CARLOS CHEN

Q&A Rahul Mehrotra

Elephant man

Architect Rahul Mehrotra builds with social advocacy in mind. His latest project at Hathi Gaon, a village in Rajasthan, India, provides housing for 100 elephants and their mahouts. A professor at Harvard Graduate School of Design in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he talks about urban evolution and 'impatient capital'.

What was your task at Hathi Gaon?

To design very low-cost housing for the elephants that transport tourists to the Amber Fort in Jaipur, Rajasthan, and their keepers — the mahouts. The

mahouts are traditionally Muslims in a right-wing Hindu state, and the state government had been dragging its heels over rehousing them. The mahout–elephant relationship is complex and close — the mahout often sings the elephant to sleep — so they had to be housed together.

What was your strategy?

Animal-rights groups had put pressure on the government, because the elephants didn't have access to water. Elephants bond with their mahouts through bathing. The elephants are also decorated with toxic paint that needs to be washed off. My firm and I decided that water was key. The land allocated to us was an old sand quarry — essentially a big hole in the ground. We envisaged housing around water pools, filled by the monsoon,

and a slow regeneration of the landscape, over 10 to 15 years. To begin with, the government was not keen to wait that long.

What triggered the go-ahead?

The monsoon. About 65% of the rainwater that filled the pools was absorbed, but that was good because it flooded the local water table and supported our tree-planting project. The clay walls of the pools then compacted naturally, as local craftsmen assured us they would, and now the loss is nearer 25% — enough to keep the pools filled and to support vegetation. Within two years, the landscape was transformed. The government could see what we were trying to do and became enthusiastic about the project.

What are the houses like?

They are small, one-storey structures in which the elephant occupies a portion of the ground floor, and the mahout and his family another. We designed the roofs as flat slabs so the families could build on the upper levels as their incomes grew. The walls are made of local stone. Our most important tools were local wisdom and local materials. The first families arrived in early 2012. Altogether, the village will house between 70 and 100 families.

Can architecture solve social problems?

It can contribute to the solutions. The mahouts had never lived together, so they had no real sense of community. At Hathi Gaon, we were allocated only 45 square metres per family, but we were able to build extra space into each house in the form of inner courtyards. Clusters of houses share bigger courtyards. Communities are now forming.

You describe Mumbai as your lab. Why?

Mumbai embodies many of the problems of expanding cities. City expansion can happen in two ways — involution and evolution. With involution, a space is used in increasingly dense and complex ways. Slums grow in this way, with more and more people and activities packed into the same space. Evolution is expansion through appropriation of surrounding space such as suburbs: the city becomes more diverse. The most successful cities, such as New York, strike a balance between the two. Mumbai has an extreme form of involution: the slums are major centres of production. But it also has evolution potential — a large metropolitan hinterland that it has yet to integrate.

So cities can look similar but differ radically?

Yes. The forms may be similar, but the processes that drive them are unique to each. Although Dubai resembles New York in some ways, it has grown differently. New York was essentially built by its citizens — its form was shaped by human needs. Dubai attracts impatient capital — money from outside interests such as global corporations, translated quickly into new buildings. Providers of curtain glazing tend to have more of an impact on such urban landscapes than citizens do.

NICK HIGGINS

How does that affect those citizens?

Detrimentally. Impatient capital has no long-term commitment to the city. It can distort land values or leave incompatible structures adjacent to one another. An example is gated communities — tower blocks in the inner city or sprawling suburban compounds on the periphery. Impatient capital can be dangerous if it drives planning decisions in a city such as Mumbai, which aspires to be global but isn't yet, because those decisions tend to lose sight of human beings.

Is architecture leading or following the evolution of urban complexity?

This is a live debate in the profession. One school feels that architecture should be avant-garde. Another thinks that it should be responsive to society's problems. But there is a middle ground, where architects can anticipate social problems and reduce or avert them through the imaginative use of space — as we did at Hathi Gaon. ■

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SPINNEY