

Hall of Nations- Loss of a 20c icon



ICOMOS India and its National Scientific Committee on 20th Century Heritage (NSC20C), is deeply shocked and concerned at the recent demolition of 'The Hall of Nations Complex', a part of Pragati Maidan, a permanent exhibition venue in New Delhi, since it did not fall under the 'listed' and thereby 'protected heritage' of the country. The criteria of the buildings being 60 years old or more to fall under the ambit of protection seems an arbitrary number as most modern and twentieth century buildings were built after 1947, the year marking India's independence and thus most buildings would not qualify for legal protection, being short of the 'magic number'. A large repository of India's modern heritage would thus be vulnerable to demolition decisions and face a similar fate as the Hall of Nations!

NSC20C also prepared a Heritage Alert proposal in support of deferring the demolition to be circulated in collaboration with ISC20c, Getty Conservation Institute, DOCOMOMO international. However, it was doing so, completely oblivious to the ongoing silent massacre of one of the icons of modern heritage in the darkness of the night of April 23, 2017!

The Complex, designed by the celebrated Indian Modernist, Raj Rewal, and the eminent Structural Engineer, Mahendra Raj, comprised two monumental structures, the 'Hall of Nations' and the 'Hall of Industries', connected at the mezzanine level and so grouped to enclose a space for open-air exhibits. Built in 1972 for India's first International Trade Fair, Asia 72, an event that was meant to celebrate 25 years of India's Independence and showcase to the world the nation's march towards modernity and industrial achievements.

The Complex was of immense significance as the largest cast-in-situ concrete space frame structure in the world and the first of its kind. The Hall of Nations Complex was a unique modernist icon that showcased the nation's prowess in structural engineering, and more so its ability to overcome the then prevailing constraints of technology and economy. The design also took care of the need for sufficient natural lighting as well as blocking harsh sun of the NW plains of India. The Complex, thus, is an acknowledged symbol of 20th century India's self-sufficiency, technological advancement and an important landmark in the evolution of Modern Indian Architecture a source of inspiration to students and practitioners in the design and engineering professions across the world.

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This demolition endorses a sheer lack of recognition and thereby protection awarded to modern heritage in the country. Despite several pleas having been made to local authorities (such as Delhi's Heritage Conservation Committee and the Urban Arts Commission) through various individuals, institutions and agencies to recognize and protect the Hall of Nations Complex, all efforts served little purpose before the Delhi High Court, and the 'Indian Trade Promotion Council' (ITPC), an agency of the Government of India's 'Ministry of Commerce and Industry', which found the buildings to be '**obsolete**' with plans to revamp the entire area into a *state-of-the-art Convention-cum-Exhibition Centre, including hotels and underground parking*. Efforts to draw global attention to the iconic exhibition structure were also upfront. Two cases to cite are: The 2016 exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, Paris, showcasing, with numerous models, the technology and large span exhibition spaces in modernizing India; followed by an application in 2017 for nomination of the Hall of Nations Complex to the World Monuments Fund (WMF) Watch list. In addition, some legal cases seeking stay of its impending demolition were filed. A case was also filed against the Heritage Conservation Committee for not performing as per its mandate of notifying buildings for protection. Forced into a corner, the Heritage Conservation Committee has taken a position that a building has to be at least 60 years old to be notified as 20 C Heritage building. The implications of this decision by the HCC are significant. The setting of 60 years as a limit for heritage status, in fact removes the bulk of significant 20 C buildings from consideration, and in effect leaves them completely unprotected. On the contrary it is with the initiative of Government of India, Ministry of Culture that has led *Chandigarh - The Architectural and Urban Works of Le Corbusier* (1952) to be placed on the Tentative List of UNESCO World Heritage, as well as the *Bahai Temple* (1982) , both representing Modern heritage, and relatively recent. So the arbitrary nature of the Heritage Committee for a limit of 60 years is in contravention of its own stance.

It is not for the first time that 20c heritage was under threat in the world; however the path chosen shows little value for recent heritage. There are numerous examples where 20c heritage associated with collective public memory, exhibiting cultural exchange and technology advancement utilizing indigenous material and methods of building have not only been protected and also awarded national and even world heritage status. Two examples mentioned in the Heritage Alert proposal prepared by the NSC20C of ICOMOS India are the **Philippines International Convention Center (PICC)**, designed by Leandro Locsin, known for his use of concrete. PICC was built during 1974-1976, contemporaneously with the Hall of Nations, and was also completed in a similar short time span of 23 months. By 1985 the place had fallen into a state of disrepair. A landmark decision, however, was taken to go in for renovation, which was completed in 1996. Likewise **Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum** in New York is a classic case where the age of the building was not the criteria for listing and protection. Rather, the technological and material synthesis of its unique iconic concrete spiral forms was the underlying basis of its restoration. Both these examples are pertinent to the Hall of Nations in terms of their significance and values—material and construction technologies and above all that age is not the determining factor for protecting 20c heritage!

ICOMOS India and its National Scientific Committee on 20th Century Heritage deeply anguished at this incident seeks to:

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- a) Urge international and national support for listing and notification of 20c buildings, sites and ensembles (especially post 1947) through a 20c register.
 - b) Grade and designate heritage status to the identified buildings, sites and ensembles based on established criteria such as values and significance as compared to age,
 - c) Request statutory protection from the state governments as well as amendments in current listing processes where it concerns 20c modern heritage,
 - d) Request for a national committee on 20c heritage to monitor all developments, interventions proposed for 20c heritage.
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