

RePLITO • Reimagining Housing, Rethinking the Role of Architects in India

Low-cost housing for the people - as projected by the Films Division of India (FDI)

Nadja-Christina Schneider

Published on: Mar 17, 2023

URL: <https://replito.pubpub.org/pub/r0sscne>

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

“Reimagining Housing, Rethinking the Role of Architects in India” is the title of a collection of articles in which I look into the societal role and self-perception of a group of critical architects in contemporary India. In particular, I am interested in the specific media and communicative practices architects, or architectural experts, are using today to intervene in ongoing debates on affordable housing. It is also very interesting for me to look into the formats they use or develop (exhibitions, films, public lectures, among many others) to share their understanding of architecture and spatial design as a form of knowledge (Siddiqi 2020) in a way which is accessible to non-experts and therefore has the potential to extend a critical discussion of the built environment to many more participants. To understand better on which specific questions architects position themselves differently and are critical of the state’s approach to low-cost housing, it is first of all helpful to have a closer look at the state’s view as it has been expressed and conveyed especially through the medium of newsreels and documentaries produced for/by the Films Division of India. This article presents three selected documentaries on the question of low-cost housing that were produced by the Films Division between 1954 and 1982. By way of comparison, a fourth Films Division production, which was directed by the architect Charles Correa and released in 1975, will be discussed afterwards.

The Films Division of India (FDI or FD) was established with its headquarters in Bombay in 1948, under the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. As mentioned in the self-description on the [homepage](#), the mission of the FD was,

„to articulate the energy of a newly independent nation. For more than seven decades, the organization has relentlessly striven to maintain a record of the social, political and cultural imaginations and realities of the country on film. It has actively worked in encouraging and promoting a culture of film-making in India that respects individual vision and social commitment.

It is the main film-medium organization of the Government of India and is well equipped with trained film personnel, cameras, recording and editing facilities. This infrastructure is put to use to assist in-house as well as free-lance film makers and producers.”

According to its own data, the Films Division has produced 6474 films, including documentaries, shorts and animated films, and 2640 newsreels and news magazines over the past 72 years, often in cooperation with private production companies and filmmakers (for detailed information on the organization and production of FD between 1948-1975, see the excellent [report on the website of the Hong Kong Baptist University](#)).

As Srirupa Roy writes, the Films Division of India has produced

“(a)n average of one new film every three days, making it the single largest producer of documentary films in the world. Until 1994, under the terms of a compulsory exhibition and licensing policy, owners

of commercial movie theaters throughout India were required to screen a state-approved documentary film or newsreel before the start of any commercial feature film ([Roy 2016: 383](#)).¹

However, the ubiquity of these films, through which Indian audiences learned to ‘see’ India from the perspective of the post-colonial state, does not necessarily translate into a “meaningful reception of its visual texts,” as Roy goes on to point out (*ibid.*).

In addition to the visual practices, however, the sonic dimension should be considered too, since it contributed significantly to the immediate recognition of the Films Division formats by the audience and underlined the perception of what is conveyed as significant and relevant to Indian society. Especially since the (mostly male) voice-of-god narration was a central feature of state-produced newsreels and documentaries, it is perhaps also significant when the seemingly ‘objective’ and ‘all-informed’ reporter clearly has a British and no discernible Indian accent, as, for instance, in the case of Sam Berkeley-Hill, one of the most famous and widely heard voice-overs in FD productions in English.²

The FD’s film production was divided into four categories: *Art and Culture*, *Citizenship and Reform*, *Miscellaneous*, and *Defense and International*. Between 1949-1972, for instance, most films were produced for the *Development and Planning* category (696) and the lowest number (139) for the *Art and Culture* category. Roy takes these interesting figures from Pramod Pati’s *Films Division: Catalogue of Films, 1948-1972*, which was published by FD in 1974 ([Roy 2016: 389](#)). Within the extensive category *Development and Planning*, most films in Pati’s listing between 1949-1972 were devoted to *agriculture* (137), followed by *transportation and communication* (105). In contrast, the topic of *housing* formed the taillight in this period with only 10 films, which is revealing, and perhaps also surprising, with regard to the weighting of the most pressing problems from the state’s point of view in the first two decades after Independence.

A curated selection of 27 Films Division productions on housing (up to 2015) was presented by Rahul Mehrotra, Ranjit Hoskote and Kaiwan Mehta in the context of their exhibition “[State of Housing. Aspirations, Imaginaries and Realities in India](#).” They also include this selection, each with brief summary text sections, in the accompanying first of two exhibition volumes in Chapter VI: “Housing as Seen by the State since 1947 to Today ([Mehrotra & Mehta 2018: 214-225](#)).” The 1975 film *City on the Water*, directed by architect Charles Correa in collaboration with Films Division, however, is not included in this compilation, possibly because it is primarily concerned with the question of spatial redistribution, urban planning conditions and mobility infrastructure required for settling more and more people in the Bombay metropolitan area that the film addresses. The aim of the large-scale restructuring that Correa and his team envisioned for a multi-centred future city of Bombay (including the newly built city of New Bombay/Navi Mumbai in the district of Thane in Maharashtra), was to decongest not only urban spaces of dwelling for the poor, but also to decenter the mobility flows of more and more people every year that needed to live close to transport facilities to take them to their workplace. Precisely as it looks at the future of urban dwelling and coexistence through the lens of adequate housing, equal access to infrastructure and livelihood opportunities as well as a fairer distribution of

space, Correa's film complements and enhances the perspective on low-cost housing as it is provided in the three other FD productions *Modest Homes* (1954), *Housing for the People* (1972), and *A Growing House* (1982) that I present in this chapter.

The state monopoly position in the field of documentary film production was softened and changed above all by the triumph of video technology and the simultaneous expansion of film collectives and other training opportunities which emerged all over India in the 1980s and 90s (see [Battaglia 2014](#)). This also gradually changed the perception and form of the medium of documentary film and its manifold possibilities, including experimental, more critical and activist formats as well as those characterized by a stronger self-reflexivity of 'visible and audible' directors.³ Several years before this differentiation and opening, however, there was also a phase in the history of the Films Division between 1965-75 in which new possibilities for innovative formats, film-technical innovations and experiments, as well as perspectives that were sometimes critical of the state, were opened up. This phase is primarily associated with the name Jean (Jehangir) Bhowmurry, as well as a constellation of (predominantly male) filmmakers such as Pramod Pati, S.N.S. Sastry and S. Sukhdev (see [Kaushik 2017](#), [Sutoris 2016](#) and [Dixit 2015](#)).

