Built environment, knowledge, praxis: 
Postcolonial conversations between Britain and India
Symposium, 16-17 May, UCL

THEME, PANEL DESCRIPTIONS and ABSTRACTS

This two-day curated symposium is part of what is seen to be a long term critical exchange between Britain and India in the field of architectural – and more broadly built environment and spatial – knowledge, practice and discourse. As the first concrete event marking this dialogue, the symposium has a two-fold aim. On the one hand, it traverses not only the making and unmaking of the built environment in India and its concomitant discourses but also unpacks the disciplinary, communitarian and epistemological frameworks that enclose such production. On the other, it is interested in tracing the entanglements of some of these concerns with(in) the context of built-environment in Britain, either in terms of transcultural processes or related conceptual interests.

At one level, this project stems from the realization that there is an increasing interest and, in some cases, substantial existing engagement within the Bartlett School of Architecture, other parts of the Bartlett Faculty of the Built Environment (such as the Development Planning Unit) and elsewhere within UCL (such as the department of Geography) with the built environment in India, the actors, agencies and processes involved, and the discourses emerging from it. At another level, the project is rooted in the (post)colonial shared past/present between Britain and India where issues surrounding built environment in both the countries are often bound up with each other through historically mediated (ex)colonial transcultural and transcontextual processes and shared conceptual formations. These two threads present possibilities of intellectual and other forms of exchanges between like-minded academics and practitioners in India and the UK along multiple discursive themes with possible linkages to be unearthed, traced back in history and/or forged in the future. The symposium will work to excavate these links and consider them premised on the fact that the contemporary condition warrants newer and more equal exchange of history and practice of architectural and spatial thought. In addition to this, we also see it as a ground to bring together existing and potential research areas and generating more general interest in the subject area within different parts of UCL and more broadly Britain, to give it a critical mass and nurture mutual exchange in the field.

The symposium is a three-way collaboration between Dr. Tania Sengupta (UCL Bartlett), Dr. Jaideep Chatterjee (Dept. of Art, Design and Theatre, Shiv Nadar University, India) and Dr. Pushpa Arabindoo (UCL Geography). It was chosen for the UCL Grand Challenges Small Grant(s) 2013-14 under the theme ‘Intercultural interactions’, which will partially fund the event. Additionally, it is also being supported by an Architecture Research Fund grant from the Bartlett.

PANELS:

Panel 1. The politics of the designed

Over the last two decades India’s social, economic and political fabric has been witness to profound changes. Central to these transformations is the built environment which has emerged as the arena where diverse discourses of neoliberalism, governmentality, development, security, minority rights, disability, sustainability and ecology have laid their claims as well contested each other. This panel seeks to unpack how architects, urbanists, governmental and non-governmental agencies and various stakeholder communities in India negotiate this complex and changing terrain. It is especially interested in excavating the political, economic, historical and affective forces that constantly attend the on-ground practices of architects and the kind(s) of representational, analytical and interpretive knowledges and strategies emerging within such negotiations. One of the questions it seeks to also ask is about the kinds of individual and
communitarian identity(s) of architects that are, in turn, (re)produced in the process. And finally, it looks at the possible transcultural and transcontextual links of such issues in Britain.

**Panel 2. Architecture and its forms of knowledge**

This panel investigates knowledges that ground Architecture as disciplinary formation, as practice and as culture, i.e. how architecture constitutes its object and domain and thereby (re)constructs, (re)produces, sustains, and even contests itself. It also looks at how the architectural artifact shapes and mediates various forms of knowledge. Panelists hope to revisit some of the fundamental categories of architectural knowledge (e.g. categories of design, space, temporality, contingency, representation) to forge newer ways of reimagining the field. Specific papers range from critical engagement with design and its creative-constructive instrumental potential, design as a form of research and knowledge, to unpacking the imbrications of architectural knowledges and its “tools” to questions of power, metaphysics, collective ethos and selfhood.

