

# The Architecture of Calcutta: Aesthetics and the Raj

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The art of India contains many underexamined categories and constructs, but one particularly underutilized area for analysis is that of the architectural achievements of the British Raj.<sup>1</sup> Although it might be argued that these works are reflective only of a certain sort of nineteenth century colonial mentality, it is important to note that they constitute, currently, many of the sites of interest in major Indian cities, and that certain of the buildings in today's Calcutta and Bombay—now known by their Indian names, Kolkotha and Mumbai—are landmarks shown to visitors on any tour.

In addition to providing a focal point for commentary on British colonialism in India, a large number of the buildings constructed by the English over a century or more are fascinating architecturally in their own right. They make the sort of statement that often provokes critics to extensive comment. As David Goldblatt has written with respect to the notion of the eclectic in architecture:

When Venturi claims that modern architecture lacks diversity, he primarily means that it fails to achieve what he calls a pluralism. What he calls for is 'Scarlati and the Beatles, if diversity is to be achieved.' ... What Venturi is advocating is eclecticism.<sup>2</sup>

There is a very real and genuine sense in which the architecture of the Raj achieves an eclecticism on its own, and this provides for further interest in this visually stunning style. But Calcutta, with its enormous complexity, is also a place of jarring contrasts. Part of the impact of the colonial buildings stems from their presence in the midst of the surrounding poverty.

## I

Dominique Lapierre, in *City of Joy*, has written of the effect of one of the Georgian manor houses in an area close to some of the city's most formidable slums.

Several evenings later Max's taxi passed through a grand portal guarded by two armed sentries....[H]e caught sight of the colonnades of a vast Georgian residence at the end of the driveway.... The magnificent structure really did seem to have emerged from a dream.

Built at the beginning of the last century by a British magnate in the jute industry, it was one of the residences that had earned Calcutta its nickname, "the City of Palaces."<sup>3</sup>

The original intention of the architecture of Calcutta imposed by the British was not merely to transmit British values, of course—it was to transmit the idea of dominance. And the effect was well achieved, since it is clear that the sheer size and scale of the buildings, placed as they were in areas that were comparatively flat, made an overwhelming impression. The use of colonnades, cupolas and other such devices merely increased the sense of size, and the effect might best be described, as Lapierre does above, as "dream-like."

The Victoria Memorial, New Market, Dalhousie Square and other such areas in Calcutta were intended not only to transport the values of the West to Bengal, but to make a statement by their sheer monumentality. Perhaps the architects were prompted at least in part by the response of Western visitors to some of the classic Hindu sculpture of the Bengal and Orissa area, such as the Konarak temple. In any case, size and complexity of design in the façade mark these areas. The number of windows, eaves and false front devices on most of the buildings seem to signal that presence can be marked by sheer abundance: as a recent writer has observed, "Every guidebook will opine on the sights of Dalhousie Square."<sup>4</sup>

In addition, it was, of course, important to the British to try to create as much of an atmosphere of familiarity as possible. This was at first difficult, but became increasingly easy as Calcutta and various parts of India began to generate the kind of wealth that had prompted colonization in the first place. Geoffrey Moorhouse's careful and lengthy *Calcutta* provides a detailed view of the two hundred years or more that it took before the changes implemented by the colonizers began to exhibit the yields that had been expected.<sup>5</sup> Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a genuine bridge across the Hooghly had been achieved, a telephone system had been installed, and tens of thousands of British lived in Bengal. As life in that area began to resemble what the British at least remembered or fantasized that their lives had once been, the sorts of architectural achievements for which Calcutta is to this day renowned became increasingly common.<sup>6</sup>

Of the Victoria Memorial, Moorhouse writes: It echoes inside, as it was doubtless meant to echo forever and a day. It echoes most resonantly under the dome, in the Queen's Hall whose walls have been deeply graven with the text of Victoria's proclamation of herself as Empress. But reverberations of those illustrious days pursue the visitor... wherever he goes...<sup>7</sup>

Many of the large promenades and parks, including the Maidan, were originally intended for such typically colonial activities as martial parades and games of cricket.