Since January 2023, however, the Films Division no longer exists as an independent institution, but has been merged with the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC) in Mumbai. Both the "didactic" understanding of state-controlled media production, and specifically of the medium of documentary film, which was strongly pronounced in relation to post-colonial society, and the central aspect of public communication and documentation of government measures consequently receded further into the background vis-à-vis the now much more strongly weighted focus on the development of the film industry as an important branch of the Indian economy. The question what will become of the extensive archive of the Films Division was also raised with critical concern in the discussion about this consolidation, especially in view of a controversial historical policy of the current Hindu nationalist government (see, for instance, [Patwardhan 2022](#) and [Kishore 2021](#)).

***Modest Homes* (dir. K.L. Khandpur, b/w, English, 10min, DVD)**



Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954)

„Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home.”

The voice of commentator Sam Berkeley-Hill introduces us first to the acute problem of the housing shortage in India, for which the three reasons of population growth, rural-to-urban migration of workers as well as the “reshuffle in living due to Partition (01:09min)” are named, while we see moving streams of men in an unnamed Indian city.



Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954)

The unifying ‘we’ in this early phase of FD productions is interesting to note: “So acute is the problem now that many of us are forced to live in slums (01:16min).” The second thing that stands out already in the second minute is, that the problem of “planning” is addressed immediately in order to prevent “chaos”, but the focus is not on a (fair) distribution of space or (urban) planning, but only on the construction of cheap houses and the lifestyles made possible by this (01:24min). This is followed by the introduction of the actual topic, about which the film wants to inform: the “International Exhibition in Low-Cost Housing” which took place in Delhi

in the same year. About 74 model homes were built on the exhibition grounds, none of which cost more than 5,000 IRS, some of which were much cheaper, excluding the price of the building land.



Image of the house shown in minute 04:58 as an example of a low-cost house that could be built for 2,500 IRS because of its readily available cheap building materials. Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).

Architect Habib Rahman was entrusted with its conceptualization as one of his first major projects after being appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru as Senior Architect of the Central Public Works Department in Delhi in 1953.

“One of the first projects he was asked to undertake was organizing the International Exhibition on Low Cost Housing, held in Delhi in 1954. The exhibition brought together architects and engineers from across India, who built actual sample structures and published details of plans, materials and costs. Nehru had realized that housing was going to be crucial in the new nation and it was up to the government to take the initiative. The Indian government was the largest builder in India till about the mid-60s and Rahman was inspired by Nehru’s vision to build for the newly independent country that was striving to become a modern, secular and democratic state. He remained a ‘government servant’ through his entire career unlike many other architects who left and started private practice ([Ram Rahman 2019](#)).”



Image retrieved from: <https://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/6220/habib-rahman>
(last accessed Mar 6, 2023).

Starting at minute 02:15min, the international aspect of the exhibition is first highlighted, emphasizing through visual references to Austria, Germany, Finland and Italy that “housing shortage is not an Indian problem alone but a problem facing many countries in the world (02:25min).”

Subsequently, an important feature for the conception of the exhibition is pointed out, namely the diversity in design, since the construction of residential buildings had to be oriented towards the modes of living, climatic conditions as well as available building materials (03:00min). These three points are important starting points for conceptual considerations of critical architects, which were later systematized under the term [modern regionalism](#) or [critical regionalism](#). Currently, critical regionalism in affordable housing is receiving renewed attention, especially in light of climate change, scarcity of building materials, renewed interest in local building techniques, and changed awareness regarding the sustainability of building materials used (see also the chapter on “[Critical regionalism as an approach to contemporary housing in India](#)” in this collection).

In the following minutes of the film, some selected buildings and their special features are presented in more detail.



“A home designed by the architects of Chandigarh, Punjab’s new capital (04:20min).” Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).



“A growing house that cares for the growing family (05:25min).” Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).

The extension here is not through additional floors, but through a side extension. The construction itself can be improved depending on the available income, for example, by replacing used clay bricks peu à peu with fired bricks.



„A forest house of bamboo (06:42min).” The bamboo was previously treated so that it is protected against fire and vermin. Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).



„A wooden house from the Andamans – just the thing where timber is cheap (06:52min).” Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).

These affordable homes made of renewable building materials such as wood or bamboo are also remarkable from today’s point of view, as both are considered to be particularly climate-friendly and resource-saving building materials ‘of the future’. *Modest Homes* also presents reusable building materials using the example of ply wood, compressed wood as well as bamboo chips, which in this case can even be used for the interiors and production of low-cost furniture: “Materials which would otherwise go waste, they’re used for the interiors too (07:13min).”



Functionality of living and economical use of available interior space - visualized here by the example of a fold-out shutter that can also be used as a table (07:27min). Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).



Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954)

The image below shows round roof tiles, hollow on the inside, which are touted for better insulation as well as to prevent roof structures from becoming too heavy. They are reminiscent of the roof tiles that architect Anupama Kundoo used for the roof of her own house in Auroville, for example .



Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954)





Two stills from the documentary *Building Visions* (dir. Diego Breit Lira, 2022). The terracotta roof - made by potters from the region - does not need additional supports made of wood or steel. In the film, Kundoo explains that when she first came to Auroville, nobody wanted to buy the pots made by the potters. At that time, she says, it was not important to retain the pot as such, but the craft itself, as it should not disappear: “It took centuries and generations to develop these skills (07:44min)”. For a detailed discussion of the film *Building Visions* (2022) on Anupama Kundoo, see the chapter “Critical regionalism as an approach to contemporary housing in India: architectural imagination in the two documentaries *Kanade* (2021) and *Building Visions* (2022)” in this collection: <https://doi.org/10.21428/f4c6e600.b68b3387>

From minute 08:33min, specific attention is given to the topic of rural housing, which was a particular focus of the exhibition in Delhi. Here, too, the importance of locally available building materials that allow housing to be built in several stages is emphasized. In the visualization, we see a thatched roof of a village dwelling - something that is explicitly rejected nearly thirty years later in the film *A Growing Home* (1982), presented below, as a potential danger to the residents due to its easy combustibility.

Remarkably, the exhibition in this section also included a life-size replica of Gandhi’s hut at Segaon (Maharashtra). As the commentator points out, the use of “indigenous materials” was a top priority for Gandhi in order to keep building costs down (09:00min).

