



↑*Apocalyptic Dream* by *Albrecht Dürer*, 1525. John Berger writes, “The notion of the destruction of the world existed long before men had the means to destroy it themselves.”

At the still point of the turning world

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During our years of studentship, a statistic one occasionally came across, was of more than ninety percent building activity in India being carried out without the involvement of architects. It was the early 2000's and being mostly in circles of friends and acquaintances who belonged to the field of architecture, this reminder of smallness and irrelevance within the larger scheme of things always came as a bit of a shock. So much so, that few years later, when we heard Tatjana Schneider of *Spatial Agency* speak at a lecture in the city, her polemic about architecture being too important to be left alone to architects seemed outlandish and extremely first-world.

Out here, in India, we could see ourselves within the context of an old civilization, with continuing traditions of making through formats based on directness and personal involvement. In that first-hand framework, members of the profession were still seen with a degree of suspicion, struggling to win trust and be allowed to participate in shaping the 'real' world.

Cut to 2018. We were recently engaged to work on an affordable apartment housing project at the outskirts of the city. With units ranging from 600 Ft² to 850 Ft², there was constant pressure from the developers to reduce costs at each stage- from layouts and number of openings to the choice of finishes. Any resistance or argument from our side was usually shot down by a conscientious reminder that design in the given situation was entirely a part of the need-base & for the have-nots or at least for the have-very-less. Which was true, as most occupants were part of the lower income group who ran food-carts, drove auto-rickshaws, etc. and had to incur large bank loans for buying the apartments.

With this as the background, it was a revelation for us to find out in a post-occupancy survey, that a large number of households in the scheme had actually hired (mostly fresh) architects for the apartment's interior. Much more than financial viability, we were struck by how pervasive the idea of working with professional design consultants had become (a part of the need-base), even in sections of society where just a few years ago it would seem to be a complete improbability.



↑ *Office in a Small City* by Edward Hopper. 1953. *Is the office worker enjoying the view afforded by large openings or lonely in an uncertain place? A question left strangely hanging.*

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The flurry of architects and architectural activity over the past few years is not difficult to notice. With more acceptance, more avenues of involvement have opened up- more work for small and big firms, more architectural schools and graduates, more collaborations, more award ceremonies and so on. Most discussion about sustainability and reflective practice has moved beyond its earlier narrow definitions. The entire playing field seems to have opened up.

And yet, amidst the enthusiasm one also feels a sense of discontent. As one gets more and more involved with practice, teaching, networking, documenting, etc. one realizes that the prerequisite for belonging to the zeitgeist is a perpetual willingness to keep tripping on its hyper media-space. All of us are sincere, trying to do our bit, showcasing our efforts and – as a friend put it – caught up in the web of the present. Connect, and lose agency. And as a mark of the polarizing times we live in, the only alternative would be retreating into the deep silence of work's personal exploration- have agency but can't connect.

Is the multiplicity of paths and destinations illusive? *"They only make blobs, shards and perforated boxes nowadays"* says an old teacher, while a plethora of publications and online platforms showcase "new" ideas on a daily basis. For more confusion, there's more introspection through shows and exhibitions by practicing architects than ever before. So, the state of architecture is quickly established, then declared dead and so on as desperate attempts are made to replace the old mythos with a new one. Before starting to look at the content of such initiatives, their heightened need to break up and analyse the current situation, explain what's going on, is in itself a telling story about the loss of natural ground and shared assumptions. Content wise, the tizzy of self-consciousness and self-promotion plays out through the same old mix of strategies- yearning for a bygone era, heralding few contemporary projects, little bit about eco- something, private memory and public places, rediscovery and documentation of historical buildings and so on- all wrapped in layers and layers of mapping.

Perhaps it's not right to see these efforts in such pejorative terms (most of them make for good studies, painstakingly put together and benefit a large number of students, practitioners, et.al) It also, more than anything else, smacks of the writer's own anxieties and restlessness, his FOMO.



↑ *Portrait Surrounded by Artistic Devices* by **David Hockney**, 1965. *The near and far, inside and outside, planes and solids, personal feeling (the sitter is Hockney's father) and theoretical adherence (Hockney's consideration of Cezanne's work) are all held together in a single moment of deep feeling.*

How then, should we frame the question about (our) future of architecture?

In the same conversation, my friend also mentioned something she'd read about how communism as a structure of thinking could only become possible in the 20th century. And followed it up by asking, what has the 21th century made possible?

But it is precisely this way of setting up the question that creates a particular diagrammatic relationship between past, present and the future- with the two arrows in-between pointing always to the left and right respectively (past < present > future) Often troubled by the past, as architects, we are perpetually fascinated with the idea of making something possible in the future. We call what we do "projects", prophesising the experience of how something will play out, be seen, etc. in the time to come.

But if the future can only be constructed and not lived in, available only as a possibility later on, then, this way of diagramming condemns the present to live perpetually outside of its body.

Sometimes in rare moments of involvement & sheer immersion in the work, the present participle offers a moment of salvation, as the arrows in the diagram are reversed (past > present < future) Freed from the vicious cycle of expectation & despair or abstract speculations about things afar, the still space separating the architect and the work of architecture is charged by a spirit of invitation and homecoming.

ILLUSTRATION CREDITS

Fig 1. https://blog.gwup.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Duerer_Traumgesicht.jpg

Fig 2. <https://collectionapi.metmuseum.org/api/collection/v1/iiif/488730/1004971/> main-image

Fig 3. <https://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/hockney/hockney.artistic-devices.jpg> Illustration credits:

