

Indian Furniture: Between the Body and Architecture

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INTRODUCTION

Problematizing the category “furniture” within the Indian context destabilizes our received ideas of what furniture is and how it operates, just as attempts to define “Indian” furniture — in terms of and in comparison to “Western” furniture — may raise doubts about its very existence as a viable category. A quick survey of contemporary Indian interiors shows a preponderance of western-style beds, tables, and chairs, while an inventory of typical or ‘traditional’ Indian artifacts turns up a very limited number of objects that could be conventionally described as furniture. What’s more, these objects appear to be quite primitive, and perhaps less evolved, when compared to the rich historical development embodied in the Western chair or bed, for example.

The developments in European furniture and its patterns of use since the medieval period, on the other hand, are marked by increasing specialization in use and an elaborate give and take between architectural space and its furnishings. Furniture moves back and forth from being subsumed into the architectural shell to taking a central position in a room, in the process literally consuming and overwhelming the architectural space that accommodates it.

Siegfried Giedion, in his book *Mechanization Takes Command*, constructs a narrative account of this history that addresses furniture’s relationship to both the body and the architectural shell. In the process he introduces a range of issues — the notion of culturally determined postures, the idea of comfort and relaxation, the science of physiology, and advances in technology — that have had a bearing upon furniture over the centuries.

Giedion begins by contrasting Egyptian and Greek furniture in order to suggest the importance of culturally determined ‘posture’ in the development of furniture. Egyptian seating habits are, he says, “From the present day point of view, both Eastern and Western. . . The chairs are adapted either to squatting in the Oriental manner — in which case the piece is lower than normal, and its seat deeper — or to sitting with one’s legs hanging down in the Western manner.” The image he uses, an engraving from a limestone

grave stele from the second millennium BC., exemplifies this double relationship: the body is both on top of and leaning against furniture; in one case it is self-supporting, in the other it is supported by the furniture. (Giedion, 259).

In the Greek example — an Attic red-figured mixing bowl showing a standing Palamedes before a sitting Persephone, from the fifth century BC — Giedion says that “posture and chair are one. The goddess is serenely seated on a cushionless chair in the fully relaxed pose acquired only by careful breeding and training of the body. The backrest enfolds the body and shoulders in its sloping curve.” The ‘enfolding’ that this double tracing produces — there is something mimetic in the way the chair provides the support for the body to mold itself into — presents a relationship quite different from the two identified in the Egyptian example. (Giedion, 309).

The medieval period, not surprisingly, presents Giedion with more meager fare. Giedion sketches a rough and ready menage, with a range of objects — stools, barrels, boards, and baskets — improvised into use as furniture. The table is rarely more than a board on supports and the individual chair is uncommon. Furniture as a category of elaborate artifacts does not exist. Rather, it is identified with household goods, with the portable belongings of a social unit, the chattel of a feudal clan.

The French word for furniture — *meuble* or *mobilier*, literally “movables” — signals this association. These portable, interchangeable, compact and collapsible objects were the crutches, tools, and props of medieval life, prosthetic extensions that produced a new complementarity between the body and furniture, a sense of mutual support and symbiosis: cushions, tablets, basins, and platforms that both support, and in turn are supported by the body.

Giedion attributes the improvisational and nomadic quality of medieval furniture to an ethic of austerity as well as to the general political instability. The chest, in this scenario, appears as an *objet type* of the medieval interior, ubiquitous in its multiple roles as table, as seating, as storage, and as the container for all the belongings of a household on the move.

The remainder of Giedion’s account describes the pro-

gressive differentiation and articulation of furniture into numerous types that occurred once political and social conditions became more settled and stable. In Giedion's telling of it, the production of furniture moved from the domain of the carpenter and joiner, to the cabinet-maker, decorator and upholsterer in the eighteenth century; later, especially in the nineteenth century, the mechanistic inventors and engineers took the lead in developing furniture. Finally, in the twentieth century, designer-architects reformulated the technical advances of the engineers to become the "primary form-givers" in furniture design as well.

The passing of the baton, from artisan to industrial designer to artist-architect, points to the density of reference that furniture and its design possess today: a blurring of physiology and aesthetics; experiments in new materials; a structural understanding of the artifact; the technical and economic constraints upon its manufacture and mass production; its commodification into the system of objects of consumer society.

