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The pluralist nature of architectural modernity and its professional practice

1 Over the last three decades a rich body of scholarship, drawing on ongoing debates in cultural and postcolonial studies, has successfully challenged Western Modernism’s dominant position in twentieth-century architectural historiography and directed attention to large-scale manifestations of Modern Architecture in countries of the Global South. Several contributions—in this journal, in edited volumes such as Duanfang Lu’s Third World Modernism, and in the subdomain of modern Tropical Architecture—have pointed out both the transnational similarities and the socio-political particularities characterizing Modern Architecture’s heterogeneous trajectories across the globe.

2 To articulate their understanding of such regional forms of modernist architecture, these studies often engage a discussion of “high” architecture, sophisticated works by acclaimed local or international architects that are more often than not produced in exceptional circumstances. What has been largely overlooked by scholars, yet remains noteworthy, and somewhat in contrast to the Euro-American context, is the prevalence of modernist aesthetics in run-of-the-mill building projects. In countries like Brazil, Morocco, Peru, and Turkey, to name a few, domesticated forms of modernism,
characterized by their fusion of traditional and modernist building trends, became truly popular and were adopted by the urban masses. So too in India.

By far the largest impact of modernism on India’s built environment was manifest in bread-and-butter projects like private, middle-class housing. Yet most histories of Modern Architecture in India still adopt a narrow art-historical view and revolve around a selection of acclaimed architects or canonical projects. A number of recent contributions, notably Peter Scriver and Amit Srivastava’s historical overview *India: Modern Architectures in History* and Farhan Karim’s doctoral study *Domesticating modernism in India 1920-1950*, present a welcome historiographical shift. While the former complements a discussion of well-known buildings with lesser known modernist projects, both studies not only provide political and cultural framing but point towards the role of architectural education, government vehicles (urban Improvement Trusts, Ministries and Public Works Departments), and cultural and trade agencies in preparing the ground for modernism’s broader dissemination.

The role of rank-and-file building professionals in the appropriation, growth, and promulgation of local strands of modern architecture, however, remains underinvestigated in current scholarship on India, a lacuna this contribution aims to address. In that regard, this paper is in line with other studies of everyday forms of modernist architecture conducted in different parts of the world which, rather than celebrating the architect, highlight the influence of a cast of players (clients, draftsmen, engineers, builders, officials) on its production. These studies also commonly subdivide the local forms of modernist architecture on the basis of their degree of ambiguity and adherence to older building traditions. Ricardo Agarez, for instance, distinguished between “hard” (perfected and sophisticated) and “soft” (hybrid) forms of modernist architecture in Portugal’s Algarve region, and pointed towards the role of engineer-designers and draftsmen in the propagation of the latter. Fernando Luiz Lara found that the degree of adoption of modernist innovations in non-architect-designed houses in Brazil depended on the social subclass of the houseowners, and thus indicated a relationship between architectural style and social class. Finally, Ela Kaçel, borrowing from Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci, proposed the terms “common sense modernism” and “good sense modernism” to distinguish between the uncritical and critical forms of unsung architecture in postwar Turkey. Kaçel situates “good sense modernism” somewhere between the elitist and avant-garde modernist architecture practiced by intellectuals and the replicative form of modernism which resulted from architects performing “fiduciary duties to both clients and building contractors.” She claims that for “good sense modernism” to emerge from within “common sense modernism,” relational knowledge networks and the process of building are key.

Studying such popular forms of modernism is particularly hard because, as architectural historian Adrian Forty argues, the discipline lacks the appropriate tools to deal with the hybrid agency and forms they often entail. To address this concern, the current paper explores sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “fields of cultural production” as a theoretical frame to analyze everyday modernist architecture. Bourdieu’s theory is particularly relevant because it comprises multiple categories of producers, the tensions between high, low, and intermediate forms of culture, and issues of social distinction.
Bourdieu states that in any field of cultural production there is a great divide between those who produce cultural products for mass consumption (popular culture) and those who produce for the elite (high art). Congruently, the field of the built environment can be divided into the subfield of mass production—“the field of building”—and the subfield of restricted production celebrated by architects—“the field of architecture.” The multiple categories of producers that constitute the field occupy various positions based on their class background and social trajectory. But in addition to this, there is also the logic and institutional structure of the field itself, which are shaped by broader economic, technological, and political forces in society and are thus specific in time and place.

Based on this framework, it may first be argued that cultural developments, such as the emergence of regionalist forms of modernist architecture in the subfield of mass production, cannot merely and directly be explained as a result of societal forces or status of the designer. The pre-existing organizational structure of the field within which the architecture is produced, as well as the agency of others operating within that field are essential determinants of the impact of these factors. The application of such an all-encompassing theoretical framework might seem ambitious. However, as this paper demonstrates, when attempting a microhistorical analysis focusing on the complex interactions of a small group based around a specific event—in this case the transforming residential architectural practice of the unsung regional Indian firm of Architects United—Bourdieu’s “field theory” offers a practical means of connecting apparently disparate information and revealing developments overlooked by conventional historiographical approaches.

Unpacking Architects United’s residential work in the office archives

Vijay V. Ghotge (1939–2003) and Abhay B. Sharma (1939–2004), founding partners of the firm Architects United (fig. 1), had graduated together in 1959 from the Sir Jamshedjee Jeejeebhoy School of Architecture (J. J. School) in Bombay (now Mumbai). Two years prior to their enrollment, the architecture course at the J. J. School had been elevated from a diploma (established in 1913) to graduate degree. Enrollment in the architecture degree program was limited, and both Sharma and Ghotge had to go through a rigorous application procedure, which further added to the prestige of their qualification. Upon graduation, they decided to return to their regional hometown of Pune, a choice which was far from obvious. Pune, unlike the state (provincial) capitals or former presidency capitals, had until then drawn barely a handful of professional architects. Building design and construction were largely in the hands of engineers. Starting in 1960, both Ghotge and Sharma worked as assistant architects in the firm of Sant-Ghoting-Dongre, a partnership between graduate engineers and self-taught architect Umakant Vaman Dongre (1915–1999). While the practice was well regarded, it was producing slightly eclectic and outmoded work (fig. 2), and after only one year, in 1961, Ghotge and Sharma left to start their own firm, Architects United. As one of Pune’s pioneering architectural practices (in the modern sense of the profession), Architects United thus serves as a valuable case study to understand the emergence of regionalist forms of modernist architecture within the spheres of both “building” (everyday...
architecture driven by popular and market demands) and “architecture” (high architecture that engages with disciplinary discourse).

