

Framing Fragments

The Image, Modernity, and Architecture

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Fig. 55: Mumbai, Marine Drive Boulevard in the 1960s.



The Image as a Site of Architectural Production

Architecture, we could say, might seem inseparable from its image. This essay reflects on such a relationship within the realm of writing *architectural* histories of modernity. Here, we could argue how the image operates as a site of consuming architecture through the photograph—which in a sense, is as integral to informing and producing knowledge of architecture as other key representative forms like drawing or writing. We may also speculate, even discover evidence of how often photographic images shape the practice of architectural designers.

The role such images, particularly photographs, play in historically situating and inscribing architecture seems far less questionable (for reasons to keep this text focussed on the material at hand, I'm conscious of leaving out from this discussion the moving image or motion picture, or for that matter the more current, virtual, modes of simulating spatial and architectural reality). Those writing about, describing, analysing, or lecturing on architecture often rely, rather than the actual artefact, on an object that represents it. They lean on visuals to speak about spaces they haven't walked through, sought refuge from the heat or cold in, felt the warmth of light or the cold of shadow within, surfaces they haven't touched. Seldom have they experienced architecture 'in the flesh', so to speak. Some conscientious architectural historians take exception to such an approach. To stay true to the "articles of the discipline", for instance, Reyner Banham impressed upon a research student in the 1980s—a student who later became the acclaimed scholar Adrian Forty—how a historian must write only about those buildings, spaces, or places s/he has seen or personally experienced.¹

Yet, such a thing can be considered the privilege of those for whom international or intercontinental mobility is an easy affordance. Beyond those in post-imperial societies, the question of how accessible travel might be remains open. It is possible, for instance, to speculate about the asymmetries of how many visual bodies of work produced by Indian travellers and photographers travelling in Britain or Europe or America in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries, stack up against those of individuals and groups from such societies travelling to India. Or whether travellers from other post-colonial societies such as Indonesia or Vietnam have as much to say about the Dutch or French as the latter have to say about them. I will not get into these debates here. But the limits to transporting ourselves to the places or experiencing spaces and buildings we want to write about, far too many to describe, prompt our turn to the photograph. Today, in the age of social media, students, educators, practitioners, or even potential clients across the world might see

1 Forty, Adrian, *Concrete and culture: a material history*, London, Reaktion Books, 2012.

and ‘experience’ architecture on Instagram or Archdaily far more than in person. Historically thus, as in the present, the image of architecture emerging from the photograph and architecture itself are tied a dialogic relationship.

Yet, just as physical distance separates us from buildings and spaces we wish to think of or write about, so does time. Oddly, this temporal aspect equalises different constituencies, privileged travellers or not. Such a time-space distance proffers, to say the least, one of the prime openings for architectural histories to be written. Photographs are integral to negotiating such a distance—even if, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, in a photograph “something has actually to be *constructed*, something artificial, something set up” (emphasis in original).² It is in this sense that this essay reflects on the role the present collection of postcards from India. It reflects on the plural, fragmented and uneven nature of modernity as observed through the photographic image as a site of architectural production.

Fig. 56: Mumbai, Churchgate and the Eros Cinema in the 1970s.



2 Benjamin, Walter, “A short history of photography” (1931), *Screen*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1972; p.5–26.

Fragments and Fiction

In his seminal thesis, Kenneth Boulding reminds us that the image is a form of knowledge making that transcends what we witness. Reflecting on how such knowledge is rendered mutable through the “message [that] hits an image”, Boulding argues that, when contested, images remain “resistant to change”.³ Collectively considered, the postcards we witness in this collection assert many kinds of change, however. They appear, again collectively, far from singular in the image they construct of architectural modernity in Indian cities. Individually straddling a staggering range of time, each visual fragment portrays not just the changing stylistic and spatial character of buildings, environments and spaces, but also photographic and representational techniques; the hand-painted, sometimes oversaturated, colours of the Taj Mahal Hotel or General Post Office (GPO) in Bombay, the Imperial Hotel and Ashoka Hotel in New Delhi, and the Kalighat Temple and pontoon bridge spanning the Hooghly in Calcutta are particularly conspicuous in this respect.

Specific photographs bear testimony to the resistance to change that the makers of such images might have experienced. The juxtaposition of colonial (and post-colonial) modernity with more indigenous modes of transport, for example, occupies the focal point of Bombay’s GPO, the horse-drawn ‘ekka’,⁴ as opposed to the European carriage. In Bombay itself, a lone pedestrian walks along a traffic median at Churchgate, offering a foreground to busy traffic surrounding a modernist edifice, ostensibly the offices of “Finlay’s Fabrics”. Bullock carts traverse the paved streets fronting the expansive 1800s-built Writers Buildings of Calcutta around the Holwell memorial, commemorating the sinister Black Hole

3 Boulding, Kenneth E., *The Image, Knowledge in Life and Society*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1956; p.7–8.

