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The Role of Biennale as an Aid to Explore and Conserve the Architectural Realm- The Case of Kochi Muziris Biennale

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Abstract: A Biennale, also known as a biennial or biennial art exhibition, is a large-scale international art event held every two years. It brings together artists, curators, and art enthusiasts from around the world to showcase a diverse range of contemporary artworks and engage in critical discourse. Biennales foster a vibrant exchange of ideas and dialogue within the architectural realm. Biennales also play a crucial role in representing and celebrating cultural diversity in architecture. These events important questions about the role of architecture in society, sustainability, urbanism, and other relevant topics. Hosting a biennale can spur urban regeneration and revitalization efforts in the host city or site. Biennales often take advantage of existing buildings or historical structures within the host site. Adaptive reuse of these structures for the exhibition can breathe new life into underutilized or neglected spaces. Biennales provide an opportunity for architectural interventions within the host site. Kochi Muziris Biennale played a crucial role in revitalizing historic spaces and heritage buildings in Kochi. Many of the biennale venues are repurposed historic structures that were once neglected or underutilized. The event has breathed new life into these spaces by transforming them into temporary exhibition venues. This paper aims to discuss the role of Kochi Muziris Biennale in the realm of architecture. The study is majorly based on literature reviews from secondary data.

Keywords: Biennale, heritage, conservation

INTRODUCTION

The origins of biennales can be traced back to the late 19th century when the Venice Biennale was established in 1895. It was initially designed to showcase Italian art, but it soon evolved into an international platform for artistic exchange and cultural diplomacy. Since then, biennales have emerged in various cities worldwide, each with its own unique character and thematic focus. Biennales have a significant impact on the art world, both locally and globally. They provide a platform for artists to showcase their works to a wide audience, promoting cultural exchange and fostering international dialogue. Biennales often attract art collectors, gallerists, museum professionals, and critics, leading to exposure and career opportunities for participating artists. The events also contribute to the cultural and economic development of the host city, attracting tourism, stimulating the local art scene, and promoting cultural tourism.

Moreover, biennales have a transformative role in shaping contemporary art practices and architecture. The exhibitions often reflect the current sociopolitical climate and address pressing global issues. They serve as a space for experimentation, pushing the boundaries of traditional art forms and exploring new artistic mediums and concepts. Biennales often feature interdisciplinary collaborations, blurring the lines between visual arts, performance, installation, technology, and architecture.

In the realm of architecture, Biennales have emerged as influential platforms for architectural discourse, experimentation, and the exploration of critical issues facing the built environment by bringing together artists, architects, designers, and thinkers from around the world. It serves as a meeting point for architects and design professionals from diverse cultural, geographical, and disciplinary backgrounds. Through exhibitions, installations, lectures, and symposiums, the Biennale provides a space for cross-pollination of ideas, collaboration, and the sharing of knowledge. This exchange of perspectives often leads to the emergence of innovative architectural concepts and approaches that challenge conventional norms.

Kochi Muziris Biennale

The Kochi-Muziris Biennale is a transformative and internationally acclaimed contemporary art exhibition held in Kochi, Kerala, India. Launched in 2012, it has quickly gained recognition as one of the most significant biennales in the world. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale stands out for its emphasis on engaging with the local context and the rich cultural heritage of Kochi. It takes place across various venues, including historic buildings, warehouses, and public spaces, creating a unique backdrop for the artworks. This site-specific approach blurs the boundaries between art and everyday life, enhancing the immersive experience for visitors. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale has had a notable impact on the field of architecture, both in terms of showcasing architectural installations and influencing the built environment in Kochi. These installations challenge traditional notions of space, materiality, and functionality, pushing the boundaries of architectural practice and inspiring new approaches to design. The contribution of Kochi Muziris Biennale in the architecture realm is further discussed below.

A) Biennale as a Catalyst for Architectural Experimentation.