Figure 1: Architects United’s founding partners, Abhay B. Sharma and Vijay V. Ghotge, on one of their construction sites, [place, year unknown].
At the time when Ghotge and Sharma pursued their architectural education in Bombay, the city was at the heart of the national discourse on Modernist Architecture, and they would undoubtedly have been exposed to it. The style was already being debated in the 1930s, when well travelled engineers such as Raghunath V. Deshpande (fl.1931-1963) promoted it among the middle classes. While the earlier graduates of the J. J. School, such as Gajanan B. Mhatre (1902-1973), continued with an eclectic approach, graduates of the 1950s had begun to consider the incorporation of traditional elements as outdated. An ideological divide existed at the J. J. School between supporters of the International Style or rational modernism formulated by the Bauhaus and other European modernists on the one hand, and those who preferred the organic modern architecture of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright on the other. In the late 1950s, when Sharma and Ghotge were completing their architectural studies, Le Corbusier and his team working in Chandigarh, and architect Charles Correa’s new practice in Bombay (established upon his return from the United States), applied modernist aesthetics that challenged both the “rational” and “organic” modernism discussed above. Hence it is reasonable to assume that Ghotge and Sharma had been exposed to stylistic debates on Modern Architecture within what Bourdieu would define as the field of restricted production (the field of “high” architecture driven by artistic prestige), but it is also important to note that unlike most elite architects in India, they did not study abroad, or work with an influential proponent of Modern Architecture. Their practice thus provides a better insight outside the elite restricted field (fostered chiefly in metropolitan centers and through iconic architects) into the functioning of a
regional practice and its approach to modernism in the production of everyday architecture.

In addition to the uniquely valuable positioning of the Architects United practice—placed within a regional context just outside the restricted field of production and pioneering a new professional identity—the case study also offers an exceptional opportunity to access an archive of project records dating all the way back to the founding years. This is a rare condition in the context of architectural research in India, and access to these previously undisclosed documents is a precious resource. Of course, working with such an uncatalogued and fragile archive poses its own challenges, and some of these are outlined here.

During the initial meetings we had with the office when starting our research in 2015, Architects United was in possession of drawing cabinets and old project files and reference books, packed in gunny-sacks and stored in a garage because the office was under renovations. Some documents that were shared with us, namely a notebook containing a handwritten index of all projects by the firm and a picture portfolio of projects completed in the 1960s, offered promising clues to the relevance of the archive. But by the time the renovations were over, a part of the contents of the gunny-sacks had been discarded. The files related to clients with whom the firm was still in contact were generally intact, but in several others, the only documents that were preserved were official documents (such as plinth-checking and completion certificates or approved plans). The remaining items in the office archive thus clearly emerged from the interested perspective of not only the first but also the second generation of directors of the firm. For this reason, we had to venture “beyond the archive” to reconstruct this history.

The actual buildings as they stand today, as well as extensive, recorded oral history, proved essential complementary sources. Long and sometimes multiple interviews with the architects’ descendants (the current directors), clients, and collaborators, many of which happened spontaneously rather than in a planned manner, offer the basis for much of the reflection that follows.

The sections below discuss the development of the Architects United practice in two phases, tracing the transition of their practice and its approach to modernism based on two separate external events. We argue that this context accounts for the fluid nature of this regional approach to modern architecture. The first two sections focus on the emergence of a new housing typology, following the 1960s spurt in popularity of the Co-operative Housing Society model—“the Co-operative Housing Bungalow.” The first section elaborates on how this new typology induced a shift from architectural work that demonstrates an opportunity and desire for innovation to a more subdued and hybrid form of modernist architecture. The second section focusses on the building process in an effort to explain this shift. The final section deals with the second external event: the introduction, in the 1970s, of a new type of actor within the building industry—“the turnkey contractor”—which prompted the practice of Architects United to undertake a range of new responsibilities and reorient towards processes of mass production. In the detailed discussion that follows, we seek to illustrate how these external factors impacted the architects’ mode of practice and altered their engagement with the various typological and material aspects of the modernist architectural vocabulary.
The multiple modernisms in Architects United’s bungalow architecture

Residential work was crucial in the first decade of Architects United’s practice, when 77 per cent of their commissions were related to housing. An overwhelming majority were assignments to design privately-owned, freestanding houses for the local middle class, known as bungalows (hereafter the Freestanding Bungalow). Although they were only in their early twenties, Sharma and Ghotge were able to secure a number of Freestanding Bungalow commissions from upper-middle-class clients—highly educated professionals, high-level government employees or entrepreneurs. This white-collared elite had been the primary source of patronage for architects graduating from J. J. School of Architecture. In Pune, these clients usually owned land in the upper-class wards of the old city, or in neighborhoods planned by the colonial government after the First World War. By the 1960s, however, Co-operative Society housing mushroomed at the city’s fringes, and this opened opportunities for a new clientele from the lower tier of the middle classes who earlier on would have typically been renters.

