

**Architecture: The Fourth R**  
**Culture and**  
**Multiculture**



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## Culture and Multiculture

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architecture is the most magical  
and transporting of arts.  
People travel round the world  
to experience it. Its practice  
has its own special languages,  
histories, myths and mysteries.'**

**These essays by Sunand  
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The Brick Lane area of London's East End is famous as a distillation of modern multicultural Britain. In the early eighteenth-century Huguenots escaping persecution from Louis XIV found sanctuary here. On top of terraced houses they built weavers' lofts illuminated with roof lights – now some of the most desirable properties in town. The chapel they constructed in 1743 successively housed other Christian denominations, and in 1898 became a synagogue to serve what was, by then, a largely Jewish local population. Between the wars, Bangladeshi sailors started settling in the area, and in the 1970s were followed by their families, mostly from the Sylhet area. By now, most of the Jewish people had moved on, and in 1976, the synagogue became the Great London Mosque. Now, adding to the rich cultural mix, there is also a large Somali community here – many worshipping in the edifice built by protestant Huguenots.

Raymond Williams said, in his wonderful book *Keywords*: “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” The complication is plain to experience in Brick Lane. If ‘multicultural’ as a concept isn’t difficult enough, the area also connects with culture in a quite different sense of the word. Near the southern end of Brick Lane is Whitechapel Art Gallery, founded

in 1901 to bring great art to the people of the East End. In 1938, Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* was shown there. Through many ups and downs, new art has again and again been either showcased or made in the area: Gilbert and George in the 1970s, then Tracy Emin, Rachel Whiteread, Julian Opie and many others. Brick Lane also has dozens of other venues for music performance and art, some in the converted buildings of Truman’s Brewery. And, most famously, there are scores of Indian restaurants, which are really Bangladeshi restaurants, like 90% of all such eateries in the UK, serving what is called curry only outside the subcontinent. Wrongly named restaurants serving wrongly named food, doing a roaring trade and making people happy. There’s a cultural study project there in its own right.

Where is architecture in this cultural mix? Goethe said that architecture was frozen music. More prosaically, is architecture not frozen culture? It expresses the customs, the ways of life, the belief systems and the power structures of a certain time. We can read all these aspects of culture in the design of buildings and the plans of cities. Forbidden to depict figures, and often anything natural, Islamic master builders discovered amazing architectural geometries. Contrast this with the equally amazing, highly realistic, trompe l’oeil ceilings in the lofty domes

of Venetian churches, which must have literally been taken as visions of heaven in their time. They were proof plain of the presence of God; for how else could such things be possible on earth? In aerial pictures of cities colonised by the British or French, from Delhi in the east to Casablanca in the west you can see the contrast between the old settlements with their narrow shady alleys and close packed courtyard houses – and the European pattern of streets with their individual buildings.

I want us to try to understand how ‘culture’ relates to the practice of architecture, and to do that we need to separate the different and complex meanings of the word in different contexts. With further thanks to Raymond Williams then: “Firstly, architecture is a cultural activity in itself; it is an art.”

Obviously that needs qualifying. Though we speak of the art of building, we don’t consider every building to be a work of art. The historian Niklaus Pevsner had a famous go at making a distinction. “Lincoln Cathedral”, he said, “is architecture; a bicycle shed is a building.” Frankly, this raises more questions than it answers, but you know what he was getting at. Art must have an intention to communicate and cannot be a thing only of utility. ‘Intention’ is important because all buildings communicate

something, even if unintentionally, which can be as powerful. So many public institutions of the post-war years, which loomed broodily over us, were clearly saying ‘bugger off’: think of corporate offices, some hospitals and tower blocks. But when it communicates well, architecture is the most magical and transporting of arts. People travel round the world to experience it. Its practice has its own special languages, histories, myths and mysteries.

Secondly, there is a use of culture as in the culture of an organisation. That is the way the organisation conducts its internal relationships, its rituals, its business. Architecture can support and contribute to this culture. It can, for example, support openness or secretiveness, or provide for a desired balance of privacy and community. It can reinforce or inhibit communication between people. It’s mainly through this ability to be a vessel for an organisation’s essential workings that architecture adds value. Organisations in this sense can be households, as analysed by Amos Rapoport, in his seminal book of 1969, *House Form and Culture*. Amongst the influences he identified on the form of houses around the world was what he called a group’s ‘sense of the ought’ – that is, its ethical outlook.

This brings me to the third use of ‘culture’, for ethics shades into cultural identity and architecture contains powerful languages for expressing that. This identity doesn’t have to be related to locality or origins; it might be the image or brand a corporation wishes to project. Curiously, globalisation is today causing corporate identities to merge into a homogeneous universal style. This can mean that buildings and graphics look essentially the same wherever you are in the world. The more they vie to be stridently individual just for the sake of it, the more they meld into an unmemorable mush. Placelessness. Architecture uprooted. Next time you arrive at an airport abroad, try this game: can you guess, from the airport building and interior decor alone, which country you’re in? And no cheating by deciphering the language of the signs.

No thinking architect can avoid grappling with the first two of these senses of culture, the artistic and the social. Personally, my life has been spent mostly in multicultural societies in India and England, so I’ve also been gripped by the third sense in which architecture relates to culture: identity. For example, is our multicultural society producing a new kind of architecture?

