

FRUGALITY: CONSIDERING AN INTIMATE MODERN

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to examine one of the strands of Indian modernity that does not subscribe to the industrial presupposition as the basis of its discourse. Rather this is a modernity situated in a paradigm that is "agricultural" with far reaching implications both culturally and environmentally.

The Paper is comparative, building up contrasts between concepts that underlie a modernity that is "Industrial" and one that is "agricultural". It explores their respective attitudes and modes of "reduction". The first, "Minimizing" and its aesthetic equivalent, Minimalism is located in the industrial and particularly in the processes of mass production. The second, "frugality" is its equivalent in an agricultural paradigm, and is rooted in relationships and concepts whose aesthetic and therefore architectural potentials have not been adequately elaborated. This paper aims to study the architectural implications of "Frugality" with its emphasis on the rural-agricultural rather than the urban- industrial, bodily relationship to space rather than visual and mental constructions of space, and an intimacy with the material, the tactile, and a world that is "Full".

Historically speaking this paper explores the aesthetic and architectural implications of a

"Gandhian" Modernity as being distinct from the ubiquitous modernity that is our "Nehruvian" legacy.

Architecturally the paper develops, in contrast to the idea of "transparency", that ubiquitous spatial need of all modern and minimal architecture, the idea of "Porosity", an attitude of material continuity that does not distinguish between differing forms of matter. Where as the first requires a spatial continuity, the latter is based on a continuity of material. Through the description and analysis of Gandhiji's residence, Hruday Kunj at his Ashram on the Sabarmati in Ahmedabad, this paper elaborates on the experiences of such architecture.

Minimalism & Frugality

In a world of diminishing resources and environmental degradation due to excessive plunder of a natural world, 'reduction', has come to have special importance. Here we consider two modes of 'reduction', Minimalism and Frugality, examining the values that underpin their two distinct modernities.

To 'Minimize' is to 'reduce to a minimum, to estimate or make appear to be of least possible value, or amount or importance'. Though simple enough in definition 'Minimal' implies a possible absolute. This also relies on quantification, on measurement, which at least in principle is always approximate. Thus the idea of the 'minimal' must marry the contradictory, desire for an 'absolute determinism', with a process that is 'always approximate'. This contradiction only allows for an accurate description of objective reality, which gives rise to a sense of determinism that was commonplace at the founding moments of European modernity.

The term 'Minimalism' in architecture as in music and the visual arts, generally refers to a work stripped down to its essentials, devoid of expressive elements and artifice, particularly historical reference, to heighten a gestaltic perception of an object. "Parts bound together in such a way that they create a maximum resistance to perceptual separation", said Robert Morris of a specific movement in the visual arts that had its roots in an abstract approach of the International Modernism of the 1920's. Though evolving from developments arising out of a more immediate reaction to the Abstract Expressionism of the 1960' and 1970's, 'Minimalism' shared with Modernism the rejection of both personal

subjectivity and historical reference, and was rooted in a temporality that "looks at the present as a site of ones escape from the past"¹. Spatially 'Minimalism' is intellectual rather than sensorial in its impact.

'Minimalism's' aesthetic concerns grew as much out of the methodological requirements of design for industrial processes, shaping products for mass production; as it grew with reference to the engineer's aesthetic of the 'Marvels' of the Industrial world – the steam ship, the bi-plane and the automobile. From the early proclamation by Le Corbusier, "the house is a machine to live in", this reductive materialism never lost sight of its mechanistic and industrial roots, nor did it loose its emphasis of primarily describing objects. Building Elements were conceived as abstract geometrical entities. Floating lines and planes composed weightlessly in Cartesian space. The mechanistic fascination of modern architecture gave this abstract conceptualization a particularly hard edged tactility which was rooted simultaneously in the disciplines of modern engineering, its material technology and a developing sense of urbanity. 'Minimalism' must therefore be seen as a part of a particularly European Modernity, an industrial 'Less is more'. Arising in a climate of increasing individual free choice. Subsequently this has developed into a 'style' that is associated with a watered down Avant-garde, an individualism that has come to be associated with a sense of exclusiveness and luxury. This has been its trajectory in a globalizing world. It has been flattened from its rigorous Gestaltic intent into a template and diagram for functionality. Its non-referentiality has become an outline within which local, regional and place related details can be filled

in. This has become the most preferred popular response to the social failings of modernism, where the issue of identity and place are supposedly addressed without giving up the efficiencies required for mass construction in a globally capitalized world. In Indian Architecture this is now the legacy of a Nehruvian Modernity- Industrial, Urban and rooted in a particularly European sense of order progress and development.

