*Essay*

## *Working Title:* **Opium for the masses –Public Spaces and the Indian Identity**

The idea of a public space is very powerful, especially in a democracy. It is and has been the womb of the greatest public movements in history. We easily identify with Jantar Mantar, Azad Maidan, Tiananmen Square and Tahir Square with the respective nations. The identity of these spaces transcends into a national identity of the people during important events. Identity begets empowerment, and architecture can be instrumental in creating a national identity through design of public spaces.

Throughout history, art & architecture has been used to represent the socio-political programs, from the Indus-Saraswati civilization to the present day. The English sought to claim their dominance on the Indian sub-continent via creation of public buildings as monuments of the empire. Among the myriad styles explored during this era, Lutyens was successful in creating a contemporary Indo-Colonial architecture that identified with the Indian culture and yet reinforced the idea of dominance and subservience, especially in his rendering of the then Viceroy House – the epitome of the British Empire. The sensitive suggestion of Indian elements in the architecture while maintaining the grandiose form of the British Empire strikes chord till date and makes it one of the most identifiable buildings in the country.

The overwhelming association of regional architecture with the princely states and the British Empire along with the infighting prevalent in various regions of India at that time led Nehru to look for a nationalist architectural paradigm elsewhere. His vision of a modern industrialized India was successfully complemented by Corbusier's modernist philosophy and led Indian architecture into a modernist lane for the next two to three decades. This political philosophy lost its steam once the political visionaries faded away and their successors were overwhelmed by the power of the increasingly self-aware democracy. The tempers of the independence movement had cooled down and the idea of identity in architecture was no longer required to unite the nation. As identity in architecture lost its foothold, globalization made an appearance along with liberalization. Modernism had succeeded in its program of erasing regional identities and creation of a pan-India program which contrasted completely with the traditional identity, though it supported the idea of progress and industry. Globalization wiped out the remains of regional identities by luring an unconfident India to demonstrate cutting edge global practices in order to survive in the global markets. The resulting void was increasingly filled by brandalism – the identity of capitalism. Architecture has thus become an economic program.

**Looking for directions**
Contemporary Indian public spaces display an enormous variety of spatial configurations, aesthetics, uses and meaning. Post liberalization, the absence of a need to carve a singular identity combined with varying and often contradictory preferences often manifests into a quirky pot-pourri of architectural languages into a single program.

Today, architecture has become a common man's art. In a progressive India, every single person who wants to build a home or place of work, which are the most personal of possessions, looks at architecture as a way of expressing oneself. Thus, Indian architecture has truly unshackled itself from its political and economic masters and lent itself to the common man's identity and empowerment. This boon is also a bane in the sense that architecture has lost its direction in the process and has ended up creating self-contradictory responses in the process.

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Rahul Mehrotra, in his book on the post-liberalization era of Indian architecture, identifies four identities present in India today, namely Global Practice, Regional Manifestation, Alternate Practice and Counter Modernism. He then deconstructs their *rasa* respectively as follows: appreciation by a global audience, creating a regional identity without resorting to literal references, yearning for the roots and disillusionment with the modern world.

Present India is a confident and aggressive economy that is spreading its roots worldwide through active political role of leading the developing nations in world debates and economical role of controlling assets even in developed countries. All this activity seems to have left the idea of identity in a lurch.

**Architecture versus New Media**
Jurgen Habermas, in his epic book – 'The structural transformation of the Public Sphere' says – "Prior to the 18th century, European culture had been dominated by a 'representational' culture, where one party sought to 'represent' itself on its audience by overwhelming its subjects". This was mainly achieved through arts and architecture. According to Habermas, public space has become intrinsic to the idea to democracy. However, according to him, commercial mass media and the welfare state have resulted into the decay of the public sphere. These two phenomena have turned the public sphere from a platform for developing the commons, to a ground for individual hoarding of resources through consumerism.

