

What is the rest of what

Raqs Media Collective interviewed by
Blauer Hase and Andrea Morbio

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Blauer Hase: Could we ask you to speak about domestic spaces in India, and about the relationship between public and private, home and city? How is it different from Western culture, and how is it changing?

Monica Narula: In a landscape of different temperatures and vegetations, traditionally there is a different relationship with space, also between the outside and the inside. The idea of the threshold was an important concept. Often you had a veranda or an inner courtyard, which was either open to the front (verandah) or enclosed with an opening in the middle (inner courtyard). You see it often, for example, in middle-eastern architecture.

But there is definitely a sense of the privileging of the threshold between inside and outside space: preferably a large space – depending upon the house, but as much as possible – where the inside and the outside could meet. This is specially visible in the architecture of southern India, where the householders would sit in the veranda, and you would have passers-by who would stop and talk. It is a space that cannot be described either as public or as private.

Jeebesh Bagchi: It is like in Jacques Derrida's beautiful meditation on the postcard. You have a postcard and you send it to your lover. It is in neither public nor private domain. It is in that indeterminate, unspeakable in-between zone. You can conceptualize the veranda or the courtyard as a postcard, which has a private intimate world attached to it but remains open,

exposed. It is that kind of liminal space which is very difficult to articulate conceptually. A lot of urban spaces are constructed in various ways over time and becomes like a postcard, an indeterminate space. Domesticity has its doubleness: it is a kind of secured space but also a phantasmic one – it produces a fantasy of your life, of your ability to live life. Conceptually, you can draw many different social worlds through reading a domestic space, and yet it allows certain fantasies to play out.

You can find it in Western culture also, but with one big difference: the kitchen would be very differently marked. In India, the kitchen will not be a space where you eat. The kitchen would be a space where you cook or where you stand and go. Eating is outside the kitchen. In this way, the eating and the kitchen transform the structure of the habitation inside the house, and that changes the way one socializes, the way one exposes one's craft to the world.

MN: Here in Europe, the kitchen is quite large and you often have a little bar where you can sit, eat and cook. There is a blurring of functions. But in India the kitchen is never an open plan – some people might begin to do that now, but it's still very rare. The kitchen is quite small, and it really was quite 'gendered' – still is, to quite an extent, although not in our lives. The cooking happens there and the eating happens in another place, so the dining table and the dining-together, as concepts, have different meanings.

JB: Another big difference in domestic life would be what extends out: the front of the house or the balcony. As in Italy, the drying of laundry is exposed, you don't have a problem with exposing your clothes to the world, there is no embarrassment. In Delhi there is sunlight almost eleven months a year, and the extension to the outside is quite opened-up.

In the last 150 years a new set of infrastructures has been developed: there is tap water inside houses, and centralised sewage systems. The structure of the building, specifically the

structure of moving to the toilets has changed, the location of the toilets has changed. There are also other different ways, such as shared toilets or shared or open sleeping spaces, like the terrace or the roof. This is not something that can be conceptualized simply within a public/private dichotomy. One can say that domesticity spills over to public visibility and the public eye spills into the domestic. This movement of visibility is there as an everyday encounter.

MN: If you look at most middle class households in India, the living room (or what is still quaintly called 'the drawing room') is there. And the television has become important in there. But it is also a function of class, and a function of the urban/non-urban dichotomy, which is quite sharp. If you go to smaller places, or to different places in the city, all these things are not stable. The separation between rooms as functions is another function of class. Historically, it was not necessarily like that. If you have a small space everyone lives there and sleeps there, so the room changes: in the day it is something, in the evening it is something else; it is your living room, your dining room, your sleeping room. The function of spaces is quite crucial in a place where spaces are the premium, and that's straightforward.

JB: In Europe, the idea of the public life is a 19th century construct: you go out and you have a rational discourse in the public life. And domestic life is something you keep for yourself. This neat division does not really capture all the complexity with which one hears or lives. Especially with the rise of the feminist movement, it was very clear that the domestic site had to be re-thought completely. It was the site of labour, and a double language of how to look at labour had to be brought into those spaces. This labour was not a public act. It had to be brought out as a public act.

Secondly, we can talk about the idea that the way you represent yourself in social life is played out in the domestic space. Stanley Cavell, the American philosopher, says that the

biggest transformations happen through domestic conversations: big questions of rights and justice are being worked out in these micro-conversations that the domestic space hosts. The idea that public space is a space of negotiation, rational discourse and public performance of the self, and that the domestic is the site that has a different architecture of conversation, needs a substantial historical interrogation. Maybe there is a much more fluent relationship, it is not marked by barriers, but it is moving between the two. Stanley Cavell is basically trying to introduce the idea that the ordinary, the everyday, has a possibility to hold within itself an enormous ethical and moral question, which actually transforms the way social life is imagined.

