
Quest for Identity

Charles Correa

What is identity? Firstly, it is a process, and not a 'found' object. It may be likened to the trail left by civilisation as it moves through history. The trail is the culture, or identity, of that civilisation

Secondly, being a process, identity cannot be fabricated. We develop our identity by tackling what we perceive to be our real problems. For instance, Europeans pioneered the industrial revolution, without worrying about their identity. They came out of it all the richer for their efforts, while remaining French, English or German.

Thirdly, identity is not a self-conscious thing. We may talk about French logic, but the French are not trying to be French-logical. They're simply trying to be logical; it's we who watch them and say "That's very French".

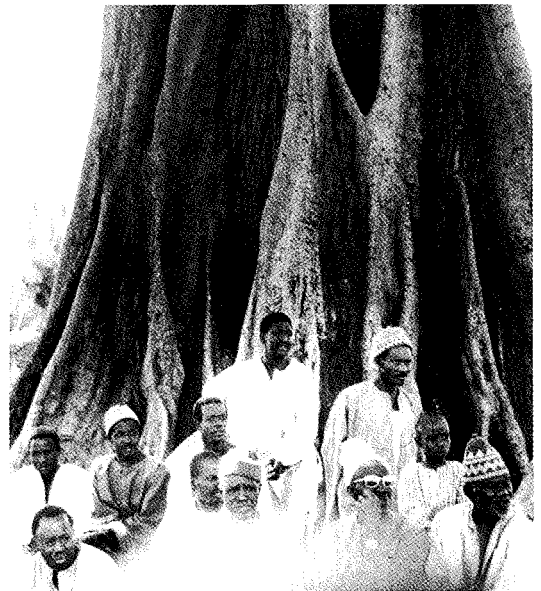
We find our identity by understanding ourselves, and our environment. Any attempt to short circuit this process of understanding, or to fabricate an identity, would be dangerous to us all. It would be manipulation, a kind of signalling. A signal is quite distinct from a symbol, for it implies a Pavlovian reaction, a manipulated response. In other words, one person waves a flag whereupon everyone else jumps up and salutes. If an architect, after travelling around the world, were to return to India, and attempt to reproduce there a glass building he saw in New York, he would simply be transmitting signals. But if, on the other hand, he were to take the principles of architecture, and apply them to a completely different set of materials, customs, climate and traditions, he might put up a contemporary building which isn't all glass but which is very relevant to its locale — and to identity.

Climate is a crucial determinant in this process. For instance, the question of whether a church should be an enclosed box, or a mosque have a courtyard, would depend on where they were being built. Places like India, Malaysia and Indonesia require through-ventilation, because of their hot humid climates. So how do we take the principles of Islam and Christian-

ity and integrate them with these environments?

I find that climate helps determine form on two different levels: One, it is an immediate determinant, finding expression in courtyards (hot, dry) or in through-ventilation (hot, humid). Two, at a much deeper level, climate helps determine the patterns of culture and rituals. And in that deeper sense, since it is a primary determinant of ritual, it also determines built form.

So this search for identity could give us a much greater sensitivity not only to our environment, but to ourselves and to the society in which we live. It is a by-product of looking at our real problems, rather than self-consciously trying to find identity as an end in itself, without worrying about the issues we face. Here, in my experience, are four of them:



African village. In a warm climate people have a different relationship to built form.

Living Patterns

In a warm climate, people have a very different relationship to built-form. One needs but a minimal amount of protection, such as a Chatri (i.e. an overhead canopy), during the day; in the early morning and at night, the best place to be of course, is outdoors, under the open sky.