“Modernity whether in architectural discourse or in other fields has been mainly discussed in asymmetric terms, in which the west is celebrated as the progenitor of the modern. Thus the discourse generated tends to produce theories of modernity which are unilaterally applied to all of humanity”ⁱⁱ. “It is now accepted that there are ‘different modernity’s’ in the making that rather than being distinct or successive are simultaneous with considerable overlap”ⁱⁱⁱ. Post colonial Indian modernity contrasts itself from European modernity as it is from the present that one must escape. It is significant and unique as it desires to re-establish links to the past^{iv}. “Indian Modernity has been both a voyage in and out of the Indian past, making way for a questioning of the meta-narrative of Modernity”^v. It is within this framework of Modernity that one must consider the second mode of reduction. The second mode of reduction is ‘Frugality’. ‘Frugal’ draws its meaning from the word ‘Frux/ Fruges’ – the ‘fruit of the earth’. It is an adjective that describes ‘processes’ that are tied to the relationship between the earth as medium and bearer of produce when acted on by human labour. This is not labour in a Marxist (political) sense but the action of the human body at work. Frugality is an agricultural attitude of saving and sparing. ‘Agriculture

itself implies ‘the culture of the earth’, and ‘culture has a common root with ‘cultivate’ – to revere, to worship- to care for. It is this care that underpins the ‘saving and the ‘sparing’. To be ‘Frugal’ is therefore to produce with care for the earth. In principle when we are ‘frugal’ we remain simultaneously in relation to the earth at one end and our body at the other, experiencing a continuum of matter that is ecologically interrelated. ‘Frugality’ is an attitude of engagement that is based on ‘being’ with an environment, rather than the ‘perception’ of an environment. Here the understanding of ones environment is ‘empathetic’.

In common language, ‘empathy’ is the understanding of another person by putting oneself in their shoes. This engagement is also applicable to understanding objects and phenomena, where one maps oneself onto the world in order to understand it. This engagement is a ‘bringing closer’ of the subject and object. ‘Nearness’ is operative in the apprehension of the environment. Deleuze and Guattari in their reading of Worringer^{vi}, refer to ‘empathy’ as the ‘feeling’ that unites representation with a subject, and this form of representation, they refer to as ‘organic’^{vii}. What Deleuze and Guattari imply, is that the signifier and the signified are as much connected by ‘feeling’ as they are by an abstract idea. For example, when we use the word ‘Tree’ it is connected to the real ‘tree’ not only by the platonic idea of the tree, but also its ‘feeling’ of coolness, shade, the rustling sound of its leaves, the sprinkling of light through its foliage. These are qualities experienced in degrees. Deleuze and Guattari call these ‘intensities’. Gregory Bateson refers to this continuity as the ‘analog’ and contrasts it to

the 'digital' where experience is cut up into distinct identifiable parts. The analog draws on direct physical experience as a source of knowledge, where knowledge itself is tacit – like 'knowing' how to ride a bicycle. 'Empathy' implies 'nearness', it contrasts itself with the earlier discussed 'objectivity', a mode of apprehension that requires a clear and critical distance in order to perceive. This distance brings into play our optical apparatus: the cone of vision, perspective and an entire set of mental processes that accompany these. Juhaani Pallasma writes, 'the eye is the organ of distance and separation, where as touch is the sense of nearness, intimacy and affection. The eye surveys, controls and investigates, where as touch approaches and caresses'^{viii}. The beauty of this materiality the force of its aesthetic trajectories is born of the body. Experience is sensual rather than cerebral, where 'care' and 'gentleness' are embedded in action and it is possible that Mahatma Gandhi recognized in this engagement the potential for Ahimsa.

'Frugality' has other relations to Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on Indian Modernity. Primarily an agrarian economy at the time of independence, Gandhiji saw the self-sufficiency of the village as the bedrock of this modernity. He also saw the village as part of an agrarian system networked together in a balance with the local environment. The dignity of human labour and its relationship to the primary needs of life (bread-labour) and therefore self-sufficiency (in contrast to individuality) form the basis of his societal thinking. Gandhiji recommended hand spinning (use of the Charkha), as a universal form of bread labour, but he considered agriculture to be its ideal form. He believed that if everybody made with

their own hands, one essential item necessary for their existence, they would realize in a bodily sense, from their own labour, the right proportion of resource and the energy required towards their living. He believed that this was the basis for a sensibility rooted in the 'frugal'.