The Co-operative Society housing model involved a group of future residents jointly acquiring land and organizing the construction of housing, which would allow them to benefit from the advantages of scale. Large plots (often former farmland), unaffordable for a single resident, suddenly became available for the middle class through the formation of housing co-operatives. After the building phase, the co-operative societies continued to function as service societies providing common facilities to their members. This model of housing provision had been explored since the early twentieth century, particularly in Bombay, but also in other Indian cities. However, in Pune, the sudden spurt in co-operative housing activity happened in 1960, when various co-operative banks and the Maharashtra State Government started to provide beneficial loans to co-operative society members and worked out supportive legal frameworks for the management of co-operative housing societies.
Being a young office, Architects United gladly catered to both types of clients. Their designs for both the Freestanding Bungalows as well as the Co-operative Housing Bungalows broke away from “functionless” Art Deco or Indo-Saracenic ornament, the Beaux-Arts parti, and the exposed stonework that had been characteristic of the early work of the pioneering generation of India-trained architects. Instead, they turned towards a design process informed by modernism and based on functional and climatic considerations. This was reflected particularly in the style of a building’s facade, but also in their spatial configuration and use.

In the larger Freestanding Bungalows, the introduction of living-cum-dining spaces rather than the more traditional combination of kitchen and dining pointed to changes in modern domestic life and entertainment. As historian Nikhil Rao has noted, another critical change in the process of modernization was the gradual migration of the toilet and bathroom from its traditional position outside the dwelling to indoors. This was not just a practical matter, but reflected a gradual change in the Hindu upper-caste mindset from perceiving “the toilet and bodily waste as polluting” and thus to be kept removed from other living spaces, towards wanting to keep them in the house so that sanitary practices and cleanliness could be better controlled. Architects United’s 1960s middle-class housing still reflects this process of negotiation. While the larger bungalows have a designated toilet and washing space for household staff (freestanding or attached to the house but accessible only from outside) as well as a guest toilet and en-suite bathroom(s) inside the dwelling, the majority of bungalows contain a bathroom that is shared, located close to a secondary house entrance (typically near the staircase), and disaggregated (a separate sink which permitted the mere washing of hands before and after dinner, toilet, and washroom). The latter arrangement (figs. 9 and 11) offered a compromise: the “impure” toilet was still separated from other living
spaces by the lobby and at the same time within easy access for inspection or daily maintenance.

In terms of the building façade the newly emerging trend was a volumetric interplay of chaïjas (cantilevering lintels that protect windows from sun and rain), balconies, verandas, jaalis (perforated wall partitions allowing ventilation while offering privacy and solar protection) and eaves, coupled with a graphic composition of colored and textured cement renders. Still, in their practice, Architects United explored this trend clearly in a more experimental and sophisticated manner for their Freestanding Bungalows, while resorting to a more subdued form and conventional layout for the contemporaneous Co-operative Housing Bungalows.

Figure 4: Architects United, Freestanding Bungalow for Kalyani cloth merchants, Pune (India), 1964-1965.

Perspective drawing.
Source: Office archives of Architects United

The Freestanding Bungalow for Dr. R.S. Rao (1963-1964), built on a large plot of land, has an elegantly designed front porch with butterfly canopy providing shade for the main entrance and the client’s car (fig. 3). The house is subtly raised on a stone plinth and offers a playful composition of colored planes and protruding surfaces, partly acting as brise-soleils. The roof parapet, which hides an accessible terrace, consists of opaque and metalwork railings in a symmetrical composition. Similarly, in their Freestanding Bungalow for the Kalyani cloth merchants (1964-1965) the architects experimented with a bolder version of this planar elevational grid by extending it over the building’s plinth and roof parapet (fig. 4). The starker geometry and dominant use of cement imparted a more brutalist quality to the elevations. For the mansion designed for Mrs. Shroff (1966), the horizontal continuation of its eaves around the building and the carved-out carport and long verandas lent it a Wright-like character, further complemented with a jaali (fretwork) parapet (fig. 5). Other Freestanding Bungalows feature similarly novel features such as planters integrated in the roof parapets, and cantilevering steps.
In comparison, the range of Co-operative Housing Bungalows that Architects United designed in the same decade was less varied and almost simplistic in its façade architecture. Fenestrations often consisted of isolated smaller windows, protected by a singular *chajja* on the top. Accentuated building plinths disappeared and form variations in the concrete *chajjas* as well as the roof slopes became the main elements to bring individuality to each bungalow. Decorative features were restricted to ornamental grooves in the façade plasterwork and the highlighting of protruding façade elements such as cornices and *chajjas* using colored paint (fig. 6). These designs combined pragmatic aspects of existing building customs (such as the veranda access or small-sized windows protected by *chajjas*) with a restricted contemporary material
palette (of rendered concrete and brickwork) to achieve a somewhat unresolved but decidedly modern “aesthetic.”

Detailed scrutiny of the archival material on these Co-operative Housing Bungalows suggests that while the client’s design instructions and building budgets had their impact, there was also a shift in the architect’s professional role in the design and building process. For instance, drawings and calculation notes show that until 1967, when the majority of private Freestanding Bungalows were commissioned, the architects developed the structural design themselves and could hence control the concrete reinforcement details and slenderness of the canopies and protruding planes. Furthermore, for the projects that the architects considered as being definitive to their reputation (i.e. closer to the field of restricted production and destined for a cultured public that included not only the occupants but also other architects), Sharma and Ghotge made perspective drawings—in some cases even scaled models (fig. 7)—to convey their aesthetic intention. Pictures of the completed Freestanding Bungalows figure prominently in their demonstration portfolio. In contrast, the portfolio does not include any of the Co-operative Society Bungalows and the archives do not contain any building photographs, perspective views, or scale models of these commissions. The different circumstances (i.e., the different subfield of production), which led the architects to respond with the subdued modernism of the Co-operative Housing Bungalow, can be better understood when the archival data is complemented with oral history, such as in the case of the Sahawas Co-operative Housing Society, discussed below.

Figure 7: Architects United, scale model, unidentified project and date.

Source: Office archives of Architects United.

Architects United’s professional scope in co-operative housing projects

In 1965, the Sahawas Co-operative Housing Society purchased former vineyards in Karve Nagar from the landowner Mr. Apte. Architects United were invited to prepare a “bungalow scheme” for the area. Keeping Mr. Apte’s estate house and garden as the largest lot, they subdivided the remaining agricultural land into eighty rectangular bungalow lots measuring 12 by 19 meters, laid along seven internal roads, and supplemented with a common central garden, and two open spaces for future community halls (fig. 8). In addition to designing the neighborhood layout, Architects United also coordinated the implementation of water, electricity, and drainage
facilities, as well as the construction of roads and boundary walls for each plot. Allotments for individual bungalows were then leased out to the individual society members for 999 years.