**Panel 3: History and the architectural present**

In nineteenth century India, “History” Sudipta Kaviraj notes, “breaks out everywhere.” According to Kaviraj, this explosion became a domain through and within which history became not simply an explanation of the experience of subjection of Indians but also a rational ground for hope; it made possible, “to change the past in the future simply by making it the past of a different present.” This panel investigates how the disciplinary frameworks as well as the practice of architecture and urbanism in India today deals with the question of history, memory, past and present. It also involves engaging with descriptors of the present in order to understand the past. We have panelists doing critical work on the notion of archives, exploring alternative, everyday and minor histories, transnational and transcultural circulations of architectural heritage and expertise including, for instance, artisanal practices and modes of translations.

**ABSTRACTS AND BIOGRAPHIES:**

**Panel 1: The politics of the designed (16 May, 11 30am – 4 45pm)**

1. **The politics of global architecture in Chennai**

Pushpa Arabindoo, Department of Geography, University College London

The use of global architectural practices as an important driver promoting capitalist globalisation is a well-documented debate (Sklair 2005, 2006; Jenks 2006). Its production and circulation as a significant urban development model in globalising cities, including those in the western hemisphere (London and New York) as well as in Asia (particularly China and Southeast Asia) has also been noted by scholars (Ren 2008; McNeill 2006; Kaika 2010). But few studies have undertaken a detailed examination of the way it is implemented or realised, with little emphasis on the debates they generate about transformations of the built environment (Ren 2011). The objective of this research is to explore the realisation of global architecture projects in Indian cities as something that is not simple and straightforward but one that is fraught with tensions and contradictions. For, while the Indian state and private corporate clients might be keen to commission a ‘globally significant architectural practice’ to design ‘world-class’ facilities, the paradigm of global architectural production has to go through a locally challenging process involving mundane issues such as translation of technical know-how, material specifications, and the compulsions of planning bye-laws. This paper by examining the tensions that global architectural practices experience in their efforts to generate a signature urban form investigates the extent to which they are therefore actually able to reorient the image of Indian cities.

Pushpa Arabindoo trained in architecture and urban design before completing her PhD in Planning from the London School of Economics. She is a lecturer in Geography & Urban Design at the Department of Geography, University College London, a co-director of the UCL Urban Laboratory, and one of the
editors at the CITY Journal. Her empirical research involves ethnographic investigation of urban transformations in the Indian city of Chennai, ranging from slum evictions and middle-class politics to ecological imaginations and the politics of architectural production. She has also been probing the interdisciplinary nature of urban studies and its tenuous link with allied disciplines from the arts, humanities and engineering through her engagement with the MSc Urban Studies programme at UCL.

2. Art districts and transport planning: postcolonial conversations between Mumbai and London
Andrew Harris, Department of Geography, University College London

This presentation draws on over a decade of comparative research across Mumbai and London to develop several postcolonial conversations between the UK and India around the travel and translation of urban ideas, plans and theories. First, the presentation explores efforts over the last twenty years at establishing art districts in formerly industrial areas of these two cities. It emphasises the social, cultural and political specificities of Mumbai that have shaped a different trajectory to a Western postindustrial model of urban development, and argues that ‘gentrification’ debates – initially formulated in relation to London – benefit from being reframed with regards to recent socio-spatial transformations in Mumbai. Secondly, the presentation examines contrasting approaches to contemporary transport planning across these two cities. It considers a curious situation where Mumbai seems to be aping discredited post-War transport schemes from the UK while certain streets in London imitate the shared spaces of urban India.

Dr Andrew Harris is a Lecturer in Geography and Urban Studies at University College London, where he convenes the interdisciplinary Urban Studies MSc. His research develops critical perspectives on the role of art, creativity and culture in recent processes of urban restructuring, and on three-dimensional geographies of contemporary cities.

3. Beyond the city: emerging constituency and professional re-alignments
Arunava Dasgupta, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi

Architectural practice in India so far has overwhelmingly concentrated on metropolitan city turfs that have been gleefully consuming the creative cream of our profession with residual talent trying to address needs of remaining urban domains while offering negligible attention to non-urban settings. However, over the last two decades, our increasing global connectedness is seen to effect widespread and unprecedented aspiration-driven demands on the professional expertise of architecture and related disciplines. Some of this demand now is palpable from non-metropolitan urban domains and also somewhat significantly, from the rural counterpart. These demands are not confined to ‘special’ or ‘extra-ordinary’ works of architecture, but also to the everyday, even mundane needs of growing societies. Issues of equity, identity, sustainability and continuity, have come to the fore in this hitherto unforeseen desire for change.