INDIAN FURNITURE

Against such a backdrop, Indian furniture shows up as almost literally medieval: a limited inventory of under-differentiated objects — charpays, takhts (divans), *peerees* (low stools), and *sandooks* (chests) — that somehow missed the evolutionary boat and the sustained attention of specialist artisans and designers, making possible the conquest of the Indian domestic interior by "sets" of Western furniture.

Earlier cultural infusions, of the Central Asian Muslims for example, had not significantly altered the relationship between the body and furniture, which remained essentially a grounding operation: Furniture, whether in the form of carpets, cushions or low platforms, prepared and marked a place for the body to take its position. The precision and economy with which this articulated physical and social stations is illustrated in Indian miniature paintings. Prince and fakir, princess and maidservant, each pair takes its position in tableaux that frame and reframe space, architecture, and furniture through each other. A raised dais in a room, a pavilion in a garden, or a carpet under a tree, each define a space, prepare a surface, and mark a place.

With the advent of the Europeans in the eighteenth century, the equilibrium achieved in the Indian context between furniture and its use, was violently disturbed. Furniture became, as never before, both the agent of and the medium through which the new power and gender relations manifested themselves. In the early period of mercantilist expansion, the agent-nabobs of the East India Company went native, assimilating themselves into the established scene while taking on a ruling role. Later, after the imposition of imperial rule and an administering bureaucracy, furniture became an instrument for establishing and displaying cultural difference. One can see this in many Company paintings, genre scenes that depict the complex protocols of Raj life: The solitary missionary in "darkest" India, warding

off the hostile environment with his mosquito net, fan, and solar topee; the scrappy young civil servant in the mofassil (rural outposts), smoking a cheroot on the verandah, his chair recklessly leaning back, with a host of munshis and supplicants perched on their haunches around him; dinner parties of men and women in full formal gear, ostentatiously grouped together at table; or the civil servant's wife managing her household, prominently seated on a chair while a retinue of servants and tradesmen take their positions, in various postures, on the floor around her.

As the culture of the Raj matured, it acculturated the Indian gentry as well as the burgeoning native professional classes. A new type of "Anglo-Indian" furniture was the result. Made of tropical hardwoods, wicker, and bamboo, the plantation chairs with extendible arms, four-poster "charpoy-beds," and collapsible charpoy camp beds (advertised in Army and Navy catalogues for the officials on tour duty) are particularly curious hybrids. Meanwhile the appearance of western "living" and "dining" rooms in traditional houses introduced into the established narratives of domesticity new divisions along class and gender lines.

The influence on domestic life and on the architecture of domesticity that this incursion of Western furniture has had is a parallel story, beyond the brief compass of this paper. However, I would like to mention three ways in which the complex cultural and material commerce between Western furniture and Indian habitats continues to unfold. Giedion's "form-giver" architects show up in interesting cameos. Antonin Raymond's charpai four-posters with movable backrests (designed for his ashram in Pondicherry), and Le Corbusier's cantilevered-frame divans for the Sarabhai house are both reinterpretations of charpai conventions. Pierre Jeanneret, during his extended period in India, took a closer look at vernacular craft, in the process reassembling Indian charpays and peerees that somehow remain within the Indian gambit.

A more ambiguous phenomenon, the rise of an ethnic aesthetic, surfaced in both the west (during the sixties) and a little later in the Indian sub-continent as well. The idea was to reclaim the handcrafted artifact, and restore to it both cultural and use value. One finds instances, for example, of the charpai both transformed into a table or else used explicitly, as both sign and object. More recently, Raj nostalgia has recommodified aspects of Indian furniture: One can order furniture from Crate and Barrel that "owes its elegance to elephants" (a reference to the *howdah* elephant seats) or a piece from British Khaki's line of Anglo-Indian furniture made of reclaimed teak.

The thickets of signification implicated in these incorporations notwithstanding, there remain crucial differences in the ways in which furniture is inhabited in the Indian sub-continent. This is even more so when one ventures beyond the confines of the bourgeois home into the landscape at large. In fact when one begins to observe self-consciously the charpai in its terrain, it becomes possible to see the subtle variations and differences in the way western furniture has been appropriated within the Indian interior.

