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Lives; New (and Improved?) Delhi

As India is transformed by technology and globalization, appreciation for traditional building practices is being lost – and sometimes found again.

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One evening a few years ago, I found myself on the road that heads south out of Delhi, in the city's fastest-developing suburb: Qutab Enclave. The area along the road was one big construction site. Many new structures sat between piles of rubble, and workers milled around concrete mixers on brown hot ground, half dug, half built. Pigs and stray dogs strolled near new plate-glass outlets for Reebok, Benetton and Levi's.

As the head of a small architecture practice in Delhi, I had just made a routine visit to the site of a house under construction nearby when I decided to take a look at the newly-erected headquarters of a leading software company. This was one of the first so-called e-buildings in India -- what its makers described as intelligent, user-friendly architecture. In my own practice, I try to conform to the ideals of hand craft, low cost and no maintenance, and having just examined the hand-applied mud plaster of the house I was working on, the idea of a peek into a high-tech extreme machine seemed all the more intriguing.

I parked in the vast lot and made my way toward a composition of polished stone and beveled glass. Built of Italian marble and erected with American and French technologies under South Korean supervision, it was truly global architecture. It was also perhaps eight times as expensive as the most expensive building in India. But a structure that has intelligence and the ability to interact with its user was one of a kind among the dumb, unfriendly buildings of old India.

Nearing the entrance, a sensor alerted a mechanism in the base of the glass door that it might soon have to open. I stood under a concealed camera for a few seconds, while my picture was beamed to an electronic control center somewhere inside, and it informed the circuit in the door that I should be allowed to pass. Sure enough, the door opened. A simple device worth probably 22 lakhs, now about 50,000 U.S. dollars, had eliminated the need for a human Haryanvi guard at \$110 per month.

Inside the lobby I stood in virtual darkness, looking for a light switch and hoping that the command center would measure my distress and send down a light. For a long while nothing happened. I stepped cautiously, hoping that the floor was real and not an e-floor. Once I reached the elevators, light flooded in as if all the switches had been flicked on at once. Rubbing my eyes, I hoped again that the command center would sense my distress and turn off a few lights; but no. Still, this complicated light circuitry that I imagine cost \$50,000 was worth it: it defrayed the cost of a 60-watt bulb left on throughout the night and paid for itself in a mere 120 years.

Before long, I heard the white noise of all six elevators racing down to pick me up. But after the lobby experience, I wasn't too keen on getting into an e-lift and opted to climb nine floors by an old-fashioned set of steps. Upstairs, I was met by the building representative, who narrated the benefits of technology as if memorized from a brochure, explaining that the double-glass wall had microlouvers and heat sensors inserted in the glass -- at the cost of about \$700,000. "During hot days, the entire south wall is protected without any expenditure of human energy."

I wanted to say that in my parents' time they used reed mats that could just be rolled down when it got too hot. Instead I said, "That's nice," and looked through the glass at all the virtually free human energy around the road below: the thousands of underpaid laborers who had helped erect the building. It was clear that the world had embarked on a new adventure. In India, like everywhere else, building had become a device to display forms of new abundance and make them available to a growing market of consumers. One client of mine, a farmer turned garment exporter, wanted me to recreate Thomas Jefferson's Monticello on a suburban lot. Another, the owner of a Mumbai shipping company, asked me to design a house he saw in a film.

Back outside, I began driving home across a landscape of multiplex cinemas and shimmering plate-glass malls. All around me, a younger breed of professionals were attacking projects with the impatience of lucrative business deals -- seeking to align their work with the idea of India as an industrial power. I thought of the house I was working on, its mud walls and brick courtyard, the kind even Mahatma Gandhi would have approved of. According to Gandhi, the ideal Indian house is built of materials and skills harnessed nearby.

For my client, a banker who had spent a working life all over the world, this new home was a symbolic return to traditional India. For me, the important thing was simply to go to my study each day, pull out a 6B pencil and spend time at the drawing board, trying for something timeless.

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[Gautam Bhatia won 2nd prize in the design competition for the India's Indira Gandhi Center for the Arts in New Delhi in 1986.]