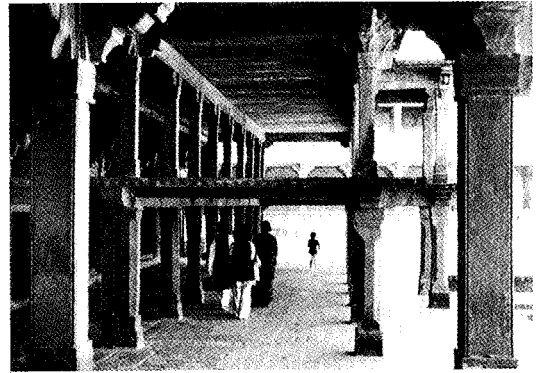
Thus, in Asia, the symbol of enlightenment has never been the school building, but rather the guru sitting under a banyan tree; and the monumental temples of south India are experienced not just as gopurams and shrines, but as a movement through the great open-to-sky spaces that lie between them. This movement — which is unknown in a cold climate — has always been a decisive factor in the spatial and functional organisation in Indian architecture (from Fatehpur-Sikri to Shrirangam).



The Guru under the tree.

Energy-Passive Buildings

In a Third World country like India, we simply cannot afford to squander the kind of energy required to construct — and aircondition — a glass tower in a tropical climate. And this, of course, is an advantage; for it means that the building must itself, through its very form, create the “controls” which the user needs. Such a response necessitates more than just sun angles and louvres; its needs must involve the section, plan, shape, in short: the very heart of the building.



Fatehpur-Sikri A different relationship to built form.



Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad

To cross a desert and enter a house around a courtyard is a pleasure beyond mere photogenic image-making; it is the quality of light, and the ambience of moving air, that forms the essence of our experience. Architecture as a mechanism for dealing with the elements (truly, a machine for living!), this is the great challenge of our Third World

Urbanisation

The rural migrants pour into our cities. They are looking not merely for houses, but for jobs, education, opportunity. Is the architect, with his highly specialised skills, of any relevance to them? This will remain the central issue of our profession for the next three decades. To find how, where, and when he can be useful is the only way the architect can stretch the boundaries of his vision beyond the succession of middle and upper income commissions that encapsulate the profession in Asia.

The Nature of Change

We live in countries of great cultural heritage. Countries which wear their past as easily as a woman

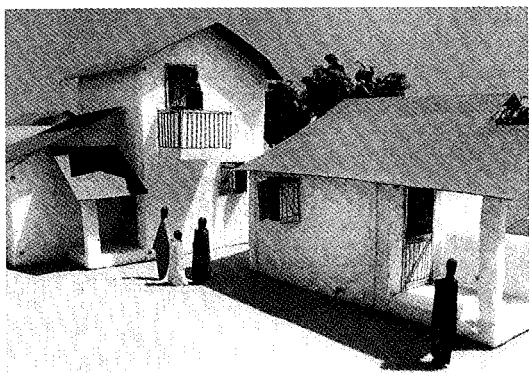
drapes her sari. But in understanding and using this past, let us never forget the actual living conditions of many of the peoples of Asia, and their desperate struggle to shape a better future. Only a decadent architecture looks obsessively backward (“I have seen the past, and it works”) At its most vital, architecture is an agent of change; to invent tomorrow: that is its finest function.

I would like to end with this image of Bombay's skyline — with the squatters in the foreground. Those buildings on the skyline although ugly represent to the squatters the dream world they will never enter, but which they struggle to attain. Can we ever really understand what people's aspirations are?

You know, about 15 years ago, when hippies first started coming to Bombay, a lot of rich Indians objected violently to seeing these Europeans sitting begging on the pavements, with torn clothes, lice in their hair, etc. It was difficult to understand their reaction, because one sees a lot of Indians in those conditions, and no one seems to mind. But a friend of mine said: Don't you realise, if you're a rich Indian travelling in your Mercedes, and you see this hippie, he's signalling to you, and he's saying: “I'm coming from where you're going! It's not worth going there!” So it's deeply disturbing to the rich Indian. But wait



Squatters along railway lines



Low-income housing, New Bombay.



A social occasion Squatters on the outskirts of Bombay living in pipes left behind by the municipal workers.

a minute; it should also work the other way round. If the hippie were sensitive enough, he'd look at this monster in his Mercedes and realise he's also sending the same signal. In other words, we are but ships that pass in the night. Perhaps I have no moral right to question these people's aspirations any more than they mine.

All photographs courtesy of Charles Correa