The next half minute of the film is devoted to other aspects of the ‘model village’ on display, which was apparently particularly popular with the public as part of the exhibition. A multi-purpose school is shown, which also functions as a training center for village arts and crafts (09:08min) as well as a central location for village panchayat meetings (09:13min). The ‘model village’ also has its own health center and cottage

industries; gas for cooking can be made from cow dung, so the principles of resource conservation and reuse are fully applied here as well (09:30min).





The 'model village' at the International Exhibition for Low Cost Housing in Delhi in 1954. Stills from the film *Modest Homes* (1954).

It is interesting how Venugopal Maddipati in his book on “Gandhi and Architecture: A Time for Low-Cost Housing” (2020) describes the close association of village life itself with the ‘father figure’ Gandhi in the context of the exhibition:

„As you see the village,’ the text in the exhibition souvenir booklet declared emphatically, ‘you think of Mahatma Gandhi, Father of the nation.’

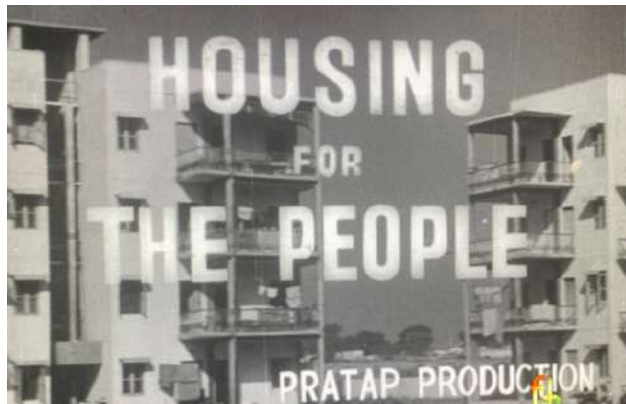
That, in 1954, an experience of a village community center could be so predictably expected to trigger people into thinking about Gandhi was perhaps an indication of how inextricably the space of the village and notions of that non-violent revolutionary as a parent of the nation may have become intertwined in the popular imagination. (...) Apparently, in 1954, people still inhabited the present moment of Gandhi’s embrace, in the mid nineteen thirties, of the village as the space of community life and improvement ([Maddipati 2020: 63](#)).

Towards the end, the film *Modest Homes* mentions the miniature buildings, which seem to have been a huge success with the young audience (from 09:49min). Less as a walk-in playground, but rather as a place of learning for India’s growing citizens, who in the future will share responsibility for their country, the film comments: “Our youngsters saw good housing in miniature, thus they will appreciate better housing no matter how modest when they grow up. Good houses build a good state.”



Still from the film *Modest Homes* (1954)

***Housing for the People* (dir. Pratap Parmar, 1972, b/w, English/Hindi, 11min, DVD)**



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

Slightly unsettled and with a clearly recognizable sense of alienation, the young reporter in the sari moves with her microphone and recording device to an unfamiliar residential area in an unnamed city, where she is about to interview a poor family about their living situation.



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

The male voice of the commentator (or 'voice-of-God-

narrator') begins with a 'matter-of-factly distanced'

intonation which is so characteristic of newsreels:

„One doesn't need a second look in an Indian city or village to spot its slums. Yet people must live somewehre, one must have a roof over one's head, even if it is to be shared with a crowd.”

In Hindi, the reporter now asks first the woman, who continues to do her work on the side, and then the man, with other family members surrounding them. “How can you all live together in this one room?” she asks the woman first. “Bahut mushkil se” - “with great difficulty.” And her husband elaborates, while the reporter avoids direct eye contact with him and instead looks at her notepad, “this is where we eat, this is where our children study, and this is where we sleep.”

Cut. The next scene begins.

(01:39) The first thing we see now is the ceiling fan in a spacious vacant apartment, which is apparently being viewed by a young couple. As they leave, the wife resolutely tells her husband (in English) that this apartment is out of the question for them because the rent is too high. The man replies nothing and walks silently down the stairs behind his wife.

Next, the voice of the non-visible commentator is heard again:

„For people of all classes and income groups, housing has become an insoluble problem. In a welfare state, even the poorest family should have a self-contained abode, reasonably neat and comfortable (02:21min).”

Meanwhile, the camera pans to a group of young middle-class women sitting together on a porch, discussing the current high rent prices.



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

As we learn next, to address the housing shortage, 83.7 million dwelling units



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

would need to be built, the vast majority (71.8 million) of them in rural areas, while just under 12 million dwelling units would need to be built in urban areas. This breakdown may be surprising, since the housing crisis could be assumed to be a primarily urban problem even as early as the early 1970s, due to continued migration to urban areas, as well as the generally much greater representation of urban-related issues. I will revisit this problem of a starkly underrepresented housing crisis in rural India - in relation to the current situation in the country - in the next chapter of this collection where I introduce the film *State of Housing* (2018), which Sanjiv Shah made for the exhibition of the same name curated by Rahul Mehrotra, Kaiwan Mehta, and Ranjit Hoskote.

In *Housing for the People*, the voice of the commentator informs us that the construction of so many new dwelling units would require an investment of Rs. 33,000 crores-more than was allocated by the Indian government for the public sector as a whole in the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1969-74), and is therefore “a problem of alarming proportions.”

In view of population growth, scarce building materials and rising construction costs, it was becoming increasingly difficult for the government, private construction companies and society as a whole to cope with the problem, which was becoming more complex every year.

Such is the inventory of this short documentary produced for the Films Division of India by the production company Pratap Production in the early 1970s.

However, from minute 03:35 on, the film unexpectedly strikes more positive and hopeful notes, the music in the background, sometimes also in the foreground, becomes peppier and more cheerful. The reason for this is immediately revealed by the commentator’s voice: “Research and experimentation, however, are dependable weapons against such vexing problems.”



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

Important state institutions are now shown, such as the Central Building Research Institute (CBRI), which was established in 1947 in Roorkee in the present-day state of Uttarakhand and which “has been continuously engaged in evolving new and cheaper building technologies and materials (03:52min).”



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

He
re,
eng
ine
ers
and

arc
hit
ect
s
are



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

familiarized with new concepts in the field of low-cost housing, for which a combination of basic needs of comfort with an ‘austerity of design’ and the possibility of rapid construction are imperative. The key to this, as the voice-of-God-narrator mentions, is low-cost yet robust building materials, such as ‘indigenous amphibole,’ which can take the place of asbestos for low-cost roofing. Machines that can produce a higher number of bricks more quickly are also beneficial, as are new methods for producing manufactured precast concrete units for roofing and intermediate floors in multi-storeyed buildings, or partial pre-fabrication, which makes house-building easy (06:51min).

