

# Re-reading the Gandhi Smarak in the Identity Politics of Architecture

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The Third World is witnessing a surge of interest in the concepts of Identity and Identity Formation. The search for the communication of a societal goal or the creation of a sense of identity or feelings of self-worth have become patently clear as these societies have gone through political upheavals or, more generally, now strive to establish identities which break from their colonial past. This paper investigates the question of representation, issues of Identity and memory, through the case of a postcolonial architectural encounter perpetrated by the act of building a memorial to Gandhi: the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, located at Ahmedabad, India.

Amos Rapoport has pointed out that the "experience of particular environmental settings is itself a part of enculturation." The colonizer's efforts towards this enculturation are visible in all their major urban ventures, from Le Corbusier's grandiose plans for Algiers, to Imperial Delhi. On the other hand, for the most part the native did not occupy the European-constructed buildings, which he needed to visit mostly for administrative purposes. He inhabited the "Black towns". The content he devised for his *privileged* Self was the set of values he deemed lost to the "enlightened" West. But ironically, the very Rationalism that was being projected as the native's Other, was also responsible for the nourishment of Nationalism, and ultimately, freedom for the colonies.<sup>1</sup>

Takeuchi Yoshimi, writing after Japan's defeat in 1945, places Japan in a similarly curious double bind, claiming that if the Orient had not resisted the West, it would never have been modernized, and yet the Orient had to modernize and adopt things from the West in order to resist it.<sup>2</sup> This appears to represent intellectual colonization as somehow operating in reverse, what might have formerly overlaid and infiltrated a native culture against its wishes is now taken by that other culture, codified and redirected, back to its colonizer. So this compartmentalization of spatial and non-spatial territories did not result in a loss of exchange between the colonizer and the native, and in fact, reveals an ambivalent and symbiotic relationship between them. In this regard, Albert Memmi writes that the colonial condition "chained the coloniser and the colonised into an implacable dependence, molded their

respective characters and dictated their conduct".<sup>3</sup>

Also, as has been pointed out by T. G. Vidyathan, "for many Indians insecurity (has been) nearly always a consequence of the withdrawal of external authority but never of its presence."<sup>4</sup> In the case of architecture, the paradox has been the appropriation of western modernism as the symbol of anti-colonial struggle and national independence. An example is Chandigarh: 'to be western in spite of the west'. The desire of the colonizer for the colony is transparent enough, but it is difficult to account for the inverse longing of the native. How, as Memmi asks, "could he hate the colonisers and yet admire them so passionately?"<sup>5</sup> This situation of hate and desire, the native's predicament, is in the part shaped by "his compulsion to return a *voyeuristic* gaze upon Europe."<sup>6</sup> The question in the context of the Gandhi Smarak was of how to respond to this "gaze."

## IDENTITY AND MEMORY

Announcing that memory is the necessary, and sometimes hazardous, bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity, Homi Bhabha writes, "remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present."<sup>7</sup> Elaborating on this, Leela Gandhi states that the therapeutic agency of remembering is built upon the maxim that memory is the 'submerged and constitutive bedrock of conscious existence', and that while some memories are accessible to consciousness, others are blocked and banned. This latter type of memories passes through the unconscious in dangerous ways, causing inexplicable symptoms in everyday life. And it seems that the best way to deal with such a situation is to release such violating memories from their captivity.

Freud and Lacan both maintain that the mind engages in two types of amnesia. *Verdrangung* is the neurotic 'repression' of memory, and *Verwerfung*, the more devastating of the two, is the psychotic 'repudiation' of the past. While *Verdrangung* censors and thereby disguises a vast reservoir of painful memories, *Verwerfung* deceives in its transforming

the past into a 'hostile delirium.' Lacan states that the memories and images *expelled* through the violence of repudiation enter into a "reciprocal and symbiotic opposition to the subject."<sup>8</sup> These phantasmal memories thus become 'simultaneously alien, antagonistic and unfathomable to the suffering self.'