BH: What about the social function of furniture?

Historically furniture has always been used to represent a status, an identity. Do you think it still has this function?

MN: We were actually having a conversation on the train that was so much about this. If you wanted to come into Jeebesh's house, you would sit on the floor. There is no notion of sofas or chairs. It is a floor-sitting arrangement, which means that there is a different dynamic than if you were sitting on chairs and there was a centre table. If you look at the traditional notion of house, especially if you look at Bengal after the Bengali renaissance, there began to be an enormous bed where a lot of the personal home life was lived out (we are talking about an upper class situation). So you would talk, play cards, read, rest on the bed, and it was not only for one or two people.

JB: When we talk about furniture, we usually talk about sitting: furniture that would provide a seat to dine or a seat to talk. But if you look at the furniture used for keeping things in the house – like cupboards – you have a very different architecture of the house that emerges. Or you can look at the furniture where you take a rest or lie down; or the furniture that makes you dress up. This changes the way you look at a household. I remember my

grandmother used to have a beautiful big bed, which was a main site for telling stories, sitting, chatting. We would come and meet her there; she had no discomfort with people meeting her in a bed. Another thing she had was a big chest, a trunk, and as you went deeper into the trunk it 'aged', in the sense that its contents got older. There is a temporal depth with spatial architecture that furniture provides inside a house. As in our house's shelves: old books and old papers are locked higher, but as you go down you have the latest books we have bought, the things we are doing now. Furniture gives a sense of time and the way time is lived – how accessible time is in your daily life. Secondly, it shows what the functions are and the things of your daily life that are visible at eye level. I think that in Western housing you have the same structure: the exposed shelves for everyday circulation and some closed shelves for the structured occasions.

BH: What about the relationship between furniture and identity?

JB: Identity is not a fixed form: as you move into a house the identity structure changes. If someone comes to meet you in the drawing room, or spends the evening with you for dinner, the identity structure of the house will change, unless you are talking of the facade or of the external parts. But if you talk of the interior structure, it morphs and changes and mutates with every encounter. It is not stable; identity is not the correct word. You can see it as a kind of performative visibility of life: I am doing well in life, or I am not doing well in life. I know of people whose house is extremely full – too full, like they want you to figure out that they are doing very well in life. The insides of houses are not easy to read culturally.

MN: I think there is an increase in the exhibitionism of the 'performance of status'. But I also think it is about a specific kind of people, and quite a small number of them.

BH: Adorno talks about the connection between the crisis of chamber music and the crisis of European bourgeoisie. He connects a cultural form specific of the domestic space with a specific social class. Did anything similar happen in India?

MN: Hindustani classical music is fundamentally a chamber construct; it is not a mass event.

JB: I think you guys should see a 1956 film called *Jalsaghar* [*The Music Room*] by Satyajit Ray if you are studying domestic space, visibility and performativity. That is where you would see the ‘chamberness’ of one of the most famous singers of Hindustani classical music. In the dining room of this house – which is not a dining room in the classic sense, but rather a meeting room – a woman is performing, and two cultures are contending on the appreciation of her music. It is a story set in a moment when one form of cultural life, patronized by a certain form of domestic structure, gives way to another form of cultural life.

MN: The end of one kind of time, and therefore also of a kind of relationship with space. The music room is the centre of the story: the protagonist is an old landlord whose money is gone, his house is falling apart but he still has the desire to sustain the idea of the music room. I think Hindustani classical music had a lot to do with patronage, as it was in Western chamber music. It was not domestic space in the strict sense, it was in those large houses where one room was for music, where people would come to listen to music and perform music.

BH: We are interested in the way domestic space changes in relation to new media. For example, in the 20th century television transformed the way furniture was arranged. With the Internet, it is like having the whole world inside our house, our house is connected with the whole world.

Some theorists say the house is becoming a mental idea.

JB: There is a difference between 'house' and 'home'. The material reality of the house stays as a space, while the home becomes dispersed. It is a big conceptual shift. A geographer who was working in Delhi used to say that there are houseless people in Delhi, not homeless people; and that there are homeless people in Europe. All these people in Delhi who do not get enough resources to build a house – or to live in a house – they live on the streets or they share night shelters. But they always have a home; they send money back home to their families. In this sense they are only houseless. With the Internet the idea of the home gets dispersed; not so much the idea of the house.

The house is a material concept. Technologically, television started as a fixed-location technology. People tended to organise sitting and viewing positions around it. But with more and more wireless and laptops, the Internet makes the house internally recalibrated to the practices of viewing. For example, in Monica's house her daughter watches videos on her laptop, which moves throughout the house. For her the idea of a fixed place of entertainment or news is not going to be there. Like a newspaper, it disperses into the house; it does not have any threshold as such within the house. That is a big shift.

BH: Does Internet produce a new way of thinking about our homes?

