

A case of assembled identity

Maria Jones and Ian McDonald reflect on a recent convention on *Globalisation and Regionalism*



Illustrations:
Ian McDonald

We knew it was going to be no ordinary convention when we saw the elephant. Welcoming visitors at the entrance, gaudily caparisoned and sporting an elaborate crimson parasol, he patiently posed for photographs in the gathering tropical dusk. But then, the southern Indian state of Kerala is no ordinary place. It was here – in the coastal town of Calicut – that the Indian Institute of Architects (IIA) held its recent National Convention.

The theme of this year's gathering was 'Globalisation and Regionalism'. Although currently celebrating 50 years of independence, India is only now opening up its economy to the international market and it still seems unsure how to harness the forces of globalisation for local benefit. We were anxious to see what Indian architects make of a debate which is already acknowledged in the West, but which could soon acquire new relevance for the fledgling regions of Britain following the devolution votes of last September.

In principle, globalisation is nothing new, and Calicut is certainly an appropriate location to discuss the influx of new ideas into India. Successive waves of foreign traders and invaders have come to Kerala's Malabar Coast in search of spices, sandalwood and ivory. Chinese traders sailed here from the court of Kublai Khan. Calicut itself was famed in medieval times for its powerful Muslim rulers, the Zamorins or 'Lords of the Sea', who attracted Arab, Jewish and Syrian Christian merchants to their tiny city state: a dazzling variety of cultures in overwhelmingly Hindu southern India. In 1498 Vasco da Gama landed at Calicut, heralding five centuries of European influence in India by the Portuguese, Dutch, French and finally the British.

Throughout it all, Kerala assimilated the cultural waves lapping at its shores with a strong local identity which would be the envy of many up-and-coming European regions. The tiny state combines strict Hindu observance with an ancient matriarchal system, modest codes of dress with wild and weird traditional dance costume, farming methods



unchanged since the dawn of agriculture with an education system the envy of the sub-continent: a 91% literacy rate being the proudest achievement of the world's first freely elected Marxist local government! If Kerala can balance such contradictions why not Wales, Scotland or the English regions?

The harsh tropical climate puts paid to the modernist 'white box', and most Keralan

building types shelter under steep, pagoda-like roofs of thatch or tile with cooling timber grilles instead of large window openings in the bamboo and mud cement walls. Even the mosques of Calicut's Muslim Lords shed domes and minar in favour of the ubiquitous pagoda, and Laurie Baker long ago reminded the Keralans of the importance of respecting their distinctive regional building tradition.

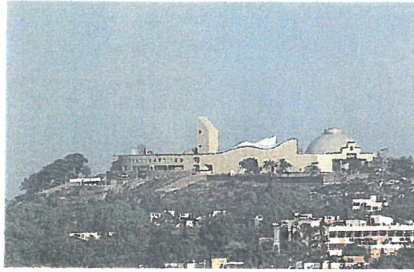
Medieval muslim mosque at Calicut, shedding the language of domes and minars for climatically appropriate pagoda like forms, with timber grilles for ventilation instead of large windows.



The similarities between our home country, Wales, and this exotic state came to mind. Both are situated on the western extremity of a landmass bounded by the sea, isolated to varying extents from invaders and ideas from the east. Wales too was subject to sea-borne influxes, by such groups as the Huguenots, French and Irish. A separate language, bilingual tradition and a strong rural identity are other common features. However the differences are vast – 2.9 million people out of a population of around 55 million compared with 29 million out of 950 million! India is slowly opening up its economy. Wales does not have to make such a choice: however it does have to rethink how to present itself within the United Kingdom, Europe and perhaps even at the proposed Council of the Isles.

On a national level, India, like all ancient cultures confronted with the new forces of globalisation, has a rich heritage of built forms which can be used or abused by incoming organisations. The result can be a genuine regionalism, but is more often mere 'exotic' pastiche.

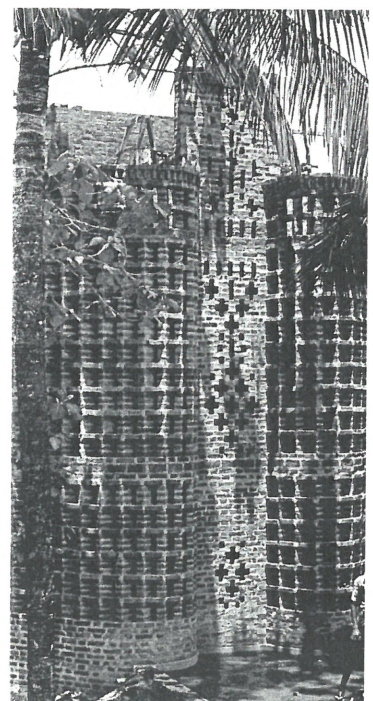
At the conference the strongest case for an Indian regionalism was put by Delhi-based designer K T Ravindran, who has himself built in Kerala. He maintained that architects need to act as 'barometers of our time', reaffirming but also continually subverting and re-inventing traditions and forms. Edwin Lutyens sublimely accomplished the latter at New Delhi, as most Indian commentators generously admit, but was emphatically no barometer for their culture which he despised as hopelessly inferior. Half a century on, India has its own post-Independence culture, and two recent projects by Charles Correa refer to an Indian tradition on a deeper level. The Jawahar Kala Kendra crafts museum in Jaipur takes as its starting point the ancient nine-square Hindu mandala on which the city itself is laid out. Perhaps more relevant to the Welsh situation is Correa's finally-completed State Assembly in Bhopal, which attempts an epic re-use of the domed Buddhist stupa at the nearby historic site of Sanchi. This huge sixth century structure is a truly timeless form, and here sits atop the Lower House Assembly