In the process of fostering a 'reparative continuity' between cultural identity and the historical past, one has to recognize the difference between these two types of amnesia, this 'postcolonial schizophrenia.' Bhabha asserts that in response to it, the 'theoretical *re-membering*' of the colonial condition is called upon to fulfill two corresponding functions. The first is the simpler disinterment of unagreeable memories, and it seeks to uncover the overwhelming and lasting violence of colonization. The second reconciles and attempts to make the hostile and antagonistic past more familiar and therefore *more approachable*. This means that the images rejected by the violence of the postcolonial *Verwerfung* be reclaimed and owned again.

As has been asserted by many, colonialism had constituted a kind of violence by instituting "enduring hierarchies of subjects and knowledge—the coloniser and the colonised, the Occidental and Oriental, the civilized and the primitive, the scientific and the superstitious, the developed and the developing."<sup>9</sup> This postulated that the native was the inverse and negative image of the colonizer. It also meant that in order for Europe to emerge as the site of rationality, of civilization, the colonized world *had to be emptied of meaning*. It is the illumination of these contiguities and intimacies that underscore the stark violence and counter-violence of the colonial condition that the reparation of the architectural project in the colonial aftermath can be/was to be most successful.

### GANDHI AND POSTCOLONIALITY:

In discussions of Postcoloniality, it has been pointed out that the first elaborations of this theory can be ascertained in Gandhi. He completed his education in the colonizing country—Britain—to become a reluctant lawyer, and prepared the theoretical underpinnings of his anti-colonialism in a third country—South Africa. Leela Gandhi suggests that it is probably for this reason that "Gandhi's resistance to colonialism is (not) matched by a corresponding nationalism", and that he "remains wary of the national elite and eventually seeks ... the disbanding of nationalist parties in favour of a more decentralized polity closer to the needs and aspirations of the vast and unacknowledged mass of the Indian ... peasantry."<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi proposed a radical style of total resistance to the totalizing political and cultural offensive of the colonial civilizing mission, the essence of which was the native's refusal of any privilege of recognition to the colonizer. By disavowing cultural colonization, he attempted to transform anti-colonial dissent into a struggle for creative autonomy from Europe. And it was this emphasis on creativity rather than authenticity that ultimately prevented him from sup-

porting a nostalgic and 'uncritical' return to the 'pre-colonial' past. His thinking is shaped, according to Leela Gandhi, by "an obsession with the rhetoric of futurity", and that he treats his anti-colonial interventions as *scientific experiments*, "geared toward the discovery of a hitherto unprecedented political style. (...) While fully acknowledging the complicity or infection of the colonised subject, [he treats] the project of national liberation as an imaginative pretext for cultural self-differentiation from Europe and, thereby, as an attempt to exceed, surpass—even improve upon—the claims of Western civilization."<sup>11</sup> But this defiance carries within it an accompanying refusal to admit the deficiency or lack which is the historical predicament of those who have been rendered into slaves.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE GANDHI SMARAK

The connections and slippages between the politics of Self/Other and content/boundary are visible in the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya (1958-63). It is an exhibition space and memorial dedicated to Gandhiji, designed by Charles Correa. It is significant for its location on the existing campus of Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram, its historical moment in time, and its ideology. It was his headquarters from 1917 to 1930 and it was from here that he launched the Civil Disobedience Movement. The institute houses Gandhi's personal possessions, letters, photographs and other documents related to the freedom movement he led. The materials used in its construction echo those of the other buildings in the ashram: tiled roofs, brick walls, stone floors and wooden doors. The only additions are the concrete channels which act as beams as well as gutters that permit additional construction to be added in future. The plan is drawn up on a square grid with about eight meters as the unit. The rigidity of the grid is broken by an amorphous periphery, and an apparently logic-less location of the rooms. The various elements of the building, in the words of the architect, "combine to form a pattern of tiled roofs, in a typology analogous to the villages so central to Gandhiji's thinking. They are grouped in a casual meandering pattern along which the visitor progresses towards the centrality of the water court."<sup>12</sup>

### HOW THE GSS PROBLEMATIZES THE TERRITORY:

he work stands amongst the first attempts to reconfigure the marginalized and agonized Indian Other. It is built on the idea of contrast: One thing superimposed on another, urban on rural, formal on casual. The Sangrahalaya's "open to suggestions" grid on the plan defies any attempt to cordon itself off from the rest of the world. One of the most readily identifiable visual icons of Indian identity has been the "walled city." The enclosed walled cities of India had become symbols of a closed, self-absorbed, mysterious, static (and unhygienic) conception of Indian society after the Britishers had started building outside these cities using the diametrically opposed formal compositional device, "the object in

