

NEWS

As part of an ongoing series featuring Mumbai's trailblazers reflecting on their underlying motivations in a changing city, architect and educator **Rahul Mehrotra** speaks about how Mumbai's leadership and elite have lost the aspiration to build a good society, pushing his beloved home city to the brink, while exploring how there's still room to make amends

MUMBAI IS IN A PURPOSELESS HURRY, DRIVEN ONLY BY GREED

Jane Borges

letters@hindustantimes.com

MUMBAI: It's been less than 24 hours since VB Gandhi Marg in Kala Ghoda, where architect-urbanist-educator Rahul Mehrotra's studio is located, was cordoned off. Just the previous day, the street and the connecting by-lanes had been emptied out and vehicles barred from entry. A stretch along the road was converted into a cozy alfresco dining space with shade sails to complete the look, and somewhere else, a pottery-maker had set up a stall on the ground. It was an important moment for the city—CM Devendra Fadnavis was inaugurating Mumbai's first pedestrian district.

But a day later, an hour before noon, it is business as usual. The street is peopled again with lawyers, visitors, brunch-goers, and the odd digital creator and their camera-wielding ally searching for a nook for their next content. Parked vehicles have replaced the outdoor dining, crowding the newly-paved grey basalt stretch on either end.

Mehrotra, founder principal of RMA Architects, who divides his time between Mumbai and Boston, and is here for his new exhibition, smiles as he relays bits about the inconvenience the inauguration had caused—and ultimately, to no end, following it up with a shrug. Having played a vital role in designating the Fort district as a conservation zone in the mid-1990s, Mehrotra's vision for the area is clearly different from the one implemented on the ground. He reserves his comment for much later in our conversation but feels that the obsession with creating "a post-card city" has taken it away from planning. "And conservation truly is a critical instrument of planning," he insists. Excerpts from the interview:

You have a new show, Contextures, curated by Ranjit Hoskote, devoted to your work and studio, RMA Architects. The last time we saw an exhibition on your practice was four years ago (curated by Kaiwan Mehta). How different is this one going to be?

For more than 15 years now, Ranjit, Kaiwan and I have been having conversations about the need to bring architecture into galleries and museums. While art occupies a lot of space in these institutions, architecture continues to remain largely absent. Simultaneously, we despair about the built environment around us. This led us to work on art exhibitions [in 2016, 2018 and 2021].

The latest edition, which Ranjit has taken the lead on, is thematically linked to a conference convened by the three of us in March called Radical Contextuality. In this exhibition, Ranjit has been looking at the idea of how one can nuance and more radically imagine a reading of the context architects work in—the context, as we would describe when we teach students in architecture school, is the climate and the physical makeup of a place, and the geology of the site. Some of us who are more ambitious excavate the hidden histories of the site. But one can also place one's work in a much broader context of politics, culture and society. Ranjit is interested in trying to understand how architecture is nourished from this broader reading which makes it truly embedded in its location.

The show has been independently curated by him, with almost no participation from me except giving him the material he selected. For me, it has been an unusual experience, because I'm beginning to see a completely fresh take on my own work, which I might have intuitively felt, but was unable to articulate.



The Mumbai that we should all dream about is one where everyone lives in dignity, says architect, urban planner and educator Rahul Mehrotra. RAJU SHINDE/ HT PHOTO

Over the last few years, Mumbai has undergone a dramatic transformation. The Coastal Road continues to redefine the city's coastline, and new metro lines and link roads are being planned, often at the cost of forests and mangroves. What are your thoughts on the direction the city's development is taking?

Let me illustrate this anecdotally. When these incredible freeways opened to the public—and naturally, I have used them—I tried to solicit a reaction from my colleagues. It was always limited to expressions like, "Now, I can get to the airport within 20 minutes", or, "I can finally come from Bandra for dinner to South Bombay". These were clearly responses that came from the elite who own cars, and who had felt stifled in terms of their individual mobility.

If you look at this more objectively, I think the bigger, not moral, question is the trade-offs that we have chosen, which means how many people are going to benefit from this infrastructure. In Mumbai, it's going to be only 10 or 12 per cent of people who use or own a private car. This means that the massive infrastructure disruption to the waterfront ecology, at a time of climate change and rising sea levels, is benefitting just a maximum 12 per cent of the population. Now, if 70 per cent of people use the train system, could we instead have

invested a fraction of that money in air-conditioned trains and stations, state-of-the-art toilets and catering facilities, or terminals designed to improve last-mile connectivity?

Any city evolves through evolutionary and revolutionary modes. Social anthropologist Clifford Geertz used "involution" to describe Indonesian rice farmers who, because of a World Bank project, were compelled to become more productive. So, instead of growing one or two crops, they were forced to do multi-cropping—cultivate three to four crops simultaneously—making it a very complex system. It became highly productive, but it led to "involution" or internal complexity, which while incredibly efficient was susceptible to malfunction. Evolution would have involved diversifying into multiple modes.