The Biennale also acts as a catalyst for architectural experimentation. It encourages architects to think beyond their usual design processes and explore unconventional ideas, materials, and technologies. Architectural biennials perform as periodical discussion platforms, which perform as an alternative space for the criticism and documentation of the current issues of architectural production and its most dire problems through a selection of works under a certain theme. The works exhibited at the biennial use different tools of narration in various disciplinary bases in addition to architecture itself, and therefore create an environment for generating content and values with multiple inputs for discussions as well as concepts defining the architectural outcome. (M. Ebru Erdonmez Dincer, 2020)



Figure 1(left): Side elevation of Pavilion of Hope

Figure 2: Front elevation of Pavilion of Hope. Source: (Cohen, 2017)

The pavilion of Hope is built to hold cinema screenings, dance performances, lectures, and art workshops. Its rising frame, walls constructed of construction waste, enormous, winged windows, and cross ventilation that brings in lots of light and breeze make this temporary theatre stand out. The design investigates how to have a smaller environmental impact by recycling and reusing materials. Through elements like the changing of spaces, gathering courts, festivities, tactile sensations, historic structures, and typologies, the space aims to generate a distinctive atmosphere of cultural rootedness. They evoke subliminal images such as the kalarithara, the 'uru' supported on poles, the muttam, a temporary sports exhibition, etc., which evoke references to the past. The pavilion's ceiling is intended to be a moving installation. Reclaimed wood and steel are used in the construction of the roof trusses. An intriguing installation made of used sarees collected from the local population is entwined with the trusses to provide a constantly shifting pattern of light and colour. Recycling-friendly materials are used in the design. Thus, the design is made up of a variety of tactile components. The exterior wall is made of "debris," or scrap materials, including earth that was scraped up from the construction site and broken brick bats, stones, and other debris. The floor's rakings are completed with a mixture of sand and lime, giving it a very rustic appearance. Areca-nut planks make up the makeshift wooden galleries on the back.

B) Biennale as a Platform to address societal issues through architecture.

The Biennale has become a critical platform for addressing pressing societal issues through architecture. Many Biennales focus on themes that are relevant to contemporary society, such as climate change, social inequality, urbanization, and cultural identity. The Biennale showcases these proposals, raising awareness and inspiring public discourse on topics that impact our cities and communities.



Figure 3(left): wire formation (2018) by Sounak Das explores dualism; tangled electrical wires are a hazard and reflection of faulty urban planning yet the patterns they create enable a romantic eye to find beauty in the mess. Figure 4(right): 'Belonged to' by Siddharth Shil(2018) displays four abandoned bathroom stalls using locally sourced junk and bright graffiti-inspired text to communicate a personal fiction of being an outsider. Source: (Achari, 2019)

C) Conservation of Heritage Structures

One of the major impacts of the Biennale is the restoration and adaptive reuse of heritage structures. Many dilapidated and underutilized buildings in Kochi have been transformed into exhibition spaces and cultural hubs for the Biennale. This has not only preserved the architectural integrity of these structures but also created a platform for showcasing contemporary art within a historical context. The Biennale has brought attention to the architectural significance of these buildings, prompting efforts to conserve and restore them.

Moreover, the Biennale has raised awareness about the importance of heritage conservation among the public and authorities. The event has shed light on the cultural and historical value of heritage architecture, leading to increased efforts to protect and preserve these structures. It has encouraged discussions on adaptive reuse, sustainable restoration practices, and the role of heritage architecture in urban development.

Aspinwall House

Built in the late 19th century, Aspinwall House was initially established as a trading post by the British East India Company. The architecture of the building reflects the influence of the colonial period, characterized by a fusion of European and local architectural styles. The structure boasts a prominent façade with imposing columns, arched windows, and a grand entrance that exudes a sense of grandeur and stateliness. Major renovation works were done in Aspinwall House when the same was transformed into an exhibition space during the Biennale.

Layout: The building follows a symmetrical layout, with a central courtyard that serves as a focal point. The courtyard is surrounded by verandas adorned with elegant wooden balustrades, reflecting the prevalent architectural style of the time. These verandas provide shade and shelter from the tropical climate, while also serving as transitional spaces that connect the interior and exterior areas of the house. The presence of the garden not only adds aesthetic appeal but also serves as a nod to the British colonial tradition of incorporating gardens into architectural designs.

Roof: One of the notable features of Aspinwall House is its roof, which showcases a combination of European and Indian architectural elements. The pitched roof with clay tiles is reminiscent of traditional Kerala architecture, ensuring efficient rainwater drainage and withstanding the monsoon rains that are characteristic of the region. The roof is adorned with decorative elements, such as finials and terracotta sculptures, adding a touch of grandeur to the structure.

