

RED ALERT: DESTRUCTION OF A UNIVERSAL MASTERPIECE, INDIAN INSTITUTE OF
MANAGEMENT, AHMEDABAD, LOUIS I. KAHN

IN DEFENCE OF ARCHITECTURAL QUALITY

'What is Barbarism but an incapacity to recognise excellence'

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Dear All..Individuals..and Members of Institutions such as DOCOMO, ICOMOS, CICA, ICAQ, World Monuments Fund, IIMA Alumnae Aumni...all concerned with promoting and defending architectural quality.

(Dear Professor D'Souza, Director IIMA and Members of Governing Board of IIMA)

It is with great sadness that I received the news recently that the Administration of the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad has decided to demolish pretty well all of Kahn's masterpiece, the IIMA Campus designed in the early 1960s, and to replace it with some as yet unknown but certainly inferior architectural interventions. See enclosed announcement.

More than just a collection of buildings this is a citadel of learning, a collective entity fusing buildings and spaces between in an extraordinary unity, within which many complex conditions and social interactions occur. It weaves together solids and voids, light and shade, materiality and immateriality, in a timeless manner. A place of inspiration and even now of collective memory for generations, it supplies a rooted architecture of stunning authenticity full, of echoes from the past, yet embodying a social vision for the then newly independent, secular Republic of India.

But it is, or was, also the home of generations of students and faculty who have recalled in letters and interviews how the buildings themselves were part of their inspiration and education, even encouraging them to aspire to excellence in their own work and careers. One would not demolish an Oxbridge college and replace it with a collection of soulless two star hotels with bland spaces between them. But that is what is likely to happen at IIMA.

AS before, the reasons given are specious: to do with supposed structural instability and with lack of response to contemporary expectations of comfort. The first argument has been demolished before several times and the second is easy to solve in a country which has successfully transformed ruined fortresses and palaces into comfortable hotels. Improvements can also be made though relatively inexpensive landscaping. In fact, according to reports from Ahmedabad, the structures of IIMA have suffered from lack of proper maintenance for years. Some have called it negligence.

It would not be difficult to restore and shore up the masonry brick structures which also define superb external spaces for social interaction and the passage of breezes, then to insert more comfortable interiors in a tasteful minimalist way with fine furnishings supplied by top class Indian designers and high quality craftsmen and craftswomen. Ahmedabad has always existed on the knife edge between the rural and the industrial, and is after all the home of NID the National Institute of Design, which from the very start sought to integrate local craft and textile traditions with modernity. Let us not forget that this is the home of Gandhi, home spun cotton and a rich textile tradition.

IIMA need to think outside the box and realise that they have a chance to 'rebrand' their place in relation to a great local history and tradition, rather than a skin deep Americanisation.

There is a lack of transparency in these decisions. Apparently a team of engineers from IIT Roorkee prepared a report, but the IIMA administration is refusing to make this public. As for the 'architectural

assessment, this has been made by 'American architects', but there too there is a refusal to reveal their judgements, their criteria and even their identity. Why all this secrecy? Naturally there is suspicion of a 'white wash'.

One does not want to fossilise Kahn's scheme but one does need to respect its essential qualities, attributes and guiding principles. The challenge here is creative reuse, but in a manner that respects the integrity of the original; not the absolutely wasteful destruction of a masterpiece replaced by a third rate pastiche. Not to mention the huge waste of resources involved in destruction then construction of a new building. Is that IIMA's model for economic development in a time of scarcity and diminishing resources?

In mid December 2020 the Administration announced without warning that it was demolishing the 18 dormitories and I wrote immediately to the Director accusing IIMA of cultural vandalism (letter of 17/12/2020 enclosed below), sounded the international alarm with articles in Architectural Record , Architectural Review (enclosed), the Times of India and the Indian Express ,and the resistance was taken up all around the world by others in a splendid concerted movement (including international petitions, letters from major institutions such as MOMA, ICOMOS, DOCOMOMO etc) with the result that a temporary halt to this cultural vandalism was achieved.

In fact I warned about this situation back in 2014 in an article in the Architectural Review , 'Nothing is Sacred: Threats to Modern Architectural Masterpieces in India'. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/nothing-is-sacred-threats-to-modern-masterpieces-in-india> See also copy of article at foot of this message by scrolling down.

