

The global meets the local – or does it?

Le Corbusier Memorial Lecture, Chandigarh 2010
By Henrik Valeur

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to speak here, in memory of Le Corbusier, one of the truly great masters of architecture, in Chandigarh, which is, in many respects, his most important masterpiece.

But I will not speak so much about the past, but rather about the future. And the important role architects can play in shaping the future.

[Sandcastle]

I am an architect and I somehow owe that to India.

When I was 19 years old I was in Goa, sitting on the beach at the water's edge building a sandcastle. Two Indian guys were going up and down the beach on bicycles. As you know, the beaches of Goa are very long and at that time there were not very many people. Maybe at every kilometer or so, there would be a girl in bikini. The two guys were quite shy, so when they passed one of the girls they would very quickly turn their heads to the side and then look straight ahead again. But when they got to me they stopped completely. This was too weird, a grown-up building sandcastles. Then I knew, that was what I wanted to do.

Architecture, even if it is only made of sand and only lasting a few minutes, can have a great impact on people!

CO-EVOLUTION

[Co-evolution Venice exterior]

One of the "sandcastles" I have built is CO-EVOLUTION. It was a project of collaboration between young Danish architects and Chinese architecture students and professors on sustainable urban development in China, which I curated for the Architecture Biennale in Venice in 2006, where it was awarded the main prize, the Golden Lion.

[Co-evolution Venice interior]

The intention of CO-EVOLUTION was to generate new and sustainable solutions to the challenges related to rapid urban development in some of the biggest Chinese cities.

[Co-evolution Chongqing]

This project from Chongqing proposes to replace the black mountains of coal with a new city shaped like green mountains.

The use of coal is not only very polluting, working in the coalmines is also the most deadly job in China.

[Co-evolution Beijing]

This project from Beijing proposes to make money on sustainability, by using polluted soil to make bricks for new buildings.

[Co-evolution Shanghai]

And this project from Shanghai proposes a new revolution – not a red one, but a green one!

[Co-evolution collaboration]

Co-evolution, however, is not about revolution but about evolution. It is about evolving together by sharing our knowledge, ideas and experiences.

[Co-evolution process]

To do that the Chinese participants traveled once to Denmark and the Danish participants traveled twice to China. In addition, the Chinese professors lectured at both schools of architecture in Denmark and a Danish professor lectured at all four Chinese universities. And my curator team traveled back and forth.

So much traveling is obviously not very good for the environment ... the environment that we were trying to save!

But let me just give you one example why it is important to meet - face to face: when I was living in Shanghai I often took my bicycle to work, but it was a bit difficult because many of the streets were only for cars. I asked my Chinese friend, who is a professor of transportation and land-use in Shanghai, why that is. He said that in the beginning of the 1980's, when China was still a very isolated country, some local planners had read in a foreign magazine that public transportation is good and private transportation is bad. Now in the beginning of the 1980's there were no cars in China, so the planners thought that private transportation was the bicycle. Therefore they wanted to get rid of bicycles and have some more polluting buses instead.

The Local and the Global

With globalization we have more possibilities for exchange. It does not only have to be a "race to the bottom", in which global companies shop around for the cheapest labor, the weakest regulations etc. It can also be "a race to the top", in which we try to improve both human and natural environments – not by copying each other, but by learning from each other!

[Gherkin Tower by Norman Foster, 2001-03 London]

Today, in the global competition between cities, each city is trying to be unique.

[Torre Agbar by Jean Nouvel, 2001-04 Barcelona]

European cities by having the same buildings!?

[Kuala Lumpur]

And Asian cities by having so many different buildings ...

[Shenzhen]

... that they all look the same!

[Chandigarh forest]

In this competition Chandigarh holds an interesting position, as it *is* actually unique - not only in India, but in the world!

It is the only city planned by Le Corbusier, and, as I understand it, the only planned city in India.

I don't know if this is the reason why it is also the richest city in India, but how can you question the planning of the richest city?

So I don't want to do that. Instead I want to point out some challenges that Le Corbusier could not have imagined, for instance the incredible power of globalization (a process in which India is now playing a key role) and the global environmental crisis (which may have a huge effect on India's possibilities for development).

One of the reasons for the environmental crisis is the massive use of cars, especially in the West. It is very difficult for me, coming from the West, to tell you not to drive cars, but if you repeat all of our mistakes the consequences could be catastrophic.

Especially for the people who are most vulnerable to climate change, pollution and resource depletion – and that is the poor!

Even though we have way too many cars in Denmark, a city like Copenhagen (our capital) has actually tried for several years now to discourage the use of cars, by making it difficult to get around and park the car. At the same time they have been trying to encourage the use of bicycles and walking.

I think Copenhagen could learn a great deal from Chandigarh in terms of making the urban environment greener, but maybe you could learn something from Copenhagen in terms of traffic planning.

At least it seems to me that the planning of Chandigarh favors the car at the expense of more eco-friendly forms of transportation. The reason is probably that Le Corbusier - and many others - saw the car as a symbol of modernization, and not a symbol of pollution and congestion, as we do today.