Moorhouse notes that, well into the period after independence, some of the features of colonial life were still at work, partly because of the many holdovers in terms of administrative offices and partly simply because the plan of the city tended to encourage such activities.<sup>8</sup>

## II

It could be argued that part of what drove the architectural plan of Calcutta, even if only unconsciously, was a desire on the part of the colonials to replicate not only the style of their homeland, but the scope and grandeur of what they had encountered in Hindu temple work. This might not seem to be a promising hypothesis, but all available accounts indicate that nearby temples, particularly Konarak, in the state of Orissa, made an overwhelming impression on the British visitors to the site, and that impression must have been in the minds of some as the architectural plan of Calcutta was envisaged.<sup>9</sup>

All of the available evidence suggests that size, scope and plasticity of carving were among those elements of Hindu stonework that made the greatest impression on visitors from the West. If we can accept Janet Wolff's thesis that categorizations of work done in certain styles are generally made on the basis of a few leading indicators of the style, taken from works deemed to be exemplary, we can see how size and scale became focal points for all things Indian.<sup>10</sup>

It appears that an important beginning category employed by those who viewed Konarak had to do with the interplay between line and form. The curvilinearity and plasticity of the stonework was stunning, and perhaps had little or no parallel in European art. Line, surface decoration and enormity all combined in the Orissa temple (and many other Hindu temples) to achieve a stunning visual effect. Although we cannot be sure of the overall impact on consciousness made by the discovery of this work, it could be said that the British began to want to dominate the Indian landscape in a way such as to counter, or in some ways to parallel, the religious and philosophical effects of the temples themselves. What both styles of architecture, if that term may be used, have in common is that they are far from understated. Thus an attempt to bring the culture of the West into Calcutta almost invariably involved massive monuments and buildings, on a scale perhaps seldom used or even unnecessary in Britain itself.

Wolff's work on the concept of the "modern" is based largely on her attempts to deal with the categorization of certain artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, and one of her leading points is that exclusion tells us a great deal about categorization.<sup>11</sup> Her overall point, however, is well-taken—insofar as architecture of the Raj is concerned, it is clear that there were desiderata to which the work had to conform.

## III

The Maidan, and two or three of the buildings along it, constitute one of the most powerful colonial statements in Calcutta. The importance of the walkway and the balancing of the Ochterlony Monument with the Fort at the opposite end of the Maidan not only continues the notion that Britain had—literally—paved Calcutta, but achieves the grandeur for which monuments in Britain itself were noted in a new and unusual

way. Moorhouse writes:

The Maidan's biggest old totem is still in place, presumably because it was too big even for the Communist Government to shift into limbo with all the other monuments to the Raj. There are 165 fluted feet of the Ochterlony Monument, which is forty feet less than the Monument to the Great Fire of London.<sup>12</sup>

Not only were the buildings monumental, but the uses to which they were put recapitulated the notion of colonial ascendancy and the trajectory that a Hindu would have to accomplish to become educated in this new environment. In his classic *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, David Kopf argues that the dual functions of the architecture of the Raj were exemplified in the mortar and intent of the College of Fort William:

At that time [1804] the College of Fort William was facing the real danger of extinction.... Work commenced by 1805 on the Asiatic Society building at its present site on Park Street and Chowringhee. When the building was completed in 1808, the first fully-equipped institution in the world for the advancement of Asian studies began to function.<sup>13</sup>

If architecture may be said to constitute a way of breaking up space, it is important to note that the works of Calcutta accomplished that task in such a way as to form a contrast, as we have indicated, with the classic Hindu works and to indicate that a voyage, so to speak, would need to be made by any Indian who wanted to participate in the new scheme of things. The spaciousness of the Maidan, its size and the length of its walkways, and the straight and narrow cornices of its buildings made a very strong and contrasting statement to the curvilinearity of major Hindu temples. If Hinduism expresses a certain view of life gone riot, so to speak, the works of the Raj express Euro dominance, both culturally and financially. That the British could afford to construct the buildings at all was an indicator of how successful their economic exploitation of their colony was, and that they would choose to construct buildings completely dissimilar, in spirit and style, to the local architecture said a great deal about their overall intentions. As Robert Sowers has argued, the primary characteristic of an architecture or architectural monument is the way in which it forces us to confront a space.<sup>14</sup> The British broke up the space of Calcutta as a city in such a way as to inform all who lived in the region of the culture that was to influence the area's future.

