



What is built cannot be easily unbuilt. An increasingly entrenched tendering based 'design procurement' process for most public projects usually demand high turnovers for prequalification and eventually often reward the lowest bidder. This reinforces the status quo while leaving little room for innovation. In an increasing glut of concrete, space for radical and relevant architecture is diminishing.

When, by and large, the ecosystem of built architecture does not encourage innovation, it is worth exploring if the realm of unbuilt architecture can provide an alternative.

Amritha Ballal

What could have been, What can be

How the realm of the Architectural Unbuilt can shape the way we build

The term 'Unbuilt' marks a project by what it could not be. Given architecture's umbilical connection with 'building', the unbuilt is what gets left behind. Seen this way, each unbuilt project carries a touch of melancholy for ideas that could not come to fruition through the act of building.

A collection of unbuilt projects, such as this publication, offers compelling insight to what could have been, offering a counterpoint to the quality of our built architecture. What do we choose to build, and why? How do we choose what gets built and what remains unbuilt? When used for such inquiry, unbuilt architecture is no longer relegated to the detritus of architectural dreams. It serves instead as an important incubator and instigator of our built reality. This essay – as part of possibly the only recent compilation of unbuilt architecture in India – explores the potential of unbuilt architecture to act as mirror and muse to the built.

At this time of unprecedented urbanization, climate change and technological revolution, the challenges facing our habitats are multiplying faster than we can build solutions for them. In many cases, the act of building – or at least building without considering the overall impact – is becoming a large part of the problem. Buildings continue to be one of the largest producers of carbon dioxide and consumers of energy globally. India is building millions of square feet annually, and planning experts posit

that we need to build millions of square feet of space more to catch up with existing demand. In all this frenzy of building, astoundingly 7 Indian cities feature in the list of the 10 most polluted cities in the world¹. Delhi and Mumbai continue to languish near the bottom of the Global Livability Index and a whole slew of public and private projects have resulted in numbingly similar urban sprawls from Kanpur to Pune. While urban housing and infrastructure remain woefully under provided, what has been built has created in many cases lasting environmental degradation and social segregation in the urban fabric that might take decades to repair.

In the post-independence era, the body of work of the first generation of master architects in India – Charles Correa, B.V. Doshi, Habib Rehman, Raj Rewal, Urmila Eulie Chowdhury et al – collectively explored notions of modernity, cultural identity and social equity, beyond the immediate demands of their individual projects. A culture of competitions for key public commissions helped hone and refine a vision of how architecture could serve the needs of a nascent republic. Yielding both built and unbuilt projects, their work provided a homegrown, probing architectural lexicon for a young nation. Even if the answers weren't always satisfactory, bigger questions were asked of architecture.

A massive increase in construction activity post liberalization has prioritized building 'buildings' as an end unto itself, superseding the development

1. As reported by *The Guardian* on 5th March 2019, based on analysis of air pollution readings from 3,000 cities by Greenpeace and Air-visual; as per *The Guardian*, the data was collected from "public monitoring sources, such as government monitoring networks, supplemented with validated data from outdoor IQAir Air-visual monitors operated by private individuals and organizations."

of a coherent vision for our upcoming towns and cities. What we have built since the economic liberalization of the 1990s will last for generations to come. An increasingly entrenched tendering based 'design procurement' process for most public projects usually demand high turnovers for prequalification and often reward the lowest bidder. This reinforces the status quo while leaving little room for innovation. In an increasing glut of concrete, space for radical and relevant architecture is diminishing. While project commissions of the likes of the National War Memorial, the Bihar Museum and the Nalanda University mark an upswing in competitions prioritizing design quality as the primary criterion for awarding public commissions, they remain an exception in bureaucratic tendering processes.

What is built cannot be easily unbuilt. When the ecosystem of built architecture does not encourage innovation, it is worth exploring if the realm of unbuilt architecture can provide an alternative. When free of the constraints of 'building', there are examples of architects using unbuilt architecture as a powerful tool to navigate continually transforming paradigms. Some of these include theoretical explorations and fantastical creations that are completely in the ambit of unbuilt exploratory form and theory – the gravity-defying monumental forms by 18th Century theorist, Etienne-Louis Boullée, Archigram's hypothetical neo-futuristic creations, and Leon Krier's urban theory diagrams and doodles were architectural explorations that

existed firmly outside the realm of building. Closer to home, Gautam Bhatia's body of unbuilt work encompassing his artworks, writings and biting satire have provided an accessible platform for both architects and non-architects to reflect on the complexities and attendant absurdities of Indian architecture in its social, economic and political context. Younger practices such as The Busride in Mumbai use their social media platforms to pose provocative architectural hypotheses. Their 'Statues We Need' series employs satire to subvert the current obsession with giant statue building. These hypothetical works, ranging from 'The Sri Dara Singh Statue with memorial Infinity Jogging Track' to the 'MS Swaminathan Urban Farm and Bee Hotel' critique the massive deployment of public funds on statue projects.