Figure 8: Architects United, Allotment plan of Sahawas Co-operative Housing Society, Pune (India), late 1960s.

Source: Office archives of Architects United

Correspondence records reveal that apart from entering into the process of urban planning, Architects United also gained a pivotal advisory and administrative role in the Co-operative Society housing process. Prospective homeowners turned to them to navigate complex administrative, legal, and financial procedures involved in the subdivision of land, registration of co-operative societies, and obtaining of building permits. The architects routinely applied for the “No-objection” Certificates from various service infrastructure departments, and planning permission from Pune’s Town Planning Department for both the overall society layout and the various individual building plans. Even if the fringe area was included in Pune’s master plan and designated as residential land by municipal authorities, the architects still had to obtain individual permits for the conversion of each subplot from agricultural land to non-agricultural land from the Municipal Commissioner, an authority of the Indian Administrative Service. In addition, the architects filled in the major part of the loan application forms to be submitted by the society to the apex financing society, on behalf of its members. Indeed, each loan application form required the architect’s (or licensed surveyor’s) contact details, area surveys, approved building plans, a detailed estimate, and building specifications.

While these new administrative and advisory tasks increased the architects’ professional leverage and prestige, the Co-operative Society model also came with restrictions to their involvement in the design and construction process, and this affected both typological and material approaches.
Sahawas was registered as a Tenant Ownership Housing Society, under which the land belonged jointly to the society, but the building was the property of the owner. Society members could thus appoint an architect and/or contractor of their own choice for their house. The archive material shows that several plot owners often appointed the same architect and contractor, and a number of “reminders” sent from Architects United to their clients illustrate that, in order to speed up administrative procedures, collective tenders and joint applications for building permits or construction loans were indeed advisable. As such, Architects United filed planning applications for at least 6 buildings in Sahawas society. Similarly, in 1967, for a project in Aundh, they designed 3 out of 38 bungalows in a scheme otherwise laid-out by an engineer. And in the Alankar Housing Co-operative Society—another bungalow scheme in Karve Nagar planned by Architects United—they designed 13 bungalows between 1969 and 1983. Such project groupings changed the building design process. In Sahawas, Architects United appointed a general civil contractor with whom they worked on regular basis, to construct all their clients’ bungalows. The bungalow designs were such that the same general contractor could execute the buildings in their totality, and thus avoided the separate tendering to specialized contractors or their coordination, as would have been the case for the Freestanding Bungalows projects. Such an approach then necessarily reduced the scope for architectural experimentation, and a more simplified structural and material solution emerged.

Similar restrictions can be observed with typological experimentations, which were affected by two factors. First, within the co-operative housing process, communication between the clients and the architects was limited. Whereas the owners of the Freestanding Bungalows were predominantly independent professionals based in Pune, the first society members of Sahawas were mostly public sector employees: an Army Major, a Defence Department Clerk, an electrical engineer with the Air Force, and a civil engineer with Hindustan Construction Company. Clients from this expanding middle class not only had limited capital to spend, but often held transferable jobs and were posted in temporary positions all over India. Absent plot-owners like Mr. Deshpande at Sahawas thus relied on the Society’s Chairman to sign the planning application on their behalf and take on-site decisions when required. Architects Sharma and Ghotge would send concise sketch plans and cost estimates all the way from Maharashtra to West Bengal for Mr. Deshpande’s feedback. It is obvious that this sporadic and indirect manner of communication reduced the architects’ scope to tailor spatial configurations to their client’s needs.

The second factor that affected the design process was that many co-operative members had no intention of immediately occupying their bungalow themselves and intended to rent out at least part of it. The building permit drawings for Mr. Deshpande’s bungalow, for instance, show two semi-detached, ground-floor tenements, which used up the maximum permissible built-up area on the plot (fig. 9). However, later structural and working drawings show that only one half was built. Drawing records of other society bungalows show a similar trend where Architects United requested permission for using up the fully permissible built-up area for a bungalow that contained two or three tenements, yet only developed working drawings for one tenement; i.e. half the bungalow; or only a ground floor and not the intended upper floors. On one such floor plan, the architect scribbled “full to be built” suggesting that was the exception rather than the norm. While in some cases these multiple
tenements were to accommodate extended multi-generation families, in many instances the intention was to build and rent out the additional tenements as-and-when the funds would be available to build them.38

Figure 9: Architects United, Mr. P. R. Deshpande’s bungalow, Sahawas Co-operative Housing Society, Pune (India), 1969.

27 Typological design that allowed for phased construction and subletting can be seen as a particular development in the work of other architects in Pune at the time. For instance, in a project designed by architects Satoor, Katdhare, and Gole in 1961, the architects had intentionally placed the kitchen and wet areas at the center of the house, instead of in their traditional location at the rear, “to allow the house owner to let out the bedroom and the veranda to a newly married couple with a view to cover part of the monthly instalments payable to the government for the loan, interest and insurance” (fig. 10).39 Their structure also accounted for the future addition of two more floors and the rear veranda was proportioned to accommodate a staircase. Since Architects United worked with a higher segment of the middle class, they had larger plot sizes and could accommodate separate cooking and bathing facilities for each tenement. Still, one can discern how Architects United started from a similar parti and arrived at a type-plan of sorts in correspondence with the rectangular lot shape which they often proposed in their neighborhood plans (fig. 11). A typical design included the main entrance through a veranda bordered by concrete jaalis that opened onto the living room. A stairwell, centrally positioned in the plan, led to the roof terrace (or tenements on upper floors to be erected in the future) and at the same time created a secondary entry door to the tenement(s) at ground level. In line with modernism’s ethic of functional and climatic considerations, the stairwell would also have a jaali,
made of stacked hollow concrete or ceramic blocks, or a cheaper, single-piece ferrocement mesh. Such a standardization process is hardly surprising, given that the end-users remained largely unknown and the designs were meant to serve a more general clientele.