I followed up in the same year with a long reflection in the form of a dialogue 'Protecting Modern Masterpieces in India' in A+D India arguing for the need of World Heritage Status and protection. Enclosed as a file.

I should mention that my deep links to Ahmedabad stretch back nearly forty years, and that they have been consolidated through friendships, exhibitions, lectures, and in numerous texts on Le Corbusier, Kahn, Doshi, Correa, Raje, and traditional architecture including Gujurati stepped wells. If I was honoured in 2014 with a Golden Global Award by India, it was in part due to these extended activities and critical positions taken up in defence of modern architectural patrimony in the country.

Under the Modi regime smash and grab capitalism has flourished combined with an anti secular, anti democratic Hindu nationalism. Modern architecture associated with the Nehru period and with secular values and Nehruvian social projects has come under attack. Thus the recent illegal destruction of Raj Rewal's and Mahendra Raj's masterpiece of the early 1970s, the Hall of Nations in New Delhi (featured centrally in recent MOMA show on architecture in subcontinent), but also Rewal's neighbouring Nehru Memorial Museum.

This is a deliberate destruction of cultural and national memory to suit a particular political agenda and to bend to commercial greed. Even Le Corbusier's masterpieces in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad are not fully protected in a legal sense. Some years back moves were made to demolish Le Corbusier's Millowner's Association Building in Ahmedabad and to 'develop' the plot of land for profit. The price of everything and the value of nothing; that is the new India under a plutocracy and global capitalism.

Next in line has been the disastrous Central Vista project in New Delhi which has resulted in massive destruction of architectural patrimony, the construction of brutal office blocks that look as if they might be off a beltway in Texas, and a wedding cake style new Parliament decked out with skin deep historical references, all this the handy work of architect Bimal Patel, Modi's favourite architect, a clever operator but scarcely an architect of international note. See enclosed article WJRC June 2021.

By some charming picturesque coincidence this same Patel is President and Director of the CEPT (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology) School of Architecture in Ahmedabad and the chief architect of IIM Ahmedabad. He designed the modern campus across the road from Kahn, about as interesting as the average commercial office park.

Patel is also involved in cutting a route through ancient Benares and is designing a pet Modi project which will vulgarise and undermine the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad. This involves messing around with the fine work there by Charles Correa., the Gandhi Ashram Museum of 1961. Nothing is sacred where modern architecture in India is concerned.

Ahmedabad and the surrounding rural areas also owe him the gift of a polluted and dead lake at its heart due to the damming of the Sabarmati River. If this were to flow again it would be a great benefit to the city and to villages and towns up and down stream.

One might have hoped that the CEPT (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology), once the leading architectural school in India, would be on the side of right in the fight to defend architectural excellence. But this may be a vain hope. On the website of the CEPT architecture department one finds links under the general heading 'Towards a Critical Project and a Project of Criticism'. These make curious reading and viewing.

In the name of an on site 'criticism' one finds Doshi's Sangath with its superb vaults replaced by angled roofs with about the interest of a low grade alpine hotel; Correa's Gandhi Ashram with its function changed, partitions blocking the easy flow of space, and the floating plinth blended into the ground; Le Corbusier's Capitol in Chandigarh endowed with what looks like a commercial business park, the open air theatre under the Open Hand filled in, and a portion of the Tower of Shadows smashed and removed; IIMA with gratuitous additions and subtractions, with the superb Vikram Sarabhai Library turned into an administration building ,and with several other calamitous interventions which ruin the fine Kahn scheme.

The strangest of all is a proposed intervention in the sublime church space of Le Corbusier's Monastery of La Tourette near Lyon in France. This is being 'improved' by shifting the altar to the far end between the choir stalls, by illuminating the shadowy organ box and by affixing a crude cross, also by adding candy coloured lighting to the gap between ceiling and walls where normally there is a crack of day light. Le Corbusier identified the altar as the energy point of the room, giving rise to 'ineffable space' 'espace indicible'...but someone at CEPT knows better.