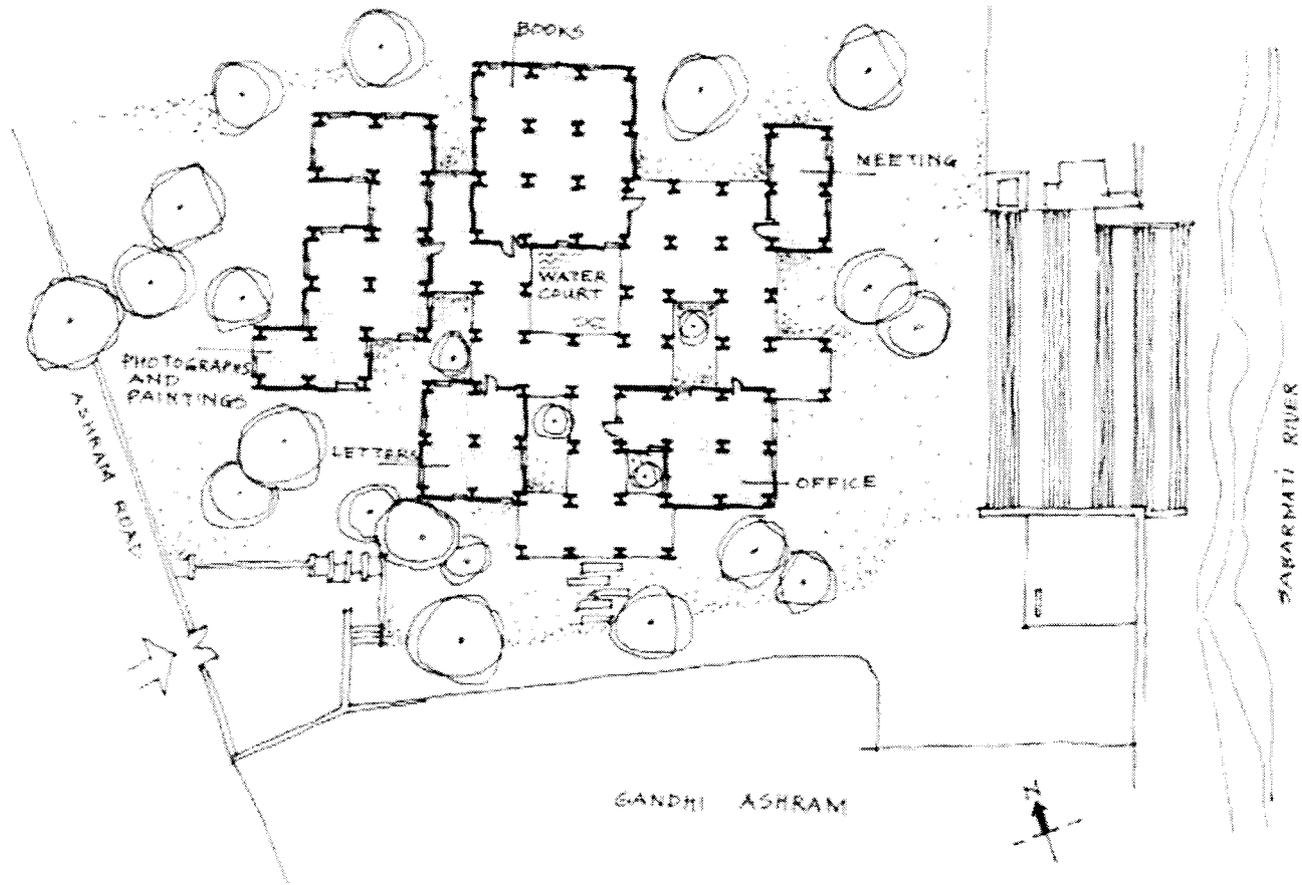


Fig. 1. Plan of the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya.

space.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, it became necessary to delineate the Sangrahalaya as an Indian space carved out of the generalized *rational* space that was identified as Western. An identity that was a break from the past, both colonial and previous, was necessary, since focusing on India’s “specialness” would miss, in important ways, crucial aspects of Indian culture and traditions. The deep-seated heterogeneity of Indian traditions would be lost in a homogenized interpretation, such as the Revivalists and the enlightened colonists tried, which principally tended to focus on the religious and spiritual elements in Indian culture, in a self-conscious attempt to distance themselves from Western traditions.

