



## Book Review

Pushkar Sohoni. (2023). *Taming the Oriental Bazaar: Architecture of the Market Halls of Colonial India*. London and New York: Routledge. Pp. x+110. Price: \$35.99 (eBook). ISBN: 9781003079774 (eBook).

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Among the many architectural legacies of the British Raj in India, none perhaps is as ubiquitous and unseen as the public market hall. In the colonial era, every city and town possessed one; many have endured as a familiar part of the subcontinent's contemporary urban landscape. But, as Pushkar Sohoni notes, there is a "glaring lack of scholarship on market halls in India" (p. vii). Existing works on the built environment fashioned by colonialism typically fall in two categories: on the one hand, works of architectural history that focus primarily on questions of form and style; on the other hand, cultural studies that explore the ways in which buildings reflected competing ideological visions of empire. Neither tradition, Sohoni argues, has engaged in a sustained and systematic analysis of "single architectural programmes" nor paid due attention to "the materiality of the objects of study" (p. viii). That is the task his fascinating—if regrettably telegraphic—survey sets out to accomplish. "Ideally, the book would have been informed by more archival work and detailed field studies," the author states at the outset, "but the (Covid-19) pandemic effectively reduced that ambitious project to a cursory study" (p. x). Notwithstanding this unanticipated attenuation, Sohoni's work offers a useful overview of the historical dynamics that shaped the emergence and evolution of market halls in colonial India.

The market hall—which Sohoni defines as a "large-scale environmentally controlled retail space" (p. 1)—formed part of a panoply of public buildings that represented the new civic culture inaugurated by colonial rule in India. Essentially an urban phenomenon, it stood forth as a "universal sign of modernity and progress" (p. 4). The historical logics that underpinned the creation of the public market hall were "radical medical theories of disease, emergent technologies of large-scale construction, and the economic centralisation of markets" (p. 1). As with other built forms spawned by colonial modernity, the public market hall was thus emblematic of order, rationality, discipline, efficiency, and good government. But, Sohoni suggests, "The public market with its own architectural space was not a completely new idea in India" (p. 19). The Sultanates of the medieval period as well as the Mughals had constructed buildings in the past that were meant to function as business sites. Such retail spaces in pre-colonial times were "mostly functional and not meant as architectural proclamations" (p. 19). Their cultural meanings, he suggests, owed less to their monumentality (or lack thereof) and more to their role as a vibrant space of everyday life (p. 19). Moreover, the commercial life of pre-colonial cities tended to be dominated by the permanent bazaars devoted to commerce on public streets and the temporary weekly markets that were set up in large *maidans*. Importantly, too, the construction of public market halls marked a rupture within the history of colonialism in India. Prior to the mid-19th century, retail spaces in British India were of two kinds. First, there was the storied 'Oriental Bazaar', perceived in the imperial imagination as "an exotic and dangerous place, with equally sinister merchants and goods" (p. 11). In late-19th-century colonial discourse, its automatic association with dirt and disease rendered the 'native bazaar' unsuitable for the buying and selling of commodities. Second, the military conquest of India, the growing size of its standing army, and the presence of a European civilian population, led to the emergence of independent 'colonial bazaars'. In most town and cities,

these bazaars were located at the ‘interface’ between the ‘Indian’ quarters and the British cantonments and civil lines. Known as “Sadar (or Sudder) Bazaars, these constituted ‘the principal bazaars for the colonial establishment’” (p. 14). They were tightly regulated spaces because of their location within or in proximity to cantonments. Unlike the Oriental Bazaar, these ‘cosmopolitan’ retail areas sold a wide range of “goods and products imported from Britain and Europe in general” (p. 14).