Again, the music changes to emphasize the importance of the next statement: ideas developed by research must now go into mass production, “if they are to fulfill mass requirements.” Then the Hindustan Housing Factory

(Hindustan Prefab Ltd., HPL) is shown, which was built in the early 1950s on the orders of Jawaharlal Nehru [to counter the then pressing housing shortage caused by the influx of refugees from West Pakistan.](#)

We learn (07:03min) that the Hindustan Housing Factory is the first factory in India that specializes in the production of low-cost building components and prefabricated houses. The narrator also informs that in addition to traditional building materials, the factory also uses new methods to produce prefabricated components. Industrial wastes like fly ash from thermal power stations (07:30min) are also used for the production of building materials.

Again, music plays in the background and we hear the sounds of the machines. Next, the National Buildings Organization (NBO) fades in from minute 08:00. According to the [organization's homepage, the National Buildings Organization...](#)

“... was established in 1954 as an attached office under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (the then Ministry of Works and Housing) for technology transfer, experimentation, development and dissemination of housing statistics. In the context of formulation of Housing Policy and Programmes, study of socio-economic aspects of housing issues and the increased need for housing statistics, NBO was restructured in 1992.”



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

In the film *Housing for the People*, we learn about a permanent exhibition at the NBO that incorporates the latest trends, both from India and internationally, on construction methods and materials and informs engineers, architects, and the general public about them so that this can help them “to put up clean and decent low-cost housing (08:40min).”



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

The scene is particularly informative in light of the Indian state's then-prevailing notion of how knowledge transfer should occur through government initiatives and institutions ([Mehrotra & Mehta 2018: 213](#)). As is predominantly the case with documentaries commissioned by the Films Division of India, the focus here is not only on documenting and informing about government institutions and policies, but also on persuasion or the 'educative approach' of the medium. There is an explicit appeal to viewers on behalf of the government to actively participate in improving housing conditions themselves. The citizens are addressed directly and are given co-responsibility for how the Indian nation is perceived in the world, when the authoritarian voice of the commentator says: "A nation is known by the way its people live. A people living in clean and neat houses are a clean neat people (09:38min)."



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

Towards the end of the film, the role of the government



Still from the documentary *Housing for the People* (1972)

is described as a "catalytic" one and it concludes by describing an optimistic future scenario, apparently already considered almost inconceivable at the time, in which "every Indian family will live with dignity in a separate, self-contained unit (10:00min)."

The focus on the family unit is noteworthy here - notwithstanding the fact that, for instance, countless seasonal migrant workers need temporary housing in cities - as well as the state’s normative idea of orderly, planned and standardized housing for less privileged groups of society.

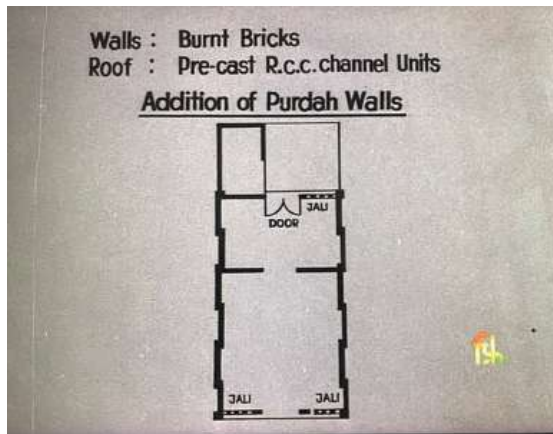
“(T)he Delhi Development Authority, Housing Board of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, and others, have done pioneering work in the field of housing and slum clearance (08: 45min)-”

“Large colonies to house low income groups have come up in many areas (09:21min).”

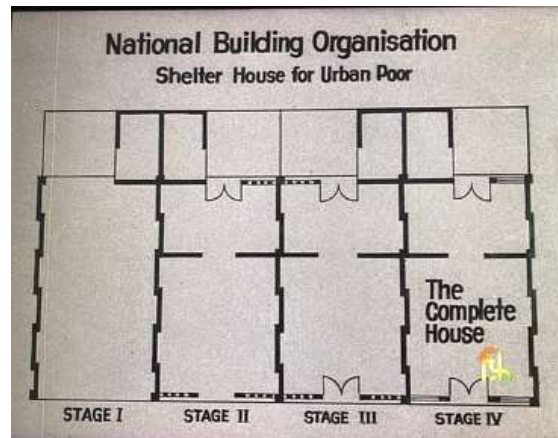
Statements like these leave little doubt that neither the self-declared needs, own perspectives nor construction skills of the residents are taken into account or asked for. Also, an urban perspective and idea prevails throughout, in which only engineers, architects and other ‘experts’ can supposedly build sustainably and cost-effectively, supported by the latest ‘scientific findings’, although the housing shortage in rural regions is at least named, but without mentioning that the named professional and actor groups were/are hardly involved in housing construction in rural regions.⁴

A Growing House (dir. Mohi-ud-Din Mirza, 1982, b/w, Hindi, 10min, DVD)

This film presents the concept of the gradually growing (incremental) house with the involvement of the future residents. Depending on their available financial means and with active participation in the construction of the house, after the allocation of a piece of building land, first the ground floor with its outer walls is built according to the floor plan shown below. In the next step, interior walls can be built in the house to separate individual rooms. Finally, windows and doors follow.



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

Nevertheless, it is not a matter of designing the houses individually

dually according to the needs and aesthetic preferences of the future residents. Instead, the state’s vision is undoubtedly an orderly, standardized settlement of similar-looking row houses as the ideal form of housing for less privileged families - quite different, for example, from the designs of Indian architects like Charles Correa

who have conceived individual residential buildings around connecting courtyards, as these support communal living in the housing estate.

The active participation of the residents, which was not even considered in *Housing for the People*, clearly comes to the fore here, but *A Growing House* leaves no doubt either that the state and its institutions, represented here primarily by the National Buildings Organization (the Central Building Research Institute is briefly shown and mentioned in this documentary too), know exactly how the construction techniques and building materials must be conveyed and used: plastered walls and masonry as a guarantee of hygiene, health and safety, especially for women and children (“स्वस्थ और सुरक्षा”, healthy and safe); windows for ventilation and lighting of the interiors.



