make these reflections transparent in the writings based on them. A similarly self-reflexive observation would certainly have to take place when we trace an actor in and through a wide variety of sources, collections and archives – only in this way can we also gain insights into a possibly ***un***conscious gender bias that may nevertheless have a significant impact on what we research and how we shape and describe the knowledge that we convey publicly.

31 Online available at https://www.infoclio.ch/sites/default/files/eventdocs/call.pdf (last access Jan 3, 2024).

# 4 Living Together in the Vertical City?

## 4.1 Vertical City, Part One

> What most annoyed Wilder about life in the apartment building was the way in which an apparently homogeneous collection of academics and high-income freelancers had split into three distinct and hostile camps. The old social divisions based on power, capital and self-interest had reasserted themselves here as everywhere else.
>
> In fact, the skyscraper had already divided itself into the three classic social groups – lower, middle and upper class. The shopping mall on the tenth floor formed a clear boundary between the lower nine floors, with their proletariat of film technicians, stewardesses, and the like, and the middle section of the high-rise, which stretched from the tenth floor to the swimming pool and restaurant floor on the thirty-fifth. These middle two-thirds of the apartment building constituted its middle class, composed of self-centered but essentially docile members of academic professions – doctors and lawyers, accountants and tax specialists who were not freelancers but worked for medical institutions and large corporations. Puritanical and disciplined as they were, they had the cohesion of those who eagerly settle for second best.
>
> Above them, on the top five floors of the high-rise, was the upper class, the discreet oligarchy, made up of smaller captains of industry and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics, with express elevators, better utilities and carpeted staircases. They set the tone in the building. It was their complaints that were taken care of first, and they subtly ruled life in the high-rise, deciding when children could use the swimming pools and the rooftop play garden, setting the menu in the restaurant and the high prices that kept almost everyone but them out of there. Above all, it was their sophisticated patronage that kept the middle class in line, that constant lure of friendship and recognition (Ballard 2016 [1975]: 73 f.).

In these almost satirical words, British author J. G. Ballard, in his 1975 novel *High-Rise*, has his character Richard Wilder, an increasingly angry resident of

the "lower floors," television journalist and aspiring documentary film director[32] pass judgment on the question of social cohesion in the novel's titular *High-Rise* (1975). In this fifth chapter, titled "The Vertical City," the impending escalation of vandalism, intensified class-based segregation, and brutal violence among the residents is already beginning to take shape, but its monstrous scale is hardly imaginable after this first third of the novel. It begins, as it often does, with a dispute among neighbors, in this case over the use of a swimming pool, which unleashes a never-ending nightmare in this forty-story residential tower on the outskirts of London.

At the top of this high-rise resides the highly narcissistic architect Anthony Royal. Up to 2,000 residents were to move into their condominiums and, thanks to the latest technology, infrastructure and various amenities, in a position to leave the high-rise whenever they felt like it. When the dystopian violence can no longer be contained, but many residents nevertheless – or especially in view of the war-like situation and gathering of ever smaller groups – feel such an intense energy for life as probably never before in their lives, this case actually occurs: many hardly leave the high-rise anymore, not even to go to work. It is not improbable that J. G. Ballard thus deliberately caricatured and smashed with relish the notion of a *unité d'habitation* and bringing together of 'all of life under one roof,' a concept associated in particular with the influential architect Le Corbusier. Perhaps Ballard even had the larger social connection between growing social inequality, intensified class-based demarcation, and a de-democratization fostered by the authoritarian understanding of planning in urban development clearly in mind when he wrote this novel, which lacks the idea of an active participation of the future inhabitants.[33]

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32 An interesting aspect of this is how Ballard has his protagonist Wilder reflect on the medium of documentary film as well as its multiple forms and functions:

"To bring his neighbors together, Wilder needed something that would give them a strong sense of identity. Documentary film would do that perfectly, moreover, in a form they could understand. The film would dramatize all their resentments and expose how utilities and other facilities were abused by the upstairs residents. It might even be necessary to secretly stir up trouble, to exaggerate the tensions present in the high-rise.

As Wilder soon discovered, however, the form of his documentary was already about to be fixed" (p. 75, translated from the German version of the novel).

33 In his essay for the exhibition volume *Die Neue Heimat (1950–1982). Eine sozialdemokratische Utopie und ihre Bauten* ("The Neue Heimat [1950–1982]. A social-democratic utopia and its buildings") (2019, eds. Andres Lepik and Hilde Strobl), Oliver Schwedes describes how Le Corbusier's authoritarian understanding of urban planning was transformed into an urban model, due to a generalization of industrial mass production in the postwar period combined with welfare-state centralization and regulation in urban design. This model

**Fig. 3.** Verticality as an ordering principle? To this day, New York is the epitome of the vertical city and an urban model for other cities worldwide. View from one of the city's latest attractions: the 437-meter tall One Vanderbuilt, advertised as the the tallest commercial skyscraper in Midtown Manhattan and one of the 30 tallest buildings in the world. Source: photograph by author, 2023.

After reading the novel *High-Rise*, the extremely violent images lingered for a long time in my mind and I have not yet felt the desire to watch the film of the same name, which was made several years later, on the basis of J. G. Ballard's book, and released in 2015, a full forty years after its first publication. The novel dates from a time when skepticism about skyscrapers, especially when they were residential rather than office towers, was at an all-time high. In the western part of Germany, where I grew up, criticism of this form of housing construction and the urban planning linked with it, which at that time was not yet geared to profit maximization, had found a much-cited expression in the formulation chosen by the physician and psychoanalyst Alexander Mitscherlich for his 1965 pamphlet "Die Unwirtlichkeit unserer Städte. Anstiftung zum Unfrieden" ("The Inhospitability of Our Cities: Incitement to Unrest"):

> Cram the employee behind the uniformed glass facades then also into the uniformed monotony of the apartment blocks, and one has created a condition that makes any planning for democratic freedom illusory (Mitscherlich 1996 [1965]: 52) (translated from the German original version of the text).

Shortly before the novel *High-Rise* was published, the UNI-Center in Cologne (architect: Werner Ingendaay), one of the tallest high-rise residential (or mixed use) buildings in Europe to date, was opened in 1973. Here, the proximity to the city (a so-called 'high-rise center') was consciously given more weight by the planners than an environment with green spaces, as they had often been built for newly emerging urban settlements on the outskirts or outside the cities. Nevertheless, the UNI-Center was not really an 'urban success' and, especially in its initial phase, considered hostile to families and especially children, due to the lack of amenities and prevailing anonymity. Today, the building is described with the usual German terms such as 'Bausünde' (building sin) and 'Bauklotz'

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prevailed over competing lines of tradition and, as a consequence, dominated building and planning in the Western world.

As Schwedes writes:

"Nevertheless, Corbusier had the right intuition when he saw in the fascist regimes in particular those forms of organization that corresponded to his planning ideas. After all, National Socialism had also significantly prepared the implementation of Fordism in the post-war period. The bundling of the largest housing cooperatives under the umbrella of the Hamburg Neue Heimat as well as its hierarchically organized and centrally managed development in the context of the German Federation of trade unions in the postwar period had their roots in the National Socialist era, just as decisive ideas of forced industrial housing construction and essential conceptual urban planning considerations in the postwar period were fed from that period" (p. 21 f.) (translated from the German original version of the essay).

(concrete block), but on the other hand, questions of monument protection as well as the preservation and renewal of existing living space to solve the so-called new housing question in German cities are now also changing the view of residential towers such as the UNI-Center.

Against this background, newly developed neighborhoods such as Darmstadt-Kranichstein, which were created in the course of the construction of high-rise housing estates by the non-profit building and housing company Neue Heimat (NH) in the postwar era[34] and have long been viewed with suspicion as 'social hotspots' or 'ghettos,' are currently being reconsidered. However, the stigmatization of 'satellite towns', as it also became increasingly prevalent with regard to East German prefabricated housing estates in the period after reunification in the 1990s and 2000s, cannot be overcome so easily, even if many developments in the high-rise housing estates have in fact already taken a positive turn.

As a child of the 1970s who grew up in West Germany, I was particularly familiar with high-rise buildings that were built for less privileged groups in southern Germany as well as for the so-called *Aussiedler* (German immigrants from Eastern European countries). A then prevailing, deeply classist and disparaging view of these high-rises and the people living in them was expressed for me exemplarily in the term "Assis". "Assi" is the short form of the term "Asoziale" ("asocials"). During the Nazi era used the terms 'asocial' and 'workshy' to categorize together a group of people who did not conform to their social norms. It puzzled me throughout my youth how ubiquitous this expression was. (Re)engaging more intensively with the discourses and politics surrounding the construction of residential towers from a transregional-comparative perspective today is undoubtedly related to this formative experience, but also my astonishment at how little public presence the history and present of high-rise housing estates currently has.

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34 Neue Heimat was reestablished as a union enterprise after the Second World War, continuing a history of union housing construction in West Germany dating back to the Weimar Republic. In the following decades, it developed into a major supraregional corporation that enjoyed broad political and societal support. However, the extent of corruption within the management level only became publicly visible as a result of the financial bankruptcy and subsequent breakup of the group.

Hilde Strobl speaks in the book accompanying the exhibition *Die Neue Heimat (1950–1982). Eine sozialdemokratische Utopie und ihre Bauten* ("The Neue Heimat [1950–1982]. A social-democratic utopia and its buildings," edited by Andres Lepik and Hilde Strobl, 2019), of a "shock for the West German population" (p. 9). Only in recent years has there been an increased reconsideration and examination of the history of the Neue Heimat, spurred not least by the discussion of affordable housing in Germany.

After the Second World War, the Neue Heimat, at times the largest housing construction company in Europe, played a major role in the reconstruction project. Between 1947 and 1985, the non-profit organization built hundreds of thousands of housing units throughout the Federal Republic of Germany. Today, they still characterize the face of many west German cities. For instance, the architect and urban planner Ernst May, who was head of the planning department of Neue Heimat in Hamburg from 1954 to 1961, was commissioned by the city of Darmstadt (near Frankfurt on the Main in the federal state of Hesse) in 1965 to take over the planning for Kranichstein, a satellite town with 18,000 inhabitants and all kinds of community facilities.

In Luetten Klein (Rostock), however, which was presented as a 'model city of the future' in the German Democratic Republic Erich Kaufmann, one of the outstanding architects of the GDR, was responsible for a series of residential projects and large housing estates in Rostock. He was mainly in charge of prefabricated buildings, including the 18-storey high-rise buildings in Luetten Klein. At record speed, 10,000 apartments were built within just ten years (mid-1960s to mid-1970s). This was made possible by the prefabricated slab construction method. Not only apartments were built here – leisure facilities, restaurants, department stores, polyclinics and even a tram line were planned from the beginning.[35]

Maintaining what already exists through conversion, repair or retrofitting measures and improving living together in high-rise buildings, for example through more opportunities for co-design, offers for residents, as well as the creation of communal spaces inside the buildings, is an approach and emerging perspective that various architecture exhibitions are currently trying to support and communicate. For instance, the exhibition "Architecture Now: New York, New Publics" (The Museum of Modern Art, 2023) argued for the improvement of housing blocks and their grounds while keeping the communities they house in place. The design strategies have come out of multiple community workshops organized with tenants of the New York Housing Authority (NYCHA). As a project description in the exhibition mentioned, "(o)ne in sixteen New Yorkers lives in public housing units owned and managed by the NYCHA. Many of its complexes are in need of routine maintenance and costly repairs, often after decades of neglect." Challenging previous recommendations to demolish entire campuses and start from scratch,

35 The sociologist Steffen Mau grew up in Lütten Klein in the 1970s. In his famous book titled *Lütten Klein. Leben in der ostdeutschen Transformationsgesellschaft* ("Lütten Klein. Life in the East-German Transformative Society," 2019), Mau takes the high-rise estate as a starting point for his investigation of the social upheavals and developments since the fall of the Wall.

critical architects and urban designers advocate for "scalable design solutions" and for the preservation of existing buildings.[36]

Nevertheless, skepticism about expectations of neighborly cohesion in residential towers or a sense of community in high-rise housing estates remains widespread – interestingly, regardless of whether they were built for less privileged or particularly privileged social groups. For representatives of the latter viewpoint, J.B. Ballard's novel is therefore still valid today as a timeless reference and is cited once again in the context of recent high-rise discussions. On the one hand, by critical observers who, in view of a new global enthusiasm and wave of high-rise residential construction which has been evident for several years now, express their fundamental doubts about the possibility of residential cohesion in high-rises. On the other hand, also by architectural journalists such as Dirk Meyhoefer, who considers the construction of a high-rise building to be the dream of every (male) architect:

> Every architect would like to design a church, a theater or a high-rise sculpture one day. I've never actually heard an architect say 'no' when asked if he'd like to build a high-rise.

This is how Meyhoefer puts it in his 2022 Deutschlandfunk feature "Hochhäuser, Megahäuser, High Rises. Zwischen Himmel und Erde" ("Skyscrapers, Megahouses, High Rises. Between Heaven and Earth") and he also reproduces the idea of the skyscraper as a masculine symbol of "power, sex and property" as well as a "metaphysical transit space" in which people allegedly not only want to reach high, but also "seek to be close to heaven", which alludes to a (monotheistic) religious connotation (ibid.).[37]

For media reports, novels and feature films, the image of the 'starchitect' planning and building 'visionary' heights may be particularly appropriate, and ultimately it is once again primarily about the question of conquering space and outdoing each other in terms of built height.

However, especially in the field of residential construction, this common image regarding the supposed high-rise ambition belies, on the one hand, the fact

36 From a similar perspective, the exhibition "The Great Repair" at Akademie der Künste in Berlin (Oct 2023 – Jan 2024) reflects on new strategies to reduce resource consumption and preserve and repair what already exists.