Left and below, plus facing page centre top and middle: the new State Assembly building for Bhopal by Charles Correa using timeless forms with regionalist associations. All photographs courtesy of Charles Correa.

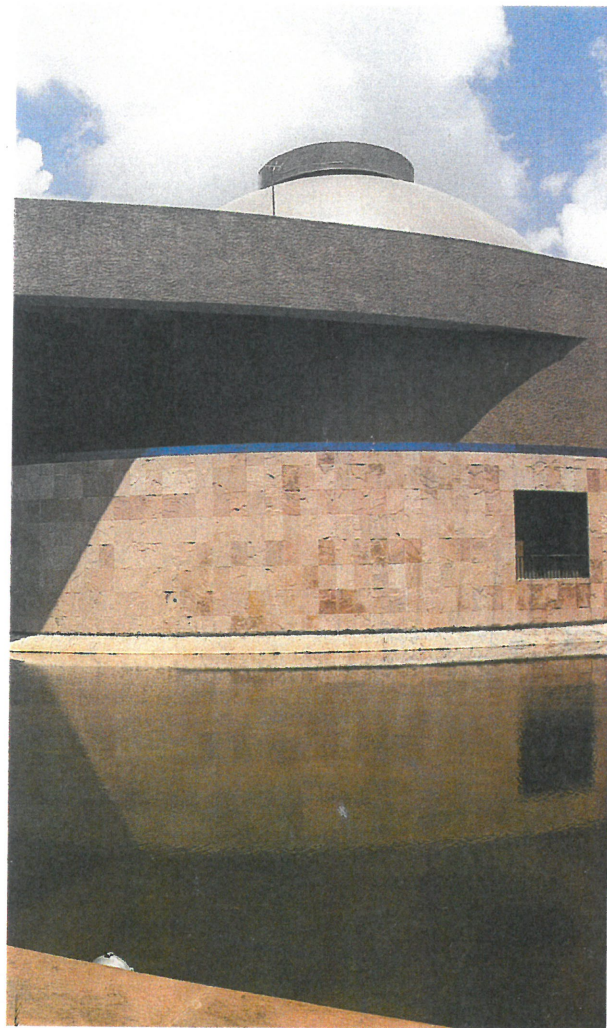
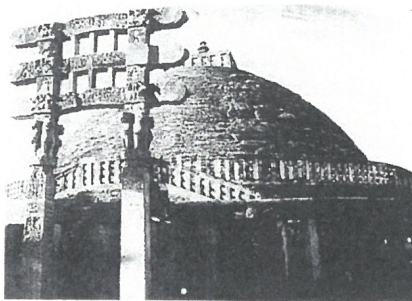


Right: Laurie Baker's intimately regionalist architecture; the women's hostel at the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum.



hall. Both projects are enhanced with mosaics and sculpture by local craftspeople and form an impressive addition to the cityscape.

The buildings of Kerala's most famous architectural resident, British-born Laurie Baker, may look 'traditional' due to their use of vernacular building methods and elements. However each house is planned with a rigorous attention to the clients' needs which would put most modernist 'machines for living in' to shame. Baker's constant presence on site allows for continual reassessment and



Above: The Stupa at Sanchi, the inspiration for Correa's Vidhan Sabha, the new parliament's largest assembly chamber (see right).
 Right centre: The Court of the People at Correa's Bhopal Assembly. A beautifully regionalist solution based on the geometry of 'ghat' and decorated by tribal artist Jagan Singh. Let us hope the best of contemporary Welsh art and craft will inform the conception of the new Assembly building, as well as adorning it.
 Bottom right: Karnataka State Legislature and Secretariat, the Vidhana Soudha, Bangalore 1956; impeccable revivalist pastiche, at the other extreme from Corbusier's Chandigarh. Let's hope the Welsh Assembly plumps for neither of these extremes.

adjustment as work progresses. The result is an impressive portfolio intensely rooted in locale, culture and user requirements.

Both Baker and Ravindran have re-used existing elements from demolished structures in their designs, and indeed this approach has a special resonance in the Asian context where buildings are often seen as part of a continuum rather than in the western 'museum style' approach. Architect and critic Romi Khosla has recently pointed out that, in the case of religious buildings in south Asia, *'the sanctity of a spot is more important than the building placed on it. The continuous additions and alterations that are carried out to such a structure are not perceived to be destructive in any way. On the contrary a stream of donations to a mosque or temple ensures that (it) is constantly being altered'*.¹ In such an environment, western concepts such as conservation, preservation, restoration and reconstruction are rendered meaningless.

