VISUAL ESSAY

Soft India

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This visual essay documents informal constructions in urban spaces across India, presenting them as ever-changing collages. The towns and cities appear to have continually evolved in response to needs of the inhabitants: the buildings show a patchwork of old and new additions. As if never completed, the buildings appear to be unfinished—some with exposed plaster or block work, others with free-standing columns at the ready for yet another story to be added.

These half-built structures echo the principles of Herman Hertzberger’s ‘half-product’ architectures or the ‘half-houses’ designed by Alejandro Aravena. It is precisely the informal vernacular structures that may have originally inspired both these architects, leading us to acknowledge there is something to be learned from the vernacular.

Large, street-level apertures and rooftop terraces open the buildings to the outside, so that in India’s warm climate these spaces become a place for living and socializing, animating what is otherwise a static architecture. These living spaces are decorated with a collage of belongings, they become places for hanging the laundry, adorned with potted plants and water tanks. These ‘soft architectures’ are as much a part of the urban fabric as the concrete and brick architecture that support them, bringing new color and traces of human life into Indian cities.

The general lack of enforced planning regulations technically allows for adding stories to existing buildings, and their owners compete to build the highest story to gain the best view or the most floor area. For example in Udaipur, which is set around a series of artificial lakes, developers compete to gain the best undisputed view of the lake by building higher. As the stories grow ever taller, the floor areas shrink, leading to tiered roofscapes accessed by zigzagging staircases—often the top tier is crowned with a water tank.

Although these cities are not free from developers and city planners, they appear to have mostly been shaped in accordance to the needs of the individual inhabitants. There is something more organic and humane about this informal way of making cities, of making place. It allows urban spaces to be shaped at individual and community levels, although not without an ensuing race by developers who sprawl their projects out for a growing population and tourist numbers. While planning regulations in other cities in the world help prevent this from happening and ensure certain quality for housing, the lack of regulations in these Indian locales, leaves something to be said about “soulless”, “cookie cutter” developer-led housing, of which the ever-shrinking floor areas leave little room for inhabitants to shape their own homes.

Despite evident poverty and—in some places—precarious unsafe constructions, the resourcefulness and the act of leaving a building “unfinished” and allowing a building to evolve, leaves something to be learned or rediscovered in modern cities, where planning laws have become severely strict.