Though the Gandhi Smarak shares its typology with the villages of central India, so central to Gandhi’s thinking, the “casually meandering pattern” of the units offers a suggestion of the breaking, and the spiraling away from, the much maligned (perhaps also in the minds of the Indians) closed-circle dragging of the anchor of the colonial past. In its meandering, its spiraling out, the work manages to convey the inclusion of an uncertain, yet potent Present. It is indicative of the Nehruvian willingness and eagerness of a pre-industrial, newly free society to tolerate difference within itself and to move towards a polyvalent/“absolute-value-free” modern society. Thus, the Gandhi Smarak becomes a setting for universality to negotiate and be negotiated by the particular.

## MEMORIALIZING AND SPATIALIZING GANDHI

More than the other memorials, the Gandhi Smarak makes it hard to forget the idea of a memorial, a textbook of rural Indian character where every built and unbuilt element of space could teach something if the reader were apt, but here the literalness of the lesson triumphs over the science of the museum. The textbook, a splendid confusion apprehended at once before a word of it is read. In fact these loose clusters of units are the most faithful imitations of the then present scenario of merging the conflicting visions of India’s future, presenting a summary of both rural and urban India, all spaces and materials harmonized with each other, all history overlapping, the randomness of modern growth on the point of swallowing up tradition, where tracing the windings of narrative opened by each chance juxtaposition gives endless occupation for those who hurry by, working out the first steps of a few of the paths of India’s future that branch off to the sides.

From the outside, even to an architect, some architecture seems an easy art, for infinitude seems to be almost as well suggested in a small plot as a large one, if one remembers the whole range of focal lengths, from the remote to the microscopic, and the fact that one cannot keep one’s imagination’s and memories’ association of elements from rearranging themselves drastically, if not quite kaleidoscopically, as they



Fig. 2. View of the semi-enclosed spaces.

grow in one's mind's eye. Here, it seems that the small-scale details never mattered much, although the surrounding settlements of Ahmedabad were dotted with dense pockets of history and ornament. Correa is always trying to lengthen the steps of the mind and the sweeps of the eye. Long vistas accumulate, views of shelter from other buildings on the campus, across courts and through the trees, so that the building is felt as some obstructive or intervening plasticity. What is missing for most architects to make them feel like artists is a sufficiently harebrained plan, an inclusive enough ground for imitation. The structure of the Gandhi Smarak answers to needs everyone shares: the need to memorialize the past and hallow it, to rationalize confusion, to transmute ugliness into ease without losing the sense that disturbance preceded harmony—for Gandhi was viewed as possessing the answers to everything—to reduce that confusion to comfortable proportions as playfulness, to summon up other places and other times, to have everything at hand, to stay at one place.

Though mostly poems and pictures do this, Correa's model is different from them in being more literal-minded, in being (like all buildings) a real place. To memorialize Gandhi we must walk around the complex. It cannot be, like the book of poems, brought to us by someone else. Though ideas of buildings can be replicated in other places—Correa re-creates Gandhi in India—the act of reproducing Gandhi inevitably becomes more startling than the supposed reproduced: the built form typology.

Correa's plan is a summary demonstration of the mental processes at work in architecture and especially helps us gauge their helpfulness, rarely conserved in other projects. In fact, it does not feel right to call even the best buildings works of architecture, because they are literal worlds in which artifice strains against the sterility of function. The visitor takes what is there and begins to bend it to his notion of Gandhi, but it is always getting beyond him, it is continuously growing and widening.

