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Rahul Mehrotra

The Kinetic City & Other Essays

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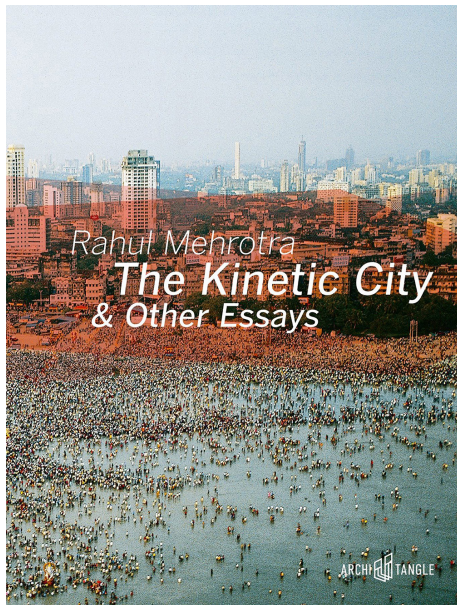
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Rahul Mehrotra is the founder and principal of RMA Architects, as well as Professor of Urban Design and Planning and the John T. Dunlop Professor in Housing and Urbanization at Harvard University School of Design. His practice can be described as multimodal and multi-scalar, emphasizing the hybridization of research, writing, teaching, design, policy advocacy, and civic engagement. With several books and dozens of essays, he has built a reputation as, arguably, the leading commentator on issues to do with the built environment in Mumbai and India.

The publication of *Kinetic City & Other Essays* was moved by an “impulse to understand and articulate the histories, dynamics, and emerging challenges” of the context in which his work has evolved. This book illustrates the architect’s long-term engagement with Mumbai: this city surfaces both as a laboratory and as pedagogy from which Mehrotra’s concepts of the kinetic city and subsequently ephemeral urbanism have emerged. The book has three components: a collection of single-authored essays, which span three pivotal decades in the history of India and globalization since the founding of his firm in 1990 to 2021; a vivid photo essay by Rajesh Vora, which expands on the text *Negotiating the Static and Kinetic Cities*, and, finally, an annotated bibliography of Mehrotra’s written production.

Although the essay themes range from Mumbai and its postcolonial condition, urban planning and design to architecture, the star of the show is the notion of the kinetic city. The concept is built upon early reflections on a form of legibility that responds to the pluralism of the Indian city, analogous to an

interplay between “skeletal structure from which its citizens derive identity” and “a flexible ever-changing, organic city.” Best understood as part of a debate on conservation in Mumbai and the question of what “cultural significance” is, Mehrotra argues that a kinetic city of festivals, rituals, and markets has replaced the static city as the most dynamic aspect of Indian cities: “Architecture is not the ‘spectacle’ of the kinetic city.” In fact, “the memory of the city is an ‘enacted’ process, a temporal moment as opposed to permanent buildings that contain the public memory as a static or permanent identity.” In this context, urban design as a practice must reorient itself to go beyond the material fabric of the city and include planning and local communities to bridge the past objects, the kinetic present, and the prospective future direction.

A crucial reference for Mehrotra in the formation of this idea is Jackson’s notion of “third landscape,”¹ defined as one in which the ephemeral and mobile overlays the “landscape of static objects to create richer social interaction.” In this regard —and although Mehrotra never explicitly makes the connection in his writings—, the kinetic city can be considered as a contribution by the majority world to a broader theory-building project dealing with new material understandings of urban space. Here, Lefebvre’s *Production of Space*² and Soja’s *Thirdspace*³ are brought into a postcolonial setting through Bhabha’s “third space”⁴ in opposition to binary extremes and the colonial invention of the “Other.”⁵

As emphasized by Mehrotra, these spaces of flux have been excluded from debates on globalization and conservation practices. Set against totalizing, “absolute” theories, the kinetic city represents a form of “minor urbanism” in the sense that it accounts for the “material conditions under which knowledge is produced” and is “streaked with the peculiar temporality and spatiality of everyday life.”⁶ Set in a relation, and not in opposition, to the major theory, the “alternative subjectivities, spatialities, and temporalities”⁷ of the minor speak about impossibility, about provoking a “line of escape”⁸, towards doing things differently, Mehrotra evidences Indian architects’ post-planning impasse and lack of policy sense. They bar access to legible urban form for the subaltern inhabitants of Mumbai and render their urbanism impossible: the impossibility of a city without permanence, the impossibility of the ephemeral holding “associative values and supportive lives,” the impossibility of urban design “becoming-kinetic”.

As the kinetic city was further deterritorialized in an endeavor to work on urban design from within

(and from Harvard), this minor urbanism was in itself transformed and eventually reframed into the broader notion of ephemeral urbanism. The realization that “flux is the new normal” prompted Mehrotra “to rethink the assumption or notion of permanence in our response to the ever-shifting conditions of urbanism around the world.” Building upon Sennett’s plea in “The Open City”⁹, Mehrotra calls upon the discipline to come up with more effective urban design strategies to manage change. His questions are univocal: “Can temporary landscapes play a critical ‘transitional’ role in this process of flux that the planet will experience ever more frequently?... Can we, as architects and planners, challenge the assumption that permanence matters?”

Mehrotra does clarify that ephemeral urbanism, and by extension the kinetic city, is “not an argument for making our cities temporary but rather for recognizing the temporary as an integral part of the city and seeing whether it can be encompassed within urban design.” While acknowledging that the notion of “becoming-kinetic” or “becoming-ephemeral” offers a powerful concept for moving beyond unproductive dichotomies, one should caution that its deterritorialization could eradicate discussions on class and racial difference before the (infra)structural, economic and political aspects provoking difference and flux have been overcome. From these standpoints, becoming-kinetic might offer nothing to those engaged in the politics of living. Conversely, only those who have access to institutional, economic, social, or infrastructural protective nets may have the privilege of opting for temporality.

In sum, ephemeral urbanism must ensure that the persons whose practices underly the concept are supported in their own situated and specific struggles for a decent livelihood, housing or access to infrastructure and make certain that they are recognized before shifting their subject positions. Let us recall here Mehrotra’s belief that the fact that new models of urban design must necessarily emerge should not be used as an argument to absolve the state from its responsibility of planning for the common good.

To conclude, *The Kinetic City & Other Essays* is better explained as an archive that makes Mehrotra’s pivotal, yet not well-known, articles widely available. The publication of the essays in their original form makes it possible to trace the genealogy and evolution of Mehrotra’s arguments, which are situated in their context (Bombay/Mumbai or the United States). In this regard, this book is a sensational resource for urban design teachers, students and practitioners interested in researching the author’s career, understanding the notion of the kinetic city, learning about contemporary Indian architecture and urban planning, and, more generally, critically reconsidering what urban design means today.

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1 John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

2 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991).

3 Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

4 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Milton Park: Routledge, 1994).

5 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

6 Cindi Katz, “Towards Minor Theory”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, volume 14 (1996): 487-499. p. 488.

7 *Ibid.*, 490.

8 *Ibid.*, 489.

9 Richard Sennett, ‘The Open City’, *Urban Age*, November 2006: <https://urbanage.isecities.net/essays/the-open-city>.