The fact that these challenges could not have been imagined only fifty years ago, constitute a profound paradox of architecture – that we are creating visions for the future, but our visions are based on and informed by the present, and the only thing we know for sure about the future is that it will not be like the present.

Development Urbanism

Nowhere is that more clear than in our cities, which are constantly changing and constantly provoking change.

Cities provoke changes of existing orders, both in nature and among people. But without urbanization there wouldn't be much development!

Since the first civilization in the Indus Valley development has been closely linked to urbanization. This can also be seen in China today, where the change of focus from developing the rural areas to develop the cities, has helped lifting several hundred million people out of extreme poverty.

I guess something similar is now happening in India – though maybe at a slightly slower pace.

[McKinsey report]

According to a recent report from McKinsey (McKinsey Institute Analysis, India Urbanization 2010): *China has embraced and shaped urbanization while India is still waking up to its urban reality and its inherent opportunities.*

[Chinese urbanization]

If this is so, then India has the chance to learn from China – from its failures as well as its successes.

The failures have to do with the environment, both the natural environment, which is under immense pressure from urban development, but also the urban environment, which is suffering, not only from bad air quality and congestion, but also from irrational planning decisions, which is often the direct result of corruption ...

[Shanghai housing]

... and from soulless architecture resulting from a combination of centralized planning and raw market economies.

The successes of urban development are, however, so overwhelming, that the question is not if urbanization is good or bad.

The question is how we make it good?

The answer to this question may change from time to time and from place to place.

[Chang'an]

But sometimes the answer is the same across time and place. Maybe this city plan reminds you of something?

It is not Chandigarh. It is Chang'an - more than a thousand years ago the capital city of the Tang dynasty in China with a population of one million people. To the north of the city are the mountains and a lake. At the extreme north of the city is the emperor's palace and the government buildings. The rich live in the northern part of the city while the poor live in the southern part. The city consists of 108 wards and each ward, was enclosed by a wall.

There are also many similarities today, between the development in China and the development in India, but there are also important differences. One of these differences is the democratic tradition of India.

Democratic architecture

In China there is no real dialogue between the people and the government; there is only a monologue. The government is telling the people what to do, but without a dialogue people don't understand why and the government doesn't understand why the people don't understand.

Because of this, the solution to the environmental crisis in China has become a purely technical issue. Of course, one part of the solution has to do with technology, but another part has to do with culture, with our habits and behavior.

Therefore, the democratization of architecture *could* be a way to a more sustainable future.

[3KRe1]

This is a planning project we did for a suburban development outside Copenhagen.

Instead of designing the buildings first we decided to first design the areas in between and around the buildings.

We invited five young architecture office offices to each lead a group of experts and artists, neighbors, developers, investors and other potential stakeholders.

The groups developed idea projects in a five-days workshop.

[3KRe2]

Some of the results would never have been possible without this participatory approach.

And the masterplan would never have reached the same degree of complexity.

[Role play]

This is a combined role-play and scenario game we invented for the planning process of a creative city, where we invited local politicians to play the roles of the various people involved in and affected by the project.

[1-1 Sketch model]

This is an idea of something we call a 1:1 sketch model, in which we use vegetation and other cheap means to create a one-to-one mock-up that gives people a sense of proposals for future development before they are actually effectuated, and thus provides the basis for a qualified dialogue.

[Change Design Model]

This is what we call a Change Design Model, in which buildings and landscapes can be changed and modified, according to changing needs and demands.

[Bat-Yam Landscape Biennale in Israel]

And this is not our project, but from a landscape biennale in Israel. It shows what I mean by “democratic architecture” – namely an architecture that is (at least partly) developed and maintained by its users.

Self-organizing Architecture

This could also be called self-organized architecture.

It may lead to a certain loss of control for the architect, but it may also lead to a vast range of new opportunities for our profession. And ... in addition, we may get architecture that is more flexible and self-sustaining.

Perhaps, a modern day Le Corbusier, would try to make as few decisions as possible, but have as many people as possible making them.

Brasilia

What would Le Corbusier do if he was still alive?

[Niemeyer architecture]

It is a hypothetical question, of course, but we *may* get an idea by looking at one of his contemporaries, Oscar Niemeyer, who is still an active architect, at the relatively young age of 103 years!

Niemeyer belongs to a generation who tried to meet the aspirations and confront the challenges of their time through a new kind of architecture. He was one of the three architects responsible for the design of Brasilia – the other planned modernist capital city from the same period as Chandigarh. As the only one of the three still alive he is also the only one allowed to make new designs in the central parts of the city.

In Brazil he is looked upon as some kind of God, and most Brazilian architects seem to have given up the possibility of producing something original themselves. Instead they are busy copying his style. And for the past several decades, Niemeyer has been busy doing the same.

While everyone is copying Niemeyer, including himself, no-one seems to pay attention to the real problems around them.

The problem with modernist architecture is not only that it tries to erase the past; it also obstructs the future!