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

A second aspect that is clearly visible



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

in *A Growing House* is a gender and family ideology that is aligned with normative ideas regarding Indian middle-class nuclear families. The fact that women are actively involved in the construction work is only shown very briefly in minute 02:30, but from the following scene on we only see women as housewives and mothers in this documentary, whose sphere of action seems to be exclusively the domestic sphere and who devote themselves to the family care work (cooking, caring for the children), while the men do the wage work and return in the evening after their work is done to the housing estate (possibly far away from their place of work) to their wives and (no more than two) children. It is also remarkable how strongly the impression of a necessary privacy of the nuclear family is visually emphasized here, where the children can be raised and the fathers/husbands working away do not have to worry about the safety of their wives and children (04:33min).



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

At the same time, the idea of ownership



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

comes to the fore, as the idea of dignified living seems to be linked to it: "यह घर हमारा है, यहाँ सुरक्षा है" ("This house is ours, here we are safe", 04:44min). Significantly, the loving father is shown in the image below wearing a suit, which may even be meant to convey the conceivable prospect of upward social mobility and steady employment.



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

From minute 05:12, the background



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

and music changes again, becoming less dynamic and thus announcing that a much more serious and worrying topic is now being dealt with. The camera focuses on thatched mud houses in villages where the "majority of our population lives" (05:30min), whereupon we look head-on at a woman stepping out of her dwelling in a stooped position with two children, while we can see that the outer walls are slightly crooked and cracks have appeared from heat and drought, which immediately triggers an association with fires with regard to the thatched roof.



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

Supported by the slow overcast music, the camera

now moves into the interior of the unventilated, dark mud

house, while the male narrative voice announces that the government has already worked out a solution to the untenable housing situation in Indian villages. Again, masonry houses are to be built, with roofs protected against fire, windows to ventilate the interiors, separate kitchenettes, and even electricity (06:02min).



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)



Still from the film *A Growing House* (1982)

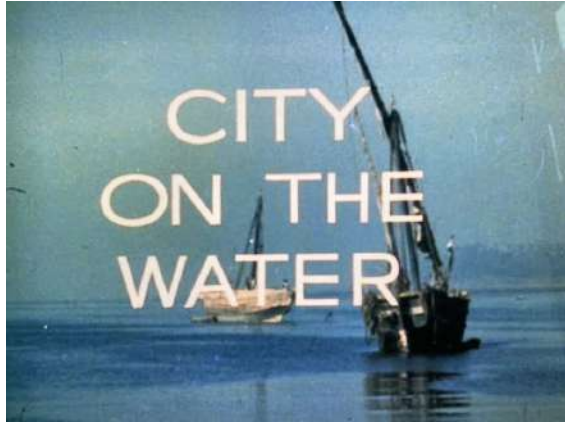
The preference for plastered walls

again finds its visual and literal expression here. To be

able to build their own house, the narrative voice says, they need the support of the Indian government and the latest research from the Central Building Research Institute (06:35min and 07:23min). In contrast to the documentary *Housing for the People* published ten years earlier, which clearly expresses hope for solutions to social challenges through scientific research on the one hand and skepticism about overcoming it in view of the enormous dimension of the problem of affordable housing on the other, *A Growing House* ends with the image of the aforementioned men strolling back to the housing estate after their day's work, conveying confidence. At

the same time, this once again manifests the idea of a geographical separation of home and work as a desirable way of life, which is apparently taken for granted.

City on the Water (dir. Charles Correa, 1975, color, 16:34min, DVD & available online)



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975)



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975)

Charles Correa, an architect with

h a pronounced interest in the medium of film⁵, not only directed this highly interesting documentary, but also wrote the text and screenplay for it. *City on the Water* is dedicated to its producer Pramod Pati, who died in early 1975. Among other things, Pati gained fame as an experimental filmmaker in the field of animation, for which he was also responsible at Films Division. Apart from several clips from older films, this is a color film and a second aspect that stands out in marked difference to the three films previously discussed is that we hear alternately a female and a male voice as narrators/commentators (Pearl Padamse and Gerson Da Cunha). Overall, however, they speak significantly less text than the commentators in the other films, and it seems that they deliberately leave pauses for reflection and entering into dialogue with their audience by asking them direct questions. This immediately creates the impression that they do not communicate the state's view 'top-down', but rather convey an intended exchange of ideas with the viewers at eye level. From a critical gender perspective, it can also be immediately noted that the distribution of roles is very clear: the female voice communicates the strongly atmospheric impressions of the city, supported by very interesting shots of everyday life in Bombay; she thereby allows an emotional and reflective access to the city, formulates many, sometimes rhetorical, questions and also invites the audience through the inserted pauses to let the images and thoughts to sink in and to continue spinning. This is supported by a sound in the background that is as sparing as it is artful, and which is in no way comparable to the rather obtrusive background music in the other three FD films.

„I love Bombay. I love its setting, the beaches and the fishing villages of the Konkan coast (02:12min).”



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975)

The male narrative voice, on the other hand,



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975)

seems to

be primarily responsible for conveying the fact-based knowledge (history, present of the city of Bombay, statistical data etc.) and, in particular, the vision of New Bombay introduced here, as a multicentric urban region, whose dynamic development could even have a positive impact on the entire state of Maharashtra. Provided that the unique opportunity is seized boldly and decisively to realize Charles Correa's, [Shirish Patel's](#) and Pravina Mehta's⁶ vision for the expansion and restructuring of Bombay, bringing the city out of its current crisis and into a bright future that recalls its glorious past while reaffirming its prominent economic role in the national context.



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975)

The film was produced for the City



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975)

y and Industrial Development Corporation and the Government of Maharashtra and can also be assumed to be the main addressee. For this reason, all the arguments that could be seamlessly applied to a perfect city branding campaign are very well chosen, as they are obviously focused on the main objective of persuasion.

The core ideas of this vision for New Bombay are presented and justified in the last six minutes of the film. At the time *City on the Water* was filmed, office jobs were already growing faster than factory jobs, causing land prices in southern Bombay to rise sharply. At the same time, more and more people were commuting daily from the north to the south, continuously increasing the pressure on available space and transportation.



“Incredible, isn’t it? Half a million people arriving every morning. Nobody leaving (00:32min).”

Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975).