37 Interestingly, on April 7, 2023, *Fox News* showed a photo which had been taken on April 5, 1965, and proudly mentioned how "(o)n Good Friday years ago, NYC skyscrapers lit up with crosses and showed a nation that embraced faith: Buildings with lighted crosses to honor Good Friday in April 1956." Left to right: 60 Wall Tower, 20 Exchange Place (formerly known as City Bank Farmers Trust Co.) and 40 Wall Street. Photo taken on April 5, 1956. (Ed Peters / NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images; Kerry J. Byrne, *Fox News*, April 7, 2023).

that a number of architects actually position themselves very critically vis-à-vis the question, or perhaps rather, the standard catalog of 'rational' sounding arguments in favor of residential towers, first and foremost with regard to the question of space that can supposedly be solved by them. I will discuss Charles Correa's position on this question below as an example. Moreover, the role of architects in housing construction is anything but central, as is mentioned in the introduction to this book. In view of their negligible share in the entire world's built environment, it could even be considered downright 'marginal' (Tauber 2014: 44).

In the era before profit-oriented urban planning, Alexander Mitscherlich had already identified this as a potential consequence of authoritarian planning and criticized it in clear terms:

> If today large housing development companies, wherever possible with the exclusion of architects, urban planners, not to mention social psychologists and psychoanalysts, but with the help of hired technicians, set about to create living space, then we have here that fatal touch of extremes, which will remain a human fate as long as we do not see through its origin by a change of our critical attitude. The extremes that meet here: the desire to provide everyone with a dwelling worthy of human beings is effectively nullified by the fact that an environment is created for all which does not allow a social engagement to arise at all (Mitscherlich 1965).

Towards the end of his above-mentioned radio feature for Deutschlandfunk, even architectural journalist Dirk Meyhoefer concedes that in the new global competition for the most spectacular high-rises, it is no longer so centrally about the figure and role of the architect:

> Superlatives require extremely good knowledge of materials and construction processes. The latter must be precisely coordinated and networked. It is increasingly a question of safety and security. And the architect is moving into the background.
>
> More and more, the high-rise is now becoming the task of economists, lawyers and other professions. And for architects, it's no longer so much a question of the big idea, but of sustainability. For architects like Werner Sobek[38], sustainability today is also a moral obligation (Meyhoefer 2022).

While in Germany, on the one hand, the question of how to deal with the existing high-rise buildings and residential towers as well as the construction of new high-rises is being debated, in countries such as India, a very rapid development

38 Werner Sobek is a structural engineer and architect who is known for his long-standing commitment for sustainable construction and design.

has already taken place in recent decades, especially in the area of residential high-rises for the wealthy (Patel 2017). While J. G. Ballard's high-rise comprised 40 floors, in Indian metropolitan regions and cities such as Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkata, Bengaluru, Noida and Gurgaon (to mention only a few), several supertall skyscrapers / towers have already been built, which comprise between 50 and 80 floors. Surprisingly, however, academic research on the question of living together in residential high-rises is still limited (which is not only true in the case of India). A large part of the academic literature seems to be primarily concerned with safety issues in relation to fire, earthquakes or strong winds as well as with questions of energy supply and sustainability of the building materials. An exception is the research of Soumi Muhuri and Sanghamitra Basu who investigated the relationship between interactional spaces and social cohesion in high-rise group housing complexes in Kolkata and address the question of quantitative measurability of residential cohesion in their publications (Muhuri / Basu 2021 and 2018).

In noting that elevators tend to inhibit communication in high-rise apartment buildings and that there is a widespread lack of open communal spaces, these observations differ little from the international discussion. For instance, in another feature produced for the Deutschlandfunk radio station, broadcast on April 19, 2020, the author Maximilian Schoenherr states:

> The elevator as a communication barrier. Numerous studies in recent years have dealt with social coexistence in the city. High-rise buildings play a subordinate role in these studies. A classic on living in high-rise buildings is a book published 50 years ago by urban sociologist Ulfert Herlyn.[39] Herlyn questioned things that high-rise architects considered God-given, such as elevators. He found that the elevator impedes communication on individual floors. With a door that can open at any time, a quiet conversation between two neighbors becomes impossible. The elevator door as a symbol of acceleration and hurriedness: impatient waiting, glances at the floor, and when the elevator finally arrives, get in and leave. Today, elevators are built more transparently, often in their own towers and glazed (translated from the German original text) (Schoenherr 2020).

The same article also quotes Eveline Althaus from the ETH Zurich Housing Forum, who has conducted research and published on the "social space of high-rise

39 The article here refers to Ulfert Herlyn's 1970 book *Wohnen im Hochhaus. Eine empirisch-soziologische Untersuchung in ausgewählten Hochhäusern der Städte München, Stuttgart, Hamburg und Wolfsburg* ("Living in a high-rise. An empirical-sociological study in selected high-rise buildings in the cities of Munich, Stuttgart, Hamburg and Wolfsburg"). Stuttgart: Krämer.

buildings" in Switzerland.[40] She mentions the example of a newly built high-rise in Zurich by a housing cooperative, "where they deliberately want to create open communal spaces on the mezzanines, starting with the stairwells" (ibid.). Interestingly, in this article, too, the construction of high-rise buildings is considered by some of the interviewed experts to be almost "without alternative", in view of the scarcity of space.

This often repeated and rarely questioned standard reference to a 'lack of space' or an achievable urban housing density by building in heights, which is meanwhile assumed to be self-explanatory, was already questioned by Charles Correa in 2010 in his lecture "India: High Rise & High Density," which he held at the conference of the Council of Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat (CUBTH) in Mumbai. Correa began this talk by explaining, first of all, that the high density of housing in Indian cities is not due to the large number of high-rise buildings, but can be explained mainly by the high average number of people who have to share a room or an apartment. Particularly in poorer sections of society, this can be up to 10 people per room. Secondly, unlike in major European cities, for example, the majority of high-rises in India are mainly office towers rather than residential towers, even though significantly more of the latter were to be built at the time, as they were being traded as a solution to the shortage of space and housing in cities in view of the scarcity of land. This was the situation when Correa made his presentation in 2010 and, in fact, it can currently be seen that the development he had anticipated has been consistently followed in subsequent years. However, in addition to the aforementioned residential towers for affluent populations, two other developments are important to consider here: first, an increasing number of so-called supertall skyscrapers of *mixed use*, that is, part commercial and part residential, and second, high-rises built as part of 'slum rehabilitation schemes', often on the outskirts of cities or in remote areas. These will be the subject of the next section of this essay, in which I present the documentary *Vertical City* by Avijit Mukul Kishore (2011). Correa was extremely critical of this development, not only with regard to India or Mumbai, but cities worldwide, where this form of "ugly multi-storey concrete tenement slums" were built on behalf of government organizations. To him, these high-rise towers for the poor were "really the work of pessimists. What they are saying is: we don't have any future" (Correa 2012: 202).

However, in his CUBTH lecture, Correa uses the example of Mumbai to primarily question the basic assumption or rhetoric regarding "saving space" through residential density in height. He explains that plans focusing on housing only

40 Eveline Althaus (2018). *Sozialraum Hochhaus. Nachbarschaft und Wohnalltag in Schweizer Großwohnbauten* ("The High-Rise as Social Space. Neighborhood and Everyday Living in Swiss Large Apartment Buildings"). Bielefeld: transcript.

often neglect important factors such as the availability of transportation – unless the planning relies solely on automobility and the availability of enough parking space – and other infrastructures that are important for living and working in the city. This also requires space, which is often not taken into consideration. In addition, it is very important to consider that a minimum area per residential unit for amenities must also be taken into account, such as educational facilities for children or green and recreational areas per person within reach of the residential area. As a consequence, Correa sees the central problem in the fact that in cities like Mumbai, the few free building areas are nevertheless built up with residential buildings according to the same logic as would be pursued for the construction of very closely standing office towers in large cities worldwide, that is, without all the additionally required areas for amenities which potentially enable residents to realize the important difference between 'residing' and "being at home." Or, as Mitscherlich puts it, the "art of being at home (…) cannot be thought of as limited to residential culture in the narrower sense" (Mitscherlich 1996 [1965]: 12).

## 4.2 Vertical City, Part Two

> *Old cities had a heart. The heartlessness, the inhospitality of the new construction, however, has a weighty excuse on its side: the taboo of ownership of land in the cities, which makes any creative redesign impossible* (Mitscherlich 1996 [1965]: 24) (translated from the German original version).

The 34-minute documentary *Vertical City* by director Avijit Mukul Kishore was funded by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) and released in 2011; it is freely available on various digital platforms (see figure 4). The film highlights the daily life and coexistence of former slum dwellers, particularly from the informal settlement Jari Mari in the vicinity of Mumbai's international airport, who have been resettled under the government's Slum Rehabiliation Program or have chosen to move into one of the available apartments in the new high-rise buildings being built for low-income groups.[41] For the implementation of this program,

41 Documentary filmmaker Surabhi Sharma published her film about Jari Mari in 2001 under the title *Jari Mari: Of Cloth and Other Stories.* The threatening destruction of the informal settlement and livelihoods on site were already the subject of her film at that time. In the description on her home page, it says: "Jari Mari is a sprawling slum colony near Mumbai's international airport Chhatrapati Shivaji. Its narrow alleys house hundreds of small sweatshops where women and men work without the right to organize. Their existence is on the line – their illegal dwellings could be demolished by airport authorities at any moment, and they have to look for work every day, from workshop to workshop. The film explores the lives of the people of Jari Mari and documents the many changes in

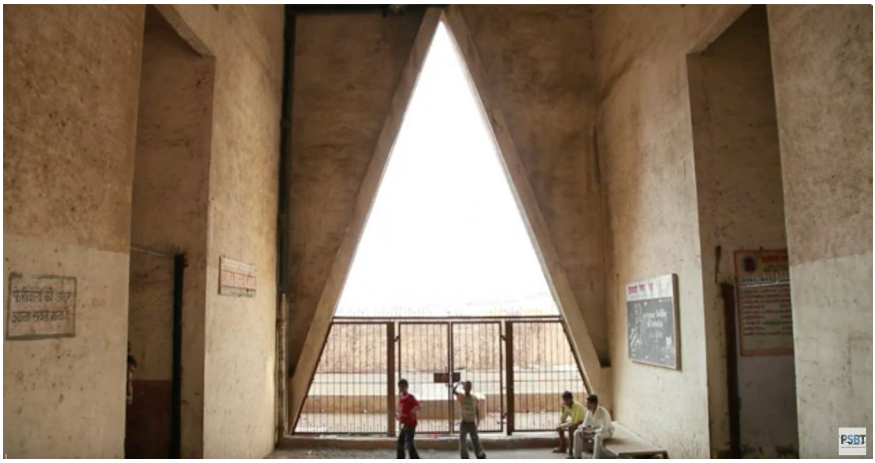

**Fig. 4.** Still from the film *Vertical City* (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).

different actors from politics, administration, construction industry and civil society have come together and formed an unexpected 'coalition' that, according to one commentator in *Vertical City*, "should not belong together": the state, local NGOs, international organizations such as the World Bank, and construction companies that are being promised coveted low-cost land for lucrative building projects, often on the site of previous informal settlements, provided they agree to build high-rise projects to house former slum dwellers in return. Essentially, it is therefore a 'by-product' of their core business, which is "to make high end real estate available and profit from it" (08:39 min).

> The slum rehabilitation schemes are executed in partnerships with private builders who are given major incentives for providing free housing. For every house provided, the builder is granted twice the amount of floor space index to develop and sell at commercial rates (05:46 min).

Although the critical perspective of the director as well as the experts he interviewed for the film (critical architects, urban researchers and activists) and residents of the high-rise buildings predominate and are clearly conveyed, *Vertical City* at least leaves room for one account of a positive experience of a person who sees an improvement for his life and survival in Mumbai by moving into the high-rise housing estate (and leaving it again). In the following, I will discuss

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the nature and organization of Mumbai's workforce over the past two decades." The film can be viewed online at https://surabhisharma.wordpress.com/filmography/jari-mari-of-cloth-and-other-stories/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

both perspectives, the hopeful as well as the deeply disappointed one, in more detail on the basis of the presented film sequences and, at the same time, include important supplementary perspectives from an ethnographic study conducted by Ramya Ramanath, which is focuses in particular on the experiences of girls and women in these high-rise housing estates for poorer sections of society. I also consider this important as we predominantly hear men speak about their own as well as their' families' experiences in the film, with a few exceptions.

A special feature of the film *Vertical City* is that Kishore has consistently refrained from showing the faces of the people speaking, so that as viewers, we can immerse ourselves in the images and scenes shown, while at the same time hearing the voices, testimonials or comments on the situation shown. At several points in the film, sequences from earlier documentaries and newsreels by the Films Division of India (FDI) are inserted to illustrate the state's prevailing view of the slums in Bombay / Mumbai and their inhabitants (see chapter 2 on "Low-cost housing for the people – as projected by the Films Division of India [FDI]"). Electronic sound is used sparingly for the background and reinforces a feeling of unease in the scenes for which it is used; otherwise, as mentioned, the reports and classifications of the interviewees can be heard, as well as the everyday sounds of an entire day in the high-rise housing estate, which *Vertical City* seems to show in only 34 minutes.

