Colonial Modernities: Building Dwelling and Architecture in British India and Ceylon
Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash (eds.)

Book Review

Colonial Modernities, edited by Peter Scriver and Vikramaditya Prakash, is a collection of essays which aims to interpret the architecture of British India and Ceylon, extending theories from cultural studies to the built environment. The book was published within Routledge’s Architext series, consists of eleven chapters written by nine authors, some of whom have published within the series already. Kim Dovey’s notion of “Framing,” from Framing Places (1999), is used in the structuring of Colonial Modernities. Part 1 “Frames of Discourse” is about architectural writing and theory; Part 2 “Institutional Frameworks” focuses on public and institutional buildings and space; Part 3 “Domestic Frames of Practice” considers everyday dwellings.

The first chapter in part 1, by Scriver and Prakash, sets out the intellectual context and scope of the book. The second by Scriver, provides a critical review of the literature on colonial South Asian architecture to date, examining the role of both individuals and institutions in framing architectural discourse in India. The third by Stephen Cairns, analyses Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), and its emphasis on representation, arguing for a more discerning engagement with the postcolonial agenda, and for the distinctiveness of different arts, like architecture.

Part 2 comprises four essays, beginning with another chapter by Scriver. He examines the “bread and butter” buildings produced by the Public Works Department (PWD), highlighting subtle changes in building forms over the final century of British rule. Arindam Dutta analyses the role of the South Kensington Museum and its Department of Science and Art, and their primary effort to improve the industrial production of indigenous craftsmen in colonial India. Prakash traces the work and ideologies of the architect Swinton Jacob in Jaipur, whose “sympathetic guidance” towards Rajput craftsmen was inevitably framed by colonial conditions. Paul Walker examines the design and reception of the Napier Museum in Trivandrum, designed by Robert Chisholm, highlighting the multiple communities, which the Museum addressed.

Part 3 comprises another four essays, starting with a chapter by Sylvia Shorto. She examines the transformation of a seventeenth century tomb to a residence, for the first British Governor of the Punjab, Sir Henry Lawrence, describing it as a cultural hybrid. Swati Chattopadhyay explores how garden houses were built and used by both British and Bengali elites in Calcutta, arguing that these houses offer a critical locus to understand the city-countryside relationship in Bengal. Anoma Pieris focuses on the successive houses of three generations of the De Soysa family in British Ceylon, describing how hybridity framed the residential forms and practices of those living in colonial Ceylon. Finally, Jyoti Hosagrahar explores Delhi Improvement Trust housing projects, constructed in the 1930s and 1940s, between “New” colonial Delhi and the “old” walled city, which he argues negotiated a hybrid middle ground.

The book aims to plot “indigenous resistance” and “vernacular” contexts outside of official building activity. Scriver and Prakash in their opening chapter, acknowledge that western academia continues to be the dominant context for such research, but disappointingly most of the essays use the usual “official” sources. With the exception of Chattopadhay and Pieris, there is little meaningful engagement with indigenous sources, or local people. Equally, with the exception of Hosagrahar, and Scriver’s chapter on PWD building, the vernacular described is predominantly that of the elite, rather than the everyday.

There is little critique of contemporary postcolonial theory or literature, with the exception of Cairns’ essay. Despite the fact that all essays acknowledge in different ways, the uneven terrain of power that characterised colonial India, underlying many essays seems to be an implicit belief that hybrid colonial architecture offers a sense of place free of such constraints. This is a dangerous assumption to make and nobody interrogates notions of hybridity in any critical way, which is the foundation for most of these essays.

As well, the author was disappointed that there was no concluding chapter, or explicit attempt to sketch out what the emerging themes presented in this book might mean for future research in the field, or for
the contemporary postcolonial city in India, or elsewhere. Admittedly, these criticisms represent the personal prejudices of the author, as much as anything. This book is an enjoyable read, and a solid scholarly contribution by some familiar names, to the modest field of postcolonial architectural studies. The essays highlight many of the complex issues involved in the field, and in an area where records are not always easily accessible, there is much detailed critique.