With a further population increase expected within the next decade, from more than 6

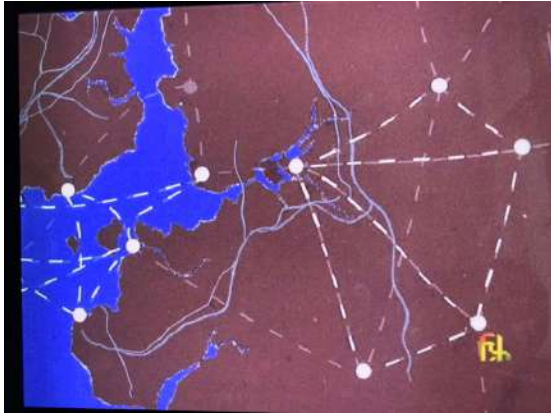


Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975).

million in 1975 to over 10 million residents of Bombay in 1985 (09:56min), the central vision of the film is to move away from a north-south structure and associated massive

problems of the congested city to an east-west structure and geographically more widely distributed multidirectional flows of movement by relocating large portions of the office jobs from south Bombay to the opposite bank of the emerging New Bombay (13:52min). Not solely via land transport routes, but by making water the focus once again, as it had been in the long history of the seven islands from which Bombay emerged as a major port city, “providing communication between the various centers - a multicentred city around the harbour (14:21min)”, the mobility of the future envisaged by Correa and his team is made possible.





Stills from the film *City on the Water*



Water (1975)

The future of housing also lies on this land, where “even the poorest must have a space and a place to live (12:23min).”² An example of this is Vashi, where housing for 50,000 people is to be built, illustrated by Correa's typical terraced units, each of which offers families of different income groups their open to sky space “to grow plants and sleep out at night (13:05min).”



Stills from the film *City on the Water* (1975)



What's captivating about this is not least the vision, early for the 1970s, of a city that doesn't depend on automobility and therefore doesn't lose unnecessary space to parking lots and car roads, as all the apartments in Vashi were to be within walking distance of a mass transportation station, “so you won't need a car to get around the city (13:29min).”



Women's envisioned participation in the industrial labour process in New Bombay/Nav Mumbai.
Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975).

Newspaper reports published after Charles Correa's death in June 2015 address the high importance that the New Bombay project held for himself - and also the fact that the ambitious project ultimately failed due to a lack of 'political will':

„Navi Mumbai builders lost the plot – literally and figuratively – long ago, and so quality conscious it has been that the initial low-cost housing promoted by CIDCO were ready for redevelopment; many were ready to crumble.

This surely was not the city Correa envisaged when he persuaded the Maharashtra government that a new city, planned from scratch, was essential to take the pressure off Mumbai. He even worked on it for five years as its chief architect ([Mahesh Vijapurkar 2015](#)).”⁸

In a 2013 interview with the [Mumbai Mirror](#), Correa commented on this in the following terms:

„We thought the government and its various offices should move out and to open the eastwest axis to create jobs there. If Bombay's population was four million in 1965, it was going to be eight million in the next 20 years and so on, but the government was not doing anything to plan for this. I think because cities were colonial creations, governments became passive (...) but when your population is doubling, you need dynamic responses.”

In the following, I would like to go into more detail about the first ten minutes of *City on the Water*, in which primarily an audience interested in the city is addressed and another level of the film emerges, on which, from today's point of view, urgent questions about a more equitable distribution of urban space, access to livelihood opportunities and important infrastructure, especially means of transportation, as well as the claim of every human to affordable housing and a basic supply of drinking water as well as sewage facilities are addressed.

Especially in direct comparison to the film *Housing for the People*, which was released only three years before *City on the Water*, but also in relation to the other two films presented on the topic of low-cost housing, it is striking that the pay almost no attention at all to context or to the actual infrastructure and livelihood needs of the residents. Instead, 'slum clearance' is explicitly named as a necessity in *Housing for the People*, whereas *City on the Water* goes into detail about why people looking for work and their families inevitably always settle near places where they either have immediate access to transportation or are already close to where they work.



„Nearby lies the great industrial belt of cotton mills. People live as close as possible (04:15min).”



“There really isn’t enough space for everyone, so men and older children sleep out, under the open sky (04:43min).”



“Isn’t that marvelous? She’s smiling. Even under these conditions, people retain their humanness, their dignity (05:03min).”



“People need transport to find jobs, so they live illegally around these stations (05:44min).”



“Do we really have to treat people this way (05:59min)?”



„Yes, Bombay’s a great city...if you’re rich enough. But what if you’re poor (06:30min)?”

Another standpoint of the film, which again has lost none of its topicality, refers to the question of whether the vertical city or building in height is the appropriate solution for the housing issue, a question that has once again moved to the fore [in recent times](#).

„As the land prizes climb, the buildings grow taller and if they grow taller, they cost more, not only in money but also in things that we as a nation cannot afford, like steel and cement and high-speed lifts (08:14min).”

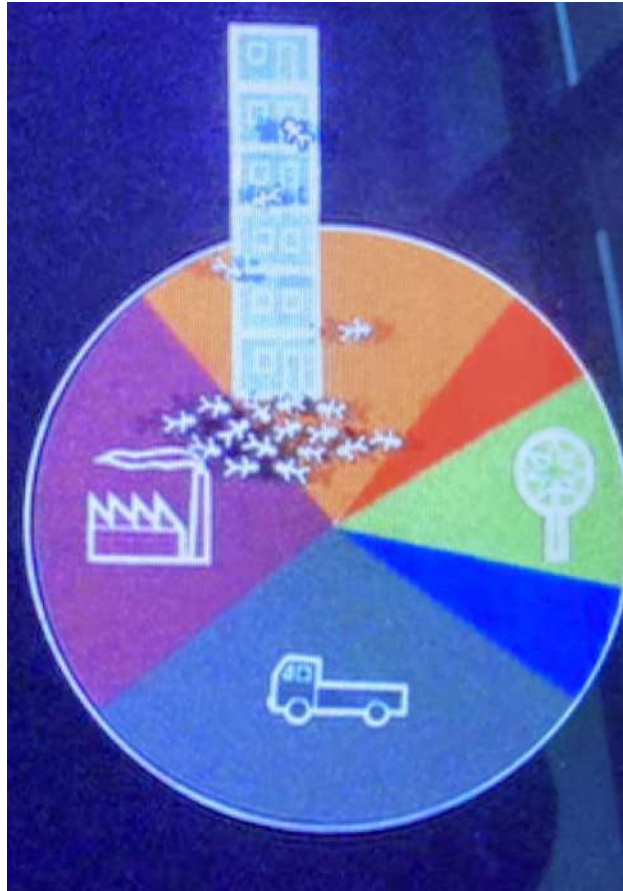


Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975).

“But don’t tall buildings mean more homes for everyone (08.33min)?”

