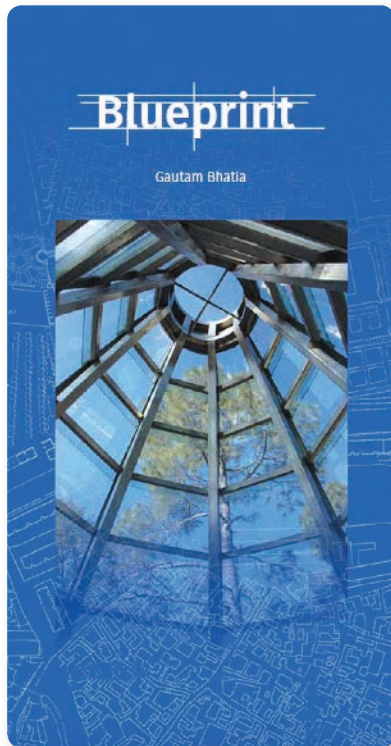


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THE BUILDING AS A METAPHOR



BLUEPRINT

Author **Gautam Bhatia**

Published by **Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.**,
2018

Size 141 x 282 mm, 142 Pages

Paperback

ISBN: 978-93-85360-33-6

A chronicle of work can be many things—a catalogue, a celebration and a critique. This one is an uncanny montage of ideas and images: a personal retrospective into the architectural journey of one of the sharpest spatial thinkers of our time. *Blueprint* is a narrative of Gautam Bhatia's work juxtaposed on his larger cultural projects and his experiments with complexity and context. The architecture of Gautam Bhatia is difficult to reconcile for a casual observer. What are his concerns? What is he trying to achieve? The work itself—as evidenced by the book—is eclectic, diverse and seemingly inconsistent. The projects themselves deal with an array of scales, programs and situations moving from historic preservation and rejuvenation projects to urban design. From the 'Palace' to the 'Mountain House'. The Foreword authored by Himanshu Burte articulates the character of the monographs as *a personal account of a creative process that is free of the noxious fumes of self congratulation*.

This personal account is a multi-layered palimpsest—a juxtaposition of Bhatia's buildings, his artworks and his texts. As one browses through the pages of the book, one comes to terms with the odd organization of the one-word chapters. Each segment, a composition of drawings, photographs of the project[s] in question and the text that attempts to articulate the architectural position. An additional layer of Gautam Bhatia's art—works of painting, drawing and installation—enriches the narrative. Nonetheless, these architectural positions are messy and as Bhatia admits, a study of contradictions. Evidenced by the dark, satirical works of art that problematize the ideas of typology, context, culture, aspirations, popular taste, wealth, consumerism, opulence, economy and so on, the works of architecture in the book attempt to deal with the inconsistent and messy domains of society and culture in India.

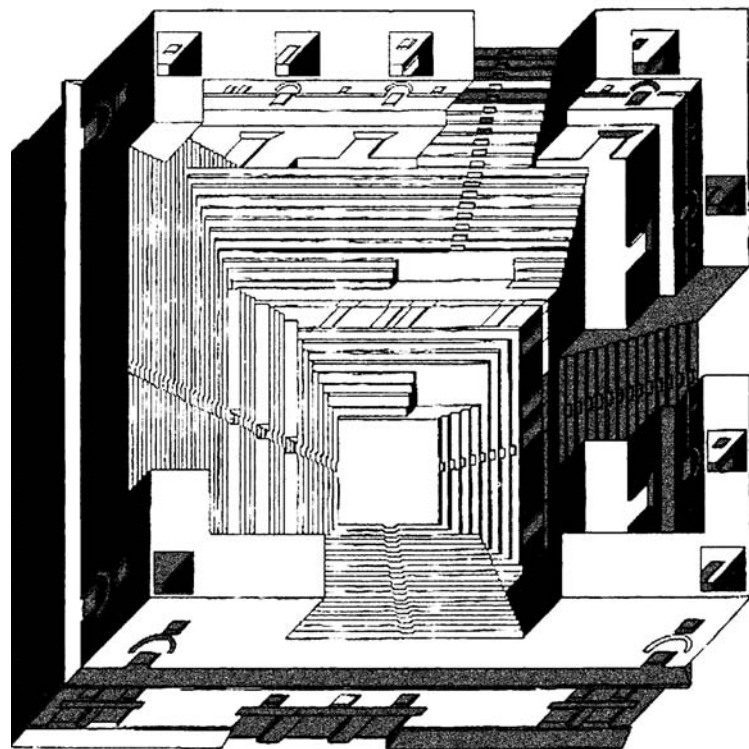
The contests that arise from the politics of space in India are evident from the book. While one may assume that architecture, like any other profession, will ideally be located in the service of the client [more so now than ever before], Bhatia articulates the problems of this world-view in his disarming opening essay 'Building'. Simply put, for the author, not everything that is built qualifies as architecture. For a work to represent architecture, it must confront the social and cultural realities that straddle *art, ecology, landscape, engineering, sociology, history and anthropology*.