At this point, one must also accept that architecture is no more the prominent torch-bearer of identity representation. Architecture has to compete with modern means of interaction & representation like television and internet. Architecture needs to gather learnings from the new public spaces –closed groups of online forums, open groups of facebook and opinion publishing via blogs. Conversations that used to happen in cafes now happen on facebook, which is a virtual café of like-minded people. Public discussions have now moved to online forums and individual opinions presented via blogs.

If one examines the structure of facebook, it can hold one's attention by providing enough activities as well as means of communication and representation. But it does not provide enough thematic elements to create a discussion or generate an identity for any given group.

On the other hand, architecture starts by defining an identity for a user group and provides enough thematic elements to generate discussions. However, one needs to examine its capacity of holding people's attention in an age where attention spans are decreasing constantly. This is where the burden to mix architecture with new media comes in – whichever identity is envisaged to be represented; its architecture should be highly adaptable, dynamic and energetic. Maybe that's why architects have started designing buildings that hold one's attention with live displays, attractive lighting displays, innovative forms and materials as well as visual effects like holography, moire, etc.

**Architecture and Identity**
The relationship between architecture and the people is cyclic – the architecture mirrors the past, present or future of the people and the people in turn are influenced by it. This fact becomes critical in public spaces, where the architecture is capable of influencing masses. If one does not tread this path carefully, the architecture may end up creating unwanted influences.

If idea of identity is not addressed intelligently, we will continue to make public spaces that do not represent anything but a mute banal space, uninspiring, meaningless, an out-dated aesthetic style;

and façade treatments that are copies of existing economic identities. The process of creating, seeking, looking for identity is imperative to progress of any society and civilization otherwise we will be stuck in the repetition of the past and present.

It is apparent that India is no more seeking refuge from the past nor is it trying to market itself to the world. Today, India wants to portray itself as a young dynamic nation with a rich cultural heritage and roots extending to times ancient that has evolved into an idea having multiple regional manifestations and sub-identities. This program is as difficult as the one Lutyens faced while creating the then Viceroy house or the one Correa faced when creating the Gandhi Museum. Their responses were highly varied, but the underlying structure was the same – creating a compact program that appeals to one and all.

**Opium for Public Spaces**
Mike Featherstone, in his essay 'Postmodernism and the aestheticization of everyday life' says - "In effect, to construct an identity, to know who you are, you need to know who you are not; and the material excluded may continue to exert a fascination or allure and stimulate desires. We seek the opposite of who we are.    We are often in a routine or ordered in our personal life and so in public spaces of recreation is where we find this attraction of 'ordered disorder'. A mall, carnival, theme parks are all sites of such ordered chaos." This raises a lot of questions - does this mean the identity of a public space could be representing opposite of who we are as a people, where we seek the exotic other, or is it merely a site of attractive chaos? What is the role of architect in this case? This idea of exoticness can be promoted in numerous ways by the architect.

This is where one starts defining the role of opium in public spaces. Public spaces require most opium character as they outlive all other kinds of spaces and host people frequently for a socio-recreational program which requires attraction. People visit public recreation spaces to escape their daily din, change the order in their lives, and most importantly - to find identity! In other words, identity is our opium. It is a comfort zone that is addictive and unavoidable.

If one were to reconstruct the language of public spaces, one must start with the 'public'. Humans are a highly self-centric species. Public spaces are visited to experience social interaction, change, recreation, etc. But more importantly these are places where people go to paint their own worlds – virtual graffiti! A series of ad-hoc interviews were taken by the authors in various public spaces inquiring about the space. They revealed responses by people about experiencing themselves in the space. People project visions from their personal cognitive vocabulary into public spaces based on references available – each creating their own world in the process. This world, though accommodative of everyone in the space, is at the same time private enough to be hidden from everyone else! As Banksy says "You don't need planning permission to build castles in the sky". This leads to an important note - a vibrant public space should be fertile enough to stimulate the growth of each such imagination. Such space could be as banal as a streetside café with adequate social program, location and structure. This would essentially mean that architecture needs as much of a program of promoting creative imagination as it represents physicality.

