

# If the people don't want change



The professions of architecture, urban design and planning possess two qualities that also provide them with their *raison d'être*: the urge to intervene and the belief that this will make the world a slightly better place. Better organized, better to look at and to live in. There are plenty of places on this globe where such ambitions are held in high esteem, where there is a demand for the professional skills required to tackle things properly or, in the absence of demand, at least a kind of passive opportunity. But there are also places where mentality or magnitude make such ambitions seem rather futile, or where they have been so long disavowed that they appear to have died out. One such place is India, a country where designs, master plans, development projects and all other forms of spatial reorganization seem to founder on an imperturbable course of events in which the future is scarcely a matter of self-determination and free will.

Should one simply leave them to get on with? Or is one allowed to become indignant, to proffer advice? It would certainly not be the first time that outsiders had devised an emancipation programme aimed at 'ameliorating' indigenous reality. Such programmes have fallen into disrepute in recent decades and are not infrequently identified with paternalism, colonialism or imperialism. Whether they were selling Christianity, capitalism, Marxist socialism or

apartheid, the ideological legitimacy of their aims has evaporated with the advent of globalization and cultural relativism.

Despite this, there is a new polarizing tendency afoot in which democracy is pitted against autocracy, free states against rogue states – in short good against evil. Forceful arguments are being mustered for a reshuffling of the geopolitical pack of cards. At present, this lordly sorting of sheep from goats is chiefly a top-down affair, a high-level political game backed by economic might. But what of the people themselves? Wouldn't it be more honest to focus on their interests? In populous India, for example, where the government faces a gigantic spatial task? Might the urban planning profession even learn something from the way the Indian people themselves experience, and in a certain sense solve, the problem of overpopulated cities? *Archis* publishes the reflections of several travellers through the urban landscape of Hinduism. Tales of anger, amazement, respect and resignation.

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*The authors and photographers who contributed to this theme took part in a study trip to India, in late 2001, organized by the Netherlands Foundation for Visual Arts, Design and Architecture in Amsterdam*