Is there a role of architects beyond cities? Specific to our conditions of professional (and academic) skew, away from the vast majority of the non-urban that comprises India, this question formed the basis for a sustained inquiry towards re-visiting prevailing processes of architectural engagement and service. Using the experience of multi-dimensional institutional initiatives this presentation explores the dynamics of architectural contribution within the comparatively less discussed space of institutional practice, towards an alternative, immersive and grounded approach addressing change and connected imaginations in our part of the world.

Arunava Dasgupta is an urban designer and architect, currently engaged as faculty in the Department of Urban Design, SPA, New Delhi. Over the last 20 years, through applied research projects in rural and urban Himalayan settlements, he has been pursuing the larger question of the role of architects and designers beyond the city. Within the academic arena, Arunava is interested in experimental design studio methodologies that allow exploration by students as citizen designers in their own settings while theoretical pursuits revolve around contemporary, inter-disciplinary discourses concerning city futures. As Founder Member and National Secretary of the Institute of Urban Designers – India (IUDI), Arunava is actively promoting the idea of participative and holistic urban design through government agencies, NGOs and educational institutions across the country.

Contd.
4. The unsustainable attractions of abstraction

Himanshu Burte, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

Modernism instituted abstraction as the key mode of thinking, designing and building, as well as the privileged aesthetic value, in architecture. I argue that this procedure and value is complicit in the creation of the socio-ecological crisis of our times, through the rise, fall and rise again of modernist aesthetics. Abstraction, as well as the ‘making real’ of Lefebvre’s ‘abstract space’ through architecture, must be subjected to critical scrutiny in a more substantive manner than was done over the 1970s and 1980s by some strands of postmodernism. Lefebvre (and in a very different way, Ivan Illich) point to the complicity of abstraction with various modes of domination and the suppression of difference that have accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism. Abstraction as a mode of knowing and representation suppresses the socio-ecological complexity of place and place making. These suppressions are reproduced in the production of architecture through a drastic modification of the socio-ecological fabric locally and globally, a dynamic that has been accelerated under neoliberalism. This raises important questions: Can a sustainable architecture be built purely upon abstract expert knowledge from the technical sciences, and within the paradigm of measurement that ultimately serves only the interests of the state-market coalition? Are there different values or orientations we can explore in thinking about the critical practice of sustainable architecture, that avoid the pitfalls of various kinds of romantic denial of history? This is the predicament the presentation will frame and explore by engaging with some important built and proposed projects across different scales and contexts in India.

Himanshu Burte has practiced architecture, and written on the politics of the built environment extensively. His book, ‘Space for Engagement: The Indian Artplace and a Habitational Approach to Architecture’ (Seagull Books, Kolkata, 2008), proposes an alternative conceptual framework for architecture centred on the act of dwelling. A former Fulbright Fellow, he teaches at Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai. His research interests include modernity, public space, housing policy, theatre architecture and sustainable architecture. He is co-writing a book on sustainable architecture in India with a grant from Graham Foundation, Chicago, and pursuing a PhD in urban planning from CEPT University, Ahmedabad.

5. The architectural profession and the evolving practice of sustainability in India.

Ashok Lall, Ashok B Lall Architects Delhi and advisory board, USAP Delhi and KRVIA Mumbai

In today’s context of a developing economy undergoing rapid urbanization, the coming decade will, arguably, be the determining decade for the quality of life and environmental fate of our cities. Over the last decade, with a growing awareness of climate change and environmental sustainability, the professions of the built environment have come to recognize the criticality of the ways in which buildings are to be built and the patterns of urban development that are adopted for the growth of cities. One can see increasing activity at the governmental and institutional levels with a primary focus on Climate Change and, more recently, a concern for protection of the environmental commons and bio-diversity. In this largely science-and-technology approach, which has its roots in the formulation of the sustainability theory in the developed West, what is clearly missing is an understanding of the relationship between sustainable architecture and urbanism in its developmental dimension – as a strategic method for improving the quality of life from a platform of limited resources with means that would be environmentally sustainable. A more serious concern is the confusion that pervades the culture of architectural practice with respect to sustainability.

