

Between Idea and Site Lies 'Architecture' as Emptiness

A few key aspects define MADe's approach. Given that every other project is situated in a different country — because the practice, based in Hyderabad and Spain, works primarily on international competitions — what commonality can tie the approaches together? It is an approach to a place. Every project, in some way or other, is an exploration of what the place wants to be. Every idea seeks to negotiate the site. It seeks to explore how the shaping of empty space by built form can leave something for the larger community beyond the project. MADe's projects are therefore often more about the unbuilt than the built. They are about emptiness rather than form. In them, movement determines the form, rather than the visual form determining movement.

Sometimes, form seeks to slip into invisibility, leaving only traces on the land. The competition-winning Suncheon Art Platform in South Korea is more an architecture of the void than of the built. The intervention sinks below ground, leaving only two light pavilions as markers of architecture's presence. A void carved from the site creates a much-needed breathing space in the dense old city of Suncheon, opening new linkages in the neighbourhood. Just as the emptiness witnessed on an ocean horizon can be stirring, MADe's architecture strives to work with emptiness as the emotional centre of its projects.

In the finalist proposals for the Bamiyan Cultural Centre in Afghanistan and the WHO headquarters extension in Geneva, the interventions aim to merge with the landscape while respecting the site's significant markers — the monumental Buddha statues on the Bamiyan cliffs and Jean Tschumi's building for the WHO. The architecture defers to the site and to nature. In the Losbates School proposal, the architecture defines an edge between the village and the forest, embracing the view.

At other times, projects may want to assert themselves boldly — but again, through emptiness: through empty spaces that channel movement and forge linkages with the surroundings that may not have existed before. While the National War Museum proposal for New Delhi is a massive monolith that lifts itself off the ground, even here the central concept is emptiness. A vast, empty public space extends beneath the floating canopy, and internally the built form disintegrates into a matrix of courtyards.

The courtyard is a recurring concept that weaves through MADe's projects — an emptiness around which the built form defines itself. At the school and community centre in Jharkhand, a simple interplay of grid and walls gives way to classrooms that spill out into an intimate courtyard.

There is a constant pursuit of contrast between the inner and outer worlds in MADe's projects. Sometimes projects appear as places of refuge, such as the Walled Oasis in Porto, which wraps around an abandoned site to create a sense of sanctuary, or the Retreat House, which forms a miniature fortress within the densely populated neighbourhood it inhabits. At other times, the only opening to the outer world is through the vertical dimension of the sky. At other times, the projects negotiate a conversation between the 'open' and the 'closed' by creating thresholds between the two. In the proposal for the Great Kemerī Bog Visitor Centre in Latvia, a 'place of passage' marks a threshold between the world of man and the world of nature. In this way, architecture is often the 'inhabitable wall' in MADe's projects. The 'wall' serves to define an emptiness.

Finally, MADe's architecture strives to be about collective memory. Beyond treating material expression as a form of memory, the architecture explores the memory of empty space and sculpts itself around the collective memory of the court, the void, the landscape, the horizon and the sky.

As in Lao Tzu's famous image of the vessel, the work is as much about the space it contains as about its form – "usefulness [comes] from what is not there."

Between idea and site lies an emptiness waiting to be made.

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21 July 2019