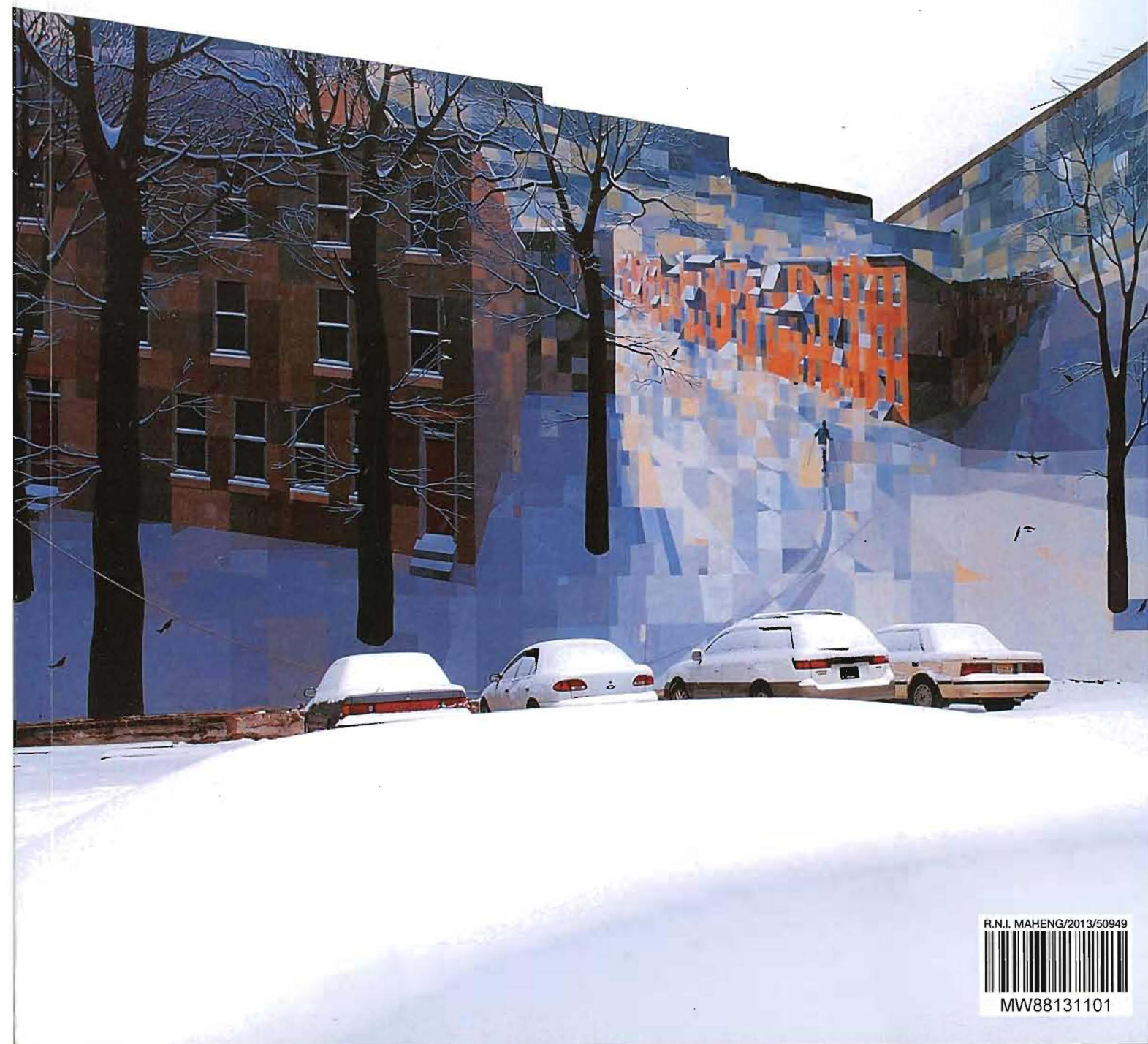


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“The meaningful addition of architecture and design into media and public debates is critical for transformation,” says **Martand Khosla**



In a recent weekend supplement of The Hindu, I was surprised to find architect Raj Rewal on the front page. The article was prompted by an upcoming retrospective being organised by the George Pompidou Centre in Paris on the architect. The article in some depth discussed the issues faced by our cities and the nature of solutions that Mr Rewal is thinking about as the head of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission.