This paper attempts to establish the social and environmental context of the present developmental condition in India which the practice of sustainability needs to engage with. It briefly traces the historical processes that have thrown up the various and divergent attitudes to sustainability in the practice of architecture today. It argues for fundamental research with regard to the built environment and a theory for the practice of sustainability specific to the situation of the developing South.

Ashok Lall graduated from the University of Cambridge U.K. in Architecture & Fine Arts and obtained the Architectural Association Diploma in 1970. His architectural firm (estd. 1981) is committed to an architectural practice based on the principles of environmental sustainability and social responsibility. The firm has won a number of awards and its work has been published widely. Engaged in architectural education since 1990, he has developed curricula and teaching methods to address environmental issues. He has published many articles and presented papers on environmentally sustainable design and has been...

Hussain Indorewala, Kamla Raheja Vidhyavidhiti Institute for Architecture, Mumbai

While urbanization in India, under the New Economic Policy regime, is designed to facilitate private exploitation of land and resources in the countryside, urban development is driven by the goal of creating “hospitable investment environments” to attract footloose global and local capital. Cities are conceived as sites for the private provision of urban services, and urbanscapes are increasingly becoming “dreamworlds of consumption, property and power.” Placed firmly in the global hierarchy of “corporate cities,” Mumbai’s ongoing transformation, far from being uniform, has resulted in a unique morphology of socio-spatial exclusion and segregation: large tracts of affluent residential neighbourhoods, workplaces and leisure zones, tied up with motorways (and plugged into the circuit-board of generic global corporate urbanism with airways and electronic-ways) are secured with emerging-new and resurrected-old forms of social, economic and physical barriers.

What are the roots of the city’s socio-spatial structure, and the historical processes through which it has been transformed? What is the contemporary nature of segregation and exclusion in the city, and what forms does it take? What are the methods and mechanisms through which the city's transformation is being affected? How is this transformation being resisted? What alternatives are being posed? These are some of the questions this paper will attempt to explore.

Hussain Z Indorewala teaches at the Kamla Raheja Vidhyavidhiti Institute of Architecture (KRVIA) in Mumbai. He writes regularly on urban politics, physical planning, and sustainability and works with community groups in the city on issues of urban development, affordable housing, waste management and food planning. Actively involved in the Research and Design Cell at the KRVIA, he is a co-convenor of the Campaign over Mumbai’s Development Plan, and is currently working on a People’s Plan for Malvani, in the Western suburbs of Mumbai.

Panel 2: Architecture and its forms of knowledge (17 May, 11.15am – 1.15pm)

1. Jugar pe duniya kayam hai: Articulations of (an)architect-self(s) and knowledge(s)
Jaideep Chatterjee, Shiv Nadar University, Noida

While for architects in India “design,” “architect” and “architecture,” remain the quintessential lexical forms mediating the interlocutions of their field, they also continually lay claims to idioms other than these to articulate their sense of them-self(s), their expertise and their domain. Using ethnographic vignettes from my fieldwork amongst architects in India, this paper unpacks the articulations of one such claim they make; of what they do as being jugar, and of them being jugars (those who do jugar). It argues that embedded within the claims to jugar and being jugars is an understanding of selfhood, of things, of others, indeed, of the “world” which far outstrips the dichotomies of subject-object, concept-thing, content-form, self-other, theory-practice and so on, that is, forms of order of thought that have traditionally been the essential grounds securing an autonomous domain qua architecture, design and architect.

An obsessive-compulsive multi-disciplinarian, Jaideep is trained as an architect, a historian and an anthropologist. With doctorate(s) in History of Architecture and Urbanism and in Socio-cultural Anthropology from Cornell University, Jaideep’s academic enquiries traverse questions of architecture, design, visual culture, techno-politics, social formation of expertise and expert identity, popular culture and nationalism. His research on architects, and design as a form(s) of expertise and expert identity in postcolonial India has been published with prestigious academic presses worldwide. Having taught at several universities, including Cornell, University of Cincinnati, and he is, at present, an Associate Professor in the dept. of Art, Design and Performing Arts at the Shiv Nadar University. He is also an
affiliated faculty in the dept. of Sociology. His current research involves unpacking the intersections of the profound transformations of the built environment in Greater Noida near New Delhi and emerging modes of sociality, aspirations, and identities.