Laurie Baker says "I believe that Gandhiji is the only leader in our country who has talked consistently with common sense about the building needs of our country. What he said of the house. What clearer explanation is there of what appropriate building technology means.

One of the key aesthetic markers of the advent of Modernity in Architecture was the increased possibility of 'Transparency', with the development of new construction materials of steel and concrete. Their higher strengths dematerialized into lighter and lighter constructs. The organization of structure allowed for the possibility of a dynamic space. Frank Lloyd Wright one of the first to exploit this with diagonal vistas released through corner windows proclaimed that with modern architecture, man had finally emerged from the cave. In Europe Le Corbusier made a parallel contribution by freeing the building from the ground. His free plan and free façade with its ribbon window free from structure, allowed for 'transparencies' that have been discussed in detail by Rowe & Slutsky^x. In our modern world 'transparency' has developed a moral and ethical value. Susan Sontag says, "Transparence is the most liberating value in art - and in criticism – today. Transparence means experiencing the luminosity of the thing itself of things being what they are"^{xi}. A system that is 'transparent' is assumed to be 'honest', to be 'true'; one does not hide

anything from view. All is brought into the light. Truth is rooted in 'seeing'.

'Transparency' has little place in the Gandhian notion of truth, which is ontological. Others have discussed this in greater detail, but for our discussion here it will suffice to say that his notion of truth was based on 'action'. In our imagination of a material continuity, the experience of space presupposes its occupation. It follows that void within the continuity of matter is the place of 'action'. The measure of void in a material is by definition its 'Porosity'. 'Porosity', is the equivalent of 'transparency' in this paradigm. 'Porosity' requires a density, proximity and continuity, which opens up a material 'intimacy'. It is the 'porosity' of Hruday Kunj, Gandhiji's residence at the Sabarmati Ashram, that marks its particular Modernity.

Hruday Kunj: Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad

In 1917, as Europe faced the violent fallout of modernity in the form of the First World War, Gandhiji established his Ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati river a little outside the main town of Ahmedabad. This would be the place from the place from where he would lead the Salt March to Dandi in 1930, signaling publically his political intent and methods against the British towards independence. His own residence, Hruday Kunj, became the centre of both this non-violent political activity and the place of his personal experiments with 'living'. The house mediates between both these scales of habitation with an effortless continuity,

with overlapping domains of 'public' and 'private' which are both simultaneously latent and never overtly expressed. This is a building where the character of spaces is determined by activity and use rather than the specificity of its formal container.

The first striking experience of entering the Sabarmati Ashram, is one of leaving the city- its hustle and bustle behind. One enters a tranquil space full of trees (Img.1) At most times of the year coolth, silence and shade simultaneously make one aware of having entered the ashram.

As one moves along a path, under the trees, it is impossible to distinguish Hruday Kunj, the residence of Gandhiji, from the other small buildings that seem to be loosely scattered among the trees (Img 2). One first sees this house diagonally across shaded ground. The open side of the 'c' shaped house is the first view we have. This is a view in which the building is scaled to seem like two huts facing each other across a court (Img.2,4 & Drg 4.1) To enter here, opening a wicket gate under a trellis of creepers has the intimacy of moving from one inside to another of greater intensity.

Today, a paved path directs us towards the river. We move right to enter through the house' large verandah. Here the timber columns, the king post trusses and the lattice work (Jaffery), give us the sense that this might be a colonial bungalow (Img. 5, 9 & dwg. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 4.4) This seems at odds with the sense of 'hut' that one has had as one entered- a sense that lingers on as ones eyes are drawn to the country tiled roof, the details of the doors and windows. And yet the verandah is not an intimate space. The columns are tall, the eaves are high and the king post trusses give the verandah the scale more appropriate to a space



Img 1: Entry into the Ashram:Hruday Kunj in the Distance



Img 2: Ashram Side Entry Into Hruday Kunj

for community gathering than that of a residence.