Even more than ten years after its release, the film has lost none of its topicality and offers an excellent access and introduction to the question of affordable housing and living (together) in the vertical city, which is why the film is presented here in more detail. It should be mentioned in this context that there is no shortage of highly critical, and in some cases independently funded, documentaries dealing with the destruction of slums in major Indian cities and the repeated displacement of less privileged or marginalized groups. An early milestone in this regard, which has both stirred and inspired many subsequent directors, is Anand Pathwardan's film *Bombay, Our City* / हमारा शहर.[42] However, critical or (self-)reflective *architectural* perspectives on the question of affordable housing, including an examination of construction methods, spatial design, the building materials used, as well as the possibilities for residents of 'dwelling' (Rahul Mehrotra) or 'being at home' (Alexander Mitscherlich), which form the specific focus of this book, are less frequently addressed in documentaries. Even rarer so far are documentary films which deal with everyday life and living together in high-rise buildings. In

42 Patwardhan makes the Hindi versions of his documentaries available via YouTube, while the English subtitled / synchronized versions are only available via DVD through his website. हमारा शहर / *Bombay Our City* (1984) can be accessed online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEIX36rbIJM (last access Jan 3, 2024).

view of an ongoing high-rise building boom in Indian cities, I found this rather surprising, but hope that more documentaries will deal with this important topic in depth in the coming years.[43]

Kishore's film begins with a five-minute prologue in which we are first introduced to the high-rise housing estate, its residents, and the steep staircases that are repeatedly shown in *Vertical City*. Their condition needs no explicit explanation; the building material itself appears damaged and heavily soiled, the staircases endless and worn. In clear contrast to this are the extremely well-maintained, small interiors of the apartments, which are also briefly shown in the first few minutes and are furnished according to the disposable income of the residents. Overall, the materiality of the building already illustrates in these first minutes of the film that the housing estate is in a very bad condition.

Another form of high-rise dystopia, which unfolds in J. G. Ballard's novel through the rampant vandalism of the apartment owners in the residential tower, seems to prevail here solely due to the bad quality of the construction, design and building materials used for the high-rise shown here, without any further intervention by humans. The experts, whose voices we now hear, are not introduced by name, since Kishore apparently decided to present only what they say on this and let it have its effect on the viewers:

> It is shockingly scary; it is scary that anything can be imagined that is actually completely legal – there is nothing illegal about it (01:39 min).
>
> The State's view of the poor is essentially that they are dispensable (01:44 min).
>
> These are not nice places to be in in the city (01:50 min).
>
> It is not clear what is the purpose of these slum rehabilitation schemes (03:24 min).

A former resident of Jari Mari tells us how overjoyed he and his family had been at first about the news of getting an apartment here and what high hopes they had in terms of educational opportunities and later job prospects for their children.

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43 A documentary produced for Deutsche Welle which has been viewed more than 5 million times on YouTube alone is the film *Megacity Mumbai – From slums to skyscrapers*, released in 2021. It should also be mentioned that apart from the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) and a few others, there are not many funding options for critical documentary filmmakers in India. Nevertheless, documentary filmmaking continues to thrive in India and gets more and more recognition worldwide. Co-funding and international collaborations are one way which proves particularly successful for contemporary documentary filmmakers from India.

**Fig. 5.** Still from the film *Vertical City* (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).

Their aspirations were dashed very soon after they moved into the apartment, and we also learn in minutes 09:00 and 10:00 of the film why:

> People were shifted in a big hurry, without even completing the basic infrastructure. There's no way to get out of the community at all – no vehicles could come up to the location (09:53 min).

There is a lack of traffic connections and affordable transportation, the high-rise housing estate is located so far outside of any connection that the residents are effectively isolated and, as a consequence, also eventually lose their jobs and regular income:

> As a result, they have lost their jobs, they have lost their livelihoods which they are not able to bear (10:13 min).

In this context, it is also mentioned that it is hardly comprehensible why the "most vulnerable communities" were the first to be relocated from the slums without first being given access to "rehabilitation measures" on the spot.

The serious repercussions for life in the high-rise housing estate are illustrated by the two examples of water supply and the non-functioning elevators. From minute 05:00 onwards, we see children and adults hurriedly running around the courtyard with their water containers, transporting fresh water to their apartments as quickly as possible; children take the opportunity to shower at the same time. For days, the water supply is sometimes interrupted, as we learn, and for elderly single people living on the higher floors, it is extremely tedious and difficult to carry the water all the way up the stairs to their apartments (12:36 min). Everything

works only by climbing stairs, because even the elevators do not work in the high-rise building shown and, according to one resident, they actually never did at any given time:

> They have been reduced to junk with then years of disuse. We have no illusion of ever being able to use them (10:00 min).

Similar to this film, Ramya Ramanath also reports in her book titled *A Place to Call Home. Women as Agents of Change in Mumbai* (2019), which is based on extensive ethnographic research in one of the largest 'resettlement sites in Asia', the high-rise Sangharsh Nagar (Chandivali) settlement in Mumbai, of the severe disruption to daily life caused by poor electricity and water supply in the high-rise buildings. Ramanath describes very vividly in her book why this is in many cases a clear deterioration for residents compared to their previous housing situation in informal settlements, using the community-based or neighborhood-based self-organized provision of basic amenities such as water, electricity and sanitation in Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park, from which many residents had moved to the ambitious 'flagship' Sangharsh Nagar resettlement project. She explains:

> As in other slums across urban India, networks of 30 to 40 migrant households formed to obtain basic amenities such as water, electricity, and sanitation. Residents pooled their financial resources to purchase electricity through an informal service provider who illegally tapped into an overhead electrical line or a distribution feeder using cables. Over time, residents in the park's lower elevations organized themselves in *chaalis* to qualify as collectives entitled to municipal water connections and toilets. The formation of groups among proximate homes was a prevalent means to create more habitable accommodations (Ramanath 2019: 149).

However, this neighborly cohesion and self-organization is rendered more difficult or hardly possible by the architecture of the high-rise buildings. In addition to the lack of infrastructure and basic amenities, the new high-rise residents have to pay many fees on a regular basis and also municipal taxes. Without a regular income and in view of the rising cost of living, they can hardly pay these and accordingly fear being kicked out again at any time.

It is not surprising, therefore, that this can lead to an assessment that the residents were better off in the slum:

> How will people who don't have enough to eat pay any maintenance charges? How far will the 200 rupees per room go to pay the expenses towards lighting or water, sanitation or tax? (21:25 min).

> Even if all the members of a family work, they can barely make ends meet. One can't survive on bricks and mortar alone. So, people moved back into the slums, close to where they find work (22:08 min).

Against this background, the impression of some experts is reinforced that this rehabilitation program of the Slum Rehabilitation Authority actually contributes more to the expansion of slums than to their reduction (22:26 min). However, the authority has learned little from these experiences and an improvement for the residents, if any, will only occur when the high-rise housing projects for wealthy groups – in the immediate vicinity of the high-rise housing developments for the poor, in this case in the neighboring Mantri Park – are completed and the necessary infrastructure and amenities, which are denied to the disadvantaged and marginalized groups, have to be ensured for them. Accordingly, as one resident puts it: "We got in charity what was rightfully ours. Change comes about only after the big people move in" (25:32 min).

The only more positive assessment of his own situation and future prospects after or even due to the (multiple) relocation(s) within Mumbai, as indicated above, is told by a man who introduces himself as a carpenter and interior decorator. He describes how, after his arrival in the city, he initially shared a rented room with five other workers and during this time always had 2–3 different jobs on hand to build up savings. Once the money he had saved was enough for him to take a loan and then buy his first apartment in Tata Colony in Mumbai for 150,000 IRS, he moved and lived in it for 9 years. So it continued with selling and buying new apartments until he was able to sublet his place and move to a chawl[44] instead where he still lived at the time of the interview for *Vertical City* (18:47 min).

Since the film *Vertical City* looks very sensitively at the situation of the children, but perhaps less carefully at gendered im/mobilities and its relation to architecture and urban planning, it makes sense at this point to once again include a comparative perspective from Ramya Ramanath's ethnographic research in Sangharsh Nagar, because her focus is specifically on the decision-making power and agency of women after moving from the slum to the newly constructed high-rise housing estate. Whereas in *Vertical City*, one interlocutor lamented the fact that nearly all his family members would now have to continuously engage in wage labor in order to afford the cost of living and additional expenses in the high-rise, Ramanath highlights how many of the girls and women she interviewed for her study were in fact very eager

> (t)o join the labor market and begin contributing to the financial welfare of their households. The risks that women are taking, often bolstered by new familial or social support, and the pride they display in their efforts – running grocery stores from their ground-floor windows, grinding grain from their extended verandas, hawking goods in the roads within and around the resettlement site (Ramanath 2019: 137).

44 Chawls are large tenements in Indian cities that are divided into many separate apartments and provide(d) cheap, basic housing for industrial workers.

As long as they do not have access to savings accounts or formal lending, women establish local informal groups and networks, known as *bishis*, within which they can save money and borrow it as needed for their entrepreneurial investments. Like the formation of other neighborhood associations, such as youth *mandals* or *mahila mandals* (youth or women's circles), Ramanath describes *bishis* as a practice which had first emerged in the informal settlements, not in the high-rise housing estate. In Sangharsh Nagar, on the other hand, she was able to observe that the question of religious, regional and caste identity now played a much greater role in these network or group formations and worked particularly well among Hindu women from Maharashtra, while Muslim women, for instance, experienced much less access and opportunities for mutual support and solidarity here.

> At Sangharsh Nagar, the development of funds and bishis and the interactions among women within these spaces carried tremendous potential for building social and political capital. In effect, these funds and bishis provided women with training grounds for civic involvement and open discussion, and were forums for community mobilization.
>
> But spaces for social and political engagement were not the norm. Excluded from such groupings were the Muslims, residents originally from UP, the Biharis (from the state of Bihar) and the other non-Maharashtrian women who called Sangharsh Nagar home. (…) But the move to Sangharsh Nagar had brought other forms of pride and empowerment to some, spurring them into employment they wouldn't have considered otherwise (Ramanath 2019: 120).

Without claiming that all the different communities had previously "lived more peaceably amidst each other than they did at the resettlement site" in the informal settlement in Sanjay Gandhi Park (Ramanath 2019: 150), the markedly different spatial configuration there would nevertheless have enabled a "sense of place" among them and the sharing of resources and utilities in a city where all of them were not welcomed with open arms as new arrivals. This was not the case in Sangharsh Nagar or any other resettlement site due to the spatial separation, the vertical living (instead of on the same level) and a general sense of insecurity as well as lack of safety outside their homes, which was strongly felt by girls and women in particular, as there was a fundamental lack of opportunities for "place-based interaction" through which participatory spaces could emerge (ibid.).

> When women are allowed room to reshape and expand the terms of their own empowerment and the use of their environment, then newer types of spaces emerge, spaces that seek to recreate the spirit of place through relationships they crave (Ramanath 2019: 151).

Without glossing over their difficult situation, Ramanath's gender-sensitive perspective reveals the practices and – in some cases previously tried and tested – solutions that women in particular resort to in the newly constructed high-rises

for less privileged and marginalized groups, in order to bring about positive change. In a situation that Kishore's film *Vertical City* depicts as almost hopeless and stagnant, they therefore see themselves and become, in many ways, agents of change. The fact that this is hardly perceived by the public or represented in the media is drastically demonstrated, for example, by a short television report on Sangharsh Nagar for the channel NDTV from 2016. The responsibility for the poor condition of the high-rise buildings, the littering of the settlement and the generally bad situation, which stands in stark contrast to the many promises and aspirations that accompanied this (or one of the) largest resettlement project(s) in Asia, is attributed here exclusively to the residents themselves. A deep-seated classist / casteist contempt and gulf in relation to "the poor" is expressed in the words of the commentator, who speaks of the need to "educate" the residents to live in the high-rises buildings "properly", to "better maintain" the building fabric and to significantly improve the overall condition of the housing estate, so that this "vertical city does not become a vertical slum." On YouTube alone, this two and a half minute long unspeakable clip has been viewed more than 7000 times – the only comment from a user below it posted in 2022 reads, "You have hurt the people of Sangharsh Nagar."[45]

45 See "Sangharsh Nagar: The Need to Educate Slum Dwellers," NDTV Profit Shows, 03 Nov 2016. Available online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EQ_J9UH_rKs (last access Jan 3, 2024).

# 5 Memory, Housing Architecture and Everyday Life: *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* (2019)

> *Houses remember and haunt as they animate the memories of previous inhabitants, memories that become embodied by the houses and the current dwellers. Houses also embody histories of design, reflective or broader social attitudes toward intimate places* (Davidson 2009: 332).

## 5.1 Uninhabited: The Prefabricated Wooden House

For some time now, mass-produced wooden houses have been receiving increased attention as a possible key to creating affordable housing. Timber is also seen as a sustainable building material of the future, especially in view of climate change. In the United States, the rise of prefabricated wooden homes as a path to affordable housing dates back to the 19th century and experienced a major boom due to the new possibilities of industrial manufacturing, particularly after World War I and as a result of the Great Depression in 1929. In 1919, the Ford Motor Company produced a nine-minute documentary film titled *Home Made – A Story of Ready-made House Building*, released by Goldwyn, in which the dream of home ownership in a serially manufactured wooden house was visually staged. Buster Keaton quickly recognized the material for a parody and released his self-produced silent film *One Week/Honeymoon in a Prefabricated House* only one year later, in 1920.[46] In the short film, the uncle gifts his nephew (Buster Keaton) a wooden prefabricated house set for his wedding. However, a jealous rival messes up the numbering on the components, so that the already laborious process of putting them together faces many additional challenges. Friday the 13th turns out to be an unlucky day

46 The film can be watched online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xd6ddOlbKp8 (last access Jan 3, 2024).

for the newlyweds, as their warped prefabricated house is barely able to withstand the rising storm and is running full of water. When a notice arrives informing the couple that they have erected their prefabricated house on the wrong side of the railroad tracks, they try to transport it to the other side by car, but the house gets caught on the railroad tracks. A few seconds later, a train coming from the opposite direction thunders through the prefabricated house, ending the young couple's dream of owning their own home after just one week. This penultimate scene from *One Week* also ends the 32-minute autobiographical documentary *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* directed by Mumbai-based architect and filmmaker Rohan Shivkumar (2019, PSBT India, Cinematographer and Associate Director: Avijit Mukul Kishore).

How does a newly built housing estate become a home for a family and its members?

How do its architecture and design shape the family and neighborhood relationships as well as forms of living together, and consequently also the biography of the residents – even long after they have left this home?