My surprise at seeing the article in the newspaper stemmed from the great disappointment that I have felt over the years at the absence of architecture and design discourse within the broad sheet newspapers and television media in India. For a country that has been urbanising at such a tremendous pace, the omission of such an important component of our lives from the broader public realm is partially to blame for the urban

chaos that our cities have become. Our understanding of architecture and its role within our society has been reduced to purely regarding it in the form of capital, either as a generator of wealth or as a hedge to 'park' capital in a growing market.

This point does not need further illustrating, as the property pages of newspapers are testimony to the fact that though the trading of built-up space may at times cover up to 20% of a newspaper, whereas any opinion or critique of its design may make at best an annual appearance. This is no doubt about the symptomatic of a society where education from an early age reluctantly includes art, creative writing and music. Though over the decades book reviews, performance art reviews along with fine art reviews have made their way into the broader



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news media, somehow architecture has been unable to create such a space for itself within this public domain. However, this is not to say that design discourse is absent. It exists within the realm of a number of periodicals ranging from academic critiques to announcing the latest trends in wallpaper colours.

For the large part most of these publications remain a vehicle 'for the architects, by the architects' and certain others find their way into affluent homes and dentists' waiting areas from where misconceptions about the role of architects and their decorative functions are strengthened.

Limiting the discourse on design to home furnishing and interiors has led to the present crisis of our time, where architecture is increasingly regarded as a provider of cold or warm shells and design is seen as a surface treatment of the inside of these containers.

For the affluent, architecture largely exists somewhere between an external facade cladding and an air conditioned cell module. For a large number of our urban self-built landscapes, the owner/builder combined architecture is understood as a maximisation of the interpretation of the built form. Lastly, and perhaps the most significant contributor to the urban visual landscape,

are the public agencies for whom architecture has come to be known as the lowest bid in a tender process.

Though indeed this is a lament of the present predicament, my intention is to return to my earlier point: the basic lack of awareness and public discussion of the possibilities and reach of architecture within our urban fabric.

While reading various international newspapers online, over the past year, three particular events in London sprang out from an architectural perspective. The first was the incredible honour bestowed upon Charles Correa by the Royal Institute of British Architects by holding a retrospective of his work on the occasion of Mr Correa donating his entire archives to the RIBA.

The news of this event was accompanied by a tinge of sadness at the thought that there was no such institution in India to archive important architectural works. The second event was an ongoing exhibition of the works of architect Richard Rogers at the Royal Academy on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The book that accompanied this exhibition had such a varied list of contributors from artists to politicians, underscoring the entrenchment of architecture in British society and the potential to receive, appropriate and critique

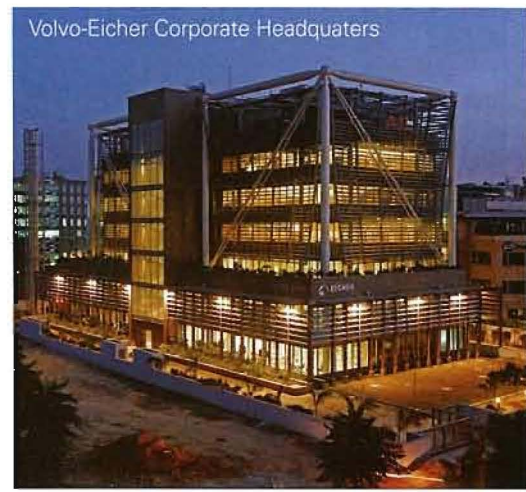
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architecture through a variety of media.

The last event was one associated with the recently concluded Design Week in London. Over its final weekend, several iconic buildings, public and private, which are closed to the public throughout the year welcomed visitors into them. From the reports, the lines for entry were several hundred people long for each of these buildings, which included the Lloyds bank head quarters, the Gherkin and Battersea power station. London, perhaps more so than several other global cities has a particularly vibrant space for urban debate, which is a broad based platform not only open to citizens, it is also welcomes contributions from them. These interventions have led to numerous policy changes and reversals which have contributed to the evolution of an inclusive city, where the residents feel empowered through knowledge to have a voice in a democratic urban evolution.

