‘A fairground of monsters and miracles, India-town is different from other boomtowns. Don’t be fooled by the plethora of cranes and confuse it with China.’

Ramesh Biswas, ‘One Space, Many Worlds’, p 25

The current economic excitement over the Chino-India region has meant that India’s development has in recent years been all too readily identified with that of China. The figures produced by analysts to describe the ‘Chindia effect’ reflect this buzz; it has been projected that if the current growth persists in China and India, by 2050 the two nations will account for roughly half of global output. Encompassing a third of the world’s population, this greater Asian region has the potential of not only huge domestic markets, but also cheap, highly skilled labour and governments that pursue capital-friendly policies. The impact of this will be to effectively position the world at a tipping point in terms of economic and political power. When the full realisation grew over India’s potency as an economic powerhouse, both as a nation and in the greater context of Southeast Asia, two or three years ago, like any other editor my antennae were out. My motivations for wanting to commission an issue of AD dedicated to the subject were admittedly, in the first instance, simplistic. I was in no doubt that the confluence of a booming economy, globalisation and a rich cultural tradition – both historic and modern – rendered it fertile territory. The potential of a publication that could deal with contemporary architecture with acumen and insight – beyond the current treatments of China – only transpired when I saw Kazi Ashraf present the subject of current Indian culture and transnationalism at the Architectural League in New York for the launch of Sara Caples’ and Everardo Jefferson’s issue The New Mix: Culturally Dynamic Architecture, for which Ashraf was a contributor.

Ashraf has configured an issue that is able to deal with all the complexities and contradictions of India and the greater subcontinent: a region that is experiencing unprecedented prosperity, while much of its population remains stuck in a cycle of destitute poverty; it is an uneven urban landscape of decay and opulence, slum dwelling and emerging middle-class townships of pastiche mansions. While the majority of the population are embracing new technologies with alacrity, the new media is also effectively heightening anxiety and awakening superstitious beliefs; as a nation, India has for the past 60 years often been defining itself through its break with its colonial past, but with globalisation could, in Sunil Khilnani’s words, be in danger of losing its ‘self-understanding’ in terms of its culture and architecture. According to Ashraf, India is a nation of ‘messy cities’, ‘transmogrification’ and ‘blanketing landscapes’. Through a set of fascinating critical essays, Ashraf and his contributors adeptly define the many layers and simultaneous developments of a nation and its greater region. Threaded through this in contraposto is the work of some 25 architectural practices who are designing buildings for India from at home and abroad. Diverse in approach, style, type and context, they are in a sense the material evidence of the shifting, multilayered landscape of India in the present and the future. 

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