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# TRANSFORMATION AND CHANGE: TO LIVE IN INDIA AND CHINA

*The Culture, The Cultures of Living. The House in the 21st Century, between Globalization and New Technologies* is the title of a conference held in January this year at the Milan Politecnico.

Made in memory of Filippo Alison, the famous design critic who died one year ago, the conference brought together interventions from people from around the world, dedicated to the different realities of living and home landscape, between globalization and new technologies. Themes and questions that they would buff today, the era of great changes: the culture, the architecture of interiors, the house.

Coordinated by Vanni Pasca, the speakers talked of living, outlining an international vision through a series of contemporary case histories: Giampiero Bosoni, Milan Politecnico (The Global Home); Jonathan Makinda, University of Chicago (Visions of the Home from Chicagoland); Maria Helena Estrada, director of "Arc Design" (Metropolis and Favelas); Tevfik Balcioglu, Yasar University, Izmir (The Good, The Bad, The Ugly: the New Domestic Landscape in Turkey); Simonetta Venosta, Social Housing Foundation (The Social Housing and Collaborative Live). Patrizia Scarzella's speech focused on the theme of transformation and change: to live in China and India. Here is a summary of the contents.



## INDIA

India is a continent, rather than a country, of ancient culture and contrasts, where opposite aspects of extreme poverty and wealth live together, where culture ranges from the excesses of the magnificence of the palaces of the maharajah to the miserable vision of slums.

In the Nineties, the enthusiasm for the bourgeois revolution in the Indian subcontinent fed on urban legends tailored by the propaganda of the "Great Indian Leap Forward": the army of the middle class, it was said, was made up of 300 million fighters in white shirt and tie, ready to conquer the global economy.

Twenty years later, re-doing the counting, the standards set by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) indicate (2013 data) that the Indian middle class was made up of a quarter of the population, about 255 million people, a few million more or less. In India a person out of four spends between 2 and 20 dollars a day.

In China, to make a similar demographically comparison, the same band is well over 60%. Meanwhile, in the major metropolitan centers it grew a medium-high class of young professionals, who have access to excellent local universities, at that level of education that until the beginning of the Eighties the Indian rich class was achieving in London or in the United States.

There is a high number of graduates in computer science and scientific subjects. It is especially to this social side, that we must look at, to capture the transformation and change in a society that seems so rooted in its traditions to appear immutable.

In a country with enormous urban problems, the infrastructures, the cities where the slums are growing out of control and the population growth rate continuously increasing, the search for a specific identity of local solutions for living different from Western architecture seems like a possible partial solution to these problems.

A research was made in the late '40s by Laurie Baker, an English doctor (not an architect) born in India, who worked in Kerala, considered one of the fathers of the sustainable architecture and supporter of 'self-construction', the use of sustainable, local materials, the building together with craftsmen, carpenters and people who then would live in his architectures. Baker pioneered cost-effective energy efficient beautiful and simple architecture in mud brick and local materials.

## THE INDIAN WAY TO ARCHITECTURE

In a meeting with Mahatma Gandhi in 1943, Gandhi told Baker that his knowledge of Western architecture would be of very little help in India, where the rural areas needed more attention than the cities.

Gandhi gave Baker his idea of building houses, saying that the materials needed to build a house should be acquired from within 5 miles from the site. This idea was to have a great impact on architects a few years down the line.

Nowadays, architects outline a new 'Indian way' to architecture reflecting the heritage of Baker and opening interesting perspectives to the problem of living. Among them, Bijoy Jain of Studio Mumbai, presenting itself as a "collective of architects and craft workers".

This group of architects and craftsmen works together and dialogues as part of the same process. Their work is based on the act and process of constructing, on the idea of working collectively in a spirit of workshop. Ideas take form through a shared dialogue capable of integrating the thinking and making of architecture, the result of a careful consideration of the place and a practice that draws from traditional skills, local building techniques and the use of natural materials.



#### CHINA. WHERE IS 'GENIUS LOCI'?

How do the Chinese young people live? The panorama of the most popular life style and design magazines in large urban areas is very large and an analysis of the styles of what they publish - houses and products - can light up on the taste of the new generations in terms of home guidelines and choices.

From the magazine 'Deco-Rayli' to 'Trendshome', from 'Today'sliving' to 'China-Designer.Com' or 'IDEAT China', the Chinese version of the French lifestyle magazine that features the best French and Italian design and fashion brands, the overall image that catches the eye is the one of a clear globalized style, without any reference to the

'Genius Loci' and to the local culture, if not, sometimes, only for small decorative elements as a picture or a gadget with a Chinese inscription...

While witnessing the irreversible loss of a local cultural identity of living on the one hand, on the other hand this phenomenon comforts us, confirming that there are wide market opportunities for Italian furnishing products of different styles and levels.



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