Ascending the plinth we are aware of our ability to freely walk across this publicly scaled verandah, into what seemed from the other side the most intimate part of the house. This permeability into the courtyard is surprising, and it is also possible to experience this continuity from outside the building across the verandah into its courtyard (Img. 5). One realizes that Hruday Kunj is a house with no inside. You are outside before you enter, released before you are either held or gathered. This building does not have a front or a back. It simply responds differently to the river on one side, and on the other, to the particular space of the ashram; its shaded outsides, which are the insides of the ashram. And yet this is not a transparent building. It is not the eye that is released. In fact it is not the

eye at all, that is at the centre of its experience. If the first scenario described above is a description of entering alone- i.e. when the verandah is empty and any people in the building are either inside a room or in the courtyard, consider a second scenario of entry when the verandah is full- i.e. during a public gathering. In this second scenario, our experience of entry would be considerably different. The intensity of public occupation of the verandah would drown out the possibility of a continuous experience into the intimate part of the house. In terms of activity, the public nature of the verandah articulated by scale and volume is strengthened by its intended use. The increased public intensity now distinguishes this space from the inside. In material terms the inhabitation of this space by bodies has changed its 'porosity', the permeability of experience across the building

Img 3a & 3b: Comparison of Shade and Shadow: Porosity and Transparency 1: Form and Space.



has been reduced. The intimate “space not only recedes but fluctuates in (a) continuous activity”^{xii}.

‘Porosity’ in material terms is defined by relationship. It is by definition the relative amount of void to material. In conceptual terms it is the relationship between surface area and volume. The greater the porosity, the greater the surface area. The greater the surface area, the greater the physical contact between a given mass/volume and its context. By controlling porosity one controls the interaction between a given volume and its environment. At Hruday Kunj this allows for an understanding of the architectural gestures that underlie the occupation of the space and allow for our fluctuating perceptions. On considering the section of the building carefully one realizes that it is the position of the wall that divides the verandah that is largely responsible for the possibility of our dual experiences.

The wall appears at first to clumsily cut across the trusses (Dwg. 4.4) with neither the

structural implications of the other walls nor with integration with the roof system. It seems to be a planar separator (somewhat at odds with the articulation of the rest of the house) cutting off public from private. However as one moves across from the verandah to the courtyard it become evident that the wall ties together its own character with the character of the spaces it articulates. If one imagines moving this wall towards the river the verandah would become a linear space- more like a conventional colonial verandah. It would lose both its proportions and its volume that lend it its public character. Simultaneously, the verandah towards the court would increase in width and height, and lose its particular intensity of ‘inside’. The wall engages spatially in both directions (Img. 6,7,8) emphasizing its materiality over its abstract planar quality.

To further understand the architectural implications of ‘frugality’ it is useful to compare the Hruday Kunj mode of building with the mode of building used by Charles Correa, for his modern pavilion