However, without some critical appraisal, is exercised by Ravindran, Correa and Baker, regionalism descends into just another style. In this many Indian architects find condescending echoes of an earlier form of globalisation, the 19th century Orientalist Movement active under the British Raj, which sought to re-package suitably exotic elements of eastern cultures for middle-class western consumption. The immaculate but expensive work of Geoffrey Bawa, for example, applies impeccable vernacular design and detailing to luxury holiday accommodation. In a bizarre piece of cultural inversion, visitors to his Club Villa resort at Bentota pay a large amount of money

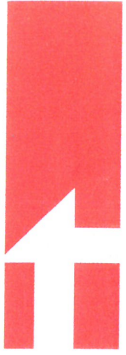
for the privilege of staying in an 'authentic' Sri Lankan cottage. Foreign tourists, here in India, are given the 'regionalist' experience at the equivalent of the St Fagans Museum of Welsh Life: Dakshinachitra near Madras, which boasts re-built dwellings from the neighbouring states. Theme dinners encompass traditional southern cuisine, catered by a 5 star hotel chain, and served on plantain leaves to visitors sitting cross-legged on the floor.

However, a regionalist approach need not involve the re-use of traditional features at all, and Malaysian architect Ken Yeang, in his keynote address, placed climatic response centre-stage with his thesis on the skyscraper, bioclimatically considered.

This theme was in turn taken up by Vijay Paranjpye, a noted environmentalist, who challenged the Gandhian rural idyll of India's 'one million villages' with the suggestion that such small settlements as needed should be turned into liveable medium-sized towns. Such a move may pre-empt the misery of whole-scale migration to the mega-cities and proto-suburban sprawl. It would certainly prove a strong creative challenge to India's architects and planners, many of whom – like their British counterparts avoiding the 'difficulties' of brown-field sites – prefer to work from a clean slate.

Perhaps the ultimate opportunity to express an emerging identity is the construction of a new parliament building. After Lutyens' *tour de force*, India's best known example is Le Corbusier's heroic state capital complex at Chandigarh, thoroughly modernist in approach, with no reference to India's past. In direct contrast is its lesser known contemporary, Bangalore's Vidhana Soudha, completed in 1956 to accommodate Karnataka State's Secretariat and Legislature. This is an imposing granite edifice designed in an unashamedly revivalist style with references to Hindu temple architecture – an extravagant pastiche impeccably executed. As mentioned previously, Correa's State Assembly at Bhopal is a building that re-evaluates India's past and is the epitome of a new regionalism.

What India does have on its side when confronted by the forces of globalisation is a



millennia-old tradition of tolerance and adaptation which enables it to transform outside influences with amazing subtlety. Despite setbacks, India continues to move forward, maybe not as fast as its east Asian neighbours, but without suffering their recent spectacular setbacks either. It is, perhaps, more like Rudyard Kipling's ponderous but resourceful elephant which, famously, 'could not gallop' but could catch an express train if it set its mind to it. ●



1. *The Persistence of Pre-Modernism – The Search for Authenticity in Central Asia, Tibet, India and Nepal* by Romi Khosla in *Contemporary Architecture and City Form – The South Asian Paradigm*: Marg Publications, Mumbai, 1997.

Touchstones...

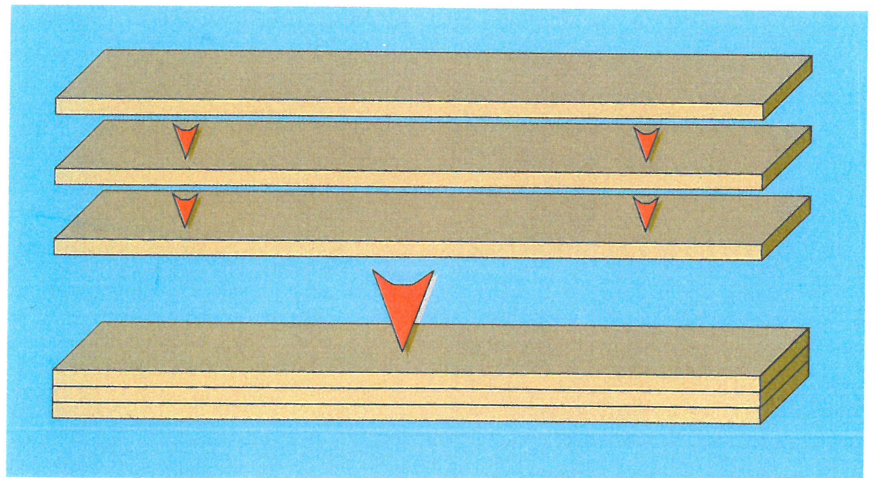
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