4 An ‘ekka’ is a two-seater vehicle drawn by a horse, as opposed to a multi-seater where the horse-driver and passengers are separated, the latter often occupying a compartment in the rear.

incident of the eighteenth century.⁵ A bullock cart also appears in front of the elegant Crawford Market in Bombay. Some photographs also construct juxtapositions: the spherical, or onion-shaped domes dominating the images of a hybrid architectural setting, the mosque on Muhammad Ali Road, while also forming a backdrop (the Prince of Wales Museum), to the photograph of a modern automobile speeding past Durga Bajpai's understated Jehangir Art Gallery.

The indigenous denizens of these Indian metropolises seem to resist experiences of colonial and modernist architecture or respond to it with practical exigencies—an everyday resistance of inhabiting modern spaces, perhaps of the kind that Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash posit.⁶ Conversely, counterparts from their erstwhile, racially dominant societies seem to cling to India's new-found architectural modernity in the post-colonial period. A couple of images take us, to recall Thorstein Veblen, into their world of conspicuous consumption,⁷ a world of extravagant leisure within luxury hotels such as the Sun and Sand in Bombay or the Oberoi Inter-continental in New Delhi.

All such images are but fragments. But how do we interpret them? They appear to construct a fiction of Indian cities and environments resisting the onslaught of both colonial modernity and the architectural modernism that followed. Indian cities, their architectures, and the experiences of these cities and architectures, we are told through these photographs, did not yield so easily to the imperatives, perhaps also a fiction, of a universal modernity. Rather, they complicate the story. These spaces, buildings, and environments, seem to assert that modernity is hybrid and plural. Rather than a robust category applicable across cultures and societies, architecture meets its adversary in

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- 5 Hill, S.C., *Indian Records' Series, Bengal in 1756–57*, Volume III, London, John Murray, 1905; p.131–53.
 - 6 Haynes, Douglas; Prakash, Gyan (eds.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991; p.1–22.
 - 7 Veblen, Thorstein, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, New York, B.W. Huebach, 1918; p. 68–101.

them. Domesticated by its many inhabitants, cities and architecture emerge as porous and leaky, both as conceptual and physical containers of modernity, also a kind of delicate bubble in which the conspicuous consumption of modernity is held by some.

The Photographic Gaze: From Above and Below

About half of the postcards of this collection view urban spaces from above. In their wide, sweeping view of the cityscape, we are compelled to recall Swati Chattopadhyay's critique of the grandiose, how "an aesthetics of big scale dominates our historical imagination".⁸ Still, photographs of particular buildings, seen from the eye level, comprise a third of the collection. This brings us, finally, to two interrelated questions. What happens when we photograph buildings and urban spaces? Does the photograph, with its colours, forms, lights, details, animate our imagination and understanding of modern architecture?

Fig. 57: Kolkata, Brabourne Road in the 1960s.



8 Chattopadhyay, Swati, "Architectural History or a Geography of Small Spaces?", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, March 2022/1, vol. 81; p. 5–20.

Or do photographs, little more than a shadow of reality, deprive us of the rich lived experience of architecture and urbanisms? These questions bring us back to the mythology of the popular image, embodied in the very medium of the postcard, perhaps a mode of speech, a meta-language of symbols and meanings of architectural modernity.

Yet, it is this aspect of the popular image that ushers in fresh ways of looking at modernity through Indian architecture and its metropolises. Images exist in a triad: the site of their production, the sites of their consumption and those of their interpretation—domains that include the creator, receiver as well as the researcher. More importantly, the image, while very much embedded in a modern technology of photography and printing, defies easy classification. This collection of postcards subverts the ways in which India entered the colonial gaze as a form of unchanging knowledge where architecture and cities are concerned.⁹ The very ambiguity of the image helps to transcend the colonial-modern impetus of labelling and classifying,¹⁰ a problem that very much populates architectural histories to the present day.¹¹ In effect, such an image of Indian modernity—as experienced through this collection of postcards—brings forth varying, competing and not necessarily coherent, perspectives through its architectural and urban spaces, both from above and below.

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- 9 Prakash, Gyan, *Another Reason: science and the imagination of modern India*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999; p.21–22.
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Fig. 58/59: Left: Mumbai, Mahatma Gandhi Memorial, Sanjay Gandhi National Park, 1969. Right: Chennai, Valluvar Kottam, Memorial to Poet Saint Thiruvalluvar, 1976.



Fig. 60/61: Left: Agra, Clarks Shiraz, 1950s. Right: Claridge's Hotel, New Delhi, 1955.