Rohan Shivkumar's remarkable and complex documentary film examines these questions using the example of the LIC Colony designed by Charles Correa in Borivali (also: Borivli), one of the city districts in northwest Mumbai (see also the section on Charles Correa's FDI documentary *City in the Water* in chapter 2). In 1974, as a young boy, he moved into an apartment complex there, which was completed at the beginning of the 1970s with the title name 'Lovely Villa'. As Shivkumar himself describes, the kaleidoscopic film follows four lines of vision, each with a distinct visual language and voice, and each with its own interesting sound. First, there is the "detached conceptual voice", through which large abstract ideas are introduced and historically classified. Perhaps not coincidentally, this detached voice is reminiscent, in terms of film sound history, of the supposedly 'objective' narrative voice that was characteristic of the way in which the Films Division of India's (FDI) state-initiated or state-sponsored documentaries were conceived for the post-Independence era, prior to the advent of video technology and subsequent pluralization of existing documentary practices in the 1980s and 90s (see Gadihoke 2012 and Battaglia 2014). The state's vision of 'home' and of communal living in a post-Independence state, on the basis of which architects and designers conceived and realized their buildings, is described in this first voice. In addition to contemporary film recordings, it is visualized by footage from different archives such as that of the Films Division of India (FDI) or the Charles Correa Foundation.

The 'second voice' in the film explains the physical form of the colony itself and how individual architectural details shape everyday life within it. A third, at times nostalgic and occasionally ironic view / voice illuminates and describes the 'inner life' inside the houses – the development of individual identities and relationships in

the family over the years during which the siblings – Rohan Shivkumar and his sister Sonal Sundararajan, who like himself is an architect too, – grew up in this 'Lovely Villa'. Finally, the fourth voice and perspective, which is directed at understanding personal feelings, remembering and longing, is deliberately kept fragmentary and vaguely hints at traumatic experiences, personal fears and losses. Here, *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* is strongly reminiscent of documentary film practices that Michael Renov has explored and discussed under the term domestic ethnography.[47] At the same time, the significance of the photographic family album becomes more prominent on this level. In the sense of the "acts of memory and imagination" described by Annette Kuhn in her book titled *Family Secrets* (2002), these acts, as well as the presence of the camera itself, provide the siblings with the occasion and "catalyst" for their (family) memory work. As Kuhn explains,

> (p)ersonal photos have a particular, and very special, place in the production of memories about our own lives. (…) As part of a vast industry devoted largely to the cultivation of ideal images of the family, family photography constrains our remembering, tries to funnel our memories into particular channels. But it also has more subversive potential. It is possible to take a critical and questioning look at family photographs, and this can generate hitherto unsuspected, sometimes painful, knowledge as well as new understandings about the past and the present, helping to raise critical consciousness not only about our individual lives and our own families, but about 'the family' in general and even, too, about the times and the places we inhabit (Kuhn 2002: 152 f.).

As Michaela Schäuble analyzes on the basis of her own film practice in her insightful article "Familien Filme(n)" (*Family Films/Filming Family*, the article was published in German), the medium of film, or more precisely the camera

47 As Renov explains, his interest is in work "being made by independent film and video makers that suggests itself – at least to me – as yet another response to the ethnographic impasse. If indeed participant observation founders in its tacking between 'inside' and 'outside', a passage that restages the subject / object dichotomization installed in the post-Enlightenment West, the films and tapes that I term *domestic ethnography* play at the boundaries of inside and outside in a unique way. (…) But domestic ethnography is more than simply another variant of autobiographical discourse, given its explicitly outward gaze; nominally, at least, this mode of documentation takes as its object the father, mother, grandparent, child, or sibling who is genetically linked to the authorial subject. Care must be taken in defining the particular relations that obtain between the domestic ethnographer and her subject (…) In a limited way, domestic ethnography occasions a kind of intersubjective reciprocity in which the representations of self and other are simultaneously if unequally at stake" (Renov 2004: 218 f.). Michael Renov (2004). *The Subject of Documentary*. University of Minnesota Press. Chap. 14: Domestic Ethnography and the Construction of the "Other" Self. 216–229.

itself, "not infrequently becomes an instrument that is able to sound out closeness and distance, to track down the past and to potentially reveal what has been kept secret" in the genre of the (auto-)biographical family film. Family films, however, are capable of telling far more than just the story of one's own or a single family. Schäuble explains that "family relationships, fates, and constellations allow a direct and undisguised insight into the sociopolitical backgrounds and social structures within which they take place" (Schäuble 2015: 348).

In the film *Lovely Villa*, this active process and desire for a conscious confrontation with the past, and what, at the same time, continues to be 'ghostly' present in their lives, is expressed particularly impressively through the joint poetic reflection and times when the two siblings Rohan Shivkumar and Sonal Sundararajan speak together, sometimes even synchronously.

Asked about the connection between this film and the previous explorative documentary *Nostalgia for the Future* (2017, jointly directed by Avijit Mukul Kishore and Rohan Shivkumar), which explored the interlinkages of an imagined Indian modernity, the making of a new citizen after Independence and the architecture of the home, Shivkumar responded in an interview that he considered *Lovely Villa* as a culmination of many of the ideas that Avijit Mukul Kishore and he have been interested in in some of their other jointly produced work. They were both interested in exploring the nature of Indian modernity within their respective disciplines, Kishore as a filmmaker and Shivkumar as an architect (Ramnath 2019). To some extent, *Lovely Villa* can also be seen as a follow-up to their film *Nostalgia for the Future* (2017) which was interested in exploring modernity, the idea of citizenship and the architecture of homes that were built to "clothe this ideal citizen". *Lovely Villa* was the logical extension of that interest, as Shivkumar explains in the same interview (ibid.).

In the following, I would like to take a closer look at the film *Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* on the basis of the four 'lenses' or voices / perspectives mentioned by Rohan Shivkumar.

## 5.2 Affordable Housing for the 'Old' Middle Class: The State's Vision of the Home and Neighborly Coexistence in Post-Independence India

From minute 03:34, the male narrative voice first reports how the first village-like settlement (Bombahen) emerged around the river in the middle of the forest area and later, cave temples and monasteries were added along the water, followed by a church and school. "Soon this was the city or at least the outskirts of one. A place to house refugees after the partition. Around these was imagined a new town and like every new town, it was meant to be perfect" (03:52 min). The theme


**Fig. 6.** Still from the film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* (dir. Rohan Shivkumar, 2019).

of housing refugees from the area of present-day Pakistan in this forest-dominated area (Borivali, also: Borivli) is taken up again from minute 14:52 in *Lovely Villa* (see figure 6). We see and hear that the refugees were housed in low-rise barrack-like structures, some of which are abandoned nowadays, but others were later converted into apartments. "How does one make a home – or rather, how does one leave one?" asks the narrative voice in minute 15:11. In cases where residents were able to bring their furniture from their old homes, they tried to arrange it in the same way in the residential barracks, thereby reproducing their old living environment, the "home" in the new place. However, this could hardly succeed, so that "the older home spilled out of the shell of the new one. Eccentric, disturbing" (15:28 min).

How exactly there, in the middle of the mango grove, a new neighborly community was to emerge a few years later, which at the same time was a miniature image of the envisaged unity in diversity in post-colonial India, is a question to which the film refers from minute 04:00 onwards, and for this part, it also includes very interesting excerpts from state film archives.

First, a port and industrial facilities from Bombay are shown, followed shortly by a strikingly long building called Yogakshema at Nariman Point which was the newly built headquarter of the Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC), founded in 1956 (the same year of India's second Five Year Plan that focused on industry). The government insurance sector was seen as an integral part of the post-independence nation-building program, providing loans for large-scale infrastructure projects and housing projects throughout India. Within this framework of township projects and government housing schemes, Charles Correa was

engaged as architect for a large residential colony built for policy holders of LIC in 1970 ("Own Your Home", 05:00 min).[48]

While we see and hear the director (Rohan Shivkumar) guiding an international group of students through this residential colony, where he grew up from 1974, we also learn that a cross-section of the 'old' Indian middle class of the 1970s was deliberately supposed to live together here (07:27 min), and this referred not only to occupational groups, but also to regional origins and religious affiliation:

> As we see the last names, you will realize that they all come from very different sorts of backgrounds – which is rare. In this building while I was growing up there was a wide variety of different sorts of religion and castes, because of the nature in which they were distributed (*Lovely Villa*, 07:34 min).

Who exactly these people were, who formed this cross-section of the middle class at that time, and how they were able to find their new home in this model housing estate of the LIC in Borivali, is explained in more detail later in the film, when the white-collar immigration to Bombay is mentioned (from minute 14:15). Archival footage of an arriving train is shown in this scene, from which commuters hurriedly disembark and move quickly towards the exit, at first mainly men, followed by significantly fewer women wearing saris.

> They came from all over the country – Tamil Nadu, UP, Kerala, Punjab. Accountants in banks, housewives married into the city. Small businessmen who set up shops near railway stations, peons in offices at Churchgate. Bombay was the promise. The insurance policy, their foothold. Their home (14:38 min).

Accordingly, the names of the residential buildings were not oriented towards an origin or past history (as would perhaps be the case today), but towards the promise of a good future for their inhabitants – and, metaphorically, of the post-colonial nation itself: Lovely Villa, Jolly Jeevan, Gay Life. Today, however, hardly any residents remember these names themselves, "nice, secular names though they are" (07:14 min). Rather, the only thing that remains in memory is the number painted on the houses, such as A-6/16, C/24, etc. – "the neatly ordered index that catalogues us all" (07:20 min).

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48 Arguably much more famous is another LIC housing complex designed by architect B. V. Doshi in Ahmedabad, better known as Bimanagar. Considered as a model example of low-cost housing which allow inhabitants to modify and transform the space according to their ideas and needs, for instance, through incremental growth, Doshi's work for the LIC continues to be discussed by architects who are interested in finding solutions for the ongoing shortage in affordable housing. Doshi's LIC housing project was also among the works exhibited at Vitra Design Museum in an international retrospective titled *Balkrishna Doshi: Architecture for the People* (2019).

As one such "archetypical modern Indian citizen", the voice of the sister introduces the father in minute 12:26 min when she explains:

> Our home was always tech-savvy. It must have been because both my mother and my father were engineers. My father was the archetypical modern Indian citizen. He was born in the 1940. He studied at IIT Madras and IISc Bangalore. The state's temples of science and technology before working at the TIFR in Mumbai.[49] This is where he met my mother (12:41 min).

The aspect of secularism comes to the fore once again later in the film, when Rohan Shivkumar recalls how, as a 13-year-old boy, he heard about the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards on the television news. The family had purchased the color TV in 1982 to be able to follow the broadcast of the Delhi Asian Games live that year – the centrally planned, national media event formed the starting point for the so-called "color TV revolution" in India. Shivkumar recalls a Sikh family taking shelter in the home of neighbors for some time during the anti-Sikh pogroms following Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 and mentions in this context (17:28 min):

> Refugees that found safety in the relatively secular nature of this state-built housing colony. This was also perhaps the reason my friends Zubair and Amjad found it to be the only shelter when their neighbourhoods burnt in the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992 and 93.

Shivkumar dedicates his film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* in the credits to his father D. Sundararajan (1942–2014) as well as to his 'architectural father' Charles Correa (1930–2015). In terms of a third formative 'father figure', the paternalistic post-colonial state and envisioned social order, especially as it was embodied by Jawaharlal Nehru, can be effortlessly identified in this (auto)biographical film. Insofar as secularity is not necessarily regarded as the absence of religion, but rather in a sense of mutual acceptance and recognition of respective identities, it seems that Shivkumar sees in it a principle which can be critically

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49 The Tata Institute for Fundamental Research (TIFR) was founded in June 1945. On the homepage of the TIFR you can read: "TIFR is a National Centre of the Government of India, under the umbrella of the Department of Atomic Energy, as well as a deemed University awarding degrees for master's and doctoral programs. The Institute was founded in 1945 with support from the Sir Dorabji Tata Trust under the vision of Dr. Homi Bhabha. At TIFR, we carry out basic research in physics, chemistry, biology, mathematics, computer science and science education. Our main campus is located in Mumbai, with centres at Pune, Bengaluru and Hyderabad." Under the section "History and Vision," Homi J. Bhabha is quoted as saying: "It is the duty of people like us to stay in our own country and build up outstanding schools of research such as some other countries are fortunate to possess."

reflected and ironically commented on but should not be abandoned in India as the best possible guarantor of respectful and peaceful coexistence in difference (on the aspect of visual secularity, see also Schneider 2020).

## 5.3 Design for Living Together: The Importance of Architecture in Everyday Life

Reflecting on the beginnings in his own architectural studies, Rohan Shivkumar recognizes the defining influences of the housing estate in which he grew up (07:57 min). He ponders on the influence of key elements in Charles Correa's architecture on his own early drawings and designs:

> I recognize the scales, terraces – windows, doors as a vocabulary learnt by imitation (08:04 min). A vocabulary learnt by experience. My vision of the ideal life was the one that I had lived. In the design of the colony, you can see many of the concepts that shaped Correa's imagination for ideal living (09:04 min).

From a bird's eye view, it is first apparent that the lanes lead inwards ending at the edge of the forest. The front of the residential buildings adjoins these lanes, the gardens are located on the rear side. Terraces cascade down to the gardens, which merge into the adjacent forest. Dead-end streets prevent the forest from being overly encroached upon by vehicular traffic. The large-scale terraces, open to the sky, celebrate Correa's named principle of 'blessings of the sky', while the large openings on both sides of the tubular apartments allow their cross ventilation. The apartments have different sizes, which was supposed to guarantee a "healthy mix of different classes living in the same building" (09:21 min). The step that separates the entrance to the apartments from the front door may not be a very prominent detail in the design, but it has an important function in neighborhood life, and in the director's photographic memory it did in any case, as neighbors could sit on it and talk to each other. The interior design is functional and simple, and the doors and windows were largely made of wood instead of glass for cost reasons – "after all, this was meant to be affordable housing" (09:51 min).

