



IMAGES
CONTRIBUTE
TO
THE
MAKING
OF
SPACE

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France, 1991
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I grew up in Asnières, a 80.000 strong city only a few kilometers Northwest of Paris, in the first ring of the Paris «banlieues», where my parents settled in the mid-90s. As is the case with the Western suburbs of Paris, Asnières is quiet and affluent with a strong Catholic bourgeoisie. It is quite diverse socially, also featuring a mix of people with immigrant backgrounds living in social housing blocks in the Northern part of the city. While social segregation is enforced through the choice of private schools, I was lucky to go to public schools and have friends from a broad range of origins. Overall Asnières was unexciting but comfortable to grow up in.

I got interested in photography while on an exchange programme in Delhi¹ in 2010-11. I was studying social sciences back then with a focus on economics. Living in Delhi was a shock. I found a special love for this rough city. At first I used to walk around using the newly expanded Metro system as I did back home. Midway through the year I realized that cycling would be better suited to explore this gigantic city. It gave me a better sense of how places were connected to each other. I bought a bicycle and started photographing while going around. It was naive and spontaneous as I sought to capture the atmosphere of the places I visited. Sadly I was using a bridge digital camera and am despaired

today by the poor quality of the images.

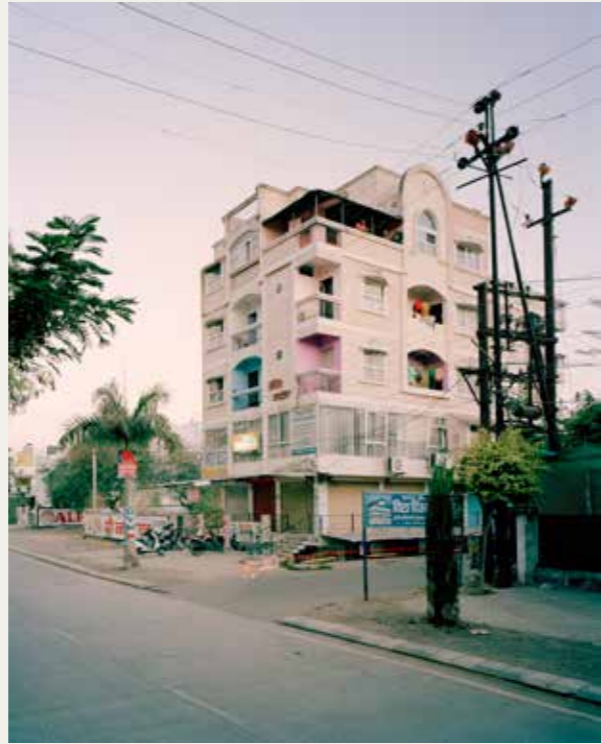
I came back to Delhi for three months on the next summer and kept on photographing the new places I visited. I quickly realized that I was drawn to the themes of protection, surveillance and social control. I had learnt about the violent history of Delhi by then, going back to the influx of refugees from the Partition in 1947 and to the 1984 massacres in which 3000 Sikh people were assassinated in Delhi as retaliation for the murder of the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi² by her Sikh bodyguards. Fear and paranoia have been ingrained in the lives of the people of Delhi since 1947 and it reflects in the city. Going back to the images taken at the time, I realize that they were influenced by this violent history I had come to know about. I had called the project 'Delhi Mental Space'. After completing a Masters in urban studies in Paris in 2013, I chose to study photography to continue to engage with the medium.

Studying at Louis Lumière gave me ample space and time to experiment with different techniques, from digital to film and alternative processes, while offering me the time to reflect on my practice and engage with other photographers. The most important part of the curriculum was writing my thesis about the representation of Indian cities in

documentary photography since the 90s, as I got to meet many photographers while confronting myself with the tropes coming with the subject. Louis Lumière made me more rounded and professional, while giving me foothold in the world of photography. I have fond memories of the courses given by Jean-Paul Gandolfo on darkroom printing and alternative processes. I also have a special affinity with Christophe Caudroy, who teaches studio photography and was my thesis director, thanks to our common interest in Asian cities and architecture. We follow each others' work with interest today.

Looking at society as a whole I would say that photography has grown from being a visual language to becoming an end in itself. Social media, especially Instagram, has sacralized it on one end, while emptying it of its meaning through the way that images are displayed and consumed. I am concerned and worried that the endless flux of images and information that we receive may make us numb, and find the instant gratification through likes and followers to be a distraction for me as a photographer and for people in general. My position is ambivalent as I find the tools useful to communicate and discover works by artists and photographers, yet after the early excitement about it I try to restrict my use of social media to a minimum as I find it distracting





Designed in the 80s by the Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi, the project Aranya, in the Central Indian city of Indore, is an experiment in provision of housing for the poor.

and frustrating at times. I still find that photography on social media is a powerful tool to express repressed or minority voices and as such contributes to a greater understanding of others and to openness.