Thus, in addition to the structural and material restrictions discussed before, this form of modernist architecture also involved typological restrictions based on a recurrent standardized plan, which contrasted sharply with the diverse spatial configurations applied in the design of Freestanding Bungalows.

Figure 10: Satoor, Katdhare and Gole, co-operative bungalow, Pune (India), 1961-1963.

Elevation and plan.

Unlike the owners of Freestanding Bungalows on private plots, the society members did not intend their bungalows to be individualized statements. Nor did these Co-operative Society Bungalows resolve an urgent housing need, as plot holders often had no intention to construct a bungalow immediately. At Sahawas, Mr. Deshpande recollects how initially merely five out of eighty society members started the construction. Whereas the construction of the first bungalows began in 1970 and lasted about a year, some other bungalows in the society were built as late as 1984, which means plots remained unoccupied for well over a decade. Factors such as plots remaining unoccupied, owners not being present, and the fact that many bungalows provided multiple tenements, substantiate the worry expressed by the then state Minister of Co-operation: “It is doubtful if many of these [housing co-operative] societies could really be called co-operative societies at all as they were not formed with the object of providing dwelling houses to their members but to provide them with an attractive method of investment of their finances.” Indeed, as the next part of the paper illustrates, in a matter of a decade, Co-operative Housing became the symbol of speculation in Pune’s housing industry. And since the 1970s Architects United realigned their practice to address a new speculative client—“the turnkey contractor.”

Before the speculative turn in the housing industry of the 1970s, Architects United had only designed two apartment projects for Co-operative Housing Societies. Yet, because they were important precursors to the typological and architectural change that would emerge, it is worth looking at them in detail.

The first apartment project was designed in 1965 for a co-operative housing society named Sukhnivas and was located in the prime neighborhood along Prabhat Road. The smaller lot size and higher land costs might have encouraged the society members to opt for an apartment building. Like other contemporaneous Co-operative Housing Bungalows, society membership had spread by word of mouth, and in this case all founding members belonged to the Saraswat Brahmin community. The brief to design twelve tenements offered various possibilities for clustering, but the symmetrical layout employed by Architects United was conventional in nature and based on prevalent building types of the 1930s. A centrally positioned stairwell served two identical tenements on each floor, to the extent that that the ground floor apartments, which did not have balconies but opened onto the common garden, had the same façade-openings as the other levels (fig. 12). Moreover, Architects United proposed two exactly identical buildings on the plot, each consisting of a ground floor and two upper floors. A founding co-operative member revealed that while they had wanted three-bedroom apartments, they had to settle for two-bedroom flats, as they could not find enough candidates to afford the larger investment required.

Figure 12: Architects United, Sukhnivas co-operative housing society, apartments, Pune (India), 1965.

Source: Office archives of Architects United.

It remains unclear why Architects United did not accommodate the demands of the clients by providing them with differently sized apartments and customized floor plans, the way they did for Freestanding Bungalows. But it is possible that the use of a
repetitive layout, which attributed equal flats (and shares) to all members, relieved work pressure on the architects who had to provide approved plans, specifications and estimates for each member’s loan application. Moreover, repetition facilitated a speedy construction process. In the façade detailing, however, the architects spared no effort, as was the case for the high-end bungalows. The planar elements of the chajjas, balconies and roof terrace parapets for the Sukhnivas project form a dynamic composition. Construction details employed here, such as the unusual slit and composed metal frame windows, a three-dimensional jaali made up of hollow bricks providing distinctive light effects in the stairwell (fig. 13), and the bent wooden handrailing in the common staircase would typically be omitted in later speculative turnkey apartments (locally known as Ownership Flats). The fact that the architects made a hand-drawn perspective view (fig. 12) and included photographs of the completed building in their presentation portfolio also attests to the efforts they devoted to design detailing.

Figure 13: Architects United, Sukhnivas Co-operative Housing Society apartments, Pune (India), 1965.

The Sukhnivas project, however, was an exception. By the 1970s, ambitious general contractors started to act as intermediaries between co-operative society members on the one hand, and landowners and Architects United on the other hand. The emergence of this new type of actor within the building industry—“the turnkey contractor”—was the second major external event that prompted a transformation in Architect United’s professional practice and influenced their engagement with modernist residential architecture.

The first turnkey contracting firm operating in the prestigious area of Prabhat Road was M/s. Bhate & Kelkar, and they relied on Architects United for the design of all their turnkey apartment projects throughout the 1970s. Messrs. Bhate and Kelkar, civil engineers, had formed a contracting company in 1963, but soon took on responsibilities beyond contracting and also became involved in land procurement, building design, and construction. It is indicative of their influential social network that their first
contracting job in 1963 was to build the Pune branch of the Indian Institute of Engineers. And when in 1968 some employees of the Bank of Maharashtra formed a co-operative housing society, Dharati, they engaged Bhate & Kelkar to help with “everything, from suggesting the plot to constructing the building.”

“Suggesting the plot” sometimes meant buying the land in its entirety or participating in the initial investment for the land together with the founder members of the society and reselling it afterwards. Accordingly, aside from being contractors, Bhate & Kelkar also acted as creditors and land brokers.

Figure 14: Architects United, Dharati Co-operative Housing Society apartments, Pune, 1968-1969.

Elevation and plan of a typical block. The apartments have an en-suite as well as “disaggregated” bathroom and there is the option of providing a staff entrance to the flat via the kitchen (left). Note how the stilts at ground level provide shaded car-parking yet compromise the interaction of interior and garden (right).

Source: photograph by Sarah Melsens (right), Office archives of Architects United (left).

