

Launch of the book “The structure: works of Mahendra Raj”, India International Centre, New Delhi, 15 March 2016 Address of Dr. Linus von Castelmur, Ambassador of Switzerland to India

Dear Mahendra Raj, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends,

1. It's a privilege to be invited to celebrate with all of you the presentation of an essential book tonight. I should like to congratulate Vandini Mehta, Rohit Raj Mehndiratta and Ariel Huber as well as Park Books for publishing this remarkable work.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is not just another coffee table book! “The structure” is a scientific monograph, the sum of a life dedicated to top-notch engineering. This book is an extraordinary testimony of the life-long passion of Mahendra Raj for reliable technical solutions that fit human aspirations, from functionality to the quest for beauty and harmony. What this book showcases is humanistic engineering at its best and for that I would like to pay tribute to the great master of engineering Mahendra Raj.

2. You may legitimately ask yourself: Why is the Swiss ambassador on the dais? First of all, one of the co-authors and co-editors, our friend Ariel Huber present today, is Swiss and so is the publisher, Park Books, located in Zurich. This is not a coincidence. But the connections go further. It is true, as a diplomat, as a layman, I cannot add any expert value in the field of engineering, architecture and urban planning. As a citizen and amateur I am however very much interested in these questions, and also institutionally involved through the programmes of my embassy. In fact, I reckon that Switzerland has a lot to offer when it comes to urban planning, smart transport and engineering solutions, water and sewage treatment, renewable energy, low-energy consumption systems but also education of the citizen-consumer. Indeed, I see a perfect match between Swiss technology, intelligent systems and citizen's behavioral practices and the various needs and aspirations of India. In many ways, Swiss cities – irrespective of their size – are smart cities and we are eager to share our experiences with you.

For this reason, already in 2013, we launched a programme on architecture, design and engineering and I vividly remember a lively public debate between Mahendra Raj and his Swiss colleague Daniel Meyer on the essential practice of a structural engineer! As some of you know, the embassy organized several exhibitions on architecture, i.a. one on Studio Mumbai/Bijoy Jains practice, another on Le Corbusier and his use of photography. We had exciting discussions on Re-centering Delhi around the Yamuna, proposed by architects and urban planners Pankaj Vir Gupta and Inaki Alday, a conference by architects Rahul Mehrotra, William Curtis and Alfredo Brillembourg on the topic “The journey continues – from Le Corbusier's Chandigarh to future smart habitat”, and many more such events. So, both personally and institutionally, I am committed to an open exchange on the topics of urban planning, architecture and engineering in order to promote highly relevant Indo-Swiss cooperation in these fields.

3. Ladies and gentlemen, with your permission, I would like to continue by making three points: one on citizen's involvement in the planning and building process, one on the apparent opposition between tradition and innovation and a final point on the necessity of maintaining and preserving a nation's heritage buildings.

In urban planning, we need experts. But, having good professionals is not enough. Urban planners cannot work in isolation from society. For sustainable projects one would also have to consider three stakeholder groups:

- the role the central state, state and municipal authorities are playing in the planning and construction process through the regulatory framework, the authorization procedures as well as public funding;
- the role of developers, financiers and bankers – they are the providers of money, they are running financially driven real estate projects;
- and finally the role and the needs of civil society in the planning and building process, at a local and regional level.

The most powerful of the three groups are undoubtedly the developers, financiers and bankers, but for me, the citizens are (or ought to be) the most important stakeholders. Citizens have to become more involved in urban planning, neighborhood policies have to be rooted in the common needs and desires of citizens living together. The democratic *polis* of the 21st century needs activist citizens who talk to other citizens, who are involved in a permanent dialogue with the authorities, promoters as well as architects and planners. Reinventing the urban space and reshaping the city is a task for all. Active participation is key if we want to build not only technologically smart, but also citizen-friendly cities.

4. My second point turns around what is often seen as an opposition between tradition and innovation: In browsing through the book I was amazed by the kind of functionality, forms and solutions Mahendra Raj is developing in tandem with the architects he was working with. Highly innovative solutions come in the shape of contextually and culturally sensitive forms. This is contemporary Indian engineering, rooted in centuries of Indian building traditions, from Ellora to Mandu, from Mahaballipuram to Fatehpur Sikri... Modernity and tradition are reconciled, Mahendra Raj and his architect friends never indulge in looking for modernity in sake of modernity nor do they plagiarize historic buildings. He and his fellow architects understand and care about the local context, the climate, the glaring light, the harshness of the onslaught of the monsoon, the cultural expectations and requirements and they adapt these factors, transcending them into a powerful new synthesis. That truly is the art of great architects and engineers!

5. Finally let me quickly touch upon my third point: maintenance, preservation and conservation of the built environment. In a rapidly urbanizing context of thousands of young and often uneducated people moving to cities, the built environment comes under pressure. New spaces, new habitat and new factories and offices have to be built, sometimes older constructions have to be demolished. Certainly, not all of the built environment is worth maintaining and preserving, but some of it definitely is. This is as true for temples of the 11th century, mosques and caravanserais of the 15th century, as well as some factories, exhibition halls, universities and cinemas of the 20th century. As the Swiss ambassador, admiring Le Corbusier's legacy in Chandigarh and Ahmedabad, awareness-building about the important modernist building heritage of India is close to my heart. Modernist buildings by Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn, Joseph Allen Stein, Charles Correa, Kanvinde+Rai, Balkrishna V. Doshi and many more have marked the face of newly independent India. I express my hopes that books like the one we are celebrating tonight, that exhibitions and discussions among urban planners, architects and interested citizens will open the eyes of wider Indian audiences about these treasures of 20th century architecture. I hope that they also provide new inputs leading eventually to a better understanding for much needed conservation measures in order to maintain these iconic buildings, an essential part of the Indian national heritage of the 20th century.

Ladies and gentlemen, in concluding, Switzerland is proud to partner with India in the area of urban planning and conservation. Once again, let me applaud Mahendra Raj, the great engineer, the great humanist and the citizen of the world! And cheers to this exquisite book on the work of a lifetime!