Img 4: Ashram Entry



Img 5: River side Entry



Img 6: Interior Courtyard





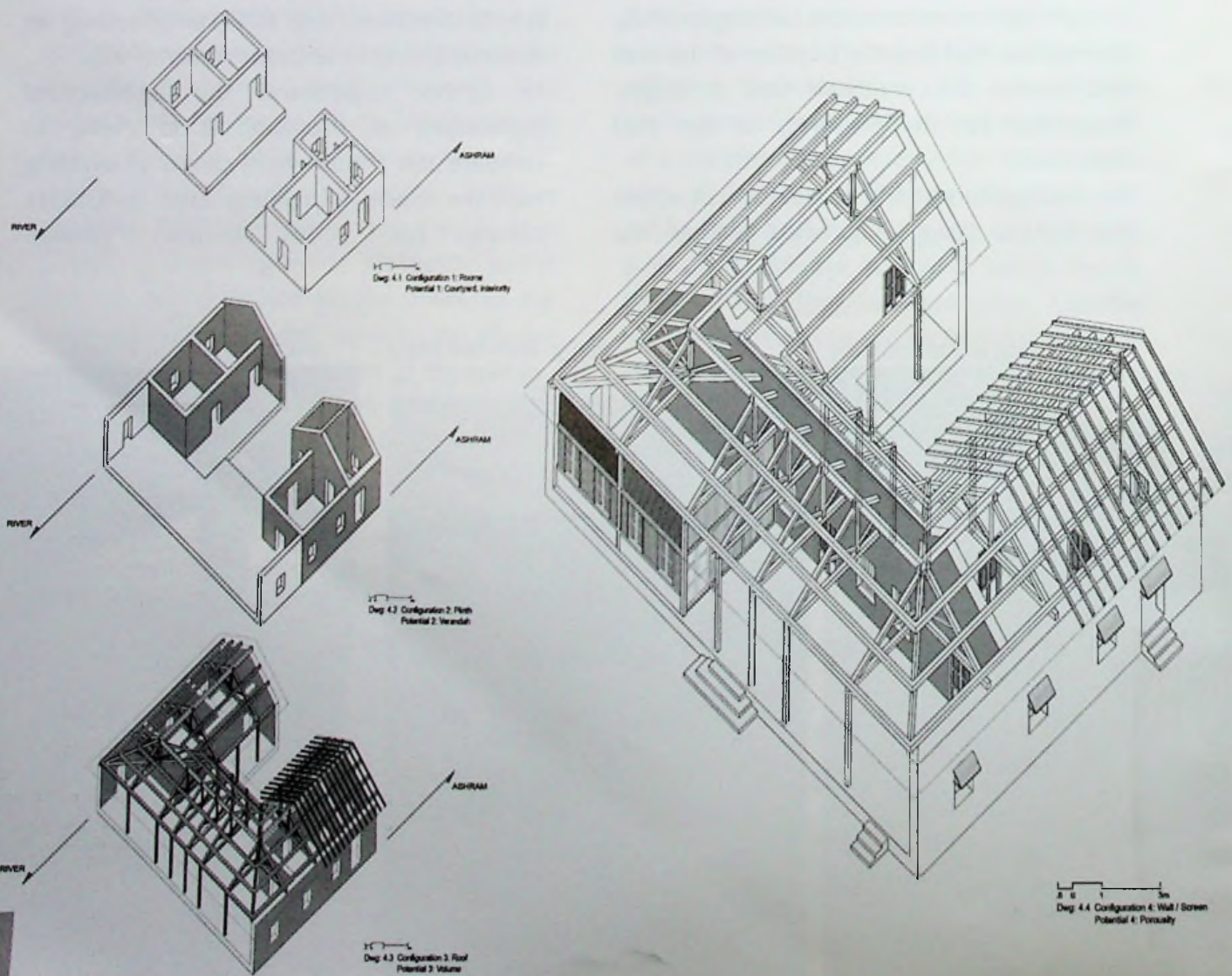
Img 7: Courtyard Intimacy



Img 8: Verandah Divided:
Towards the court



Img 9: Verandah Divided
The River Entry



now within the same ashram. To start with; it is evident that there are two different paradigms at work (see comparative sketches *Img. 3,10,11,15 & 16*). In Correa's Building the structure punctuates space. There are various degrees of inside and outside spaces (*Img.12*) articulated by controlling transparencies across the diagonal experience of an orthogonally repetitive module (*Dwg ..& Img.13*) Open to sky courts, reflective pools, and the ambiguity of green spaces within and outside the building, (*Img. 14*) articulate a spatial richness. The experience of this building is further heightened by the differing trajectories of sight and bodily movement.

The medium of experience in this building is space, which is seen to be continuous, and is punctuated and articulated by material. At Hruday Kunj, on the other hand, the building seems part of a continuous materiality (*Img 3, 10*). It seems to be made from the same stuff as the trees, the foliage, the ground, and the human body, only to articulate different intensities of use under varying conditions of shade. Shade is the spatial measure of porosity (as opposed to light which is the spatial

measure of transparency). It is the shade that characterizes both Gandhiji's ashrams in Ahmedabad and at Wardha. It is the shade that is an indicator of a specific, continuous, yet differentiated materiality.

In an architecture of 'frugality' there is an organized distribution of material in accordance with its substantial characteristics which leads to a simplicity of form that is free of obtrusiveness, and subtlety. Construction as labour (actions of the human body), determine the principles according to which forms grow from their contexts. Resources are close at hand. Concepts and intentions have direct physical implications. 'Configurations' are of greater importance than 'Composition'. In this paradigm one might look at architecture as simply acts of modifying the earth's crust, or building with 'care for the earth'.

Img.11: Comparison of Shade and Shadow: Porosity and Transparency 3: Space and Volume





Img.10 : Comparison of Shade and Shadow: Porosity and Transparency 2: The Entrances: Material and Light

For Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and many others Modernity brought with it an emancipation that was literal, from the ground, the cave and the practical restrictions of building with mineral material systems, and simultaneously an emancipation, which was ideological, from the immense weight of the

past and the dead load of dogma. In all its forms it brought forth emancipation from 'gravity', that conceptual principle of Earth. In a hundred years we have come a full circle. We have lived through a time in which the gravity defying endeavors of man from the skyscraper, to flight, to that absolute release from the clutches of the earth: space travel, have come to symbolize the aspirations of progress. These technological advancements all made possible by a fossil fuel based industry have as a by-product also valorized movement. Newer forms of technology have further de-materialized the world, bringing into