Only a year after the Dharati project, Bhate & Kelkar realised their first “true” turnkey Ownership Flats, the Madhuban Apartments, in 1970. Having purchased a large piece of land from a royal family in Hyderabad, they invited Architects United to design five quasi-identical three-story buildings of six apartments each. As soon as Bhate & Kelkar had confirmed bookings from eleven prospective buyers, they registered a housing co-operative society, so that buyers could apply for loans if they wanted, and the management of the property was legally established.

The remaining nineteen flats would be pre-financed by Bhate & Kelkar and sold off to society members who could be identified and added at a later stage. Thus, the co-operative aspect in the conception of these Ownership Flats was not genuine, and developers leveraged the financially and juridically advantageous co-operative housing legislation by registering most of the Ownership Flats as Co-operative Housing Societies.

The popularity of contractor-promoted Ownership Flats was no coincidence, as it resolved a range of issues that had plagued genuine Co-operative Housing projects. In the latter, the process of decision-making involved society members who had no background in or understanding of construction. In contractor-promoted developments, control was concentrated with the builder, who could apply comprehensive knowledge of construction processes to ensure faster project delivery.
Furthermore, member-promoted societies had faced issues with members failing to pay on time, or at all, resulting in projects being put on hold or getting delayed. In contrast, contractor-promoters had the financial capacity to advance money when required.

An important distinction emerging between genuine Co-operative Housing Societies and Ownership Flats, however, was that the latter were tailored to buyers from particular economic backgrounds rather than particular social communities. The Ownership Flats designed by Architects United, all located in a well-regarded neighborhood, and with flat layouts containing an en-suite as well as disaggregated bathroom, suggest that the involvement of turnkey contractors in co-operative housing opened this option to the upper tiers of the middle class who would have in the past commissioned Freestanding Bungalows. This rising popularity of Ownership Flats and corresponding decline in commissions for freestanding bungalows encouraged Architects United to reconfigure their architectural practice to suit this more mass-produced form of residential architecture.

A closer look at the Dharati project and Madhuban Apartments indeed suggests that the new role of the turnkey contractor affected the design process of Architects United and resulted in the simplification of several structural and material details (fig. 14). Early drawings for Madhuban Apartments, for example, show balcony parapets—composed of split concrete planes as well as metalwork—which are similar to the Sukhnivas project. However, these were later abandoned. Jaalis employed in stairwells at Dharati and Madhuban consisted of easier-to-construct, planar ferro-cement mesh, rather than honeycomb brickwork or hollow cement blocks. Windows and door openings were also of smaller and standard sizes. In the turnkey projects, only one side of the building had balconies (resulting in fewer rooms with balconies) and the mildly sloping roofs had been replaced with a common rooftop terrace. The promoter and architect optimized the use of a lot’s area by placing (some) apartment buildings on stilts, thereby creating sufficient shaded car parking without compromising on buildable area.

Evidently, the professional roles of both the contractors and the architects had changed. On the one hand, the contractor-promoter had put their social and economic capital to use for building up a land bank and identifying prospective society members. Their success depended on their reputation for trustworthiness and ability to “deliver.” Projects were not advertised, and the news that flats were available spread by word of mouth. As Bhate’s son recalls, all deals were based on “contacts and goodwill.” The architects, on the other hand, gave up the pivotal advisory role they had worked so hard to gain over the previous decade, and in return got to deal with a single well-informed and financially reliable client. Their role in managing the construction process was also reduced, since tendering procedures were no longer required, and construction site supervision happened only at crucial moments. However, the architects were still in charge of integrating the work of structural consultants, providing permit and working drawings, and making sure the building complied with all legal norms and procedures.

Archival material suggests that the opportunities to implement the more critical strand of modernism characterizing earlier projects by Architects United diminished day by day. Within ten years after the completion of Madhuban Apartments in 1970, Architects United had designed eleven more apartment projects for Bhate & Kelkar. In 1973, another general contractor, Suma Engineering, started to collaborate with Architects
United in a similar manner, and they built nine turnkey projects together between 1973 and 1985. From then onwards, the majority of Architects United’s residential work was for building developers leading to the wide dissemination of a form of modernism that “presents less the wants of any single person [whether designer or user] than what is communally sanctioned” and, in that sense, qualifies as a field-specific vernacular modern. 

Conclusion

In India, modernist architecture became widespread as a result of the style’s appropriation by multiple agents outside the field of restricted architectural production. This microhistorical case study revealed how external forces compelled one such agent, Architects United, to reposition their practice away from the field of restricted production—the “field of architecture”, for which they were trained—closer to the field of mass production. When Architects United’s opportunities to design customized Freestanding Bungalows for landowners dwindled, their turn to Cooperative Housing and Ownership Flats was a matter of economic survival. Whereas earlier they had pursued the recognition of acculturated peers, or, what Bourdieu calls “symbolic capital”—as evidenced by their production of scale models and portfolios with perspective views and photographs—increasingly, external demands and sanctions guided their efforts. Outside the field of restricted production, a different idea of professional practice, which emphasized efficient planning and assisting with complex administrative and permit procedures, informed a more pragmatic and standardized modernism. This breed of modernist architecture is less-celebrated but at least equally historically consequential in India.

As such, this case-study of Architects United’s practice and work countered the idea that everyday modernism was designed by the less talented practitioners and brought forward Bourdieu’s theory of “fields of cultural production” as a powerful framework to understand (and ultimately value) architectural design as determined by the positions taken within a particular site- and time-specific field of production. Only through such a variegated and heterogeneous comprehension of architectural professional practice, even within one firm, can one deepen the nascent understanding of pluralism in modernist architecture across the globe.

NOTES

1. Our gratitude goes to all the interviewees and in particular to Ar. Uma Ghotge, late Ar. Dheven Ghotge and Ar. Deepa Naik of Architects United for generously sharing their company archives and time. Colleague Ar. Priyanka Mangonkar-Vaiude was an essential companion on many of the fieldwork trips. This research was enabled by a Gustave
BOEL-SOFINA fellowship and a Ph.D. fellowship of the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

2. Docomomo and Reaktion Books have published on “national” histories of modern architecture. See the thematic issue Other modernisms, Docomomo Journal, vol. 36, 2007; Vivian Constantinopoulos (ed.), Modern architectures in history, Reaktion Books (including volumes on India, Brazil, Turkey, Australia and Russia).