The answer to this question is again provided by the male narrative voice: no, because if more and more people were crammed into even higher buildings while housing space remained the same or shrank, this would

inevitably lead to a sharp drop in costs, which would ultimately throw the poor back onto the pavements (09:05min). This is illustrated by a particularly drastic animation showing people falling out of a high-rise building.



Still from the film *City on the Water* (1975).

The articulate rejection corresponds to another of Charles Correa's principles, who was firmly convinced of the possibility of high-density settlement through sophisticated low-rise construction of residential buildings, which could even be connected by a connecting courtyard, as he had demonstrated in his Belapur Incremental Housing project (Navi Mumbai) in the early 1980s (see also the chapter on [critical regionalism as an approach to contemporary housing](#) in this collection).

City on the Water, like the other three Films Division films presented here, is carried by the firm conviction that central planning is necessary and can be successful in addressing the severe housing shortage. Unlike the other three films, however, Correa's documentary does not adopt and address an abstract national scale and perspective; rather, it conveys very clearly that a local perspective and search for solutions has to be based on the specific context and can only come from those who know very well both the history and identity of a city and its concrete problems.⁹

Nevertheless, *City on the Water* is not about the possibility of democratic participation or co-design in such a large-scale urban restructuring, but above all about conveying an understanding that the distribution and organization of urban space is central to the solution of the pressing housing issue, and not the question of building technology or materials used for it. In addition to the role of the visionary planner, it is the role of the architect as a knowledge communicator and representative of the interests of those population groups that are permanently marginalized and who “cannot compete for the space and services they require (05:21min)” that is particularly noteworthy here.

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

City on The Water (1975)

It is precisely this approach that Charles Correa’s son-in-law, Rahul Mehrotra, has consistently developed further in recent years in many of his books, lectures, and not least in the form of the exhibition he co-curated on *The State of Housing* (2018). Mehrotra argues that architects can play an important role as bridge-practitioners, bridging communicative gaps and negotiating on behalf of less empowered and marginalized groups on the one hand, and mediating between more powerful forces and interest groups on the other. Moreover, architects should direct their skills particularly to the realm of urban imagination and how space itself can be ‘organized’ and reconfigured so that the “static city” (built of concrete, steel, and bricks) and the “kinetic city” (built mainly of recycled materials) in Mumbai and other metropolises in India can better coexist and a participatory form of planning can be realized ([Mehrotra 2012: 344](#)).

To achieve this and to generate a new debate on the question of meaningful housing for all Indians, it is first necessary to deconstruct the rhetoric of ‘universalizing solutions’ and notion of universal housing that the central Indian government continues to adhere to ([Mehrotra & Mehta 2020](#)).¹⁰ Accordingly, the three curators - Mehrotra, Kaiwan Mehta and Ranjit Hoskoté - of the exhibition *The State of Housing* also critically questioned the state’s imagination of the low-income house in their exhibition which is limited to a uniform idea of the basic ‘house unit’ that can measure “up to 30sq.m. as a single unit or part of a multi-storeyed apartment building across all urban areas in the country ([Mehrotra & Mehta 2018: 347](#)).”



Images shot by Peter Bialobrzeski in collaboration with the State of Housing exhibition and the Goethe Institute,



documenting the 30sqm housing unit across various rehabilitation projects in Mumbai. Published in: Rahul Mehrotra & Kaiwan Mehta (2018). Housing in India. Mapping of Precedents and Prototypes. Mumbai: Spenta. 364-373.

At the same time, the context and central aspects that form the ecology of housing (transport infrastructure, mobility, livelihood, location, social networks) are completely ignored (ibid.: 248) – and this is exactly the impression that the three selected FD films *Modest Homes*, *Housing for the People* and *A Growing House* create, i.e. that a focus on housing alone could provide the solution. However, as Charles Correa has put it in an [interview in 2013](#):

“People don’t come to cities for housing, they come for jobs which is why they are willing to sleep on the roads. But then they also need water, healthcare, eventually education for their children. But we have failed to provide for any of it.”

Beyond the dogma of the state ‘to deliver housing for families’, Rahul Mehrotra therefore argues that the focus should instead be more on housing as dwelling and homemaking, and in the many cases of seasonal or circular migrants within India, the challenge of multi-local dwellings also needs to be considered ([Mehrotra & Mehta 2020](#)).

“Circular migratory patterns show that the labourers treat the city as a temporary place of residence, a place where they earn money and leave. But their precarious housing conditions is the most important reason why workers can never belong in the cities. Finding a somewhat permanent shelter is crucial to finding one’s foothold in unknown places and making them into homes ([Sushmita Pati 2020](#)).”

When the Covid-19 lockdown began in March 2020 and the Indian government halted public transportation, it was estimated that 30 million people walked or cycled ‘home’/reverse migrated within two weeks, many of them facing extremely adverse conditions. It is important to bear in mind that a large percentage of the approximately 139 million internal migrants who at present work for daily wages in Indian cities are farmers who must “pay off debts or earn money for seeds and farming equipment for the next agricultural cycle” ([Babu 2022: 52](#)). Analysing the situation of migrant workers in the state of Tamil Nadu, M. Suresh Babu describes how difficult it is to estimate their number or employment status, as they are not registered with any government body and do “not receive any welfare provision from the local/state government (ibid.: 53)”.

I would like to thank Reyazul Haque for his valuable comments on the draft version of this article.

Footnotes

1.

As Ravi Vasudevan writes in his chapter on “Configurations of Partition: The Indian Newsreel Archive in the 1940s (2021: 71-108)”:

“(T)he newsreel is news, of the moment; the documentary may also have such topicality, but it is often deployed to present a narrative about institutions, practices, social, cultural and political references that are less datable in their reference and more durable in their exhibition value.” Nevertheless, they two forms might also overlap and documentaries “might also have been very timely”. In addition, documentaries “could also be made from pre-existing footage, including footage originally used in newsreels.” Ravi S. Vasudevan (ed.) (2021). *Media and the Constitution of the Political: South Asia and Beyond*. Series: Politics and Society in India and the Global South. New Delhi: Sage, p. 72. ↵

2. As Jag Mohan describes in his book *Two Decades of the Films Division* (1969, quoted from Roy 2016: 403): “The cold words written by the commentary writers turn flesh when the commentators take over. It is they, who convey to the ‘captive audience’ the importance and significance of the visuals. Sam Berkeley-Hill, the late Nobby Clarke, Romesh Thapar, Zul Vellani and Partap Sharma have done the salesmanship for the Films Division in the English language.” ↵