In the context of cities, this is important. In Mumbai, the last evolutionary move was New Bombay. Since then, we have never imagined the city as a larger ecology. It's all about involution. Redevelopment is the ultimate fantasy of involution—we are able to house more people as we build vertically, but we are locking all our assets in a limited space, and making the same space more complex to use.

For planning any city, it is the relationship between livelihoods, dwelling or housing, and mobility that is critical—a holy trinity! And then the location of amenities follows logically. If mobility is efficient and subsidised, we can open up well connected affordable land for people to live. Today, the oil crisis has caused a breakdown of the American suburbia, because it's dependent on individual mobility to create a workable relationship between dwelling and livelihood locations. Unfortunately, in Mumbai we are not paying enough attention to this trinity of domains.

Mumbai is perhaps the most expensive slum in the world. I'm astounded when I go to the homes of wealthy friends; the quality that surrounds them is incredibly decrepit. You arrive at an oasis and that doesn't make for a healthy city. If the transitions between public, semi-public, sacred, semi-private and private spaces are not seamless, it's not a great city. In many cities we admire, whether in Europe or elsewhere, this transition between the spectrum of public to private-ness is usually very seamless. In Indian cities, they are brutally abrupt. And, that's a good indication that we haven't got our urban form and larger urban culture right.

RAHUL MEHROTRA, Architect and educator

Having been so invested in Mumbai's built heritage and influencing policy around it, do you feel the city authorities today are sensitive to heritage?

The city is in a purposeless hurry! For many, it's a golden goose and everyone is trying to extract as many eggs as soon as they can. The nexus between politicians and developers is now evidently blatant. So planning and infrastructure choice are made to exploit land values. And therefore, in my mind it's only greed that is driving the city. Our leadership and the elite seem to have lost the aspiration for making a good society and are focused on the good life. Unless one can put people at the centre of planning imaginations and control or calibrate that greed, we'll never get a society that is focused on the civic, realm, the commons, equity and a greater empathy towards the poor in the city.

The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes what is happening in our city as a "deployment of weapons of mass construction".

Mumbai is perhaps the most expensive

slum in the world. I'm astounded when I go to the homes of wealthy friends; the quality that surrounds them is incredibly decrepit. You arrive at an oasis and that doesn't make for a healthy city. If the transitions between public, semi-public, sacred, semi-private and private spaces are not seamless, it's not a great city. In many cities we admire, whether in Europe or elsewhere, this transition between the spectrum of public to private-ness is usually very seamless. In Indian cities, they are brutally abrupt. And, that's a good indication that we haven't got our urban form and larger urban culture right.

Your studio is located on Mumbai's first pedestrianized district. Do you think this is a step in the right direction?

When we talk about pedestrianization of a historic area like the Fort district, it has to be done as a much broader planning exercise. Which means one has to address parking and alternate modes of public mobility like hop-on hop-off buses that ease the movement of people who have decided not to bring their cars in. It also means pedestrianizing several other streets simultaneously, so that it can operate as a network. Infrastructure has to be conceived holistically. You have to anticipate what the implications of that infrastructure would be, who it would benefit, and then create a strategy to implement it. I think what we are seeing within the 100 yards at Kala Ghoda is at best a poorly conceived expensive token.

As a young architect in Mumbai, you worked very closely with the late historian Sharada Dwivedi. The two of you wrote nearly 12 books together, including 'Bombay: The Cities Within'. How instrumental a force was she in

your life?

Sharada was very important for my work in Mumbai because she was an insight into a "Bombay" that I didn't really know.

I had grown up in Mumbai and of course knew the city and its culture, but I was not nostalgic for the old lost city of Bombay. In hindsight, I am very thankful to Sharada to have sensitised me to the assets of Mumbai beyond what I had researched as a student [at CEPT in Ahmedabad and Harvard University in Massachusetts].

Spending time with her, and researching and accessing archives, helped me understand more deeply the processes that had made Mumbai. And by learning about these processes—social, cultural, institutional—I was able to understand the DNA of the city better. It was this understanding that later equipped me, for example, to work with my colleagues Sandhya Sawant, David Cardoz, Foy Nissen, Shyam Chaiyani, among others, where we got the Fort area designated as a conservation zone.

This confidence Sharada helped build. She was a friend, a partner in terms of the scholarship we constructed, and my best sounding board in trying to understand the politics that surrounded me as a professional in Mumbai.

You married architect Nondita Correa Mehrotra, daughter of the late legendary architect Charles Correa. Given your shared backgrounds, what do you both most enjoy discussing?

For most part, my wife worked with Charles Correa and was really a partner in many of his later projects after the 1990s, which is also when we got married. I had worked with him for three years before that, but then felt I should have an independent practise and not let these two lives overlap. And so, she continued working with him till his passing. We have since been working together on some projects. I think what has been fantastic is that we don't spend our evenings discussing architecture, but when we travel together we enjoy visiting buildings and cities and make architecture central to the time we spend together.