As the size of the European population increased after 1857, the colonial elite increasingly sought to fashion sanitised retail spaces. The market halls that were constructed across India during the late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a departure from the Oriental Bazaar and the Sadar Bazaar. Suffused with the values and norms of urban modernity, the market hall was “a monolithic building that was a visual spectacle for the native gaze” (p. 18). In other words, it was meant to be ‘consumed visually’ as a structure even as it served as a functional retail space. Simultaneously, it was also meant to offer a safe and healthy space for “negotiation between the European and native population” (p. 19). In intent, if not in form, these newly created market halls in colonial India bore the impress of their metropolitan inspiration. From the early 19th century onwards, this type of retail space became a common feature of the British urban landscape. Marked off and enclosed, and reflecting new ideals of order and transparency, these set the template for the proliferation in market halls that occurred over the course of the 19th century (pp. 16-19).

After tracing these intersecting genealogies in chapter 2, Sohoni proceeds to identify the historical imperatives that underpinned the construction of market halls in colonial India. He identifies two factors as crucial determinants of this process: (a) new scientific theories about disease and the attendant transformations in the discourses and practices of public sanitation (chapter 3); and (b) the impact of the railways (chapter 4). New theories of disease causation highlighted the importance of sanitary standards in retail spaces; the railways dramatically scaled up the quantity and quality of retail activity. Both these developments spurred the construction of market halls both in British and princely India. The architectural styles of these new retail structures tended to comprise a mix of buildings in the Victorian Gothic and Indo-Saracenic style. “Generally,” writes Sohoni, “the British favoured English styles for market halls as they wished to project the grandeur, superiority, and vision of their government, whereas the Indian princely states preferred variations on the Indo-Saracenic, which reflected their own patrimony and association with buildings” (p. 47). The Mahatma Jotiba Phule Mandai (Crawford Market) in Mumbai (1869), the New Market (Sir Stuart Hogg Market) in Kolkata (1873), the Shivaji Market (Connaught Market) in Pune (1886), the Mahatma Jotiba Phule Mandai (Reay Market) also in Pune (1886), and the Empress Market in Karachi (1889) can all be considered prominent examples of the neo-Gothic category. While market halls in the Indo-Saracenic style were mostly located in the princely states – notably, the Victoria Memorial Market in Gwalior (1905) and the Khanderao Market in Vadodara (1906) – they were also to be found in British India: for example, the Moore Market in Madras (Chennai) and Russell Market in the Bangalore Civil and Military Station. But some market halls were *sui generis*. Thus, the Moazzam Jahi Market in Hyderabad (1935) was constructed in the ‘Osmanian’ style, patented by its City Improvement Board.

Chapter 7 of the book provides brief summaries of the various market halls in India that were constructed in late 19th and early 20th century. These provide a wealth of empirical detail, but in a largely descriptive vein. It would have been useful had this part of the book been more closely integrated with the thematic strands identified in the preceding chapters. This points to a more general drawback in the organization of the book. Chapters 3 to 6 are thematically arranged with little by way of empirical detail; indeed, these are notable for their startling brevity, adding up to a total of 23 pages. This content might profitably have been condensed

into one or two chapters and connected more robustly to the material presented in chapter 7. In terms of analytical framework, too, the book suffers from an excessive focus on the visions of creators (both British and Indian). It would have been useful to know how these market halls came to impinge on popular perceptions, representations, and practices. A focus on the users of these spaces would have helped to make for a more dialectical historical account. Moreover, as new sites of retail activity, market halls raised important issues pertaining to caste, religion, and gender. Chapter 5—entitled *Market Halls and Gender, Literature, and Popular Culture*—gestures towards such an analytical move, but this is also the shortest chapter in the book (4 pages) and is marred by an eclectic use of supporting evidence.

Overall, then, this book should be seen as a spur to further research on the social and cultural history of specific genres of buildings that formed an indelible feature of colonial modernity. We need more works that recover the histories of the quotidian architecture that proliferated under British rule: town halls, railway stations, post offices, public libraries, museums, hospitals, and prisons. And it is to be hoped that this research agenda will transcend the watershed of 1947 and trace the postcolonial career of these structures.