Courtyards, as spaces of encounter, were often prominent in Correa's designs, as in this LIC housing development in Borivali. Parallel to the staircases of each house is a pedestrian path that connects the street with the gardens at the back of the houses. All the footpaths were connected through the gardens and courtyards of the settlement, so that residents could reach the residential houses without having to cross the main road. Children were thus able to make friends in all directions of the settlement (10:52 min), but this is no longer as easy today, as many of these shortcuts have now been closed off for (perceived or real) safety concerns. In order to increase the available living space, some of the generous terraces were also reduced in size.

## 5.4 “The home is the witness, and no witness is mute”

Until minute 03:29, the sound of the raga Malkauns introduces us to the film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography*, while the camera moves over the surrounding forest, captures the beginning of everyday life in the LIC Colony, shows some of the now empty buildings from the barracks which had been built after the Partition for refugees from Pakistan. We see director Rohan Shivkumar with his group of students on a guided tour through the housing estate, sense the evening atmosphere, the view of the striking terraces, of plants, trees, branches, blossoms – right in the first minutes, we are sensitized to the fact that living together cannot and should not only be related to humans alone, but also includes plants and animals from an interspecies perspective. In some of his interviews, Shivkumar also mentioned the now significantly decimated number of wild animals that lived in the LIC colony during his childhood and youth.

Tonya Davidson’s short quote at the beginning of this chapter helps us understand that the apartment building in *Lovely Villa* embodies memories that are ‘curated’ in a visual and sound filmic archive: on the one hand, the memory of the histories of design, the state and societal attitudes towards housing and family life therein, including the perceptible or fixed gender roles and relationships between parents and children inscribed therein. On the other hand, a memory of the intimacy of shared life, of certain ways of living, and of all the practices and routines that made this house a home for its inhabitants, is also preserved and curated. Unlike in the case of a home which was destroyed or lost through flight or migration, the dwellings in *Lovely Villa* continue to be materially present – both the now vacant barracks built for refugees from Pakistan in the course of the Partition history and the titular ‘Lovely Villas’ which continue to be inhabited but have changed in appearance. So how can this ‘witness’ who is never ‘silent’ (02:03 min) be heard, or, in other words, how do we as the audience access this embodied memory knowledge?

As Davidson writes:

> Memories of intimacy, legacy of strangers, and memories of distant ways of life are all imbued in and reflected by domestic architecture. These house-bound memories are accessed both through the houses’ materiality and how houses are imagined in the intangibilities of memory (Davidson 2009: 334).

In this sense, access is made possible for us as viewers and listeners through the dialogical space that the siblings create with their conscious memory and curative work, and they include the architecture, as a ‘speaking storage medium’ for the different levels of personal, family and social memory, just as naturally as the family’s photo albums as well as film footage, video and sound recordings are included. It is interesting to ponder about the moments and images from a family

life rich in memories within their apartment in this 'Lovely Villa' that were chosen for this documentary film, which at just over 30 minutes is quite short and yet very dense and layered.

First, the relationship of the siblings to their deceased father, his ghostly presence in the apartment after his death, as well as the implied occasional irritations and ambivalent feelings caused by his seemingly eccentric personality.

Second, growing up as children and adolescents in the process of finding their own personal, also gender and sexual, identities in the midst of a period of upheaval in post-Independence society, which extended from the Nehru era through the period of the state of emergency (1975–77) and into the transitional period of the 1980s (Rajagopal 2011), finally culminating in the economic liberalization and rise of identity-based politics.

> Those were the times of Russian ballet dancers and evil Americans. Of the trickling images of elsewhere worlds. Of lines at ration shops. Of repression and the dream of freedom. Of evenings on the stoops of buildings. Of adolescence and innocence (06:18 min).
>
> [18:34 min] There we were, trying to be men. Our frontier to the south was the railway station that we sometimes walked barefoot to. (…) [19:36 min] On most evenings, we would walk to the edge of the city with the thick stench of the creek and the dank green of the mangroves (…) [19:49 min] My arm around his shoulders, friends and lovers.

And finally, the sound archive, which in the words of the sister, Sonal Sundararajan, has also inscribed itself in the memory of the house / home when she says (23:35 min): "These walls have collected songs as residue. Songs off-key, off beat. Lyrics mangled beyond comprehension". Music and singing took place in the context of family gatherings and one of the terraces of the house had been specially converted into a music room. Classical Indian music and Hindi film songs were as much a part of the family's sound archive and repertoire as the stars of global pop music at the time (Michael Jackson, Madonna, A-ha, among others), as the many posters on the walls of the young people's rooms suggest. The whistling and the sound of the father's voice, still so present, whose words were not always accessible or understandable for his children, are also part of this sound memory. His death left the survivors with a palpable feeling of emptiness and 'unhomeliness' inside their home: "Alone, I felt his ghost rise and speak to me" (24:35 min).

Reflecting on ghosts, Tonya Davidson writes: "Ghosts offer up and make available pasts to be reconciled with, and in their communicative insistence, ghosts demand remembrance. They draw us affectively and mysteriously in relation with other

times and people" (Davidson 2009: 334). Hence, they compel us to remember, but they also "produce the places" to which they belong (ibid.: 335).[50]

In addition to the late father of the director Rohan Shivkumar and his sister Sonal Sundararajan, this place-bound, spirit-like "communicative insistence", as Davidson calls it, and desire to be remembered can of course also be related to the architect Charles Correa as well as to the planning perspective of a post-colonial state. As Rahul Mehrotra describes, the period from the 1950s through to the 1970s was characterized by the idea that architects could shape the form not only of the physical environment but also social life: "Modernists' ideas, and the optimism of reconstructing society through the re-orchestration of the built environment pervaded the debate in India" (Mehrotra 2011: 30). While the sphere of the architect in India has shrunk significantly since the 1980s, and in particular since the 1990s, the first three decades after Independence were marked by a considerable expansion, through the building of both physical and social infrastructure (ibid.). The state's ideas of a social order and way of life for its 'ideal citizens' are expressed in an exemplary manner in the housing architecture and vision of living together in the LIC Colony, and through this architecture, it also shapes the lives and feelings of its inhabitants. Therefore, by necessity, the filmic method of domestic ethnography and visual (auto)biography not only centers on the family members but has to be expanded to the architecture itself.

50 As the article titled "How To Live with a Ghost", by Anna Kodé, published on Oct 26, 2022 in *The New York Times* mentions, a recent study "from the Utah-based home security company Vivint found that nearly half of the thousand surveyed homeowners believed that their house was haunted. Another survey of 1,000 people by Real Estate Witch, an education platform for home buyers and sellers, found similar results, with 44 percent of respondents saying that they've lived in a haunted house. (…) With so many people believing that they live with ghosts, a new question arises: How *does* one live with ghosts?" Interestingly, however, and perhaps in stark contrasts to what many stories and films may suggest, the article quotes persons who don't experience cohabiting with a spirit as a fearful experience but seem to enjoy it or, "at least have learned how to live with it", just as they would need to learn to "coexist harmoniously" with roommates. Online available at https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/26/realestate/haunted-house-paranormal-ghosts.html (last access Jan 3, 2024).

# 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 Hoskoté 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* *house*
*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.

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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-plan*[55]

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

*agrarian*
*rural* *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.

'pucca' houses now increasingly turns to building with bricks, for which more and more clay is removed. As a result, geological conditions in rural areas are changing profoundly and, in many areas, "the once fertile land has now become unproductive" (14:13 min). Intervention is urgently needed against this and also with regard to the building materials which need to be much more diversified.

## 6.5 URBAN

*industrial cities*
*urban* *modern*
*density*
*suburbs*
*slums*

*As per the 2011 Census a total of 137 lakh households live in 1.08 lakh* ***notified, recognized and identified slums*** *across India.*

This episode emphatically criticizes the continuous neglect of paying attention to who the people arriving in cities are, what their needs are, and where they can live, or of the fact that their place of residence is tied to the availability and accessibility of affordable transportation to their work – a problem which was already addressed in the mid-1970s by Charles Correa and others (see chapter 2).

As shown in chapter 2 on the basis of three exemplary Films Division's films from 1954, 1972 and 1982, the state's view is largely focused on the construction of fortified housing and on the elimination of unplanned informal settlements from the urban landscape, and therefore also strongly influenced by globally circulating ideas of mass housing as a suitable solution in the post-World War II era – or, in Rahul Mehrotra's words, the idea of an 'absolute' or 'permanent' solution. However, as Sheela Patel, founder director of the Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC), an NGO which supports community organizations of the urban poor in their efforts to access secure housing as well as basic amenities, points out, at least a basic infrastructure and supply of water and sanitation should be provided by the state in order to significantly improve the quality of life of the residents (19:29 min).

## 6.6 GENDER

*equality*
*gender* *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

*state*
*delivery* *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 activisms 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

*incremental*
*self-help* *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 or 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

*livelihood*
*adequacy* *community*
*Accessibility*
*Services*
*performance*

*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.

# 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*.[57] 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

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).[58]

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

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.[59]

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.[60]

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

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.[61]

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”.[62] 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.[63]

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.[64] Intentionally or unintentionally, both

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.[65] Nevertheless, it would certainly fall

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/f4c6e600.79b3dcdc.

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. Giaracuni’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).[66]

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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, Giaracuni 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.stadtkinobasel.ch/galerie/0/steffi_giaracuni/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 (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 cosmolocalism.[67]

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, cosmolocalism 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 *cosmolocal* 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).

# 8 Architectural Imagination in the Two Documentaries *Kanade* (2021) and *Building Visions* (2022)

As more and more critical architects in India have realized the limitations of solving housing problems through the design of buildings alone, they began to focus more on aspects such as the (re)distribution resources and the provision of better employment opportunities for future residents. Some of them also dedicated a lot of their time to extensive research and experimentation in low-cost and low-technology solutions, two key aspects of the critical regionalist approach to architecture and housing design. This chapter introduces two films that give us valuable insights into the intensive engagement of architects with local building materials and the knowledge associated with these. Both films and the three architects in focus – the two brothers Shankar and Navnath Kanade in the film *Kanade* (2021) and Anupama Kundoo in the documentary *Building Visions* (2022), show us how the protagonists expand the architectural imagination by linking their research on local building materials, techniques and knowledge to contemporary designs and building methods. By doing so, they also invite us to question binary opposites like 'modern vs. traditional / vernacular', a dichotomy which is generally dissolved by genuine approaches to critical regionalism in housing.

## 8.1 Housing as Dwelling: *Kanade – A Documentary about the Architects Shankar Kanade and Navnath Kanade* (Teepoi, 2021)

> *Yes, this is our house. As soon as the sun sets, a space that draws me back in – that's the kind of home I want, that's what I had told Navnath and Shankar. That's not in the walls alone or just the windows, not in a ventilator, but wholly captivates me as a dwelling. That is what poetry evokes too. Reading a sentence by itself is futile, or even a stanza alone, but on reading it as a whole, there is curiosity experienced – that experience is poetry (Kanade 30:27–30:59).*

This is how the actor, playwright and English professor Lohithaswa T.S., who passed away in November 2022, expresses his intimate relationship with the residential building that the two architect-brothers Shankar and Navnath Kanade designed and realized for – and together with him. He is one of the central figures who share their experiences in detail in the documentary film *Kanade* made by the film collective Teepoi from Bengaluru (2021) and who describe both their special relationship to the two brothers and to their unique architecture.

A particular focus of Teepoi's work is on the architectural documentary film, which they use specifically as a non-commercial medium for disseminating knowledge and discourse about architecture in India. As they describe on their excellently designed website, Teepoi's co-participants came into contact with the architecture of the two brothers Shankar and Navnath Kanade rather by chance in 2012, when they were looking for a suitable location for a short fiction film and happened to find a residential unit within an unconventional housing complex, which seemed puzzling and seamless to them. This place was Keremane, built in 1995, a coherent group of independent row houses bordering a lake *(kere)* which exhibits some of the distinctive features of the architecture of the two Kanade brothers through which, according to Teepoi, "the Modern movement in Bangalore city" can be explained: "This was not just a phase but a combination of the right set of people, present at the right, at the right time. Sufficient within its context – with nothing left to add or remove."[68] Although they were rooted in the Modern movement, "the Kanade brothers allowed their work and lifestyle to be guided by the environment around them" (ibid.).

A key feature of this formative influence on their work is the use of locally available building materials, such as *chapadi* (granite stone), which was still abundant in Bengaluru at the time. Wherever possible, they tried to avoid concrete and use materials instead that were commonly available and accessible. Inner courtyards within the units are also characteristic of the Kanade brothers' style. They

68 See https://www.teepoi.com/kanadefilm (last access Jan 3, 2024).


**Fig. 7.** Karishma Rao and Vishwesh Shiva Prasad from Teepoi during a film screening event at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in May 2023. Source: photograph by author, 2023.

facilitated cooling and ventilation of the buildings. Cooler air can enter through the windows built deeper into the walls, while warmer air can exit through the openings in the roof. This allows continuous ventilation of all rooms and floors in the house, which are open and interconnected. As the well-known architect Sanjay Mohe, who has known the two Kanade brothers very long and well, mentions in the film, he asked Shankar and Navnath Kanade many times if they did not consider it a certain limitation to always use the same materials (39:27 min), "but they just believe in that and it has to be local and if it has to be brought from somewhere they would say no, we would rather use something local" (39:37 min). As one resident (31:50 min) in Keremane, (late) Ms. Sumithra, mentions in the film, she was often asked why the red bricks were visible and the walls of her apartment were not plastered, which apparently not all visitors liked. "These bricks being visible and very little plastering, I liked that a lot" (33:31 min), she points out, and adds that this aspect, as well as the fact that it was a "low-cost house" for which the family paid no more than 5 lakh rupees at the time (about 5700 EUR) (33:48 min). Contrary to the widespread belief that an architect unnecessarily increases the cost of building a house, she therefore advises that an architect should always be consulted for any building project.

