

# THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

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**AR special issue: new architecture in India**

**Shiv Temple in Wadeshwar, by Sameep Padora**

**HCP adds to the Indian Institute of Management**

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**Stuttgart station / The trouble with beauty**





# An extraordinary field trip, seen as a journey of both discovery and un-learning

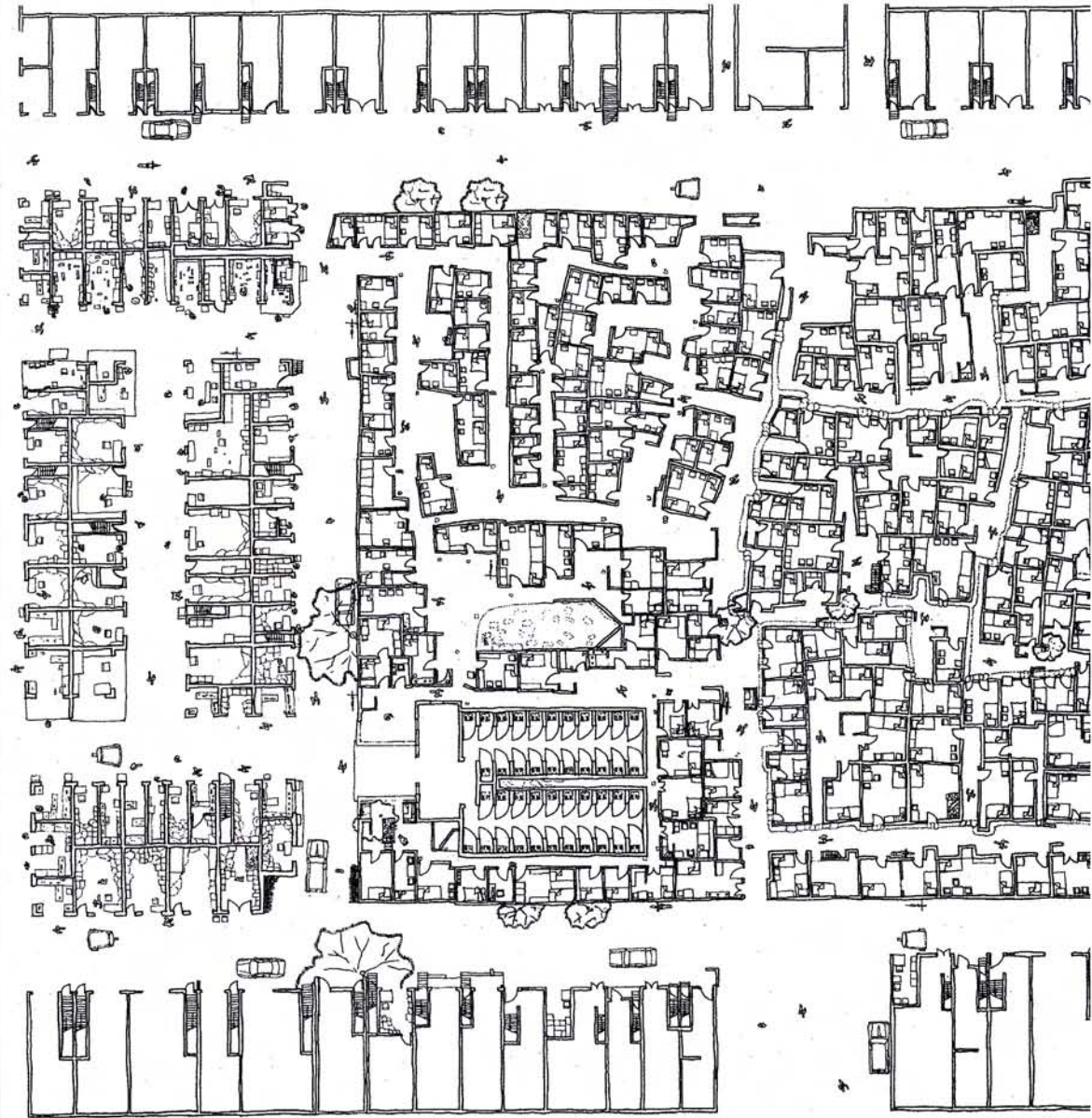
## **BOOK/ Learning from Delhi**

**Maurice Mitchell,  
Ashgate, 2010, £35**

This powerful book is truly a wake-up call to all architects. It speaks about the meaning of architecture in circumstances that appear very different to those with which we are familiar in the West. The line of enquiry always revolves around the question of 'how might architecture improve the way we live?' This universal generalisation finds poignancy and immediacy when interrogated by author Maurice Mitchell's architectural studio at London Metropolitan University.