Interior: The interiors of Aspinwall House are equally captivating. The spacious rooms feature high ceilings, large windows, and ornate plasterwork, reflecting the architectural preferences of the time. The use of teak wood for the flooring, doors, and window frames adds warmth and richness to the interiors, while also showcasing the craftsmanship and natural resources abundant in the region.

The architectural significance of Aspinwall House lies not only in its physical features but also in its historical context. As a remnant of the colonial period, the building stands as a reminder of the cultural exchanges and reflects the assimilation of different architectural styles, representing the cross-cultural interactions between the European colonizers and the local communities.



Figure 5(left): Entrance of Aspinwall House featuring the sloping roof with Mangalore tiles, deep eaves and semi-circular arches. Figure 6(right): The sea-facing facade of Aspinwall House. Source: (MASTERS, 2017)

KVN Arcade

The building originally is a Jew property, which was later bought by a Keralite. The building is used as a pepper godown, and during the Biennale season, it becomes an exhibition space for displaying artwork. The structure was built around 1900. The building has a direct entry from the street. It houses low-height rooms on either side of a narrow open-to-sky corridor. The spaces used for the exhibition are large, high-ceiling spaces. The building has undergone a few changes like cement and flooring, installation of electrical and lighting fixtures, etc. The roof is made of wooden truss with clay tiles.



Figure 7 (left): entrance of KVN Arcade. Figure 8(right): exhibition spaces in corridor. Source: (Niharika.K.R, 2019)

D) Conservation of Traditional Architectural Practices

The Biennale's engagement with heritage sites and buildings has also created opportunities for local communities and artisans. Traditional craftsmanship and skills are being revived and celebrated through collaborations with artists and architects. This has not only empowered local communities but also contributed to the sustainability of traditional architectural practices.



Figure 9(left): Installation of BHUMI paying homage to the legacy of traditional crafts, indigenous practices, and agricultural ways in Thakurgaon, Bangladesh., Figure 10(right): Improvise (2022), Bamboo, coir, pandanus leaves and panambu at Aspinwall House. Source: (Foundation, n.d.)

David Hall

Originally built in the 17th century as a residence for Dutch officials, it later served as the residence of David Koder, a prominent businessman in the early 20th century. David Hall is another example of heritage conservation as a part of the Biennale.

Exterior: The architecture of David Hall reflects the influence of Dutch and Portuguese styles, with its elegant arches, gabled roofs, and prominent use of wood. The exterior of David Hall showcases the typical characteristics of Dutch architecture, with its white-washed walls and large windows. The gabled roof, covered in red clay tiles, adds a touch of charm and protection from the monsoon rains. The intricate wooden carvings on the eaves and windows exhibit the skilled craftsmanship of the era.

Layout and Interior: The building features a central courtyard surrounded by galleries and rooms. The courtyard, known as the "nadumuttam," serves as the heart of the building and is designed to allow natural light and ventilation. The wooden ceilings, often intricately carved, depict mythological scenes, floral patterns, and geometric designs. The use of teak wood in the flooring and furniture adds a touch of warmth and richness to the space.



Figure 11 (left): Exterior view of David Hall

Figure 12 (right): Interior view of the David Hall
(keralatourism.org, n.d.)

Source:

Pepper House

Pepper House is a fascinating example of adaptive reuse and contemporary architectural design. Formerly a dilapidated spice warehouse, it has been transformed into a vibrant cultural space and gallery.

Exterior: The exterior of Pepper House showcases a classic Kerala architectural style known as "nalukettu," which translates to "four blocks." This style is characterized by a courtyard surrounded by four wings, each with sloping roofs and intricately carved wooden elements. The main entrance of Pepper House features a traditional "tharavadu" doorway, which is adorned with detailed wood carvings showcasing motifs inspired by local culture and mythology. This ornate doorway serves as a testament to the craftsmanship of the time and sets the tone for the visual richness that awaits within the building.

Layout: The courtyard serves as a central gathering space, allowing natural light and ventilation to permeate the building while creating a sense of openness and harmony.