'Towards a Critical Project and a Project of Criticism' does seem a misnomer for these ill judged ignorant changes. Of course the whole thing smacks of one more post modern game in 'criticality' and 'inter textuality' but the effect is to destroy masterpieces behind a pretentious academic smoke screen. At a time when such buildings are under threat from malignant political forces, this seems like an unwise path to pursue...unless, that is, there are ulterior motives?

'Something is rotten in the state of Denmark', as Shakespeare put it in Hamlet. Is one now to say that 'Something is rotten in the state of things in Ahmedabad?' Despite pretence at academic neutrality, is there not the danger that the teachers and authors of these misguided interventions may be regarded as 'useful idiots' in the overall destructive scheming of powerful interests?

Maybe the course should be renamed 'Uncritical Interventions: Strategies for Ruining Modern Masterpieces' ? What a disappointing state of affairs. In turn it opens a Pandora's box of deregulated interference with existing buildings of quality. If the central aim of criticism is the identification of quality, this CEPT exercise ends up doing the opposite, promoting the destruction of quality.

But why stop there? Why be restricted to the modern era? Why not shift the axes at Fatehpur Sikri (16th century) to suit some contemporary whim, as is being proposed for the capitol in Chandigarh? Why not move the ceremonial lingam in the sublime Elephanta Cave (5th century) so that it is easier for tourists to see it on arrival? Why not mess around a bit with the Taj Mahal in a 'critical exercise of architectural criticism'? The thing is this: IIMA is a Fatehpur Sikri of the future: it should be preserved in its entirety as part of Indian and universal patrimony.

One learns ,by the way, that the next site in line for the 'critical project' is the campus of CEPT itself. As

it happens there is also an architectural project to redo parts of the CEPT campus. The architect?..
....Join up the dotted lines.

So here we are again two years down the line defending Kahn's magisterial city of learning at IIMA against the short term interests of the institution housed there. In fact as temporary residents of a universal masterpiece, the administrators have long term responsibilities as custodians of a heritage that should be handed on with pride to future generations.

Ideally they should continue to restore the buildings while adapting them intelligently and sensitively to present and future needs. An IIMA thus restored should acquire the status of Universal Patrimony of Humanity, UNESCO Protection. And the administrators could take pride in that, instead of coming across as wreckers of a masterpiece that stands equal with other great buildings in India's heritage. Nothing less will do.

For the moment I wished to share this information with you along with several of my own earlier critiques, but we are talking about a universal masterpiece and this destruction will set a terrible precedent. People will say 'If the prestigious institution IIMA knocks down its buildings, so may we'. In my opinion this whole saga is already a blot on the reputation of IIMA which likes to think of itself as a world class institution.

What now? You may wish to act in any way that you can: via press, political connections, institutional pressure, students groups (why not start with CEPT?), petitions and more. Or even by writing open letters to the Director and Governing Board of IIMA. If so address these to both the Director and the Governing Board and use the email below. I have copied in Dr D'Souza and the Board of Governors. BUT ABOVE ALL ACT NOW !

Professor Errol D'Souza

Director Indian Institute Management Ahmedabad

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The recent IIMA announcement makes for curious reading. Half of the text is taken up with vaunting the new supposedly improved website (some alumni object to it!). The rest to a discussion repeating and dusting off previous evasive 'reasons' for knocking the place down. Meanwhile the dormitories already stand empty, the student life and energy evacuated from them, their animating spirit gone. If IIMA Administration do go ahead, I hope that the demolition will be filmed, along with the rumbling and crashing of bulldozers and the scrunching sounds of broken bricks and collapsing walls. That visionary Vikram Sarabhai who was the main force behind the foundation, must be turning in his grave.

Mercantile concerns are allowed to triumph over human and cultural concerns: this is 'business today' in the era of 'disaster capitalism'.

At a time in which violence and war are destroying lives and buildings, it is appalling to think that in peacetime a major institution would destroy a masterpiece of its own volition, then replace it with a pastiche of itself. What has the world come to? Where is there any sense of values? It would be tragic if Kahn's great work were to be demolished when it can certainly be restored and refurbished. It is so rare to find architecture of this level in any period or place in the history of architecture. Kahn's IIM is timeless but of its time.

Yours sincerely

William Curtis