3. Sanjiv Shah, whose film *State of Housing/A Place to Live* (2018) is featured in the next entry in this collection, draws on his own experience as a mostly independent film director to talk about how he personally found both the advent of video technology and, later, the “digital revolution” to be “liberating” for his own critical film practice. In an interview with [IIHS \(Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bengaluru\)](#), he also mentions that he lacks any form of nostalgia towards celluloid, even though he had been trained on celluloid as part of his film studies. For Shah, however, the impression that it is a “tool” prevails, even if filmmaking itself is still a “craft” that should be learned and not considered dispensable merely because of today’s digital possibilities and therefore much easier access to the medium. ↵

4. Architects, for instance, contribute only a minuscule percentage to the world's built environment in general, as Gertrud Tauber highlights in her study on "Architects and Post-Disaster Housing" in South India after the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 (Tauber 2014: 43). It is also important to note that their contribution is largely found in urban contexts, whereas "(t)o this day, formally trained architects hardly play any role whatsoever in rural housing (ibid.)" [↵](#)

5.

Exactly twenty years earlier, in 1955, Charles Correa had made a short, animated film titled *You and Your Neighborhood. The Story of Urban Rehabilitation*, as part of his master's thesis at MIT in the US. Correa was the scriptwriter, animator, photographer and director of the short film which draws on a project he had worked on extensively in the framework of his MA studies in the 1950s. *You and Your Neighborhood* discusses what happens when a neighborhood develops to its disadvantage and the condition of the houses in it continues to deteriorate. The film further raises the question how urban sprawl can be stopped or even reversed. It can be viewed online at: <https://charlescorreafoundation.org/2020/07/30/you-and-your-neighborhood-the-film> (last accessed Mar 7, 2023).

[↵](#)

6. For a detailed account of Pravina Mehta's contribution as a "woman architect in India", see the chapter on her in Madhavi Desai (2017). *Women Architects and Modernism in India. Narratives and contemporary practices*. Routledge, 64-69, and Mary N. Woods (2017). *Women Architects in India. Histories of Practice in Mumbai and Delhi*. Routledge. [↵](#)

7. Because it is not differentiated further in the film, 'the poor' are more or less presented as a homogenous class of people in the film, perhaps as many assumed at the time that caste-based identities and forms of discrimination would cease to exist in cities, or failed to see/acknowledge the role it continued to play in the distribution and design of urban space as well as in the coexistence of different communities in cities. [↵](#)

8. A detailed analysis of the background to this generally perceived failure of the New Bombay or Navi Mumbai urban planning project can be found in Annapurna Shaw's 2004 book, *The Making of Navi Mumbai*, published by Orient Blackswan. [↵](#)

9. This resonates with the sharp critique on "dysfunctional nations and rising cities," as expressed by Benjamin Barber in his book *If Mayors Ruled the World* (2013, Yale University Press). [↵](#)

10. In 2015, the Indian government introduced the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) to provide affordable housing to all citizens by 2022. Through this credit linked subsidy scheme (CLSS), the government aimed to provide its beneficiaries an interest subsidy to avail loans to purchase or build a house. The scheme was launched to aid the middle-income community, economically weaker sections (EWS) and low-income groups (LIG). Depending on the areas it serves, the scheme is divided into two sections,

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Rural) (see <https://pmaymis.gov.in/>). ↵

References

- Anand Patwardhan (2022). “Why the merger of the National Film Archives and Films Division is an assault on the Constitution. Our archived history is in danger of disappearing or being re-cut and rewritten.” *Scroll*. Online published at: <https://scroll.in/reel/1020454/why-the-merger-of-the-national-film-archives-and-films-division-is-an-assault-on-the-constitution> (Mar 21, 2022).

Avijit Mukul Kishore (2021). “Why Films Division matters: It’s the largest moving-image repository of Indian history. The proposed merger of Films Division with National Film Development Corporation raises several troubling questions.” *Scroll*. Online published at: <https://scroll.in/reel/1013895/why-films-division-matters-its-the-largest-moving-image-repository-of-indian-history> (Dec 29, 2021).

↵

- Babu, M. Suresh (2022). “Vulnerable Livelihoods in Cities during the Pandemic. Migrant Workers in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India”. *Trialog 140/141* (52-57).

↵

- Giulia Battaglia (2014). The Video Turn: Documentary Film Practices in 1980s India. *Visual Anthropology*, Vol 27, Issue 1-2: Reflections on the Lens. 72-90.

↵

- Mehrotra, Rahul (2012). “Post-Planning in Mumbai”. In: Mostafavi, Mohsen (ed.). *In the Life of Cities: Parallel Narratives of the Urban*. Zürich: Lars Müller. Co-published by Harvard University Graduate School of Design (333-344).

↵

- Mehrotra, Rahul & Kaiwan Mehta (2020). “State of Housing in India”. BIC Talks. Online available at: <https://bangaloreinternationalcentre.org/audio/52-state-of-housing-in-india-with-rahul-mehrotra-and-kaiwan-mehta/> (last accessed Mar 10, 2023).

↵

- Mehrotra, Rahul & Kaiwan Mehta (eds.) (2018). *Housing in India. Mapping of Precedents and Prototypes*. Mumbai: Spenta.

↵

- Rahul Mehrotra & Kaiwan Mehta (eds.)(2018). *Housing in India. 1, Aspirations, Imaginaries and Realities*. Mumbai: Spenta.

↑

- Rahul Mehrotra & Kaiwan Mehta (eds.)(2018). *Housing in India. Aspirations, Imaginaries and Realities*. Volume 1. Mumbai: Spenta.

↑

- Ritika Kaushik (2017). “Sun in the Belly”: Film Practice at Films Division of India 1965-1975. *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, Vol. 8, Issue 1, 103-123.

Sutoris, Peter (2016). *Visions of Development: Films Division of India and the Imagination of Progress, 1948-75*. Oxford University Press.

Shubra Dixit (2015). “Believe It or Not, Films Division Was Also Edgy, Subversive & Cool”. *The Quint*. Online published at: <https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/believe-it-or-not-films-division-was-also-edgy-subversive-and-cool> (26 Jun 2015).

↑

- Srirupa Roy (2016). “Moving Pictures. The Films Division of India and the Visual Practices of the Nation-State (2007).” In: *The Documentary Film Reader. History, Theory, Criticism*. Ed. by Jonathan Kahana. Oxford University Press. 383-405.

↑

- Venugopal Maddipati (2020). *Gandhi and Architecture: A Time for Low-Cost Housing*. Routledge.

↑