Sowers has a great deal to say about architecture and its relationship to the other arts, and he does so in a way that helps us to understand the importance of Raj architecture in Calcutta. He writes:

Conceived as an either-or choice between unity and duality, absolutes that are inviolable and irreconcilable, the relation between art

and architecture becomes a hopeless paradox. But just as the relation between black and white is neither one thing nor a ragtag collection of things but a seamless scale of gray values, so in this case: once we take into account all the elements that can unify or separate art and architecture to varying degrees, the paradox disappears and the range of possibilities becomes apparent.<sup>15</sup>

What Sowers is claiming is that what we count as “architectural” varies according to context, and the same may be said of any of the tropes of the visual arts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Calcutta.

The green shutters on the buildings make a statement of color that plays out against the palette of the city. The cornices and inset windows on many of the buildings make the same statement, vis-à-vis and with respect to that architectural style, that the spokes of the chariot of the sun at the Konarak temple make in that particular context. The space is not only carved up, but the carving is done in such a way that individual items on the buildings are as much objets d’art as the celestial nymphs at Konarak, or, indeed, even the image of Vishnu. Again, although we cannot be sure that the British had any such scheme in mind when they began their projects, they succeeded in dominating the relevant space.

#### IV

In their attempt to establish an architecture in Calcutta that signaled the full complexity of the Raj and its relationship to the surrounding Hindu and Muslim cultures, there is also the chance that the British had, at least to some extent, been impressed by the extant Islamic works available in Northern India. Although these would have been fewer in number in West Bengal, Islamic art in general has always made such a substantial impression on its viewers that we cannot leave this hypothesis unexamined. As Holland Cotter noted in a journalistic piece published years ago, Islamic work has a boundary-trespassing quality that—like Sowers’ use of the shifting modalities between the architectural and the visual arts—puts viewers in a certain contemplative state of mind. Much of what falls under the rubric “Islamic art” was intended, originally, for utilitarian purposes, and yet achieves a certain status on its own. Cotter notes that these objects—and, indeed, Islamic public space—need to be examined in a certain way.

But where [do we place these objects that might be termed “craft”]? In the home? In a school? In a mosque? ...seen out of context it is often hard to tell from its form alone what role a particular object was meant to play. A carpet is both to sit on and to pray on. An alabaster window carved with a pretty floral design may have been intended for a harem or a tomb.... In these ambiguities Islamic art again asserts its

distance from the Westerner accustomed to firm lines between things sacred and profane....<sup>16</sup>

Although the boundary shifts about which Cotter is writing may, in a sense, be fuller and more fluid, Moorhouse seems to see something of the same happening to the visitor at Raj Bhavan, the Government House at the extreme end of the Maidan.<sup>17</sup> This building was intended to be a direct replica of a similar architectural achievement in Derbyshire, and it leaves the visitor dazzled with staircases, statuary in the form of sphinxes and Caesars, and four wings and three floors. The full import of the British achievement is perhaps best captured by Moorhouse when he writes that Lord Curzon held a centenary ball there, about which a visitor at the time wrote “We became our grandparents again, imitating in spirit...[the] stately men who danced in these very halls a century ago.”<sup>18</sup>

In general, then, we can make two or three points with respect to the architecture of the Raj with a fair amount of certainty. The first—and this would be hard to dispute—is that it was intended to establish a sense of dominance and empire, and an impression so strong in whoever happened to take note of the structures that the viewer could not help but be awed by the achievements of the builders. The second (and this, obviously, can be stated only with less certainty, since we have comparatively little evidence) is that the British themselves may have felt stricken in the presence of the mammoth Hindu temples of the North and South, or, perhaps, the Mogul works of the North. The third point is that a certain sort of eclecticism, of the very kind that, according to Goldblatt, Venturi wants to see in contemporary architecture marks most of the salient works of the Raj in Calcutta. Indeed, they might be thought to constitute a sort of architectural hodgepodge, albeit one that in itself certainly can be said to exemplify a style.