In a multicultural metropolis like London, the presence of different cultures is obvious in the way people dress, in the wide selection of food available and in the languages we hear and see. But where is this presence in architecture? Look at the streets of Brixton or Bradford: if the setting and décor is stripped away, they are unchanged underneath. Isn’t that strange? Our towns and cities are said to have been totally changed by the coming of immigrants and foreigners. But the change is all surface. No future archaeologists will find much evidence of it, and what they find might confuse rather than illuminate. What would they make, for example, of the Moorish Market just off Brick Lane, with its pretty oriental arched windows? It was built fifty years before significant immigration had even started, by a whimsical East End chancer who wanted a department store with a different look. Some of the archaeologist’s finds will have weightier and more distinguished content – the Regents Park Mosque, the Ismaili Centre and the Neasden Temple, for example. It’s not surprising that identity is most strongly expressed in the architecture of religious buildings, and that is where the minority ethnic and cultural communities have slowly been making a mark. I estimate that there are more than two and a half thousand religious buildings initiated, funded, built and managed entirely by these communities, mostly

The woven pattern on the façade of the Rich Mix arts centre alludes to the metaphorical weave of cultures in London's East End.



in the last twenty years. They include 1700 mosques, 300 synagogues, 250 Hindu temples, 200 Sikh gurdwaras and a number of others, less numerous. Our archaeologist is unlikely to get it right, as some of these buildings will originally have been chapels and churches – now a little altered and redecorated; and even more are converted shops and houses. It's all a bit of a guess, because there's no architectural or historical study yet of this fascinating area of contemporary culture.

In the 1990s my own practice, Penoyre & Prasad, started becoming involved in a number of projects the promoters of which wanted an architecture that responded to particular minority ethnic or cultural groups. To impose an architectural language in the pursuit of so-called appropriateness we thought would date quickly, even farcically; for no convincing shape in architectural history has ever been known to have come about in such a way. Architectural forms originally arose from function, the properties of materials and the skill and imagination of their designers. Through their regular use and familiarity, meanings became attached to these forms, making them symbolic. Forms then started to be reproduced simply to express this symbolic meaning, their functions having almost been forgotten – and that's how languages of architecture seem to have evolved.

For example, a number of motifs in classical architecture can be traced back to the jointing of timber. The most brilliant master masons and architects always explored the limits of these languages with an engineering based on trial and error that sometimes pushed at the limits of buildability. When the mathematically based engineering and new ways of seeing unleashed by the industrial revolution totally transformed architecture, it seemed initially to free it from language or any convention whatsoever. But soon new conventions and languages were created. The most brilliant architects continued to explore the limits, sometimes returning to the past. Le Corbusier rediscovered rustic brickwork and vaulted roofs in the 1930s, and in the last decade a number of architects have again experimented with decoration and ornament.

Helping develop the initial brief for the Rich Mix centre for the arts in Tower Hamlets, I came across a pair of migrations poignantly related across time. In the second half of the twentieth century people from Bangladesh started setting up households in England. Two hundred years earlier, the first British people had set up households in Bengal, the eastern half of which was to become in 1974 Bangladesh, the Nation of Bengal. The British had quickly and pragmatically adapted the

local house type, known throughout India as a Bangla, making it suitable for their own lifestyles. The settlers wanted rooms with highly specific functions quite unlike local custom, including arrangements for defecating inside dwellings, not the rule in that part of the world. Some yearned for a true home from home, so they added an arch here and a portico there. Out of the cottages of Bangla was to come the great global phenomenon of the bungalow.

If the Bengali immigrants of the 1970s had had the power, opportunities and self-confidence of these colonisers, what would they have built? We do have clues. Some housing associations in the late 1980s started asking Bangladeshi and migrant communities about the design of their housing. The answers were highly practical – more rooms for extended families, or a relocation of the kitchen to the centre of the house. These changes were easily accommodated by small alterations to conventional housing association plans. One clue as to why, possibly lies with the bungalow: its universality shows that lifestyles round the world have become more convergent across countries. At the same time they have become more diverse within cities.

When my family first came to England in 1962, the people in our North London working-class

street would keep the front parlour empty and ready for guests and special occasions, though that reduced the space available in already small houses. By the late 1960s in our street, front and back rooms were being knocked through.

As it happens, the old front parlour/back room arrangement turned out, twenty years later, to perfectly suit traditional South Asian and particularly Muslim families. They made the front room the men's domain and the back the family area. For most immigrant communities, open kitchen and dining space suits families, especially extended ones, far better than the separate small cramped kitchen of standard council housing. A couple of decades later an open kitchen and dining space would be at the centre of modern houses and apartments – the larger the better.

Penoyre & Prasad's exploration of housing design in a modern multicultural society showed that it is futile to design for any particular lifestyle. Houses change hands and within any particular community there are diverse and constantly changing ways of living. A design that is simple, reasonably spacious, adaptable to different uses and robustly specified will prove to be of the longest lasting value.



The same goes for an arts centre with the difference that it has to communicate its message. Jean Nouvel at L'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris devised a solar screen with motorised irises arranged in a pattern based on Islamic geometry. At the Rich Mix centre, we used the verticals and horizontals of its construction to make a coloured weave-like pattern on one façade, alluding to the many meanings that the concept of a weave has for this area – from the Huguenots to the nearby Weavers Fields, to the textile trade and the metaphorical weave of cultures. On another façade we exploited the raked geometry of the cinemas to make an abstract silver sculpture.

In the 1960s, Yehudi Menuhin and Ravi Shankar attempted a brave fusion of Indian and western classical music, pleasing neither constituency. In the 1980s Ry Cooder, first with Mohan Bhatt and then with Ali Farka Touré, made a much more convincing job. They were all much more familiar with each others' music. A decade later musicians, such as Talwin Singh, Massive Attack and Nitin Sawhney were producing a truly new music out of the many traditions in which they have been immersed almost from birth. The same can happen with buildings. If people from more diverse backgrounds have access to architectural education, practice and patronage, we will see

an unforced and natural evolution of a varied world architecture.

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Sunand was President of the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) from 2007 to 2009, where he was responsible for a number of projects designed to focus the energies of the profession upon the need to address climate change.

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