The book is also a visual comment. It traverses disciplines of architecture, painting and sculpture that echo Gautam Bhatia's background as an artist. Often, in the reading of the book, one senses his dark humour and his urge to subvert the forces that shape the profession. One can almost sense the guilty pleasure the author must feel in breaking the rules of running a practice. The speculative sketches [sometimes made in the process of design and sometime in retrospect] affords the architect a segue into parallel visual domains, stealing time from the process of making architecture.

The unique structure of the book also affords one to imagine architecture as a profession that ventures beyond the *problem stated, and problem solved* culture. The book lays bare the non-linear, erratic and inconsistent conceptual process that enable an architect to be a producer of cultural works. The text in the book confronts misrepresented agendas of the profession and empathizes with more humane ideas that deal with scale, intimacy and place making.

Confessing to the incompleteness of the work represented in the book, Bhatia outlines the issue of dealing with the grandiose ambition of architecture, admitting the shortfalls of the building in completely articulating this ambition. In this context, all the projects in the book—built and unbuilt [some perhaps unbuildable]—can be seen as works in progress.

There is an irritating order in which the visual content is arranged in the monograph. The drawings are intentionally stripped of tedious legends unveiling the parts that are essential to the idea. By *describing the intention rather than the result*, Bhatia admits to the foreseen failure of the building in translating the architectural idea in its pure form. Rather, for his work, the idea serves as a point of departure and a constant frame of reference to negotiate with the



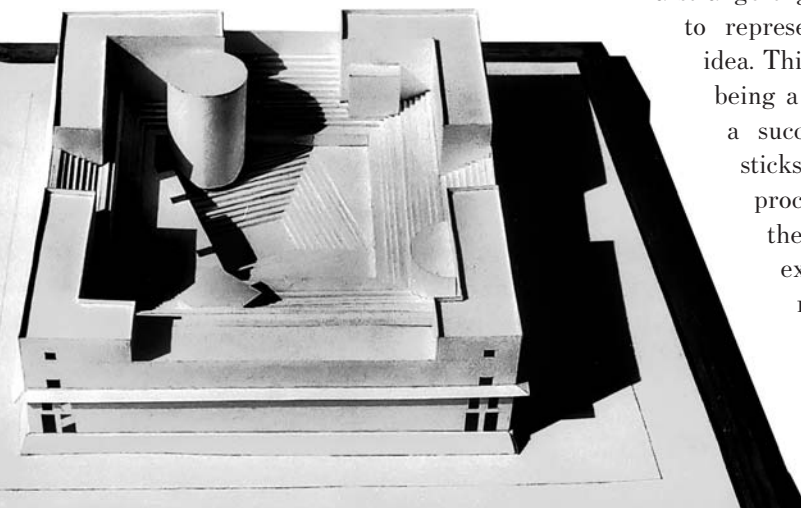
realities of execution. From a purely architectural perspective, the drawings in the book are a better resource than the photographs in understanding the works of Gautam Bhatia. While the drawings commit to the idea, the photographs are selected to capture materiality and a sense of place.

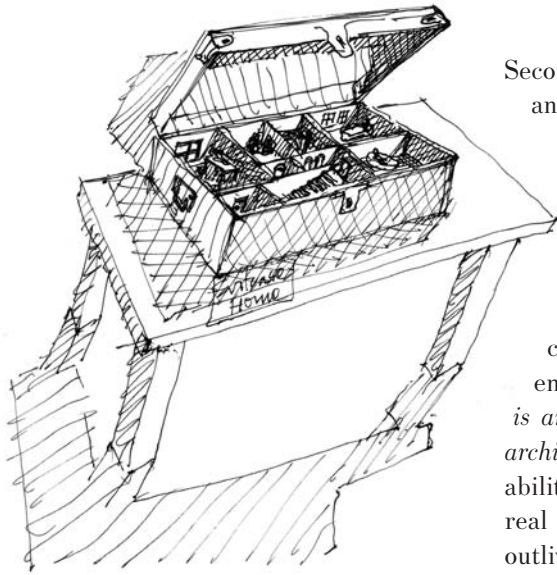
But as one reads on, one senses the virtue in the non-visual representation of architecture in the book. Our world had become too visually biased and spaces seem to be too complex to capture in a choreographed image. By staying away from the seductive representation of architecture that contemporary monographs deal with, this book raises critical questions on the validity of the profession and the inherent contradictions in practicing architecture.

Even if my buildings do not warrant a presentation, I hope the way of thinking about them does, says Bhatia. Certainly!