**Public Architecture as a form of Public Art**
Art is capable of creating a larger program by re-imagining the world, providing windows to new ways of experiencing the surroundings and questioning existing norms – social as well as spatial. Today, public art is seen as a regenerator of hastily created faceless public spaces. If architecture would have only resolved the program in the first place, art would have been instrumental in

increasing its amplitude.

An Indian identity should successfully depict one or more of the parameters that identify India – past, present, future aspirations, culture, society, politics, economy, etc. The architect may look upon these parameters as subject of art work to be commissioned in the public realm, with the constraint that the art work should remain in the public realm for two to three generations at the very least, and still hold true to its original idea. In the future, the commission may become a documentation of past ideas, to be discovered by the public in the same way as buildings provide information on lost civilizations.

Economic identity is overshadowing all other kinds of identities. Consumerism is the identity of capitalism, not a nation. It can be called as a religion or cult, but not a national character. It has successfully shown that an identity can influence the public to follow a certain way of life and mould society accordingly. One can only imagine a more meaningful identity in the public realm that will inspire the people similarly.

**A checklist for public space design**

By now, we can conclude that a public space design for national identity must consist of a physical program, representation brief (national or regional), Identity association and Opium character. The outcomes of this may be endless. As Louis I Kahn famously quoted - "Nobody needed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony till it was created. Desire created its own need".

The problem solving process could involve the use of flow charts, showing connections – assimilations leading to an identity creation which is then presented to the public at large for their understanding. The following can help as a checklist:
1. What is the basic need of the public space?
2. What does one desire to achieve by this program?
3. Can it create a universal influence?
4. Is it open to one and all?
5. Does it promote a social dialogue?
6. Does it represent cultural displays and aspirations of the people and users?
7. Will it outlive its physical existence?
8. Will it enliven its users and surroundings?
9. Will it connect to every one?
10. Will it lead the way or remind of the past?
11. Is it ingenious and creates new perspectives?
12. Will the public space hold one's attention from now to a few generations down the line?
13. Is it inspiring? It is reformative? Is it a commentary – a dialogue – a pause?
14. Is the architecture for its own sake or to evoke a response that is a part of the national dialogue?
15. What does one gain by visiting this program?

This checklist must only be treated as a start-up for a thought process – the outcomes of which can be much more layered than the questions posed above.

**The State and the Public Program**

The state has lost its will to create an identity in architecture patronized by it. Bureaucratic processes have overtaken sensible discussions on design and often end up as either political displays or budgetary undertakings.

At the same time, with increasing prosperity, urbanization and awareness, the public program has expanded greatly. Hence, the resulting development is mostly a loss of opportunity. The responsibility of government is to help generate the identity by appointing experts and inviting public opinion, and not deciding the identity by itself. Instead of awarding architectural consultancy projects based on lowest tender, illegal favouritism and unwise judgements, if the state simply follows the Council of Architecture rules for holding competitions for each public project and awards entries judged by eminent experts in the region as well as representatives of the public, the process will bear more fruits.

That the identity should be judged by political leaders and administrative officers is a misconception which was born when the leaders of the independence movement became the representatives of the public and started churning out the program for independent India. Such projects should be judged by the people to whom public project truly belongs to with help of experts. This can be learned from case studies of public space creation programs in Europe where public space proposals are subject to a high level of scrutiny via public exhibition of design followed by debates and opinion polls. A unanimous decision to build something important is only taken after such consideration.

While the danger of excessive public opinion leading to a mediocre compromise is very much present, the architects should take the role of creative leaders who are capable of convincing the larger public about the possibilities of designed public environments, rather than shirk into private commissions. Maybe academics of architecture should look into juries as a mechanism to present the work to the public, and not merely members of the profession. This will not only increase the interaction with the general public, but also allow budding architects to be comfortable to the idea of a public input based design.

Responsibility of architects is to take collective action, take part in public tenders and to voice their views about wrong policies followed by government bodies. However, if we choose to continue down the current lane, architecture may become another technical field to be executed by faceless organizations that do not struggle to create identities, but just provide functional solutions.