The film portrait takes us very close to Shankar Kanade's simple life and the central role of architecture in it. For Shankar in particular, everything revolved around architecture throughout his life, so that architecture literally shaped a way of life for him. Born in Nagaj in the federal state of Maharashtra (Shankar in 1937, Navnath Kanade in 1944), the two brothers grew up in deprived circumstances, and the period of Shankar's architectural studies at the Sir JJ School of Art (Architecture Department) in Bombay was also marked by a precarious situation. In the late 1970s, Shankar Kanade set up his first architectural practice in Bengaluru, where his younger brother Navnath followed him after having spent several years in the United States. During this time, Navnath collaborated with Italian architect Paolo Soleri, who coined the term arcology (composed of architecture and ecology). Although they created a number of striking buildings together (in addition to Keremane, Jal Vayu Vihar, completed in 1991, is also presented in the film, as are several other earlier and later works by the two architect-brothers), it becomes clear, especially through the interview statements of Sanjay Mohe, that the Kanade brothers have not received the recognition, either in terms of the number of their commissions or attention, that they would have deserved due to their outstanding work and abilities. Interestingly, in Mohe's view, this would also have made a significant difference to the city of Bengaluru itself and to the city community. What prevented this recognition is a question that is not clearly answered by the film, but which may preoccupy viewers beyond it.

As becomes once again very clear at this point in the film *Kanade* (39:38 min), the architectural documentary film can therefore play an important role in the preservation and communication of knowledge about architecture and architects. Furthermore, the Kanade brothers now also receive more public recognition for their important contribution as educators through the documentary as well as the accompanying information materials provided on the Teepoi website:

> The role of Shankar and Navnath Kanade as teachers has had its effect on generations of students who now practice with the wisdom imparted by them. Students benefited most from them while in the impressionable age as first and second years, unlearning years of textbook knowledge. Beyond that even architectural institutions expect less exploratory, and more presentation driven outputs from students, which they could not connect with.[69]

We also gain a valuable insight into the forms of professional networking, sociability and knowledge sharing among architects in Bengaluru at the time, in this

69 See https://www.teepoi.com/kanadefilm (last access Jan 3, 2024).

case, in the form of the BASE group. According to Teepoi, BASE stands for "Beer and Slides Evening" and it is therefore perhaps no coincidence that the special sonic and visual pleasure that comes with the projection of slides also plays a role in the film *Kanade*. As can be read on the Teepoi website, the BASE group of young architects met every week on Tuesdays in one of the participants' homes or offices. They showed each other slides of their current projects or recent trips and discussed them together. Among the guests regularly invited to the BASE group meetings were also well-known persons such as Charles Correa, MF Hussain and BV Doshi. Together with Doshi, the group also visited the construction site of the Indian Institute of Management in Bengaluru, which he had co-designed.

> There was mutual respect for each one's work and a spirit of sharing. Apart from working on competition projects together, one would seek the expertise of another in executing live projects – a scenario that is hard to imagine today (ibid.).

Through the visual archive, however, not only the memory of their architecture and interesting way of life is preserved and now becomes more publicly visible than before. With a view to Arjun Appadurai's critical reflections on a "repertory of unbuilt possibilities" (Appadurai 2012: 330), Sanjay Mohe's statement regarding the important difference that the Kanade's architecture for the city of Bangalore / Bengaluru itself, as well as for its inhabitants, would have made, had they been given the opportunity to develop on a larger scale, raises exactly the question, to what extent such an archive can also provide "deeper resources for the future of the local, the regional, the national, and all those other addresses in which we actually live and wish to imagine our futures," as Appadurai puts it:

> But there is a wonderful critical potential in the future of architecture in places like India. That future does not lie in the tomorrow of elsewhere (like Shanghai, in some fantasies for Mumbai) or in the floating terrain of international brand architecture whose main purpose is to sell an accidental group of architects, but it might lie in a systematic effort to struggle against the grain of that amnesia that I have argued is the very basis for the work of building, and thus of architecture itself. But if the critical spirit of architects, of critics, and informed citizens could be alerted to the histories of the unbuilt, we might find deeper resources for the future of the local, the regional, the national, and all those other addresses in which we actually live and wish to imagine our futures (Appadurai 2012: 331).

## 8.2 Architecture as a 'Synthetic Profession': Anupama Kundoo and Her Experiments with Low-Tech Building Materials

*My work begins with and remains close to the deep human need to have purpose, refuge, and social engagement. It speaks through details; details that foster intimacy and variety, sensory and spatial. My work is about the innovation and socio-economic abundance that results from research and investment in materials and building techniques. The act of building produces knowledge just as much as the resulting knowledge produces buildings* (Anupama Kundoo).[70]

Anupama Kundoo is another particularly interesting architect and designer who is known for her longstanding engagement with locally available building materials and practices. After her graduation and first professional experience as a young architect in Bombay, she made the courageous decision at the age of 23 to stop being pressured for commissions and a regular income and instead take the time to develop and deepen her own understanding of architecture and design, especially through the careful observation and study of local building techniques and materials. The place she chose to do so in 1990 was Auroville, a planned city experiment in South India. Auroville was founded by Mirra Alfassa and inaugurated in 1968, with support of the United Nations and in the presence of 5000 people. Youth from more than 120 nations were present at the inauguration ceremony. Today, around 3,300 people from close to 60 nations live in this international city which continues to sustain itself. From the start, Auroville has provided a conducive environment for eco-experimentation, starting from the transformation of once-desert land into forest and solar panels powering much of the town to organic farming and sustainable construction. It has also been a hub for architectural experimentation throughout and therefore attracted a number of committed architects, designers and urban planners too. Anupama Kundoo had visited Auroville only once before and returned in 1990 to stay for many years and create several of her buildings. For the houses she built there, Kundoo experimented with different materials and building techniques.

Her first house there was called Hut Petite Ferme and at that time, she experimented with several materials including granite, clay and coconut fibre. The second house that Anupama Kundoo built for herself became a prototype for many of her subsequent projects. Working with local craftsmen, she opted to use

70 I found this quote on Anupama Kundoo's website (https://anupamakundoo.com/) which is no longer active. However, the quote is still 'preserved' on many other websites, especially of institutes where Anupama Kundoo gave presentations in recent years.

preindustrial *(achikal)* mud bricks, which are less energy-intensive to produce than factory bricks. She also developed vaulted terracotta roofing systems, to make use of the skills of Auroville's potters. Other widerly recognized works by Anupama Kundoo include the Voluntariat Homes for Homeless Children (Pondicherry, 2008). These dome-shaped housing units were designed by Kundoo to accommodate children from challenged backgrounds; images can be easily found on the internet. Here, she explored an innovative form of construction that is both low-cost and environmentally friendly. The structures are built from mud bricks made on site, which are then fired *in-situ* to make them more durable and water resistant. For her Full Fill Homes (Chennai, 2015), Kundoo uses ferrocement – a low-tech form of reinforced concrete – to create the modules of these affordable housing units. The box-shaped modules can be assembled in a matter of days and incorporate niches that become highly functional for storage. Anupama Kundoo describes her perspective on architecture and design in the above-mentioned video interview "More Common Than Different" (filmed in her studio in Berlin in 2020) as a "synthetic profession" that needs to integrate all kinds of concerns – ecological, economic as well as social.

## 8.3 *Building Visions – Auroville, India* (Diego Breit Lira, 2022)

Diego Breit Lira's documentary *Building Visions – Auroville, India* (2022) introduces Auroville as an 'oasis' compared to cities like Mumbai or Delhi. The film also showcases the place as an experimental laboratory and model for other cities (16:33 min) that attracts dedicated architects from all over the world. The film lays a particular focus on Anupama Kundoo's research into alternative building materials such as the aforementioned production of *achikal* bricks, which are produced and fired locally, and the roofs made from round terracotta vessels, but also her experiments with ferrocement, which is characterized by its simple production method and the lowest possible steel consumption.

The kilns are made of the same material they are supposed to burn (11:54 min). The *achikal* bricks inside the kiln end up being harder and stronger than the outer ones, but, as the narrative voice informs us, "they are all used". Used skillfully, the stronger bricks later support the weak ones. When all the bricks have been fired and removed, the kiln also disappears and a field is all that is left behind (12:29 min). We also learn that *achikal* bricks are thinner and lighter than normal bricks and therefore require less energy to produce (07:10 min).

The terracotta roof – made by potters from the region – does not need additional supports made of wood or steel. In the film, Kundoo explains that when she first came to Auroville, nobody wanted to buy the pots made by the potters. At that time, she says, it was not important to retain the pot as such, but the craft

itself, as it should not disappear: "It took centuries and generations to develop these skills" (07:44 min). She also mentions that she "didn't plan to become a material researcher" (7:57 min), but that she was dissatisfied with the quality of the building materials she had been provided with, so she began to look into it more deeply.[71] Kundoo also noticed that the existence of these potters was threatened by the ongoing urbanization. She wanted to find a way to use their work and incorporate it into architecture, as urbanization should not threaten the existence of the potters but secure it in her view (09:50 min). Even though she does not refer to it explicitly, Kundoo's own words are entirely in the spirit of critical regionalism when she says: "While the emerging space is contemporary in its architecture, the materials and production are locally rooted. This gives the architecture a traditional ('vernacular') character" (10:17 min). At the same time, Kundoo emphasizes that renewable raw materials such as earth, bamboo or clay are not available in unlimited quantities everywhere (18:21 min). And not everyone has the privilege of doing without steel and cement, even if they are harmful to the climate. Therefore, she is looking for ways to use these materials much more sparingly:

> Due to the construction boom in India, steel and cement are scarce and have a high monetary and environmental price. There needs to be a judicious use and more even distribution of these materials. Used intelligently, I believe in ferrocement as the material of the future. Ferrocement is cheap and has hardly any weight, yet it is a pretty strong material. It takes only a few raw materials to make it and ferrocement can be made into almost any shape, which makes it very versatile as a building material (20:21 min).

As the film goes on to show, with some basic skills, anyone can build something and Anupama Kundoo wants to encourage people to create homes themselves. Therefore, the Full Fill Home can be seen as a prototype: they consist entirely of ferrocement and the elements can be arranged in completely different ways. An individual building consists of thin modules that can be carried by a maximum of four people. Most importantly, anyone can create their own living space with the simplest of tools. They provide temporary, not necessarily permanent solutions wherever housing is urgently needed.[72]

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71 It should be mentioned in this context that her interest in material research also led her to her PhD research at Technische Universität Berlin. Drawing on Ray Meeker's Experiments, Anupama Kundoo provides a detailed study of baked *in situ* mud houses of India in her PhD thesis which she submitted at TU Berlin in 2008. The dissertation is available online at https://d-nb.info/990560554/34 (last access Jan 3, 2024).

72 Photos of the prototype can be easily found on the internet.

In a lecture titled "Architecture in Context. Design Challenges in Contemporary India" (2019),[73] Rahul Mehrotra uses the distinction between "Absolute vs. Transition" (27:12 min) to explain how architects need to challenge the rhetoric of "universalizing solutions" as well as the prevailing idea of "permanent housing" which is currently supported by the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, a programme introduced by the Indian government in 2015 to provide affordable housing to all citizens by the end of 2022.[74] According to Mehrotra, however, "absolute solutions" represent the desire to create a coherent urban form and to control its aesthetics, but the focus should be on the temporary and temporal. Similar to Kundoo's considerations, he therefore argues that instead of building more empty houses on cheap land where people are cut off from their livelihoods, land with services should be made available where people can build their own houses and also allow for phased development.

73 The lecture can be viewed online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsNpJp4DKTw (last access Jan 3, 2024).

74 In 2015, the Indian government introduced the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) to provide affordable housing to all citizens by 2022. Through this credit linked subsidy scheme (CLSS), the government aimed to provide its beneficiaries an interest subsidy to avail loans to purchase or build a house. The scheme was launched to aid the middle-income community, economically weaker sections (EWS) and low-income groups (LIG). Depending on the areas it serves, the scheme is divided into two sections, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Rural) (see https://pmay-urban.gov.in/, last access Jan 3, 2024).

# 9 Architectural Storytelling as a Knowledge Sharing Practice: *Bharat Minar – The Tower of a Forgotten India* (2019)

On the 7th and 8th of August 2023, the India International Centre in Delhi screened both parts of a 2017 documentary film titled *Indian Modernity – The Architecture of Raj Rewal*, directed by Raj Rewal's son Manu Rewal, who was also present at the film screening. The timing was certainly deliberate and understood accordingly by the audience, as can be seen from a comment by facebook user Le Corbusier in India: "Sad to see the Hall of Nations in the week that 'Bharat Mandapam' was inaugurated by priests and havans."[75] Bharat Mandapam is the newly built venue for the International Exhibition-cum-Convention Centre (IECC) at Pragati Maidan in Delhi. It was celebrated with great media effort by the current government as a new 'architectural marvel' and served to stage the self-confidence of a 'new India' for global media audiences on the occasion of a centrally planned media event: the G 20 Summit which took place in Delhi in September 2023.

Architects not only criticize the new IECC complex, but they also pose the question how the Indian state and current government actually view the role of architects in this special year of 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' – the 75th anniversary of India's independence. The architect Kavas Kapadia puts this as follows:

> The Government views the status of the profession as a commodity that must fit into the political calendar. If Norman Foster is to be believed, then 'architecture is an expression of values.' And what is the new complex expressing?[76]

75 See https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2546147658887947&set=a.114387548730649&locale=de_DE (last access Jan 3, 2024). *Havan* is a fire ritual performed by a Hindu priest on special occasions, usually for the homeowner. Videos of PM Modi's participation in the ritual can be found online.