The Gandhi Smarak, though built in the immediate context of the Gandhi Ashram, was designed by an architect whose academic and aesthetic affiliations were originally locatable in the canons of Western modern architecture, whose stalwart, Le Corbusier, had been patronized by Nehru. Contemporaneous to the Gandhi Smarak was Louis Kahn's Trenton Bath House (Ewing, NJ., 1955), much published and now revered for its functional and structural clarity as well as its pure, classical symmetry. It could not have escaped Correa's attention. Correa's pyramidal roofs, produced by an aesthetic response to the tiled roofs of the existing buildings of the Gandhi Ashram, echo the aesthetic event of the Trenton Bath House. This conversation between the two aesthetics becomes even more intense because of their like position in time. While the similarity with the brick-walls, stone floors and wooden doors of the other buildings in the ashram holds the Sangrahalaya securely within Gandhian "down-to-earth" morality, the aesthetic of the roof lays claim to universality. The Gandhi Smarak engages the internal Self-images of Indians with their external identity into a relationship that is informed by both collateral and dialectical discourse.



Fig. 3. Gandhi's residence at the Ashram.

The most elaborate theoretical justification for the architecture which strikes us as more natural will be found in the works of colonial writers like Rudyard Kipling, fascinated by the Indian jungles, impressed with the nobility of the "savages," and the most abrupt juxtaposition of the two poles of human existence that happened in colonial India, where Imperial *haut monde* shares the ground with the "butterfly charm" of idyllic village life. The Gandhi Smarak is a haunted place if only for vividly showing how contraries meet or call each other forth in the mind. A building is a field for these forces where one force is usually given the upper hand. So, there are buildings that could not possibly exist without their walls, buildings that are geometrical figures with sharp edges, and, a kind of building without edges. Here the Gandhi Smarak differs from the Trenton Bathhouse.

This boundless building is not a geometrical figure at all. This kind has no beginning or end and the bounds are confused on all sides, so that for this building an *un-wall* had to be invented, which performs the physical functions without the visual value of a wall. The courtyard with its sunken bed for a tree is a facetious comment on law and order that exercises real constraint with Indian deviousness, and we can almost imagine a simple person stumbling into these sophisticated spaces without realizing he is in a building at all.

It is easiest to begin with the kind of plan that looks best on paper, the one that forms a closed figure. If there is a first notion of a building, it is this: a closed place set apart, protected, privileged, with different rules and styles of life inside and outside—Eden had gates and therefore suggested life outside, but it did not let you view it. The best buildings of this sort in India are the ones that were built by the Public Works Department, but the best pictures of them are the downtown towers: ersatz visions of the modernized West, where people become dreams of themselves, lovers and men in suits and briefcases alike, falling under the influence of a beguiling softness, which neatly dissolves their individuality and turns every act to a play directed as if by God, and makes all the adventure and industry of Eve look idle. All those glass walls and partitions are too much of a good thing to remain serene, whose noise alone suggests an effort to deafen thoughts, to kill memory.

If we imagine the cubicles of a modern building in masonry instead of glass or short panels, we get an unexpectedly bizarre construction, which shows that people let themselves be confined in ways they would endure less easily indoors. In the Gandhi Smarak there is proportionately so much corridor for the small number of rooms one might think we came outside for the experience of confinement, which can be enjoyed at greater length here. As soon as we step outside of a room, the view opens up overhead and to the sides, but it quickly closes again in front, and the pattern of these intermissions of air and sky is less decipherable than it is inside.

Many of the provocations that stem from the Fatehpur-Sikri complex near New Delhi have disappeared from contemporary architecture in India, dependent as it is on the visitors being shown around in a calculated order. Visiting the

Gandhi Smarak is a more special and specific intellectual experience than we are likely to feel in most other modern buildings. As an outsider, it takes time and learning to dawn on us. It at first seems bare and repetitive, but offers to recollection the marshalling of rural forms in geometrical and urban ways with both subtlety and carelessness. We notice what is missing—large gutters are strained on the massive and historically sterile pyramids—architectural ornaments that could not have come there without a westernized human agency.

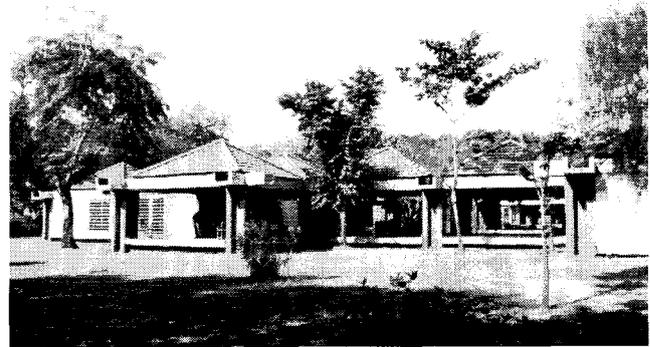


Fig. 4. View from the river side.