I am not attempting to make direct co-relations or comparisons between a global city centre like London with Indian ones. Rather, what should interest us is that all three public events were widely covered in the national newspapers and extremely well attended by a variety of people. The mandate for managing a large city like London includes contributions from citizens associations and debates within the public realm -- the beginning of this moment was no doubt a concerted effort towards public awareness. And this is where we can begin here at home. Considering that a large proportion of people who commission buildings in India understand architecture to be decorative facades and sparkling interiors, and the urban planners see parks and buildings as a hindrance to automobile movements, the urgency of our situation is indeed severe. In my earlier interaction with media professionals, whenever I have suggested that architectural and urban issues be featured within the arts section, the two common responses have been the lack of interest in the readers and



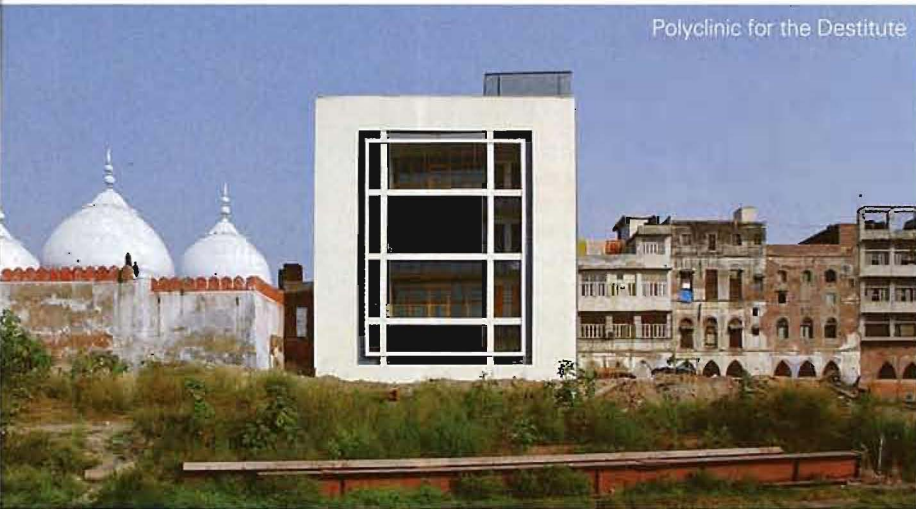
the absence of qualified writers and reporters to talk on the subject.

Neither of these challenges appears to be particularly insurmountable. In fact, I would venture to say that perhaps there is a reluctance to change the present paradigm. An attempt to democratise architecture ought to be a combined effort by the several periodicals and us, the architectural community, to write reviews and critiques of new and existing buildings and complexes from an approach not yet taken to speak about architecture.

We require critiques of the spatial qualities of a building, analysis from a social and material point of view, and above all encouragement of readers to explore spaces for themselves and re-look at parts of the city through different lenses.

Further, we must consider ways to engage the public – from childhood education to community events and public discourse – in discussions on architecture and design. Irrespective of how the serious world of architecture may view them, I might add, they have brought conversation on architecture into the most varied of spaces.

This is indeed our primary challenge in India, if we are to address our urban chaos and ensure that the built environment—and architecture itself—is indeed democratic, and the city a space owned by its population. The more vibrant and broad based that the debate becomes, the more we as a society will understand the complexities of the city and the role of architecture in its survival. We can hope to regard the city not just as a space in which the affluent carve out sealed designer bubbles to live, where migrants fit between the cracks. We can instead imagine a series of inclusive zones which allow for elegant public spaces and built solutions; we can work towards development of an egalitarian urban society. The meaningful addition of architecture and design into national media and public debates is critical to force transformation in our aesthetic, social and urban outlook.



Martand Khosla, partner at Romi Khosla Design Studios, graduated from the Architectural Association in 2001. His work includes a wide range of projects like playgrounds for children, eco-friendly mud architecture, low-cost factory workers housing, high-end villas, institutional buildings and offices.