



arc en rêve centre d'architecture bordeaux

The Vibrant Architecture Scene of Bangladesh

Bengal Stream

Bengal Stream is the first exhibition in France to focus on the architectural scene in Bangladesh.

The *East-West / North-South* programme designed by arc en rêve in 2004 presented the essential purpose of architecture, giving people places to live, and placed creativity at the heart of the major issues facing societies as they turn towards the future. We observed at the time that dwelling solutions developed by populations in extreme conditions can inform the search for new modes of design to help us to build habitable environments here and now.

Climate, mobility, time, and living are the shared materials for any architectural project.

The architects Francis Débiédo Kéré (Burkina Faso), Junya Ishigami (Japan), Studio Mumbai (India) and Wang Shu Lu Wenyu (China), who have all honoured us with exhibitions, have taught us to look at the world in new ways and provide us with an inexhaustible source of inspiration.

Why organise a major exhibition on the architectural scene in Bangladesh, today in France?

The curators, Andreas Ruby and Niklaus Graber, refer to this country, the largest delta in the world, as a universal case study.

The high risk of flooding due to climate change in Bangladesh, and also the population explosion and mass exodus from the countryside towards the cities are the new challenges that local development bodies rise to with exemplary skill. This country, whose architecture used to be largely ignored, could become a global model for responsible architectural activism.

“Bangladesh is a global laboratory. All the negative effects of climate change can be seen there,” says Munir Muniruzzaman, former adviser to the president of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has a lot to teach us, especially about the way our planet can adapt to rising sea levels. For the people of Bangladesh, this future is now present: the lost of soil is a reality.

Projects for floating schools and hospitals, structures built in two days with inhabitants, and whole villages raised to a higher level, are all examples of architecture that is able to respond to the inevitable.

The exhibition Bengal Stream presents over sixty projects demonstrating the extraordinary vibrant architecture scene in their country. Simplicity, adaptability, and an ability to cope with vulnerability are the collective strengths and values of architecture in Bangladesh.

Francine Fort director, arc en rêve centre d'architecture

emergence

Bangladesh, blessed with cultural and scenic riches, has so far barely been present on the architectural world map, but that may change in the near future, due to excellent works emerging from a vibrant architecture movement.

The output of this **Bengal Stream** is not just highly controversial in a spatial and architectural sense, it also bears witness to the high societal relevance of architecture as a discipline. Via local action, carefully developed from the country's specific history and geography, current trends in Bangladesh are taking on global significance. Participatory low-cost, environmental or social projects are often undertaken by the same designers who also get commissions from a growing middle class and from the urban high-end price segment.

Although the protagonists among the generation of architects setting the agenda today have defined individual focal points with their projects, they are interconnected as a community by a lively professional exchange and higher-level objectives. Like an unrelenting tide, more and more players are helping this still-young profession to get established and supporting an awareness of the local culture without closing their minds to global influences. In the largest delta region on Earth, veined by thousands of rivers, people seem to be aware that every kind of living culture is a combination of the inherent and the foreign.

History: Tradition as the Humus of the Present

The area where today's Bangladesh is situated has been populated for millennia and is characterized by a wealth of cultural history. In a chequered historical sequence of events, various trends have expressed themselves in different architectural ways, according to religious or socio-cultural developments. Typological strands, from the Mogul period (16th to 18th century) to British colonial architecture (1757-1947), through to 20th-century modernism, are impressively demonstrated on the basis of schematic layout plans. In particular, the Bangladeshi architect and thinker Muzharul Islam (1923-2012) had a linking function in societal and architectural discourse. Firstly, in his work and teaching, he strived to mediate between tradition and the modern. Secondly, he managed to acknowledge locality and internationality to equal extents. As he had studied at Yale in the USA during the 1950s, it was also in keeping with his personal identity to bring international protagonists like Paul Rudolph, Stanley Tigerman and ultimately Louis I. Kahn to Bangladesh for important construction projects. Another key part of Muzharul Islam's legacy is the forming of the so-called Chetana Study Group, whose thoughts and actions have played a major role in helping to shape Bangladesh's contemporary architecture over the past decades.

modernism

Bangladesh's contemporary architecture movement follows in the footsteps of the grand master Muzharul Islam (1923-2012), whose original drawings are exhibited here for the first time outside his home country. Muzharul Islam strived to mediate between tradition and the modern, while absorbing the local and the international to equal extents in his architecture. It was in keeping with his persona! understanding of intercultural dialogue to bring western protagonists to his homeland for important construction projects, such as his teacher Paul Rudolph and his college friend Stanley Tigerman, both of whom he met when studying architecture in the USA, and ultimately Louis I. Kahn.

Focus: Contemporary Positions

Many of today's protagonists were students, assistants or companions of Muzharul Islam and in recent decades they have formed an independent architecture scene that carries the societal and architectural concerns of their predecessors forwards in a contemporary way. Even though figures like Shamsul Wares, Nahas Khalil, Saif Ul Haque, Kashef Chowdhury, Eshan Khan and Marina Tabassum define individual focal points with their spatial statements usually made from brick and exposed concrete, they are acutely interconnected as a community in a lively professional exchange. Again and again, it is this loose group who, despite dynamic global pressure to develop, collectively stand up for architectural values and for an awareness of their own culture. In addition to their impressively built works, their teaching and mediation also constitute an integral part of this extraordinary commitment on different socially relevant levels. These developments are of global significance, in the sense that in nations confronted with sharply rising economic growth rates in a very short space of time, an exploitation of resources, minorities and the poor populace often ensues. Thanks to the architects, the quality of life experienced by the individual in mega-cities or the impoverished rural population remains in focus and is continually improved via scientific research.

Bengal Stream

The exhibition does not present a romantically glorified view of Bangladesh's architectural development; instead, this exhibition has arisen from a wish to learn more about the architectural approach to substantial questions: What does it take to allow good architectural spaces to emerge? What materials make sense where and for which purposes? How can these have an effect? How can natural illumination and ventilation provide added value, not just in an economic sense, but also in terms of design? Here, it becomes clear that pioneering architecture is based on universally valid architectural elements, such as light, space and proportion, regardless of site-specific limitations. **Bengal Stream** offers an invitation to go on a journey and to see one's own culture in a new way via discovery of another.

introduction of the exhibition in S AM Swiss Architecture Museum, by Niklaus Graber, Andreas Ruby et Viviane Ehrensberger, co-curators.

Bengal Stream
exhibition curated by Niklaus Graber, Andreas Ruby and Viviane Ehrensberger, produced by the **SAM** Swiss Architecture Museum in collaboration with the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements.

adaptation of the exhibition in Bordeaux
arc en rêve centre d'architecture
Francine Fort, general director

for the layout design
Michel Jacques, architecte, artistic director
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Since 1981 arc en rêve centre d'architecture has elaborated a cultural awareness-building strategy focusing on contemporary architecture and extending into city planning, landscape design, aimed at broadening perceptions of a changing world. Its internationally recognised programme features exhibitions, lectures, public discussions, publications, workshops for children, seminars for adults, visits to buildings, city tours, and planning experiments.

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