The monotony of the Gandhi Smarak—a few kinds of elements and spaces are repeated everywhere—stems from a Spartan conception of life. One of the grosser but more telling measures of a building's spirit is how much space it tries to organize and give a stamp to. The Gandhi Smarak is conceived in a large way for a building much smaller than the big western ones.<sup>14</sup> The density of its associations makes it seem larger than it is, big enough so that one can go there several times trying to see it all and still miss the best part. All the architectural elements can be seen at once and have little force apart from the context they are situated in. In the simple device of the water court, the center draws things and disposes them collectively around it, getting there and leaving there, contributing the sense of falling toward and moving away from the center. It is the perfect place for memory, and the perfection is mildly active as the flutter of hundreds of ripples draws the observer out of himself through water.

A building that wants to feel rural rather than urban, to be an idealized nonhuman "savage" avoids the romantic. Even the one, which wants a stoically Roman impression, avoids the clinical colonizer. The activity peculiar to the Gandhi Smarak is erroneous wandering away from the straight track, not far away, but usually out of sight of it. It is a loosened relaxed maze, which challenges us to cover every path once, but just once. Every time we try to find paths not taken before, and to be tricked in this attempt can be like reading the same page twice, or losing your reverie by your hand's slipping out from under your chin.

The Gandhi Smarak can be both a reassuring and a restless experience. The masonry and wood makes agreeable the huge and sterile pyramidal forms and columns, yet the visitor longs for what is not there, tries to re-collect fragmented memories of a struggle and the joy only newly attained freedom can bring, to cherish and re-memorialize it before it all collapses into the present. One could leave loose ends mysteriously dangling this way, significant of broken connections, or one could work the pieces into one's own unity and identity, less grand than what the original source, Gandhi, could have provided but more comfortable than shreds. Correa does a Gandhian burlesque of ordering the act of building by overriding and contradicting it. Its Modernist anti-naturalism creates the violence of "Here I am, free. Or, am I?" It pits one against oneself, in a search. It does not resolve the issue of an Identity for India, or Indian architecture, but brings the issues into our consciousness and debate.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> For an illustration of this, see Amartya Sen, *Indian Traditions and the Western Imagination*, Daedalus, Fall 1989, vol. 118, no. 4, p. 13; 'Mahatma Gandhi, while describing [Katherine] Mayo's book ["Mother India", 1927] as "a drain inspector's report", had added that every Indian should read it and seemed to imply ... that it is

possible "to put her criticism to internal use" (as an over stern drain inspector's report should be). Gandhi himself was severely attacked in the book, but given his campaign against caste and untouchability, he might have actually welcomed her exaggerations because of the usefully lurid portrayal of caste inequalities.'

<sup>2</sup> Takeuchi Yoshima, quoted by Naoki Sakai, in *postmodernism and Japan*, Duke, 1989, p. 116

<sup>3</sup> See Albert Memmi, *Dominated Man: Notes toward a Portrait*, Orion Press, London, 1968, p. 45

<sup>4</sup> T. G. Vidyathan, *Authority and Identity in India*, Daedalus, Fall 1989, vol. 118, no 4, p 150

<sup>5</sup> Op cit 3, p. 45

<sup>6</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Columbia University Press, NY, 1998, p. 11

<sup>7</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits. A Selection*, ed. Alan Sheridan, Tavistock Publications/Norton, London, 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Gyan Prakash, ed. *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Op cit 6, p. 19

<sup>11</sup> Op cit 6, p. 20

<sup>12</sup> Charles Correa, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996, p.30

<sup>13</sup> See Norma Evenson, *The Indian Metropolis: A View from the West*, Yale University Press, 1989, p. 28-29, for an extended explication of this theme.

<sup>14</sup> The Gettysburg Address and monumental Washington are more solemn efforts to memorialize a ground, in the antique Roman way.