76 Kavas Kapadia (2023): "Yesterday has arrived: The unveiling of Bharat Mandapam at Pragati Maidan". *Architecture Live*, Aug 5. The article is available online https://architecture.live/bharat-madapam-pragati-maidan-kavas-kapadia/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

In his article, Kavas also points to a particular form of bureaucratic and patronizing attitude towards architects as well as architectural educational institutions. In his view, architecture as a profession has been taken for granted for far too long in India and the fact that it still isn't getting its deserved recognition, "even after 70 years of independence is due to a lot of reasons, but especially in a society where the official recognition is subject to the bureaucratic whims and fancies of those who know it all, it has been harmful" (ibid.).[77]

At the same site where the newly built Bharat Mandapam and International Exhibition-cum-Convention Centre are located (Pragati Maidan), the architecturally significant Hall of Nations was destroyed in 2016. This iconic building, which was designed by architect Raj Rewal and structural engineer Mahendra Raj in the beginning of the 1970s, and everything it symbolically stood for, had to make way for the new complex. In the words of Mustansir Dalvi, the 1972 Hall of Nations was a "culmination of the Nehruvian era in Indian infrastructure building" and for decades had been an important symbol of "what we could achieve on our own in India" (Dalvi 2017).[78] As the largest continuous exhibition hall in India, the iconic structure has been closely associated with major recurring exhibition events such as the International Trade Fair, Auto Expo and the World Book Fair, which has also given it a very special place in popular imagination, as Dalvi also points out (ibid.).

## 9.1 *Bharat Minar – The Tower of a Forgotten India* (2019)

Uday Berry's nearly eleven-minute animated short film won in the category Best Fiction Short at the 2021 Architectural Film Festival in London. The director is a trained architect and graduated from the Bartlett School of Architecture (UCL) in

77 "When the architecture juries, selection committees, even design committees, and academic and executive committees in the schools of architecture are headed and scrutinised by bureaucrats, it begins to show. They tell us what is 'world-class' and what is the next big project. Good is confused with big. The biggest statue in the world, the biggest stadium in the world, and the promise of bigger things to come with zero intervention of specialists and experts" (Kapadia 2023).

78 "That the halls were designed and analysed using computers, but drawn and detailed by hand, and constructed largely with manual labour, is a testimony to the Make in India spirit of that time, which extended the legacy of Nehruvian progress into the seventies. Exhibition venues in the latter half of the 20th century were the great showcases of innovative architecture, just as the new museums are today. In the annals of modern architecture this building was singular, much in the spirit of the Eiffel Tower (1887) or the Atomium in Brussels (1956)" (ibid.).

2019, where he was part of a project group (PG24) of architectural storytellers, led by Penelope Haralambidou and Michael Tite, which uses "film, animation, VR AR and physical modelling techniques to explore architecture's relationship with time" (Haralambidou & Tite 2023: 474). As the synopsis states, Berry's film explores

> (t)he politics behind architectural heritage, conservation and the state's role as a custodian of culture, 'The Tower of a Forgotten India' follows the story of The Architect, a man desperately trying to save the nation's past. A narrative of passion and madness unfolds within the Tower, a megastructure that reinvigorates forgotten buildings and fragments, reintegrating them into the city's urban fabric. In India today threats to the country's heritage come from every direction, including religious fundamentalism, thoughtless modernisation, the culture of collectability and political corruption – themes that this film closely examines. 'The Tower of a Forgotten India' is a modern parable spanning decades, suggesting that control of a city's past is ultimately a fool's paradise.[79]

This description leaves open exactly which past epoch, conception of the past, understanding of historical time and the architectural heritage belonging to it, are specifically referred to in this fictional film. In the very first scenes of *Bharat Minar*, two different levels of time and architecture are juxtaposed in an interesting way and visually linked accordingly: in minute 0:34 min, we see Muslim men praying in front of a mosque that strongly resembles the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi and we are informed that the scene takes place in the year 2000. Above and on the left side of the mosque are construction cranes and a building which is still under construction. It is introduced to us as the titular Tower/*Bharat Minar*.

At the moment when the first-person narrator begins to tell his story, we do not know yet that he is the white-haired and visibly agitated man in handcuffs awaiting interrogation by a police officer at the Old Delhi Police Station. As we learn from him, the architecturally extremely interesting and light-as-air tower was built at the time to provide a home for "threatened heritage" and for the "layers of history that the nation had simply forgotten" (0:44 min).

Less than a minute later, the film narrative jumps to the year 2016 and we see that the construction of the Tower is still not complete. At first, it seems that the first-person narrator might be referring to this tower when he speaks of a connection to "this building" that goes back to early childhood. But as the next scene reveals, he is actually referring to the Hall of Nations at the Pragati Maidan complex in Delhi, and the film immediately makes another leap in time back to 1983.

79 See https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/architecture/news/2021/may/bartlett-alumni-shortlisted-architectural-film-festival (last access Jan 3, 2024).

Exactly this feeling of a long-standing personal connection is conveyed by the very short sequences from the film's flashback to the year 1983, apparently the childhood years of the first-person narrator, in which we see families visiting the Hindustan Aeronautics Expo in the Hall of Nations and an altogether bustling trade fair scene open to visitors in beautiful weather. However, the dynamic and at the same time acoustically cheerful scene is suddenly overturned and we now experience in a kind of 'live simulation' how the Hall of Nations is being razed to the ground in 2016, under darkened skies and rain. The narrator describes this destruction of the building as a "crime" and then explains that his team had the task of dismantling the remaining individual parts of the outer façade and then transporting them on trucks to the Tower at night.

We now also learn that as a young architect working in an architect's studio in the middle of the titular Tower, the first-person narrator was entrusted with the task of preserving the remains of the Hall of Nations. In an interesting overlap of model and 'reality', from minute 03:30, we leap into the year 2020 of the film's plot and see a hand – the architect's hand? – carefully removing a miniature replica of the Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts from the Tower, another significant building from the same period as the Hall of Nations (1968–72), which the same structural engineer Mahendra Raj had realized – this time in a "pas de deux" with the architect Shiv Nath Prasad.[80] In its place, the reconstructed/restored Hall of Nations is carefully inserted into the Tower. As viewers, we now understand that Uday Berry's film addresses primarily the 'recent' past and the question of what significance is attached to the architectural heritage of this period for post-colonial Indian history as well as the process of identity building.

As the destruction of the Hall of Nations is already classified as a "crime" by the architect and first-person narrator at the very beginning of Uday Berry's film, *Bharat Minar* takes a clear position in the debate on the preservation of modernist architecture as heritage. In no way does it follow the view of the Delhi High Court, which, in response to an urgent appeal for the preservation of the iconic building stated that buildings younger than sixty years could not be given the status of

80 Martino Stierli describes the close collaboration between architects and structural engineers, which was necessary for the formal resolution of the Hall of Nations and "many of India's concrete buildings during these decades" (Stierli 2022: 17), as a pas de deux. Mahendra Raj also worked with other well-known architects, such as B.V. Doshi and Charles Correa, among others. This collaboration resulted in other famous buildings that Stierli calls "the most iconic structures of post-Independence modern architecture in India" (ibid.). Martino Stierli (2022). "The Politics of Concrete: Industry, Craft, and Labor in the Modern Architecture of South Asia." Martino Stierli, Anoma Pieris & Sean Anderson (eds.) *The Project of Independence: Architectures of Decolonization in South Asia, 1947–1985.* New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

architectural or cultural heritage (Dalvi 2017). A very paradoxical explanation indeed, because we talk about 'contemporary history' and a 'recent past' with a view to the post-WWII and first phase of decolonization, which exerted a strong influence on the social and political orders of the post-war era that emerged from it.

> Thus, every possible contemporary Indian construct from living memory, even a monument of national importance, let alone a structure acclaimed worldwide by peers in the architectural and civil engineering fraternity, has potentially been condemned to dust. Within hours of the ruling, in the dead of a Sunday night, the India Trade Promotion Organisation, which is part of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, brought the structure down (…). The loss of the Hall of Nations will always be deeply felt as it marked, when it was built, a point in the history of modernity in our nation state (Dalvi 2017).

Back to the film plot in Uday Berry's film *Bharat Minar*. The memory and report of the imprisoned architect is now focused on the rise to power of a political leader in 2020, by which the secular ideals of society are being destroyed, while the new leader is in the process of building his "Hindu nation". We see this politician entering the Tower with much pomp and being cheered by an exclusively male and highly emotionally charged audience.

He begins to agitate against the Tower, or rather, against the work of the architects in restoring the remains of the Hall of Nations, and thereby preserving a collective memory of the architectural heritage from the 'recent past' of independent India. All this is now, in the fictitious year 2020 of the film, being branded as 'un-Indian' by the Hindu nationalist party and its supporters.

Next, the salvaged fragments of the destroyed buildings are covered and sealed, and the architectural office itself is also closed by the authorities, to the horror and despite resistance of the employees. The narrating architect recounts how he tried in vain to stop the imminent destruction of the Tower *(Bharat Minar)* through public debate.

In minute 05:42, we look over the shoulder of a male newspaper reader at an edition of the English-language daily newspaper *The Times of India*, dated 27 May 2024, another twenty years later. The headline of the front page story reads "V&A Acquires Bharat Minar Fragment", from which we learn that as a result of an agitation against the tower over many years to preserve the architectural heritage of the 'concrete era', which stood for a different ideal and an inclusive identity of post-independent Indian society, it did in fact end up being destroyed. The irony of preserving the remains in one of the most important museums in the capital of the former colonial power, Great Britain, is remarkable. But as we learn next, all this only further incited the fierce rejection of the Tower by the ruling party and its supporters.

Only pausing on the computer allows the viewer a closer look at the actual content of the *Times of India* cover story depicted in this scene, which might be

rather difficult to grasp during a live screening of the film *Bharat Minar*: what the article projected into the future actually describes is the 2016 destruction of the Hall of Nations.

From minute six, in which we see an angry crowd of Hindu nationalist activists storming and destroying the Tower, another interesting conflation of different temporal levels and layers of Indian architecture and of the mediatized memory of its destruction takes place. For what the scene could indeed remind us of visually are the widely circulated photographs showing triumphant gestures of Hindu nationalist activists after the storming and destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on 06 December 1992. For the architect, this critical event marks a dramatic turning point and the destruction of the buildings to him symbolizes the collapse of what he saw as the foundations of the independent Indian nation. We see him running barefoot and bare-chested through a street in nightmarish visions, while buildings from different eras shatter in the background. For him, there is only one politically responsible person, and he seeks retribution. In the end, he makes his decision and carries out the deadly assassination of the Hindu nationalist politician. At the end of Uday Berry's fictional short film, we return to the beginning and starting point of the architect's narrative and understand that it was his account in the context of the interrogation by the police officer at the Old Delhi Police Station. The architect does not hope for understanding for his deed and nevertheless ends his account from minute 09:20 onwards with an appeal to his audience, or an imagined public, which he nevertheless assumes still has the capacity for critical reflection and discussion when he says:

> As Delhi is reconstructed in the state's vision of world class, our heritage is forgone to make way for a new nation. Contemporary India is once again forced to ask the question what does it mean to be Indian (the original Hindi version uses "*asli hindustani*", original Indian/Hindustani in this sentence)?

In his film *Bharat Minar – The Tower of a Forgotten India*, Uday Berry uses the exciting possibilities of architectural storytelling in his chosen format of animated fictional short film to reflect on these complex questions and links them to different conceptions of historical time. In a certain way, his film also 'plays' with the different notions and levels of time and memory which, in view of the jumps between different decades as well as the creative placing of (historical) events in the past, present or future, can also cause confusion and is possibly intended to do so. To what extent the architect's assassination of the Hindu nationalist politician seems remotely plausible or if the film would have managed to convey its important very well without it, is another question. Nevertheless, the narrative construction and fascinating artistic realization shows the potential of visual architectural storytelling as an emerging form which will hopefully continue to thrive in the coming years and gain more interest, both within and beyond academia.

# 10 The Future of Housing? Architects Designing for Multispecies Cohabitation

> *Can we also think of human relationships as interspecies relationships (beyond the familiar concepts of ecological diversity) – as a condition without which humans ultimately cannot exist? (…) The idea that even humans could only emerge in interspecies relations, in each case in most different interactive and cooperative forms with other species, would be an approach to think a new politics and subjectivation beyond neoliberal individualism* (Marion von Osten, "Taubentürme und Trampelpfade" ("Pigeon Towers and Trampling Trails"), 2022; translated from the German original).

The cultural scientist and artist Marion von Osten initiated the exhibition project *Cohabitation* and she developed the concept with the project team before she passed away in November 2020 (the exhibition took place in Berlin in 2022). Among many other interesting activities, the exhibition also resulted in an issue of the magazine *Arch+ für Architektur und Urbanismus*, in which von Osten's essay "Taubentürme und Trampelpfade (pigeon towers and trampling trails)," originally published in 2020, is also reprinted. An initial consideration for the project *Cohabitation* was the fact that architecture and urban planning have so far paid little attention to non-human species or perceived them primarily as obstacles to construction projects. In the exhibition, artistic approaches were attributed a central mediating role that can provide new models for thought as well as designs for the future of our cities. New terms, such as Animal Aided Design (AAD), show that this perspective has in the meantime received more acceptance.[81]

81 See, for instance, the publication *Animal-Aided Design in the Living Environment. Integrating the needs of animal species into the planning and design of urban open spaces* (German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, 2022) Available online at https://www.bfn.de/sites/default/files/2022-03/AAD_Brosch_Eng_Web_bf.pdf (last access Jan 3, 2024).

The question of cohabitation also pointed the way for the 17th Biennale Architettura in Venice which ran from May to November 2021 under the title question "How will we live together?". The international exhibition was curated by architect and scholar Hashim Sarkis who is convinced that we need "a new spatial contract. In the context of widening political divides and growing economic inequalities", he called on architects to "imagine spaces in which we can generously live together".[82] The idea of *generously living together* can of course refer to many different dimensions and ways of life (see Schneider 2022). It may also be understood as an invitation to rethink the question of shared habitats and how we as humans coexist with other species, or how we might even create the basis for new forms of cross-species socialities – inside as well as outside our dwellings.