POSTURE

Posture is a primary clue. Giedion had already alerted us to the existence of an "oriental manner" of sitting and seating, following from the degree to which "the orient has achieved postures that allow the body to find relaxation and comfort within itself." (Giedion, 260). One sees these "innate postures. . . where the body relaxes within and upon itself," requiring little if any by way of extraneous support, in evidence everywhere in the Indian landscape. The body is in equilibrium, the statics fully resolved within the musculature. The body's lines are independent from the lines of supporting furniture, allowing it the freedom to take up a position anywhere: perch by the side of a road or on top of a charpai, or within a shop stall alongside the merchandise.

There are many body positions in evidence, each an essay in the complementarity of body, function, and furniture. Within the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions, body positions take on significant codings: the meditative postures, the balancing acts of yoga, even the populist representations of gods (the seated Ganesh, one leg dropped to the floor, the other bent and held against the other thigh, in effect "pretensioning" and stabilizing the elephantine body on the low stool) catalogue the range. The nomadic, Central Asian influences only enriched and diversified this repertoire further as is evidenced in many miniature paintings: arms prop up the body, or legs fold back under to provide a seat, while cushions, in a range of shapes and sizes, are deployed strategically.

When compared to a scene at a teastop along a canal road, with truckdrivers arranged on and on top of the gathered charpais, the image of Charlotte Perriand laid out on the Chaise-longue Basculante appears as if from another planet (Colomina, 1992). The way in which furniture is occupied and the way in which furniture itself occupies, disciplines, and re-forms the individual and the collective body is very different. Perriand's effaced and skirted body reference a very different economy of posture and body-furniture relationship. Both the furniture and the body are exposed to a clinical eye, and while the cantilevered construction is anatomically analogous to the body, the apparatus ends up overwhelming the body and absorbing it into itself. The charpais, on the other hand, perform architecturally: in a sense they reprepare the inhospitable ground and provide a series of horizontal planes on and upon which groups configure themselves.

CHARPAI

The ubiquity of the charpai has made it disappear. Like the medieval chest, it is the universal furniture of the Indian subcontinent, a conjurer's prop that is constantly put to use. As part of the physical and emotional landscape, it is everywhere: A watchman's charpai outside an officer's bungalow with an assortment of underemployed men; the grid of charpais, each with its own watercooler, at a roadside truckstop; a stack of charpais leaning against a wall with

laundry set out upon them to dry; charpais set out in a driveway, in a courtyard, or on the roof awaiting occupation; inert bodies, wrapped from head to toe, sleeping in broad daylight and in full view upon charpais along a sidewalk or along a river bank; the line of charpais at a construction site, each with a mosquito net and a bedroll, signalling occupation before the event; the charpai borne aloft in a funeral procession with its cargo of an enshrouded and garlanded corpse.

The charpai is the basic unit of the Indian landscape signifying comfort, shelter, habitation. An itinerant hearth, it initiates gathering and domesticates the terrain. Its reduced morphology and simple, lightweight construction gives it a remarkable compositional facility: It is a table when placed between two benches, seating when placed around a table; it can be arranged in grids, in circles or in parallel formations, head to head or side by side; it can be stood on its side lengthways or leaned vertically against a wall.

Its dressing and its elaborations never stray far from its basic elements. Essentially it breaks down into what its name suggests, char-pai, or four legs, with two sets of rails attaching to the legs at crude tenon and mortise joints. A webbing of natural fibers or cotton tape is strung between the rails and a length of plain rope or tape strung through the webbing and the fourth rail pretensions the whole assembly. The webbing precludes the need for elaborate mattresses, for some a counterpane suffices. The rectangular form is given direction by both the location of the tensioning rope (which is where the feet end up) and by the pillow. Under the drape of the counterpane, one can read the gentle rise of the corner posts above the plane of the webbing. When ostentation demands elaboration, the char-pais or four legs themselves become the focus. The corner posts of the charpais of the maharajahs were covered in silver; less conspicuous examples are of elaborately turned wood, or else are painted in bright colors.