Architecture as a hypothesis has also generated unbuilt works that were designed to be built but were so uncompromisingly ahead of their time that it seemed that the architect put their creation out there with a defiant hope that the right patron will recognize its potential eventually. For instance, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind and Peter Eisenman established their reputations and radical architectural visions through their unbuilt projects – usually, competition entries that didn't win or weren't realized – long before their first project was built. Competitions are fertile ground for radical approaches and ideas to capture the public's imagination and inform discourse, even if not realized immediately. However,

achieving this requires organizers to conceive architectural competitions as a platform to expand architectural thought and identify fresh, ground-breaking design. However, the culture of conducting competitions for important public commissions is not the norm in India and end results often abide by the status quo. Of the few competitions that are conducted, many have faced complaints of lack of transparency and professionalism. Recent examples of this malaise include the design competitions for Amravati Capital Complex in Andhra Pradesh and The War Museum in Delhi.²

Having participated in several key public competitions in India in the last decade and a half, we have had a ringside view on how the priorities of competition organizers impact the final outcome. SpaceMatters was established in 2005 when we won the competition for the Bhopal Gas Tragedy Memorial. As a brand-new practice of fresh graduates, the open entry and imaginative brief of the competition provided us with the rare access to a large and complex public project. The entries were anonymous and jury results were announced through a press release, keeping the process highly transparent. However, this was an experience of how even well-organized competitions are often disconnected from the framework required to see complex projects through the process of realization. The complex realities of building consensus amongst various stakeholders, navigating legal and environmental issues related

to the site and tragedy were not embedded in the competition brief and project vision. More than a decade since winning the competition we have stretched ourselves working on these crucial 'unbuilt' aspects of the project so that the project can be built true to its intention of memorializing the world's biggest industrial disaster in an inclusive, participatory manner.

In the Nalanda University competition, on the other hand, the competition itself seemed acutely concerned with the execution phase. We were one of the final eight shortlisted teams in collaboration with the Norwegian practice Snøhetta and Delhi-based firm Space Design. Arriving at a design that could match up to the breath-taking architecture of the original Nalanda University was no easy task; the competition was essentially a battle of ideas and vision. However, producing the mammoth deliverables took over the mood of the submission. Phase 1 of the projects added up to a built-up of upwards of 5,00,000 sq. ft, and the brief asked for 1:100 scale drawings of the main buildings as part of the competition entry. While the subsequent exhibition of entries at NGMA, Delhi showcased reams and reams of detailed drawings, hardly any schemes could match the legacy of the original. It is as if after having taken the pains to prequalify the best teams globally for the competition, the organizers wanted to test the 'real-worldliness' of these architects and see if they could actually churn out drawings – in other words, build.

2. *Michele Van Acker on behalf of Fumihiko Maki, "Architectural Competitions in India – Discussions with Fumihiko Maki, Maki and Associates, Tokyo", accessed 30th July 2019, <https://architecturelive.in/discussing-architectural-competitions-in-india-with-fumihiko-maki/>*

This undue stress on conservative 'build-ability' at the ideation stage is often at the detriment of radical thought and vision, typically yields entries that are competent and build-able but not necessarily exceptional. When even architectural competitions largely tend to play it safe, can our professional and academic institutions create platforms where unbuilt architecture is consciously utilized to provide space for disruptive, investigative architecture? Can unbuilt explorations offer a tantalizing glimpse of alternative futures, engage a wider audience, and spur debate in a manner that replaces apathy with ownership for how our built environment is shaping up?

As I write this, almost 700 acres of former government housing land in Delhi is up for redevelopment, ostensibly to provide housing for state employees. These new buildings will drastically alter the density and urban character of Delhi, with far reaching impacts; key neighbourhoods are already being bulldozed and the planned felling of approximately 17,000 trees has created a public outcry. Taken together, this is possibly the biggest transformation of South and Central Delhi in recent history. To put it into perspective, the old city of Shahjahanabad covers an approximate area of 1500 acres and the Central Vista of Lutyens' Zone covers 90 acres. Immense potential lies wasted as each individual parcel of land is being dealt with as a separate project with little vision or debate on what it would mean for the city as a whole. The

initial designs indicate that we risk bringing a chaotic mix of dated residential and commercial projects, reminiscent of the dreary, decade-old urban sprawl of Gurgaon and Noida into the heart of Delhi.

Imagine an alternative, wherein before jumping headlong into a building we could publicly debate, ideate, create, speculate and investigate in the ephemeral realm of the unbuilt, where we have the space to make mistakes instead of risking these consequences when we build. For the national capital, as for every other burgeoning city in the nation, unbuilt architecture provides the opportunity to conceptualize as well as gauge the merits of the impending built environment. Unbuilt architecture needs further attention as both hypothesis and provocation. As imagination recedes in the built environment, unbuilt architecture can emerge not just as creative incompletions but as the space for birthing radical ideas free from the constraints of the built. These ideas can be cautionary or inspiring, and they can pose questions or provide answers – one way or the other, they hold the potential to alter what we expect of the built.

Amritha Ballal