Img 12: Spatial Compostions

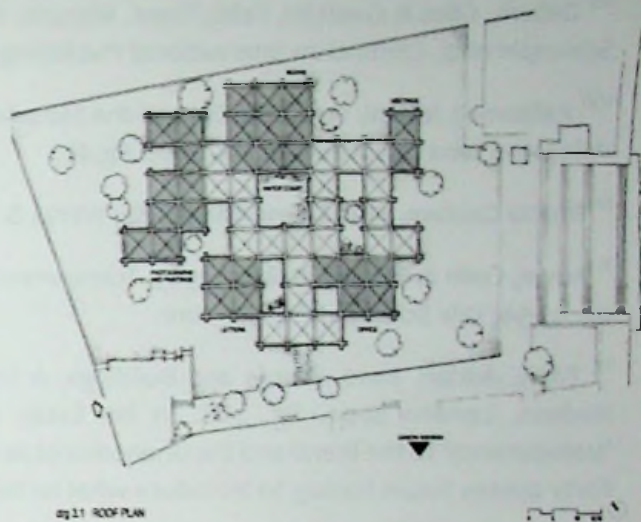
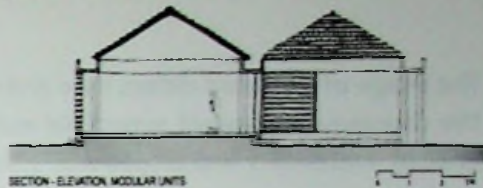
Img 13: Diagonal Vistas

Img 14: Distinction Light and Shadow



question our oldest and most deeply rooted notions of place, distance and time. Never before has man been as mobile and never before has there been such consumption of energy and resources by a single species. Our blind faith in rationality in the critical distance of objectivity has pushed us so far away that we have alienated ourselves from our environment. We have lost the ability to be empathetic to either our bodies or the earth. Our emancipation from gravity, our independence from the earth has made us oblivious of it. With the environmental carnage that has taken and is taking place, perhaps it is necessary to consider other forms of 'Modernity' that care a little more both for the environment and for a greater sense of 'our being at home in the world'.

MAHATMA GANDHI MEMORIAL



End Notes

ⁱ Mand, Harpreet 2005, *Alternative Modernities: Representing the Subaltern in (Post) Colonial India*, Proceedings Volume of the mAAN International Conference held in Istanbul between 27-30.06.2005, Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul. The author is quoting Partha Chatterjee who is commenting on the difference between the reasons and desires of a European Modernity expressed by Kant, and those of Indian Modernity. Pg 83.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. pg 81

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid pg. 79

^{iv} Ibid, pg. 83

^v Ibid pg. 81

^{vi} Wilhelm Worringer first used the word 'Empathy' in his Doctoral Thesis and his best known work 'Abstraction and Empathy'. However Worringer as a Art historian uses the word in relation to 'Realism' and applies it to European Art from the Renaissance to the beginning of the

modern. The usage of the word differs here and is closer to the usage by Juhani Pallasmaa when he says, "...the cancerous spread of superficial architectural imagery today, devoid of tectonic logic and the sense of materiality and empathy...", *The Eyes of the Skin*, Pg 24

vii Deluze, Giles & Guattari, Felix, Trans. Masumi, Brian, 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004. Pg. 550

viii Pallasmaa Juhani, 1996, *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses*, Wiley Academy, John Wiley and Sons Ltd. West Sussex, 2005. Pg.46.

ix Bhatia Gautam, 1991, *Laurie Baker, Life, Works & Writings*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1994.

x Rowe, Colin & Slutsky, Robert, 1963, *Transparency, Literal and Phenomenal*, *Perspecta* Volume 8, pg. 45-54. Yale School of Architecture.

ix Forty, Adrian, 2000, *Words and Buildings, A Vocabulary of Modern Architecture*. Thames and Hudson, London 2004. Pg. 288. In his *Essay on transparency*, Forty adds a third type of 'transparency' to the literal and the phenomenal as described by Rowe and Slutsky's. Forty quotes Susan Sontag to introduce what he terms as 'Transparency of Meaning'.

xii Quoted by Rowe & Slutsky, from 'The Language of Vision' by Gyorgy Kepes. Rowe and Slutsky use the quote to open their discussion on Phenomenal Transparency, which as Adrain Forty paraphrases is the apparent space between objects. It is necessary to point out the differences with what is being discussed as 'Porosity'. Phenomenal Transparency relates to the spatial devices used by Cubist painting and as a concept develops from visual apprehension. This apprehension in turn is dependant on the readability of objects and the spaces between them.

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