MN: What you do is not a function of technology. You make the decision about your relationship with any technology. For example – I am referring to the personal because it is a good starting point – never having had a television in our personal spaces, it meant we were making a certain decision about which way we wanted the world to enter. But that is not the point; the starting point was much more about how we wanted to situate ourselves in relationship to that. It seems almost as if technology forces you – through television, for instance – but it is not so straightforward. No matter what technology you get, if you think

about the world in X way, how you change that way of looking can only be modified by technology, it cannot be *caused* by it. You can have as much Internet as you like and you can still have the notion of home as a strong impulse. A lot of literature is all about the 'empty home', even if it is from the early 20th century. It is not because of the Internet that we talk about a hollow space where people are feeling distant from each other.

BH: Do you think 'reality shows' such as *Big Brother* can be seen as symptoms of an issue Western culture has with domestic spaces?

JB: I think in the West you have a crisis related to the fact that domestic space is no longer legible by the earlier terms. It seems you do not really know why that space is there! It is more difficult to read that space than it used to be. And that crisis is represented by all this desire to continuously see domestic space enacted, to see the performativity inside the domestic space, to see the crisis inside the domestic space, to see the breakdown of it. A 'Reality Show', if you take aside the word 'reality', is a breakdown show: it is about how things break apart, how individuals break down, how a selected group breaks down. What is left is the residue, the one person who gets it all; you start with twenty people and finally you come down to one person or two persons who will play it out for you. The rest are all turned out of that milieu, out of that domestic space. In this sense it is a profound crisis, it is like re-living the history of the domestic space, starting from hundreds of people and slowly shrinking to that one individual who does not even know why s/he should be spending and investing so much energy in maintaining this space, when s/he could backpack and travel. You can say reality shows answers the question, "is domestic space still meaningful?"

BH: It seems that in many of your works – maybe in all of them – the notion of the 'white cube' is not there at all, because the space is always influenced by historical,

geographic and social settings. Is the 'white cube' an impossible space?

JB: An unmarked white cube, a white cube without history, without geography... The colour white comes from the post-plague chalk paint: it is an evacuated concept which comes from making a space disease-free, safe. Contemporary art is all about making spaces contagious and filled with possibilities of another life, another thinking. In that sense it is always in a contradiction with the idea of the white in the white cube. But now, with technological operators like video and projections, it is the black cube that is more the materialization of the crisis. I no longer think the white cube is the discussion; the discussion is: what happens to this black cube? Because the black cube has other resonances: less from diseases but more from the 'black hole' where all meanings become meaningless, where meaning can just keep being absorbed endlessly. It is a profound site of absorption. Whatever you produce can be absorbed.

MN: Jeebesh is using this notion of the black cube quite metaphorically. Whatever one generates in the forms of art, it is easily absorbed and stopped at that point. The whole point of something that is exhibited is that it is meant to go out and leach out. But if it gets absorbed by the structure, that leaching out does not happen. Does a structure that is showing work absorb it? Or does it allow it to disperse out?

BH: We are now sitting in front of the ex Alumix, the building that is hosting *The Rest of Now*, the exhibition you curated as part of *Manifesta7*. Can you talk about how you created a show within a place like this?

MN: When we first came here, a year and a bit ago, it did not look like this at all. It was completely broken down: broken glass, plants growing wild everywhere... The question was of restoring it, which was what the municipality and the province wanted to do: to

restore this building and make it have another function. For us, this question became quite an important one during the course of this building becoming ready, because when you say 'restore' you are talking about a certain other point in time. It is not about changing it to make it new; it is like taking it back to another time. But then the question always rises: which time? To which point do you want to restore this, what is this notion of restoration, when is that moment in time to which you want to take a building back? It is a difficult question, and it is something we wanted to address.

JB: The question of 'newness'. How the 'new' comes into the world is a very complicated question. There are two ways of looking at newness. You can say that 'new' comes by doing away with the 'old', by finishing it and cleaning it out. Or you can say that the 'new' comes in a very entangled way with the 'old'. In this exhibition, our idea was to pose the question of the 'new' as an extremely entangled process. It is not just about restoration, it is about restoration asking the question of how does the new come into the world. It is a double dialogue with time past and with the future.

BH: The word 'restoration' contains the word 'rest'. An artwork can be seen in two ways: it can be seen as a residual matter of a time, of a practice, of a research, of a theory. But if you start from the artwork, then everything else becomes the rest: time, practice, research, theory. We can say that there are two ways of looking at art history.

JB: Remainder or arrival. You got it right. The idea of *The Rest of Now* is all about this multiplicity of meanings to be played out, so it is also a question of how you look at art history.

MN: Yes, you can move things around and ask yourself...

BH: What is the rest of what.

MN: That is an important point of access for us: what is the rest of what. A big question.

JB: That has been the main point of investigation of this past year and a half.