In addition to his academic pursuits, Jaideep also actively collaborates with designers, architects, artists and filmmakers on project. Most recently he (along with A. B. Lall) was awarded the “Cities that Learn Award” in the Living Cities Design Competition organized by the Living Cities Foundation, Washington DC.

In his free time, he loves to cook, analyze everything from milk cartons to restaurant menus and watch movies till hell freezes over.

2. Architects of fact and fiction

Jonathan Hill, The Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London

Architects have used history in different ways, whether to indicate their continuity with the past or depart from it. From the Renaissance to the early twentieth century the architect was a historian in the sense that an architectural treatise combined design and history, and a building was expected to manifest the character of the time and knowingly refer to earlier eras. Modernism ruptured this system in principle if not always in practice, but even early modernists who denied the relevance of the past relied on histories to justify modernism’s historical inevitability and systematic evolution. To some degree, mid-twentieth-century architects merely reaffirmed an appreciation of history that was latent but largely ignored in early modernism. But the Second World War was a more scientific war than the First, and nuclear devastation undermined confidence in technological progress, which early modernism had emphasised as a means of social transformation. In the search for stability in the uncertain aftermath of 1945, modernism’s previously dismissive reaction to social norms and cultural memories was itself anachronistic. In opposition to an earlier, didactic and universal modernism, postwar modernists embraced history, fiction, landscape and environmentalism, reviving and extending themes developed in previous centuries. This talk will consider the continuing relevance of the tradition in which architecture is analogous to a landscape, a history and a fiction, in the light of contemporary concerns for anthropogenic climate change.


3. Towards mutual knowledges

Tatjana Schneider, Sheffield University

“[O]nly partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility. Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.” (Haraway 1988:584)

Drawing on ‘Spatial Agency. Other Ways of Doing Architecture’, this presentation will critically examine some of the fundamental underpinnings of architecture as a discipline, practice and profession. In particular, the construction and use of architectural language as gatekeeper to that knowledge will be questioned. I will argue that stable knowledge, the underpinning of an architect’s professional mindset, has contributed to the marginalisation of architecture. Further, if calls for a social production and appropriation of space are to be taken serious and if architects want to play a role in this, the very concept of stable knowledge needs to be questioned.

Tatjana Schneider is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Architecture, The University of Sheffield where she teaches History & Theory of architecture. Her research is concerned with an understanding of architecture as critical spatial praxis and I have lectured and published widely about this. Her main publications include Right to Build (00:/, 2011 - with A. Parvin, D. Saxby & C. Cerulli), Spatial Agency – Other Ways of Doing
Panel 3: History and the architectural present (17 May, 2 30pm – 4 30pm)

1. Knowledge, space, territory and material:
Architectures of colonial offices in early to mid-nineteenth century Bengal, India

Tania Sengupta, Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London

This paper looks at the spatialisation and materialisation of colonial provincial governance and revenue administration knowledge in India between early and mid nineteenth century – a period that roughly marks the transition from the rule of the East India Company to the rule of the British Crown. My site of study is the colonial cutcherry [office] in zilla sadar [provincial administrative] towns of Bengal. At one level, the paper makes a case for viewing architecture of colonial provincial governance beyond the site of the colonial office, and as a much wider and dispersed network of spaces that included many other local public and communal sites. At another level, expanding on the historian Christopher Bayly’s analysis of the institutionalisation of colonial revenue knowledge, I focus on the transformation of such knowledge from embodied into spatial and material forms such as paper, furniture, designated rooms or areas and building elements, and the manner in which this played out in various other aspects of provincial office architecture. The central thrust is on how material aspects of colonial official and governmental environments were entangled with the multiple spatial practices in them by different groups of people such as officers, clerks, lower level employees, informants and visitors. In that sense, it is an attempt to write a social and political history of spatial practice than that of architecture per se. The paper on the one hand looks at architecture and urban space as crucibles for materialisation of governmental processes and knowledge. On the other, using minute readings of buildings, internal and external spaces, furniture and patterns of inhabitation and occupation, it posits architecture and urban relationships themselves as embodied knowledge and a form of text.