**Conclusion**
There is an increasing demand to evolve a glocal identity based on cultural symbolism that caters to all forms of cultures & moves beyond the 'isms' of spatial design. This requires spaces to act like chameleons, changing for various people, but always the same. Further, designers should explore the idea of public spaces, not just as monuments, but as vessels that promote a multi-cultural programme without losing their own identity.

Design of public spaces needs to tread this path carefully, if it were to be truly representative of the program without getting twisted within itself. Invention of identity for Indian public spaces will require daring experimentation. It is an art project that may fail in many circumstances and succeed only once. But that one success will allow creation of a new public will and thereby an Indian identity.

'*In your face*' architecture should make space for a contextual, layered and thought provoking architecture. Like the arts, architecture should not merely depict reality, but enhance, transcend or provide new perspectives. One may look at architecture as an artistic expression and provide identity via deconstruction of the basic *rasa*, to better serve an architectural palette based on

ordering principles of art.

The need of the hour, however, is a more democratic space that allows a series of expressions. The vocabulary of this identity should be based on the inherent mix and accommodative nature of the Indian thought process. We require invention of a new aesthetic that will override all the pot-pourri seen currently and project the identity of India that is as addictive as the idea of India in the world.

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## Abstract

Opium for the masses is a photo-essay that documents contemporary poetics of public space design in India by peeling away the superficial layers to display its construct of art, aesthetics and intent. The essay compares literal and perceived notions of public spaces by people having varying sensibilities evolved from the different cultures, geographies and lifestyles that co-exist in India, in order to derive the building blocks for a contemporary language of Indian public space design that will transcend the designer's sensibilities and evolve into a study in social design.

Crafting the process of creating opium for the masses involves looking for patterns that appeal to diverse cultural sensibilities, evolving metaphors / abstractions from the same and using them to address the public domain through a larger social program.

## List of Photos

1. Bikanerwala, Gurgaon, NCR
   Varying and often contradictory preferences often manifests into a quirky pot-pourri of architectural languages into a single program

2. Kingdom of Dreams, Gurgaon, NCR
   "A little bit here, a little bit there; is not better than a lot of it everywhere!"

3. Sanskar Kendra, Ahmedabad
   "Excuse me, when is the wedding?" "Tomorrow night… (pauses).. It's not a single one, it's a group wedding." "Oh! How many?" "25… you want to see?"

4. 10 Acres Mall, Ahmedabad
   "This is just like our mohalla in the old city… and we can sit here just like that, watching people go by…"

5. Kankaria Lake, Ahmedabad
   "Reflections, the moon and the stars, far away, into the water and sky – we are lost in our own dreams"

6. Law Garden, Ahmedabad
   "There are all kinds of games here, video games and car rides. I love this place! We come here atleast once every month" – Pinki (interview)

7. Roadside Café, SG Highway, Ahmedabad
   Public spaces are visited to experience social interaction, change, recreation, viewing people, etc. But more importantly these are places where people go to paint their own worlds – virtual graffiti!

8. Herwitz Gallery, Ahmedabad
   An exhibition space that draws visitors to its cocoon provoking thought at every step through its displays, while squeezing them close in order to generate interactions

9. Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad
   "I am very happy after know about Gandhi. It was seriously very great. He was a true Indian and I will always came here when I will upset. This is the place where    a person will be happy". – Sharon (entry in guest-book)

**Authors**

***Sandip Patil*** is a young landscape architect whose involvement in the profession ranges from private to public landscapes in various parts of India. He is also an assistant professor at the post-graduate program in landscape architecture of CEPT University. As a teacher, he sets upon himself to establish a cohesive process from wherein both the teacher and the student emerge with greater clarity and purpose of their endeavour.

***Shilpa Gavane*** is a photographer and an architect. She completed her post-graduation in photography from NID. Her primary interest lies in portraying the quality of urban life. Her recent projects include 'Ecological Utopia', 'Lakes of Ahmedabad', and Domestic workers. While her initial works tend towards formal abstraction, later works are contemporary, questioning the purpose and meaning of photography. She has experimented with cyanotypes, hand printing them on linen. Her works have been published and also exhibited in group shows at New Delhi and Ahmedabad.

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