[Favela]

Like any other emerging economy, Brazil is experiencing rapid urban migration, but since nothing can be changed in Brasilia, the waves of immigrants have to be accommodated in satellite cities surrounding the city. The result is that only the rich can now afford to live in the city itself, and the real city in which most people are now living, is not the city, but its sprawling periphery, which no-one cares about.

The result is destruction of nature on a massive scale.

Urban ecologies

[Chandigarh sector map]

If we want to live in harmony with nature we need to think of our cities, not as machines but as ecologies.

Chandigarh seems to be both!

The incorporation of nature makes it one of the world's only true urban ecologies, but the layout of functions and the traffic also makes it one of the world's most machinelike cities.

In Chandigarh it seems as if everything has been decided in advance, yet it also seems as if everything is still possible.

[Masdar]

A purely machinelike city would be Masdar in Abu Dhabi, which is being branded as the world's first CO₂ neutral city, but how can a city be CO₂ neutral, when it is located in the middle of a desert; when it is being built with materials that are shipped from all over the world; and it is being inhabited by people who will be flying in and out from all over the world together with the supplies they need for consumption?

And what will happen when they discover some better solutions and technologies tomorrow? How will they integrate them into a city where everything has already been designed?

[Shibam]

It would seem as if this traditional city (Kasbah) from the same region is actually a lot more CO₂ neutral than the most advanced, so-called CO₂ neutral city we can create today?

It is built of local materials; it uses natural ventilation and heat control; it is built for people who live in this area and who can sustain themselves here.

And it is adaptable to change!

[Termite mound]

But some even more CO₂ neutral cities, if you can call them cities, are these termite mounds.

At first glance they may look pretty simple, but when you study them more carefully you realize they are in fact highly sophisticated.

And they adapt to the local environment: the same species of termites will create different structures in different environments while different species will create the same structure in the same environment. They will also continuously modify and restore the structure following changes in the environment, thereby maintaining a stable state of equilibrium. The interior temperature is always exactly the same!

[Termites]

But how is it possible, that some of the environmentally most intelligent structures are built by some of the most stupid creatures?

Is it because a collective intelligence is superior to an individual? I guess that is what we hope for, when we vote for democracy!

Each termite performs a relatively simple task, unaware of the larger complexity and without centralized control or supervision.

This kind of self-organized architecture is ecological, adaptive and democratic.

And it evolves over time!

[Dance]

The biologist, Brian Goodwin, has called evolution a dance. It is not going anywhere it is simply exploring a space of opportunities. That's what I like to think we should be doing: creating spaces of opportunities!

Urban spaces, that is, which are accessible and inclusive and in which matter is recycled and regenerated in new and unpredictable ways.

And we should create those spaces together – not only architects and engineers, but everyone who has something to contribute with and everyone who is somehow affected

It is a matter of helping each other and learning from each other!

Workshop

[Workshop site]

That's what we have been working with in the workshop I've been conducting here this week – and again thank you Pradeep for inviting me!

We have worked with the possible interaction between the local and the global in the periphery of Chandigarh, which is neither city nor countryside. Or maybe it is both.

It is a new kind of urbanization, composed of extreme differentiation, which can be found all over the world today.

We have to pay very close attention to the development of these areas, because it is, in many ways, here - in the interface between the global and the local - our common future is being decided.

[Randiv Ghandi Technology Park]

On one side of the railroad line is the new Randiv Ghandi Technology Park ... and some holy cows.

[Informal Settlement]

And on the other side are the existing villages and informal settlements.

Architecture is about a lot of different things, but this week I have been reminded, once again, that it is primarily about people. Architecture is made *for* people and made *by* people.

The people in the area, which we worked with, were ...

[Infosys people]

The white-collar workers from Infosys and other IT companies in the technology park ... who are constantly looking at their watches.

[Village women]

The strong women in the village

[Migrant workers]

The hardworking migrants who are building the shining new IT palaces

[Slum kids]

The kids who are smiling ... even if they are living in slum

[Students in bus]

And us looking at them ... or them looking at us

[Site broken heart]

The task of this workshop was to try to understand this new kind of urbanization, in which the global and the local is, at the same time, very close to and very far away from each other.

Through the understanding of problems and possibilities, the students then developed proposals for interventions that could enable or provoke interaction between the two "worlds".

We need interaction to get to know and better understand each other. And we need that to feel more responsible for and take better care of each other.

[Students interview local]

The students conducted interviews with the people living and working in this area.

One of their findings was that biased perceptions and misconceptions of each other is perhaps the greatest obstacle for interaction.

[Workshop group1]

This group proposed many smaller points of intervention – and interaction - scattered around the site; a kind of service stations providing both practical service and learning facilities for all the different groups of people.

[Workshop group3]

This group proposed the almost opposite strategy; a coherent but differentiated landscape in the interface between the two worlds.

[Workshop group11]

And this group reminded us of the difference between what we architects imagine the street will look like and what it actually looks like after people have moved in.

The answer they proposed was better education of the people, so they would have more respect for the architecture. I am sorry to say, but I think it is us - the architects - who have to be better educated to understand the people.

Thank you very much for your attention!