I consider that my work is based on exploring spaces. I like to walk around the Paris suburbs in the same way that I used to cycle across Delhi. I am particularly interested in the aesthetics of places and the manifestation of visual cultures in the urban space, but also in the ways images contribute to the making of spaces, both real and imagined, in a process of hybridisation between the two.

The relationship between places and images is political. Whether in Delhi or in the Paris suburbs, images are used to construct discourses on places and justify urban regimes of power, especially with regards to exclusion and segregation. The different vectors and media used to this end interest me. My work is produced in reaction to the social and political processes through which space is framed and constructed. I am keen to include elements taken from contemporary visual cultures, as manifestations of vernacular modes of representation, which help understand a place and a society. Through my work I want to question the visual tools of social control. The image has proven to me to be a visual language I could understand. I first under-

stood India through images. I am now trying to understand my own city through images too.

The year I spent in Delhi in 2010-11 was essential as it gave me the desire to understand the swooping changes happening at the city level in India. Delhi offered a glimpse into the urban future of the subcontinent, which is why I kept going back there. Indian cities today are places of invention. They also are highly politicized places, and therefore a good level to observe the tensions and contradictions of Indian society.

While I was drawn to some of the dystopian aspects of Delhi and its sprawling satellite towns, I always had the desire to also look at the more utopian facets of urban India. The project Aranya, designed in the 1980s by the architect Balkrishna Doshi in the city of Indore, was a good case to gauge the impact of experimental social housing against the backdrop of urbanization.

The specificity of Aranya was the reversal of the usual top-down approach to the provision of social housing for low-income groups. It was designed to allow the residents to build their own houses on allocated plots of land, in keeping with the usual practice in informal settlements in India, while providing basic amenities such as running water, electricity and shared toilets. Technical help and building mate-

rials were also made accessible at a subsidized price. This was meant to ensure that the houses would be adapted to the needs of each household. This mode of self-building was inscribed in a very strict Master Plan, with an intricate hierarchy of alleys, streets, roads and public spaces, which was respected up to this day. It has resulted in a striking quality of shared spaces, used for various activities from washing dishes and drying up clothes to playing cricket and hosting festivals and cultural events.

Aranya makes a case for humility from architects and designers. Interestingly, it has been neglected in Indian architectural circles where it is considered to not be architectural enough. All but four lanes of Aranya were indeed built by the residents themselves. Of the hundred 'signature' houses designed by Doshi, only about 15 have remained intact while the others were modified to suit the needs and tastes of their occupants. These 15 original houses are government property and their occupants do not have the right to alter them, which they do resent today. The organic growth of the neighborhood also implies a level of vulnerability to outside forces, especially to financial pressure on land. I found that a glitzy condominium tower, the self-proclaimed tallest building in Indore, was being erected only a few dozen meters away from the original houses designed by Doshi.





I have a background in social sciences and urban studies and look at places through the lens of political economy, which is probably one of the reasons why India has kept appealing to me. I have now settled in Paris, however, and have begun working on Seine Saint-Denis, the Northern part of the Paris suburbs, a place of enormous significance to French society. It would not be far-fetched to call it the laboratory of the future of French society, for it breeds a unique mix of people of different origins, cultures and languages. It probably is the most influential place for contemporary French culture, while retaining an aura of danger cultivated by the mainstream media. It is one of the poorest parts of France but also the fastest changing. It is a very plastic and malleable place, is open-ended and has enormous scope. I am keen to navi-

gate through the contradictory representations of this epicenter of French popular culture. It is an exploration carried on by foot, as I live just 15 minutes away from the Porte de la Chapelle, which marks the Northern border of Paris on the way to Seine Saint-Denis.

I see this as a long-term project divided into several chapters, each focusing on one aspect of the urban spectacle offered by Seine Saint-Denis, looking to deconstruct the mainstream representations attached to it. It will be a dialogue between the mainstream and the singular, between the extraordinary and the trivial.

¹ According to 2018 Revision of World Urbanization Delhi is projected to continue growing and to become the most populous city in the world around 2028.

² Despite her surname Gandhi, she is not related to the family of Mahatma Gandhi; Gandhi is a common surname in Gujarat, a state in Western India. She served as Prime Minister from January 1966 to March 1977 and again from January 1980 until her assassination in October 1984 by the Sikh bodyguards. Sikhism is a monotheistic Indian religion that originated in the Punjab region in the northern part of the Indian subcontinent around the end of the 15th century.

AUTHOR'S BOOKS SUGGESTIONS

Mike Davis, *City Of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, 1992 Vintage

Avinash Veeraraghavan, *I Love My India: Stories for a city*, 2004 Tara Books

Dayanita Singh, *House of Love*, 2011 Radius Books / Peabody Museum Press, Santa Fe