7. Mary Woods’s recent study also addressed this knowledge gap. She investigated post-independence architectural practice in Mumbai and Delhi through the lens of gender studies and uncovered the life and work of India’s pioneering female modernist architects in the process. Mary N. Woods, Women Architects in India: Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi, London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016. Recent efforts by the CEPT Archives in Ahmedabad to preserve and digitize records and oral history on
uncelebrated modern Indian architects are promising and may stimulate further research on such agents in the future. CEPT Archives also organizes exhibitions around their archival material. See A. SRIVATHSAN and Vaishnavi SHUKL, Arvind Talati: A Forgotten Pioneer of Modern Indian Architecture, Ahmedabad: cept Archives, 2016. For more scholarly work on uncelebrated Indian architects see Sarah MELSSENS, Priyanka MANGAONKAR-VAIUDE and Yashoda JOSHI, “Architect-entrepreneurs in post-independence Pune (India),” in James W. P. CAMPBELL, Nina BAKER, Nicholas HILL et. al. (eds.), Further studies in the history of construction. The Proceedings of the Third annual conference of the Construction History Society, (Cambridge, Queen's College, 8-10 April 2016), Cambridge: Construction History Society, 2016, p. 461-472.


15. An architect from the same generation claimed that a “degree gave it and gave us and gave the profession a social stature. A degree holder, a graduate, in this society in our country is looked upon as a fairly respected, like a doctor or a lawyer, so an architect also became like that.” He also recalled that 28 out of 40 to 50 seats were reserved for students from the Bombay state. Vishwakumar Vishwanath Badawe, 18

16. A municipal surveyor’s list from 1952 shows that out of 83 “surveyors” licensed to prepare building permit applications, merely five were trained as architects, and only three were actually based in Pune. “List of licensed surveyors of 1952-53,” Pune Municipal Gazette, vol. 3, no. 21, 2 August 1952, p. 23-26. For a discussion of the work by non-architect surveyors in Pune, see Sarah MELSENS, Architect, Engineer or Builder?, op. cit. (note 13).

17. Umakant Dongre had cleared the Final RIBA examination held in Bombay without enrolling for the Diploma course at J. J. School. Pushkaraj DONGRE, Harsha DONGRE, 8 June 2019, interview by Sarah MELSENS, digital recording.


20. Kamu Iyer, who had enrolled in the course one year before Sharma and Ghotge, described this “dichotomy in architectural thought as a central point of debate in the school.” Ibid., p. 51.

21. Of the 36 firms we initially contacted when starting our research, Architects United was particularly keen to collaborate and “recover” their own firm’s history in the process. A major hurdle in obtaining access to the archive was a sort of embarrassment (which Architects United shared with many firms) about exposing the bad condition of files and storage facilities. Once this was overcome, we obtained permission to consult and photograph the records at will.

22. This particular methodological approach to historical inquiry is the topic of Kirsch and Rohan’s book Beyond the Archives and therefore the title is intentionally paraphrased here. Gesa E. KIRSCH and Liz ROHAN, Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 2008 (Historia).

23. This number was derived from a project index of Architects United reconstituted by the authors according to date.


25. All of the co-operative house owners we interviewed were former tenants. In Bombay, the lower middle-class also shifted from tenancy to home ownership. Nikhil RAO, “Uncertain ground: the ‘Ownership Flat’ and urban property in twentieth century Bombay,” South Asian History and Culture, vol. 3, no. 1, January 2012, p. 2.

26. For examples of early co-operative societies see Nikhil RAO, “Uncertain ground: the ‘Ownership Flat’ and urban property in twentieth century Bombay,” op. cit. (note 25); Shama ANBRINE, The Co-operative Model Town Society: history, planning, architecture and social character of an indigenous garden suburb in colonial Lahore, Ph.D. dissertation,

27. Pune’s first co-operative housing society, the “Deccan Co-operative Housing Society,” had already been registered in 1922. In the absence of banks providing loans or mortgages, however, the early co-operatives depended on private loans obtained from wealthy beneficiaries. The model was also applied to house the employees of public and corporate bodies, because these bodies could bear the initial investment. It was only in 1960 that the Maharashtra State Co-operative Housing Finance Corporation was established to provide loans to housing co-operatives. At this time, another stimulus that kick-started the popularity of the model with the general Pune public was the sudden housing shortage after the city was flooded in 1961. This led the government to facilitate land acquisition for co-operative societies in Pune. See Shashikant B. Sawant, The city of Poona: A study in Urban Geography, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Poona, Pune, 1978.

28. In Pune, Udhao Mahadeo Apte (1913-1977) and Umakant Vaman Dongre (1915-1999) were among the few architects of the first generation. See Sarah Melsens, Architect, Engineer or Builder?, op. cit. (note 13). Gajanan B. Mhatre (1902-1973) and C.M. Master of the firm Master, Sathe and Bhuta were consecrated first-generation architects who practiced all over India. See for instance Kamu Iyer, “G. B. Mhatre: The man and his work,” op. cit. (note 19); Peter Scriven and Amit Srivastava, India, op. cit. (note 5).

29. Nikhil Rao, House, but No Garden, op. cit. (note 6), p. 117-136, the quote is from p. 132.

30. The information in this paragraph is to a large extent based on a first-person account by Mr. P. R. Deshpande, resident and founder member of Sahawas co-operative housing society. P. R. Deshpande, 11 January 2018, interview by Sarah Melsens and Priyanka Mangonkar-vaitude. Digital recording.

31. Architects United’s urban schemes for co-operative housing societies actually did not differ much from the “draftsman planning” method applied by unqualified planners, although a town planning course had been part of their training. Vidyarthi has convincingly argued that such private subdivision plans, targeting one tract of land at a time, played a major role in the uneven and disjointed post-independence tissue of Indian cities. See Sanjeev Vidyarthi, One Idea, Many Plans: An American City Design Concept in Independent India, New York, NY; Oxon: Routledge, 2015, p. 89.