#### V

I have been arguing that the architecture of Calcutta, world-renowned and mentioned in almost any account of the more important sights of India, is a special case of cultural dominance and pluralistic architectural style. None of this would be so remarkable in and of itself were it not also the case that the “Jewel in the Crown” of the British Empire—colonial India, which today comprises India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and even in a sense Sri Lanka—has an importance historically simply because of its size, the scope of the original extant civilization, and the lengths to which the colonizers went to retain the territory.

Christopher Hitchens, in his recent *God is Not Great*, is primarily concerned to argue against fundamental interpretations of religion, but has a number of salient cultural points to make as well.<sup>19</sup> In his discussion of the disagreements between Hindus and Muslims that led, ultimately, to the truncating of colonial India after independence, Hitchens describes in some detail the gradual decline in colonial power of Great Britain and the resurgence of Hindu culture:

After the critical weakening of the British Empire by the First World War, and most

particularly after the notorious massacre of Indian protestors at the city of Amritsar in April 1919, it became apparent even to the then controllers of the subcontinent that rule from London would come to an end sooner rather than later. . . . [The general project] was made much easier by Gandhi's talk of Hinduism and by the long ostentatious hours he spent. . . .tending his spinning wheel.<sup>20</sup>

This piece of historical information—albeit having to do with a period well after the initial establishment of the Raj—is telling because it lets us know in specific terms precisely how difficult it was for Britain to maintain its presence in India and what a unifying effect certain tropes of Hinduism, such as the spinning wheel, might have on the population. It is for these reasons, then, along with nostalgia and a taste for things Western, that the city of Calcutta was given such stupendous architectural works and that it became important to build continuously, with larger and more ornate structures, in order to make an impressive show of force.

This alone should give us reason to appreciate the colonial architecture of Calcutta, and to emphasize its stature as an accomplishment of Westerners in the Eastern world.

In his article on Venturi's attack on modernism, Goldblatt closes by noting that "The world of the 1980s seems no less chaotic and complex than the world at the beginning of this century. . . ."<sup>21</sup> The same, of course, might well be said of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when so much of what became the important architecture of Calcutta was constructed. Goldblatt ends by noting that "the refreshing architectural acts" of postmodernism will remain with us, but so, of course, will many other styles from many other periods.<sup>22</sup> The Raj architecture of Calcutta does not have the classicism of the Greek Doric, or the peculiar ornamentation of the Mexican colonial architecture of Puebla. Nevertheless, it remains valuable in its own right, not only as an artistic and architectural accomplishment, but as a standing testament to the once dominant status of certain European cultures.

### Notes and References

1. The classic work in this area, for example, Benjamin Rowland's *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967, does not contain any analysis of this work.
2. David Goldblatt, "The Frequency of Architectural Acts: Diversity and Quantity in Architecture," in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. XLVI, No. 1 (Fall 1987), pp. 61-66. This citation p. 62.
3. Dominique Lapiere, *The City of Joy*, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1985, p. 346.
4. Somini Sengupta, "A Walk in Calcutta," in *The New York Times*, (Travel Section, p. 9), May 3, 2009.
5. Geoffrey Moorhouse, *Calcutta*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 217. As he writes, "People play crown green bowls under floodlights at night on the Maidan."
9. See Rowland, Art, pp. 173-4.
10. Janet Wolff, *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in Britain and the United States*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 66. Wolff is largely concerned about the exclusion of the artist Kathleen McEney.
12. Moorhouse, *Calcutta*, p. 217.
13. David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, p. 69.
14. Robert Sowers, *Rethinking the Forms of Visual Expression*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.
15. *Ibid.*, Sowers, p. 57.
16. Holland Cotter, "Art and Allah in Andalusia," in *Art in America*, Vol. 80, No. 10, 1992, p. 113.
17. Moorhouse, *Calcutta*, pp. 222-223.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
19. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, New York: Hachette Book Group, 2009.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
21. Goldblatt, p. 66.
22. *Ibid.*,