Select double-spread images are occasional indulgences. But as you look more sharply, these images represent a finer quality of Gautam Bhatia's work—the experience of the space and the richness of place that he so clearly desires from his architecture. These are movements where the architect relinquishes control and surrenders the work to the will of the world. It is perhaps therefore, the space comes alive. One can speculate the significance of this post-occupancy world in Bhatia's work. Paradoxically, one can imagine that his architecture thrives in chaos and not so much in order. Finally, then, what is the significance of this book in the context of many monographs on Indian architects that have been authored in the past five years? Firstly, the author of the book is also the author of works in the book. While this may sometimes be problematic, a genuine self-critique is a refreshing and a rare find! While many contemporary architects do write about their own work, the texts are either dry and descriptive or self-congratulatory. In many cases, there is also

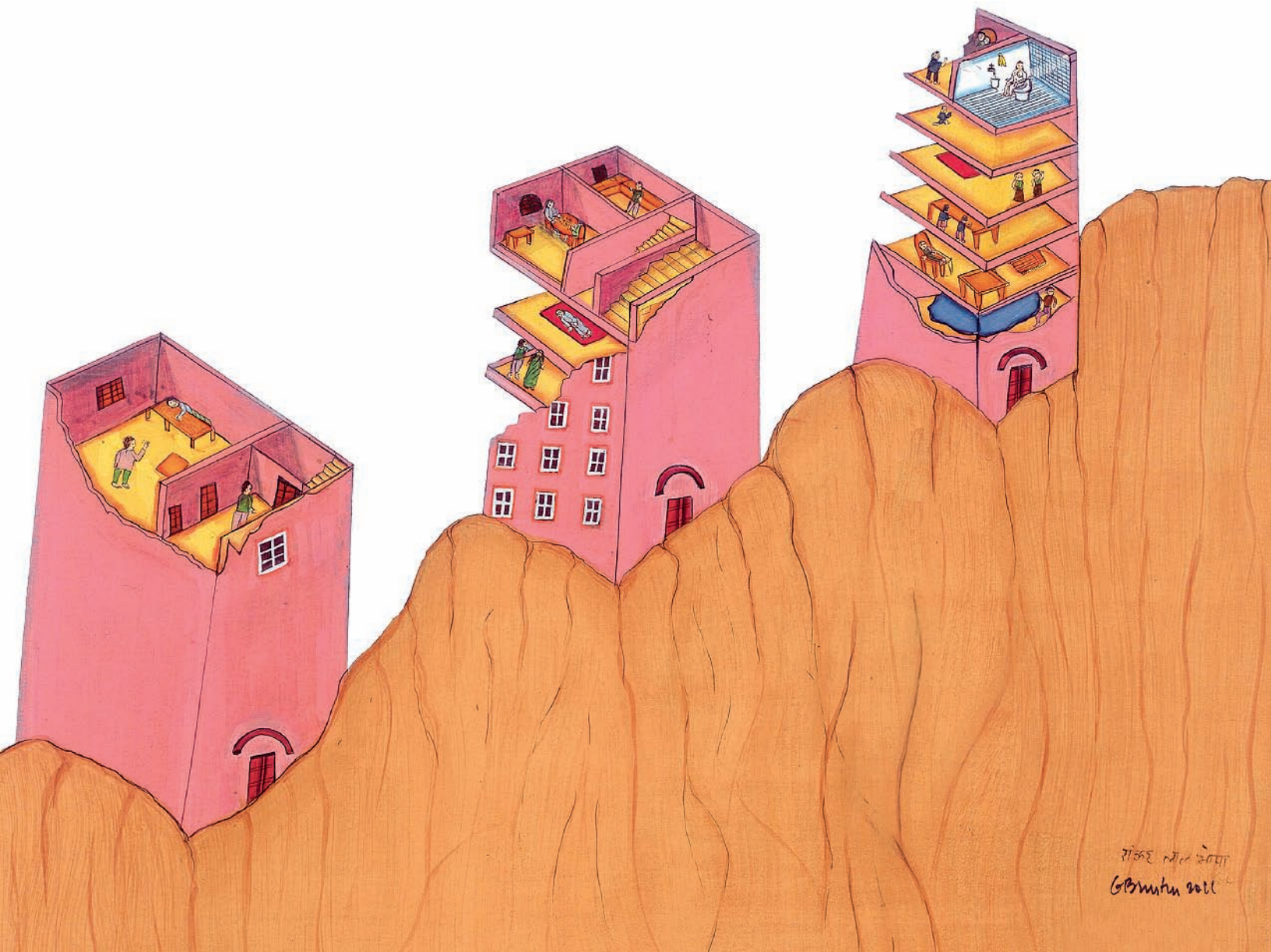
a strange urge to force the work to represent a larger, noble idea. This book refrains from being a romantic memoir of a successful practice and sticks to the analysis of the process, often making the struggles of an idea explicit. If buildings represent values, this book is a record of the values on which Bhatia's practice is built.





Secondly, this book is painted in shades of grey. By refusing to accept a black-and-white world of professional practice, Gautam Bhatia creates moments of great discomfort for the readers in his images and text. It thus serves as a hazy mirror to the reader and one begins to relate to the ideas expressed therein. Lastly, it is written with clarity. Brinda Somaya once said, *Complex thoughts do not always warrant a complicated language.* Although the book does use architectural lingo, the writing is natural and effortless.

The thoughts expressed aim to clear the smoke around an idea rather than creating screens of complexity as contemporary architectural writing often engages in. In his endnote, Bhatia states, *To physically will a building onto site is an act of design, but to set it free onto a course of transformation is an act of architecture.* In India, where the practice of architecture is not about the ability to craft beautiful objects, but about its willingness to deal with real issues that concern our society, Bhatia's architecture will perhaps outlive the buildings he has crafted.



शिकर लाल शर्मा
Gobindhu 2011