32. Post-independence urban planning policies and “modern master plans” were overlaid on preexisting institutions and administrative practices of land settlement and revenue collection. Resulting incongruency and ambiguity in authority and approach required skillful navigation of various government instances to obtain necessary permissions. See Ibid., p. 89-94.


34. Ibid., p. 142. See also Nikhil Rao, “Uncertain ground: the “Ownership Flat,” op. cit. (note 25), for more on the legal definitions of co-operative ownership.

35. They came to know about the scheme by word of mouth. Therefore, while not all eighty members may have known each other personally, social networks and class relations did tie members together. P. R. Deshpande, 11 January 2018, interview by Sarah Melsens and Priyanka Mangonkar-vaitude, op. cit. (note 30).
36. Correspondence in the architects’ archive reveals that, for bungalow projects in particular, the clients were often based elsewhere than Pune at the time of design and construction.

37. Mr. Deshpande explained that they had asked the architects to build only the northern half. However, “since they were in Pune only for one month every year,” there had been a misunderstanding and the southern half got built. P. R. DESHPANDE, 11 January 2018, interview by Sarah MELSENS and Priyanka MANGAONKAR-VAIUDE, op. cit. (note 30).

38. The large population increase of Pune Municipal Corporation during the 1960s due to the better employment opportunities that came with industrialization increased the scarcity and thus profitability of the rental market. Whereas between 1951 to 1961 the population grew by 25 per cent to reach almost 600,000, the growth between 1961 and 1971 was almost 45 per cent. C. D. DESHPANDE, “Pune: A Metropolis in Transition,” in R. P. MISRA (ed.), Million Cities of India, New Delhi; Bombay; Bangalore; Calcutta; Kanpur: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1978, p. 208.


40. M. P. MAHAJAN, The methodology of the two-tier system of co-operative housing finance in Maharashtra, op. cit. (note 33), Appendix 3.

41. GAITONDE and BHENDE families, 20 November 2018, interview by Sarah MELSENS and Priyanka MANGAONKAR-VAIUDE. The information on Sukhnivas co-operative housing society is to a large extent based on interviews with these resident-founding members of the society.

42. Ibid.

43. This was asserted by Mr. Bhaté’s wife, son, and brother-in-law, who were all involved with the company at different times. Family members of Mr. Bhaté involved in the company, On Bhaté & Kelkar, engineers and contractors, 17 October 2018, interview by Sarah MELSENS and Priyanka MANGAONKAR-VAIUDE.

44. Ibid.

45. Eleven was the minimum number of tenements required to establish and register a Co-operative Housing Society and avail of its benefits. “For every scheme there were loans, means we used to suggest the loans, and they used to apply for it, like that.” Ibid.


47. In fact, the Maharashtra Co-operative Societies Act 1960 eliminated the right to restrict co-operative membership on the basis of community. Rao provides a fascinating account of the ways in which the physical fabric of the city of Mumbai interacts with ideas of caste and community. Nikhil RAO, House, but No Garden, op. cit. (note 6).

48. As anthropologist Llerena Searle explains, this is the primordial aspect that distinguishes the field of real-estate development in India, post-1990, from international real-estate practice. See Llerena Guiu SEARLE, Landscapes of Accumulation: Real Estate and the Neoliberal Imagination in Contemporary India, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016 (South Asia across the disciplines). Our study finds that “being able to deliver” was a prerequisite for speculative developers from the very beginning, even before the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s.
The architectural production of India’s everyday modernism: middle-class housing...
realisierten Bauten hinaus auch die Entstehungsprozesse von Architektur näher in den Blick zu fassen, um anstelle romantischer Vorstellungen ein vielschichtiges Verständnis der architektonischen Praxis zu entwickeln.

Dans l’Inde postcoloniale, les projets d’habitat ordinaire témoignent d’une appropriation à grande échelle des caractéristiques de l’architecture moderne. Cet article analyse l’adaptation par les architectes locaux de leurs positions envers l’architecture moderne aux circonstances sans cesse mouvantes de la production architecturale dans un monde en voie de développement. Se fondant sur la théorie du champ élaborée par Pierre Bourdieu, l’article offre une étude détaillée de constructions résidentielles réalisées sur quelque trois décennies par Architects United, une agence d’architecture de taille moyenne fondée en 1961 dans la ville de Pune. Si les premiers projets témoignent d’une certaine liberté ainsi que d’une aspiration à l’innovation architecturale, cette tendance tend à s’affadir tandis que de nouveaux modèles d’habitat émergent, tendant vers une forme plus modeste et davantage hybride de l’architecture moderne. L’exploitation d’archives inédites, ainsi que celle de sources orales, permet de démontrer que ces adaptations architecturales résultaient indirectement de politiques publiques et de changements sociétaux, comme l’incitation gouvernementale à des initiatives d’habitat coopératif ou bien l’émergence d’une classe moyenne postcoloniale aux aspirations spécifiques en matière de logement. À ce titre, cet exemple « marginal » révèle quelques-uns des processus qui ont été négligés dans les discours sur le modernisme en architecture en tant qu’importation occidentale en Inde, discours essentiellement centrés autour de commandes exceptionnelles d’architecture publique passées à des « experts globaux » ou à leurs disciples indiens. L’article souligne aussi la nécessité d’une recherche sur les processus de la production architecturale, en plus de l’objet construit, afin qu’émerge une compréhension davantage pluraliste que romancée de la pratique.

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AUTHORS

SARAH MELSENS  
PhD Student, Faculty of Design Science, University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium  
INGLE BERTELS  
Professor, Faculty of Design Science, University of Antwerp, Belgium
AMIT SRIVASTAVA
Director, Centre for Asian and Middle Eastern Architecture (camea), School of Architecture and
Built Environment, University of Adelaide, Australia