Tania Sengupta is lecturer in architectural history and theory at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. She worked in architectural and urban design practices and taught in India for over ten years. She completed her PhD at the University of Westminster, London, in 2011 on the spatial cultures of colonial provincial governance in Bengal, India, which was shortlisted for the RIBA President’s Research Award for Outstanding PhD Thesis 2011. Her research interests lie in postcolonial studies on built environment in South Asia and its transcultural and transnational connections, in particular in governance and space, history of domesticity, cultural perceptions of health and hygiene, spatial implications of global, local and other scalar relationships, and in everyday practices and ‘minor’ architecture. She is currently working on her book Mapping the Margins: colonial governance and spatial cultures in provincial administrative towns, eastern India 1786- c.1900 to be published by IB Tauris in spring 2015.

2. New Muslim architecture and the politics of identity

Shahed Saleem, Makespace Architects and University of Westminster

The Muslim population of Britain has almost doubled in the last decade. It has grown through second and third generation British born Muslims, the majority of whom are of South Asian origin, alongside continued inward migration and conversion.

These Muslim populations have established a cultural infrastructure through Mosque building spanning hundred years. These buildings have contributed to a new post-colonial religious landscape, and have impacted the townscape of Britain’s cities to the point that they have become an intrinsic part of the national imagination.

This lecture presents an overview of the architectural history of the mosque in Britain, and considers how the architecture and visual language deploys visions of the past in contemporary processes of Othering Muslim communities, and at the same time serves as a vehicle through which those communities construct and project self-identities.
Shahed Saleem is an architect and lecturer living and working in East London. Along with residential projects, his practice specialises in community architecture and places of worship. He has been working with Muslim communities for the last decade, and has been exploring the issues and aesthetics of new Muslim architecture in Britain.

Alongside architecture Saleem has a Masters in Social Anthropology from the School of Oriental and African Studies, which, combined with his experience in practice led to him being commissioned by English Heritage to research and write a book on the architectural and social history of the mosque in Britain, which will be published at the end of 2014.

Saleem teaches at the University of Westminster on the Masters programme in Architecture, Cultural Identity and Globalisation.

3. Rearticulating the past: inter-textual readings of the practices of Indian hereditary temple builders

Megha Chand Inglis, The Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL and Cardiff University

This paper is concerned with intertextual and plastic readings of processes behind the making of contemporary temples through the shifting working practices of hereditary temple makers from Western India, the Sompuras of Gujarat. Their architectural products in the UK like the Swaminarayan Hindu temple in Neasden (1995) or the Sanatan Hindu temple in Wembley (2010) prompt us to think not only about how these objects are related to the architecture of the past, but also a ‘history’ of past architecture and craftsmanship first institutionalised in 19th century colonial India, and then appropriated on nationalist platforms in the early 20th century. Might we ask in what ways a long unbroken tradition of temple building and codification refashions itself to new spaces of modernity with its particular modes of historical writing? How does this reconstitution reconcile to contemporary global contexts?

Either represented through certain hard essences of ancient Indian craft traditions on national, transnational and post national platforms or dismissed as producers of anachronisms and pastiche by professional elites, their reception is varied and problematic. Cautious of both views, this paper presents two aspects of their work, located in colonial and contemporary contexts, which contest the above static representations. First in the innovative writing in 1939 of an influential modern day architectural treatise by a native temple maker – very much in use today - where along with an unprecedented production of typological illustrations, the image archive of the late 19th century colonial arenas of ‘antiquity’ and ‘archaeology’ come to be altered and rearticulated to a profoundly local context with its own particular notion of time. Second through a vast assemblage of hand intensive and mechanised processes, including digital fabrication, brought about to facilitate a global dispersal and assembly, the paper presents a more nuanced and differentiated view of production processes than other oft repeated homogenous representations.

-------------

Megha Chand Inglis is a PhD research candidate at the Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University. Her current research, funded by Cardiff University’s President’s Scholarships, is on the reconstituted practices of modern day temple makers from Western India. Megha is also a Teaching Fellow in History and Theory at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL, where she runs an undergraduate seminar series.