Interior: The high ceilings, exposed wooden beams, and polished hardwood floors add to the building's character and provide a sense of grandeur. The interior spaces are versatile and flexible, providing an ideal setting for various art exhibitions, performances, and events. The spacious galleries with high ceilings provide a perfect backdrop for displaying artwork. The use of neutral tones and clean lines allow the focus to remain on the exhibited pieces.

New Additions: The renovation introduced modern amenities and infrastructure without compromising the historical integrity of the building. Large windows were added to allow natural light to flood the interior spaces, creating a warm and inviting ambiance. The use of glass and steel in strategic areas provides a striking contrast to the traditional elements, adding a touch of modernity to the overall design.



Figure 13(left): Exterior view of Pepper House Figure 14(middle): Interior view of Pepper House exhibiting the traditional wooden post beam structure Figure 15(right): Courtyard of Pepper house in nadumuttam style. Source: (Siji, n.d.)

E) Urban Regeneration

In addition to its influence on the architectural profession, the Biennale profoundly impacts the host cities. These events attract a significant number of visitors, including architects, artists, academics, students, and the public. The influx of visitors stimulates local economies, boosts tourism, and generates cultural exchange. Host cities often seize the opportunity to revitalize urban areas, renovate existing buildings, and create new cultural infrastructure to accommodate the Biennale and its visitors. This process of urban regeneration can have a lasting impact on the city's architectural and cultural landscape.

The Kochi Biennale Foundation has rejuvenated and restored cultural tourism in Kerala (Krishnamachari & Komu 2012, 29). The regeneration of a city is also measured by the number of jobs an event can create (Baniopoulo 2000; Shin 2010, 406). The Biennale Foundation employed one hundred and eighty-two people during its tenure which included both permanent and temporary employees including volunteers (KPMG 2014) who not only received economic benefits but also social and cultural profit.

Another example of regeneration is the Madhavan Nayar Foundation (dedicated to local arts and crafts) on the outskirts of Kochi, which went through a facelift before the biennale opened in 2012 (Vyloor 2014).

Jew Town

Jew Town Road in Kochi, Kerala, is renowned for its rich architectural heritage. The street is lined with buildings that showcase a blend of Dutch, Portuguese, and traditional Kerala architectural styles. The structures feature charming sloping roofs, ornate wooden balconies, and intricate carvings on the facades. The use of vibrant colors, such as blue and yellow, adds to the visual appeal of the buildings. The architecture of Jew Town Road reflects the multicultural history of the area and stands as a testimony to the coexistence of different cultures and influences in Kochi's past.

One of the notable impacts of the biennale on Jew Town is its role in revitalizing the neighborhood. The influx of tourists and art enthusiasts has brought renewed attention to the area, creating a vibrant atmosphere, and revitalizing the local businesses. The once-quiet streets of Jew Town now bustle with activity, with art galleries, shops, cafes, and restaurants experiencing increased patronage. The biennale has acted as a catalyst for the restoration and preservation of the historic buildings in Jew Town. As the neighborhood gained prominence through the biennale, there has been a renewed focus on the conservation of architectural heritage. Efforts have been made to restore and maintain the historical structures, preserving their unique charm and cultural significance. This has not only enhanced the aesthetic appeal of Jew Town but has also ensured the preservation of its historical legacy for future generations.



Figure 16(left): A traditional Jewish house superimposed by a gable roof Figure 17(right): Partially ruined balcony in a home on Jew Street. Source: (Murali, n.d.)

CONCLUSION:

Kochi-Muziris Biennale has had a significant impact on architecture by promoting architectural innovation, revitalizing historic spaces, fostering dialogue between art and architecture, and influencing the built environment in Kochi. The inclusion of architectural installations in the biennale, the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings, and the interdisciplinary collaborations between architects and artists have contributed to the advancement of architectural practices and the exploration of new design possibilities. The event has sparked discussions about sustainable design, cultural preservation, and the integration of art and architecture, shaping the way we perceive and interact with the built environment.

The impact of the Biennale extends beyond the duration of the event itself. It serves as a source of inspiration for architects worldwide, shaping the direction of architectural practice for years to come. The ideas, debates, and collaborations that emerge from the Biennale continue to influence architectural discourse, academic research, and design education. Architects often incorporate the lessons learned and the innovative approaches witnessed at the Biennale into their projects, pushing the boundaries of what is possible in architecture.

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