

Aachen, March 2019; Reported by: Lucca Fischer; Proofread by: Zhen ZHANG)

The lecture series „Monday Evening Talks“ (Montagabendgespräche) took place in the winter semester of 2019/20. The topic of the 2019/20 „Monday Evening Talks“ was „Indian modernism“, covering topics from architecture to urban planning practice, featuring 6 lectures from invited guests including Anupama Kundoo, Revathi Kamath, Rahul Srivastava, Ambrish Arora, Samira Rathod and Samuel Barclay. The lectures were organized by Prof. Axel Sowa, Zhen ZHANG, Vanessa Köpper and Lucca Fischer, at the Chair of Architectural Theory at the faculty of Architecture, RWTH Aachen, Germany.

18.11.2019 - Rahul Srivastava - URBZ

On the 18th of November 2019 we welcomed the urbanologist Rahul Srivastava from „urbz“ - a design studio which was founded in Mumbai and Geneva by him, Matias Echanove and Geeta Mehta. Today it has offices in Mumbai, Bogotá, São Paulo, Geneva and Seoul.

The lecturer started by talking about the „mistaken modernity“. With this term, his former teacher in Delhi Dipankar Gupta argued that people tend to only think about technological progress and consumption when it comes to the term „modernity“ while instead attitudes, especially those coming into play in our social relationships are essential to this term. To integrate this aspect into the practice is something that all famous Indian practitioners, such as Balkrishna Doshi, Raj Rewal and Charles Correa had in common: They knew that modernity goes along with urban issues.

As an example Mr Srivastava compared Chandigarh by Le Corbusier and the artist village in Bombay by Charles Correa - an Indian urban planner, who saw his role beyond architecture: Both objects follow the same narrative of strong modernist principles but Correa's design resists what the lecturer called the „modernist show“. Correa provided the inhabitants with templates for building further; in this way the object could react on the society.

This way modernity has many faces in different countries but due to the reaction on social situations some simple designs can look very similar in different parts of the world. This was proven with the workshop „The Mashup“ which revealed the common hidden dynamics in radically different urban contexts. One of the examples the lecturer showed was a collage of an Indian Slum and part of Tokyo, which at first sight appeared to be a normal photography taken in one city.

Moreover Srivastava mentions the book: “Patrick Geddes and Rabindranath Tagore. A meeting of two minds.” by Bashabi Fraser which further differentiates on this point that modernity goes along with intervention and improvement in culture and context.

Srivastava continued his lecture with a classification of four different habitats in India: The classical village, the classical city, the rural city and the urbanising village. With this context, modernity in India takes the expression of a hybridity in the vision of urbanism, as well as mobility: Travelling in particular by train has become very important for the Indian population. Many people live in rural areas and only work in the city.

Urbz has analysed two important typologies which evolved from reactions on social needs in India: The „chawn“ emerged from the barracks and provides a combination which is different from traditional housing. The second is the typology of the „tool house“. Urbz tries to always capture the contexts: People want to have a place to work and not essentially a place to live. Therefore the tool house provides a combined live-and-work-space.

The final project which was presented is the „homegrown-street“. Following the idea that residents are experts of their neighbourhoods and therefore can enrich the process of design, urban planning, development and policy-making brought local and global knowledge together, while letting the inhabitants collect ideas for the bustling street Sangam Galli in Dharavi. The results were shared with local building contractors, who worked together with the architects from urbz to propose designs which should recognise changing needs of the residents. Finally scaled models were built by regional artisans. In an age of big scaled metropolis this project means a refocus on human and social needs during the design process, while using local resources as a product and a process.