More recently, the increased use of prefabricated steel tubing in the building industry, has led to the appearance of a "tubular" charpai. Made of lengths of tubing welded together with a webbing of bright nylon tape, it is both lighter and cheaper than the conventional charpai. However the welded joint makes disassembly and reassembly impossible and the nylon tape makes for a webbing that, while smoother and thinner, does not breathe. The availability of nylon tape in multiple colors has significantly altered the traditional checkerboarding of natural weaves; a whole new palette as well as patterns are now available to the charpai maker. Despite the change in materials and techniques of manufacture, charpai-making has not entered the realm of mechanization and mass-production. It remains a cottage industry: one still goes to the carpenter to pick out the legs and then to the weaver who provides the webbing and the rails.

JA'NAMAAS

Like the charpai, the ja'namaas too works at a number of scales: as artifacts that equip one for specific functions; as

prosthetics that both extend and prefigure the body; as furnishings that prepare and inscribe spaces for human occupation; as formal elements that produce their own architectures. The ja'namaaz, or prayer-mat, a part of a class of furnishings that mediate between the body and the built environment. It is related to carpets and rugs but it has a specific function and it carries within itself architectural and bodily codes. Unlike the charpai, it instantiates body relations that are not communal and temporal, but geographic, spiritual and metaphysical as well.

In the Indian sub-continent, the individual ja'namaaz, literally "place for prayer" in Urdu, is approximately 24" x 46" of flat, woven cloth. (As a cultural artifact, its physical appearance varies from region to region. A social and factual description of ja'namaazes from across the Muslim world is outside the scope of this paper.) Its weave, imagery and formal structure inscribe a full range of bodily motion—standing, sitting, bowed, prone—as well as demarcate a precise temenos wherever it happens to be placed. Folded and stored away, its spatiality and directionality remain explicit, a virtual precinct with its coordinates fixed on Mecca.

A Muslim may say her prayers anywhere on God's earth; all that is required of her is correct orientation and an unsullied surface. The ja'namaaz provides these conditions. It is a portable temenos that may be laid upon any surface anywhere, a sacral veneer, it woven field inscribing orientation and providing a degree of separation from the pedestrian surface immediately beneath. The place of prayer that the ja'namaaz instantiates is a virtual zone that exists within a real space. Once standing upon the prayer-mat, and enacting the prescribed prayer movements within it, the pray-er enters a heterotopic condition: simultaneously present before the Ka'aba and wherever he may actually be.

In Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, there is a powerful image of the degree to which the prayer-mat insulates, physically and emotionally, the pray-er from the actual context and the shock produced when it fails to do so and the real and virtual spaces literally collide: The narrator's grandfather, recently returned from a Heidelberg education, unrolls his prayer-mat in the cold dawn of his family's lakefront Kashmiri garden, commences his prayer, rees-

tablishing a temenos, until, head bowed down, his nose collides against a frozen tussock, hidden under a wrinkle in the prayer-mat.

Like the mosque, the ja'namaaz also sets the stage for prayer through a precise set of elements. In the mosque, it is the plane of the *qibla* wall (the long, front wall of the mosque that everyone faces) upon which the lines converging upon Mecca are projected. The mihrab, the projecting aperture within the qibla wall (where the prayer-leader takes his place) is a scaling device that draws one of the radial lines upon the qibla plane. This figuration of the qibla wall is translated from the vertical (as in the mosque) to the horizontal plane, on the field of the prayer-mat or in the revetment of the floor itself.

The formal and compositional strategies employed in the partitioning of a prayer-mat are numerous. At its simplest, the prayer-mat reinscribes the mihrab within which the pray-er stands, bows and sits. The classic Indian sub-continent ja'namaaz employs a sophisticated, and reduced compositional structure that combines images with strong narrative content. The field is partitioned into an upper and a lower zone; the one below elaborated into an arch within which the pray-er stands and looks into the bifurcated upper windows, with images of the Ka'aba and the Prophet's mosque in Medina, encapsulating within the field of vision the bi-polar pulls of the believer.

More recently, ja'namaazes have begun to employ perspectival strategies that incorporate the place where the pray-er stands into a perspectival projection of the Ka'aba compound. What makes these, and many other more abstract strategies so resonant, is the degree to which ja'namaazes compress entire worlds within their 3/4" thickness. Both the charpai and the ja'namaaz, in their thinness, and in their precise formal reduction, inaugurate worlds of enormous narrative riches.

NOTES

- Colomina, Beatriz. 1992. *Sexuality and Space*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Giedion, Siegfried. 1969. *Mechanization Takes Command*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1980. *Midnight's Children*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.