How has the late Charles Correa informed your work?

What I value were two things. One was his professionalism. He was meticulously professional, not just in the way he worked, but in his ideological and ethical positions, and in the sense of responsibility he felt towards his clients and society more broadly. I think he carried that as a very conscious burden. More than that, I also learnt the responsibility an architect has to articulate, share, and communicate with society their values, their position, and what they believe is important for society.

A dream you have for Mumbai which has still been unrealised?

The Mumbai that we should all dream about is one where everyone lives in dignity. And I think the only solution, given the size of the city, is to shift very rapidly into large metropolitan imaginations, where we invest in infrastructure and other modes that open up serviced land that is affordable and mobility that can connect us all in an equitable way. So, land, equity to land and dignity of living is most important. I think if people have homes where they can live in dignity, they will construct their livelihoods, and they will more than survive. But the home will be very central to that imagination.

Forest dept proposes conservation tag for more than 20 wildlife spots

Yogesh Naik

yogesh.naik@hindustantimes.com

MUMBAI: The state forest department has proposed declaring more than 1,835 hectares of ecologically sensitive land across 20 locations as conservation reserves in a move aimed at strengthening protection for Maharashtra's rich flora and fauna. However, several of the proposals have run into resistance over concerns ranging from infrastructure projects and tourism to real estate development.

The proposed conservation reserves are spread across Gaganbawda, Ajara-Bhudariga, Taharabad, Velhe-Mulshi, Naneghat, Bhorigirga, Dindori, Surgana, Kareghat, Chinchpada, Alibag, Ghera-Manikgad, Rajmachi, Lonavala, Gumtara, Jawhar, Dahamani, Asherigad,



Both forest minister Ganesh Naik and chief minister Devendra Fadnavis agreed to make Nerul's DPS Lake a conservation reserve to protect the flamingoes, but there is no order yet. PRATIK CHORGHE/HT

Ekara and DPS Lake in Navi Mumbai.

While national parks and wildlife sanctuaries enjoy the highest level of legal protection, conservation reserves are government-owned protected areas that typically function as wild-

life corridors or buffer zones connecting existing protected forests. Forest officials said bringing these areas under the conservation reserve category would significantly strengthen protection for wildlife habitats and biodiversity across the

state. Despite the scientific backing, several proposals remain stuck. Kishor Rithe, director of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and a member of the State Wildlife Board, said many of the proposed conservation reserves have been facing stiff opposition. "These proposals are being met with a lot of opposition. The best example is that of the DPS Lake in Navi Mumbai. I told the forest minister Ganesh Naik and chief minister Devendra Fadnavis to make it a conservation reserve so that there is greater protection. They both agreed as we have to save the flamingos that come there. But there is no order yet," said Rithe. Forest department officials said the proposal to declare DPS Lake a conservation reserve has been held up due to objections from Cidco.

Hospital assault: HC orders Sena corporator Mhatre to surrender

HT Correspondent

letters@hindustantimes.com

MUMBAI: In a special sitting, the Bombay High Court on Saturday stayed a magisterial order granting bail to Shiv Sena corporator, Ramesh Mhatre, who was arrested for assaulting doctors and other staff at a civic hospital in Dombivli along with his associates on July 6.

The court has ordered Mhatre to surrender to the police on Sunday.

A division bench of acting Chief Justice Ravindra Ghuge and Justice Gautam Ankhad stayed the order granting Mhatre bail, "considering the gravity and seriousness of the issue and the perversity" noticed in the lower court order. The court kept the order passed by the Kalyan court on July 14 in abeyance until further orders.



Shiv Sena corporator Ramesh Mhatre (in white shirt) was caught on CCTV footage assaulting doctors at the Shastri Nagar Municipal Hospital in Dombivli.

The bench has ordered Mhatre to surrender to the Vishnu Nagar police station, where an FIR has been registered against him and his associates, by 5:00pm on Sunday. It has given the police the liberty to take appropriate legal steps, including getting Mhatre's immovable properties attached, if he fails to

surrender and remains untraceable.

The high court has taken suo motu cognisance of the Kalyan court's orders granting Mhatre bail despite the outrage over the assault on civic doctors. Apart from Mhatre, the court has also named the other accused, Ramesh Pawar, Pramod Nikam and

Akshay Karande as respondents to the suo motu petition, which has been posted for further hearing on July 22.

Mhatre and three accomplices were arrested on July 8, two days after they allegedly attacked two doctors and other staff members at the Shastri Nagar Municipal Hospital in Dombivli. The assault followed a complaint that a woman, nine months pregnant and with pregnancy-related complications, was denied admission because there were no beds available in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) of the hospital.

The incident led to widespread outrage from the medical fraternity after a CCTV video of the assault went viral on social media. The Maharashtra unit of the Indian Medical Association has announced a 24-hour strike of medical services on July 20.