Over the past eight years diploma students have been travelling to India on an extraordinary field trip where they are immersed in a world of poverty, scant resources and illegal settlements. They begin to try to understand their new (temporary) world, through observing, mapping, sketching, conversations, even playing cricket. This mission is seen as a journey both of discovery and un-learning. All the prejudice of normative architectural speculation, and the sense of the architect at the centre of the discourse, is swept aside in favour of far more modest yet critical tactical strategies. Back in the classroom they reflect on their experiences and begin to suggest interventions, adjustments and tactics to

Below\_ A survey of the informal settlement of Kalyanpuri, made by a group of students on a study trip in 2008



modify the lives of the people they have met for the better. This is not a pious reading of the situation as there is no place for cynicism here – rather it is underlining the role architecture can play within societies that have been invisible or irrelevant to the professional eye. The

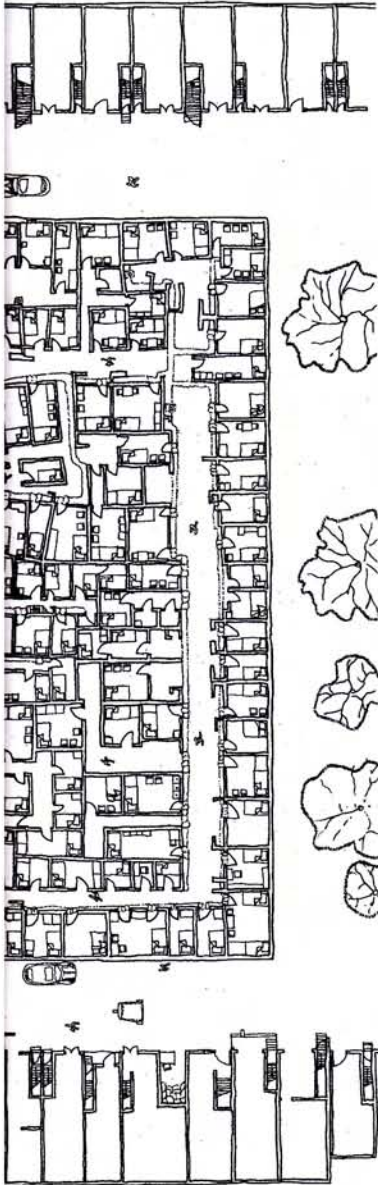
site may be in Delhi, but there are many comparisons closer to home.

However this book not only documents a body of work; it is a manifesto for an alternative form of architectural practice, and at its heart is the education of an architect. How might a

project inform a way of thinking that goes beyond stylistic or theoretical conceits and begin to engage in the 'real' world? The structure is thematic, moving from the studio's pedagogic position – which describes, for example, 'cultural exercises' and 'architect as



Below\_ Angela Hopcraft's proposal for a women's refuge centre at the entrance to Jagdamba Camp



strands, it is the work of the students that appears most convincing. The reader is offered beautiful and mind blowingly complicated plans of existing settlements that have been surveyed, not copied and pasted. Evocative shady interior views are set into landscapes strewn with debris; all the drawings inhabited by people. This is the landscape of humanity, where architecture serves as a backdrop, not a monument.

If there is one criticism, it would be the book's ambition to lay all of its credentials out on a plate as though it might not be taken seriously otherwise. Perhaps the desire for academic completeness requires the discourse and methodology to be spelt out? However, the work itself seems to negate the need

for didactic logic because the drawings communicate so powerfully. This highlights the potential dichotomy of the whole project; that the words, the theory, the premise are only valid if they can be translated into practice. One such practice is representation while the flip side is building; the newly constructed classroom in Navi Mumbai by Bo Tang and Shamoan Patwari being an inspiring example. The author further argues that the relevance of the studio is to implicate the architect within a social and often political framework where he/she must act with integrity and learning. How odd, then, that this sounds so reasonable but that on further consideration is such a rare sentiment?

One can't help but reflect on the profligate flights of fancy

seen in many schools of architecture that may be exuberant and experimental yet strangely hollow. Here the staff and students bravely research and take on the architecture of rapid change and scarce resources with alacrity and empathy. The book is a testament to the value of an education – not a training – and undoubtedly equips students with strategies that are increasingly relevant.

**JAMES SOANE**

**+** *Re-education for the architect*

**-** *Piles on the academic credentials*

detective' – to long and compelling descriptions of the various places and peoples that were chosen to study, from the waste-pickers of Panchsheel Vihar to the city of Meerut.

While the author seeks validation through referencing a number of disparate theoretical