Online and in many magazines pictures of Anupama Kundoo's famous second house, which she built for herself in Auroville, can be found (see Chapter 8 on this planned city experiment in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu) Although an interspecies design of the house actively enabled it,[83] the extent to which all kinds of animals felt invited to fly through the house, fitted into it or "colonized" the area around it, as Kundoo puts it, surprised her nevertheless. However, the most astonishing experience she made during that period was that her house was in fact so open and *generous* that even the neighbor's horse felt free to just enter her house and visit her and her paralyzed mother every day, as Kundoo mentioned in her talk in Berlin in 2018.

Anupama Kundoo's house seems like a perfect illustration of philosopher Emanuele Coccia's idea that building a home is not necessarily a way to start a family or bring relatives together. Rather, it may be a deliberately chosen method to rid ourselves of our fixed identities as well as to create "uncertain and unbalanced blends to live a life outside our own species." Coccia argues that in the future, "we as humans must welcome back and reopen the doors to living beings who are not family or part of our species and whom we have pushed out of the house" (Coccia 2022: 156 f.).

In what follows, I will introduce an example of an innovative interspecies housing design created for a unique form of animal-human cohabitation with a long history in Asia: Hathi Gaon, or the "Elephant Village", in the state of Rajasthan.

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82 See https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2021/statement-hashim-sarkis (last access Jan 3, 2024).

83 Anupama Kundoo describes very vividly in her 2018 talk how freely and without regard to the ideas and wishes of clients she was able to experiment in the planning and implementation of her own house in Auroville.

Raman Sukumar describes the relationship between Asian elephants and humans as "the most contrasting and complex interaction between any animal and human through history":

> The elephant is a creature that has been tamed yet never really domesticated, that has carried our heaviest burdens, yet has also been a huge burden to farmers whose crops it has ravaged. It has been a participant in Asia's fiercest battles for over two millenia, yet it has also played the role of an ambassador of peace. Elevated to the status of a supreme god, the elephant has also been kept in chains and brutally slaughtered for its ivory. It is then not an easy task to fully comprehend the legacy of Elephas maximus, one of the planet's most intelligent and charismatic denizens (Sukumar 2016: 31).

## 10.1 Hathi Gaon in Rajasthan

A few years ago, architect Rahul Mehrotra and his firm were commissioned by the BJP state government of Rajasthan to design very low-cost housing for the elephants that transport tourists to the Amer Fort in Jaipur, and for their keepers – the *mahouts* who are traditionally Muslims in this region of India.[84] Animal-rights groups in India had successfully put pressure on the state government because the elephants didn't have access to water. Elephants bond with their mahouts through bathing, for instance. The mahouts often sing the elephants to sleep, so it is a close relationship, and it was therefore no question that they had to be housed together. However, the mahouts themselves had never lived together with their own human species, so Rahul Mehrotra and his team found out that they had no real experience of community. Although they were only allocated 45 square meters per family at Hathi Gaon, the team was nevertheless able to build extra space into each house in the form of inner courtyards. This way, clusters of houses share bigger courtyards and communities could form. But before this became possible, they had to solve the water problem, as the land which had been given to them

84 According to Thomas R. Trautmann, the "unity of elephant and mahout" has its origin in the long history of the war elephants in South Asia, as "the emergence of the mahout as a professional elephant rider depended on the sponsorhip of kings, who also managed reserved forests to ensure their continued supply" (Trautmann 2016: 47). Although he admits that it is difficult to prove that this continuity exists, or, in other words, to link the text-based research on ancient Indian history to contemporary ethnographic research on mahouts and the human-elephant relation, he nevertheless thinks that mahouts of the present day are "the recent twigs of branching lineages of teachers and pupils extending far back into the past. We know this, even though the mahouts left no written record of their own and are only rarely mentioned in the record written by the literati" (Trautmann 2016: 48).

was an old sand quarry, basically a big hole in the ground. Accordingly, the first step was to develop a concept for the slow regeneration of the landscape and then to design interspecies housing around water pools filled by the monsoon. In the beginning, most of the rainwater was absorbed which was good because this supported the tree-planting project. The clay walls of the water pools then compacted naturally, as local craftsmen had assured Mehrotra and his team they would, so that the loss became less and there remained enough water to keep the pools filled and to support vegetation. Within a few years only, the landscape was thus transformed, and the new low-cost houses could be built.

The houses in Hathi Gaon are small, one-storey structures in which the elephant occupies a portion of the ground floor, and the mahout and his family another. Mehrotra's team designed the roofs as flat slabs so that the families can build on the upper levels as their incomes grow. Like the inner courtyards, the principle of incrementality was a central aspect in architect Charles Correa's approach to low-cost housing. Incrementality means in this context that a low-rise house can always grow according to the owner's requirements and his or her earning capacity. In addition, this also allows the inhabitants to adjust the available spaces to suit their personal needs and preferred lifestyles, hence they can design the house individually. Not least, a low-rise housing can be constructed much faster, as an individual building his or her own house is, in Correa's view, a highly motivated person. It is also much easier and less cost-intensive to maintain low-rise houses.[85]

The walls were made of local stone. As Mehrotra explained in interviews and talks about this project, their most important and inspiring tools were local wisdom and local building materials, whereas the negotiations with the state government proved to be extremely tedious throughout.

> How can modern technology mesh with village wisdom?
>
> Refraining from fetishizing the local as an end in itself is not productive. So in this case, for us it was more important to focus on water and contemporary ways of doing things to improve the lives of the mahouts. Evoking the architectural splendour the Mughals used to house elephants in, would be a non-productive or irrelevant approach, which would not sustain. So while we

85 Especially in combination with a policy of equity plots, that is, a distribution of urban space not according to income or social status but to the actual household size, Correa's hope was that the kind of low-rise high-density housing that he envisioned could constitute a crucial step towards defining a truly egalitarian urban society (Charles Correa [2012]. "Equity". *A Place in the Shade. The New Landscape & Other Essays*. Ostfildern / Berlin: Hatje Cantz. 199–205, p. 202). From the perspective of animal-human cohabitation and interspecies design of housing, it would be an interesting question if this approach can be expanded to include the co-production or co-designing by non-human species too.

> built on local wisdom about how to hold water or ventilate the buildings, we were not constrained by the traditional images that went with those practices.[86]

A six-and-a-half-minute video on the Sahapedia platform, an online encyclopedia on Indian culture and heritage, shows how an elephant in Hathi Gaon in Rajasthan is elaborately painted with plant motifs by its mahout and subsequently decorated with jewelry and textiles, at least on special occasions. Shakshi Gupta describes this in article as a contemporary continuation of a very old courtly tradition, which was particularly pronounced in Rajasthan:

> Since ancient times, harnessed elephants have been employed by emperors and religious institutes for various purposes. They have always been an essential part of the lifestyle of Indian royalty, especially in Rajasthan. Therefore, they were groomed with great pomp and ceremony. But with the passage of time, the use of bedecked elephants gradually declined, which gave rise to rapid commercialization.[87]

However, animal rights activists have repeatedly pointed out in recent years the health hazards to animals that regularly have chemical dyes applied to their skin which sometimes contain toxic elements.

The first families of the mahouts and their elephants arrived in early 2012 in Hathi Gaon and the village was finally ready to house between 70 and 100 families. According to press reports, there are currently 65 elephants in this village, although some sources mention a higher number. Over the last decade, Hathi Gaon has been regarded as a highly innovative architectural project and received a lot of attention worldwide, it has also won awards for sustainable architecture.[88] However, it is important to mention that because of the dependence on tourism, the imposition of a severe lockdown in India in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 had terrible effects on the elephants as well as the mahouts and their families, as elephant rides at Amber Fort and weddings, which used to be their primary source of earnings, had come to a halt ever since the lockdown began, and the government did little

86 Deepika Sorabjee (2013). "Rahul Mehrotra. Elephantine vision". *Mint*, Oct 26. The interview with Rahul Mehrotra is available online at https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/570oqHdiGbWdiVd2hO4nBK/Rahul-Mehrotra--Elephantine-vision.html (last access Jan 3, 2024).

87 Shakshi Gupta (2018): "Decorating Elephants in Hathi Gaon in Rajasthan". *Sahapedia*, Jun 18. Online available at https://www.sahapedia.org/decorating-elephants-hathi-gaon-rajasthan (last access Jan 3, 2024).

88 See https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/2013/05/rahul-mehrotra-architects-awarded-top-prize-for-hathigaon/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

to improve their situation.[89] At the same time, there is increasing activism by animal rights groups who fight for a banning of the elephant rides and also want to free elephants from captivity.[90]

After the Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre and others had filed a petition against the use of captive elephants' rides with the Supreme Court of India, the Ministry of Environment & Forests (MoEF) commissioned a team of veterinary doctors to investigate the health and living conditions of elephants in Hathi Gaon and Amer in Rajasthan. In their findings report on this investigation, which was published in 2020, the responsible team also mentions the extremely difficult situation of the captive elephant owners who, with no income at all during the Covid lockdown in India since March 2020, had to additionally cover all expenses for the upkeep of the elephants. The report does not mention when exactly any form of support began and over what period of time it was made available to the mahouts and their families, but only states that "(t)he Forest Department of Rajasthan, however, has come forward in assisting the captive elephant owners by providing a COVID maintenance ration of Rs. 600/day/elephant."[91]

The ecofriendly rubber mat floorings, which are used in some of the accommodations for the elephants in Hathi Gaon, are positively emphasized in the same report. Unlike the constant marching on asphalt or concrete, these are very good for the feet of the elephants and should also be used on the paths they cover daily to Amer Fort, according to a recommendation in the report (ibid.: 485). However, Peta India, the Indian branch of the animal rights organization, would rather see the elephant ride replaced altogether by electric vehicles. A vehicle named "Maharaja" was designed in collaboration with the design firm Desmania Design and according to Peta India resembles a royal chariot and will ferry four tourists around. It is considered suitable for the hilly terrain the fort is located on.[92]

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89 See Tabeenah Anjum (2020): "Of Tuskers and Mahouts: The Elephantine Issues of Jaipur's Elephant Village". *India Today*, Jun 02. Online available at https://www.outlookindia.com/national/india-news-of-tuskers-and-mahouts-the-elephantine-issues-of-jaipurs-elephant-village-news-353965 (last access Apr 3, 2024).

90 See for instance Peta India at https://www.petaindia.com/blog/torturing-elephants-for-rides-at-amer-fort-endangers-everyone/ (last access Jan 3, 2024).

91 The pdf version of the report is available via https://www.petaindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/MoEFCC-Health-Investigation-Report-of-Captive-Elephants-in-Jaipur_2020.pdf (last access Jan 3, 2024).

92 See also "PETA has designed an electric chariot to replace elephant ride at Amer Fort", Outlook India, Feb 02 (n.a.). Online available at https://www.outlookindia.com/national/india-news-peta-has-designed-an-electric-chariot-to-replace-elephant-ride-at-amer-fort-news-373068 (last access Apr 3, 2024).

Apart from these ongoing discussions, as a serious attempt by architects and designers to respond to complex situations in a meaningful way and to find the best possible solution in the given circumstances (and with a very limited budget), Hathi Gaon remains a very relevant example which offers fresh perspectives on the question how multispecies design and low-cost housing can be (re-)imagined in local contexts with unique requirements. The Hathi Gaon project also speaks to the thinking of Piers Locke in an interesting way, who argues that elephants should no longer be viewed as representatives of a seemingly unchanging species, but rather on the basis of "evolving ways of life in historically changing environments" as well as "their interactions with other lives in particular landscapes" (Locke 2016: 6).

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*Housing for the People* (1972), directed by Pratap Parmar, b/w, English / Hindi, 11 min, DVD (Films Division of India).

*A Growing House* (1982), directed by Mohi-ud-Din Mirza, b/w, Hindi, 10 min, DVD (Films Division of India).

*City on the Water* (1975), directed by Charles Correa, color, English, 16:34 min, DVD (Films Division of India).

*State of Housing*, directed by Sanjiv Shah, color, English, 41:34 min, online (vimeo).

*Lovely Villa: Architecture as Autobiography* (2019), directed by Rohan Shivkumar, color, 32 min, English, online (https://psbt.org/films/lovely-villa-architecture-as-autobiography/, last access Jan 3, 2024).

*Kanade. A documentary about the architects Shankar Kanade and Navnath Kanade* (2021), directed by Karishma Rao and Vishwesh Shiva Prasad (Teepoi), color, 50 min, English & Kannada.

*Building Visions* (2022), directed by Diego Breit Lira, color, 26 min, English / German.

*Vertical City* (2011), directed by Avijit Mukul Kishore, color, 35 min, English & Hindi, online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwoOJ9VYSfc, last access Jan 3, 2024).

*Earth Crusader* (2016), directed by Shabnam Sukhdev, 54 min, English & Hindi (Films Division of India).

*Didi Contractor – Marrying the Earth to the Building* (2017), directed by Steffi Giaracuni, 80min, English, Hindi & German (independent production).

*Bharat Minar – The Tower of a Forgotten India* (2019), directed by Uday Berry, animated short film 11min, English & Hindi, online (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0BuNHCvCRmw, last access Jan 3, 2024).

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## 11.3 List of Illustrations

Fig. 1 and 2 Stills from the documentary *Housing for the People* (Films Division of India, 1972, DVD).
Fig. 3 Source: photograph by author, 2023.
Fig. 4 Still from the film *Vertical City* (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).
Fig. 5 Still from the film *Vertical City* (dir. Avijit Mukul Kishore, 2011).
Fig. 6 Still from the film *Lovely Villa – Architecture as Autobiography* (dir. Rohan Shivkumar, 2019).
Fig. 7 Source: photograph by author, 2023.

Media and Cultural Studies, Volume 5

This book explores the self-perception of critical architects in post-independent and contemporary India. It takes particular interest in the role of documentary films and other media forms used by architects to intervene in debates on affordable housing and to share their alternative visions on spatial design and sustainable architecture. As a heterogeneous and highly mobile group of social actors, architects and designers develop and implement viable solutions at the intersection of extremely complex challenges and specific local contexts. The book argues that the interconnections in their design thinking and work can best be understood through the conceptual lens of critical regionalism.

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