

Sofia Karim's architecture at the “hinterlands of human experience”

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Sofia Karim is an architect and activist known for her campaign work for political prisoners in Bangladesh and India. Having spent two decades working at elite international architecture practices, Karim left her career in 2018 to develop her own architectural language. Soon after, her uncle, the documentary photographer Shahidul Alam, was imprisoned and tortured. Our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, begins there.

Can you tell me about the arrest of your uncle and the beginning of your activist and artistic practice?

It had only been a few months since I left my career when we got a call from Dhaka, Bangladesh, saying “Uncle’s been taken. He’s been abducted.” We didn’t know where he’d gone.

That night was transformational for my life and for my work . I began to become an activist; but, strangely, architecture came into that night as well. In the day I was very busy writing emails to MPs, yet at night I began to dream about him: I would see the spaces I thought he occupied, trying to build them in my mind so that I could be with him.

My uncle had helped to raise me. I hated the thought of him being alone and tortured, and I began to question, “what happens to space when you are confined?” I would see, involuntarily, spaces that I'd never seen before, which would expand, contract, expand, contract; scaleless, formless. I knew that, at one point, he was made to walk up and down stairs blindfolded with heavy objects on his head. I wondered “what happens to space when you are blindfolded or confined for long periods? Is that what happened? Is that what I'm seeing? I don’t know.”

The campaign went on, and he was released. I became an activist and began to work on campaigns for other political prisoners. But I couldn't find a tradition of architecture being used as a medium for protest; and I had no other tools with which to explore what I wanted to say.

Sometimes when you talk about the art of dissent you have these stereotypical, proselytising images; and, ultimately, one has to be very clear about one's aims: we’re talking about life and

death. But activism itself is also this kind of strange hinterland of human experience, where meaning is not necessarily so direct. Architecture very much lends itself to exploring those regions of pain. And so it became a very natural medium with which to explore those things.

I've been reflecting on what I would consider to be 'architectures of resistance' – the miniature stone-henges used in Hong Kong in 2019, for example. – they're all light, cheap, and inherently temporary. Of course, protest needs to respond to the *now*; but it's also that architecture is slow, expensive, and heavily regulated. I see in your work a yearning for a more permanent architecture of resistance– is that something you are looking towards?

Architecture is a very slow medium, though.

I find it interesting that you are using the word *permanent*. Ironically, it's the less tangible aspects of resistance that I try to explore through those more permanent things.

During the summer of 2021 a friend asked me to design a garden room, something inexpensive, basic. At that point I was working on the case of Father Stan Swamy, an 84 year old Jesuit priest, and one of the BK16 activists I campaigned for in India [the Bhima Koregaon 16 is a group of sixteen Dalit and Adivasi rights campaigners who were wrongfully imprisoned in 2018 for plotting to overthrow the Narendra Modi government; the evidence against them was planted by an unknown actor]. He was in a very bad way physically, and close to death. I was also looking at Renaissance painters like Fra Angelico and the way in which they were using the walled garden as a metaphor for the Virgin Mary; I instinctively began to think about the walled garden as a metaphor for imprisonment. As I was working on the garden room drawings, these three ideas began to co-evolve.

The design became one garden for each of the BK16 members; and a small shelter for Father Stan Swamy. In the model for the shelter I used texts from his bail hearing; and a few weeks later he died. I was distraught, and I began to imagine myself in the shelter with him. Somehow I knew that I had to put a square opening in the shelter's ceiling, just to bring in a parallelogram of light.

Another example is from a kitchen extension in Oxford. There's a red window inside, which is a reference to something called the "Lal Gate" – the red exit gate that all the prisoners I campaign for dream of. The client won't even know why I've put a red window there; but *I* know what it's there for; that at a certain point, red light will begin to enter and shift around that space.

Could you expand on the empathy and shared imagination in your practice?

When writing to Professor Anand Teltumbde, sometimes I'd send him letters that would open into little architectural models as a means for him to escape. And he would write back – one letter is about the meaning of art, if ever there was one. And it comes from people who are in long periods of confinement, on the edges of life and death. I once wrote to Professor Teltumbde about my samosa packet that's becoming part of the permanent collection at the V&A. He said, "myself and my co-accused really liked seeing this Samosa packet." And I thought, "wow – he's shown it to all of them!"

Professor Teltumbde and the rest of the BK16 don't know that I'm reading the memoir of Arun Ferreira, one of their members, called "Colours of the Cage". In that book, he writes about the low door they use to enter the prison. The prison guards won't belittle themselves by stooping; they enter through a taller door. And Arun Ferreira doesn't know, that because he wrote about the prisoners' door, I have a little door in one of my designs that only a child can fit through – or someone in a wheelchair, like Professor Saibaba. He'd be able to fit through without humiliating himself. A child would too, but an adult would have to stoop. And so those forms of sharing I find very heart fulfilling.

And deeply radical, somehow, even in their quietness. It's subversive: a child will love that door, or a person in a wheelchair, because it was designed for them. Yet it was lifted from a place of utter inhumanity.

Yes – because it's about power and who holds that power.

That power – the power to actually *build* buildings – is today often concentrated with the state and wealth. I wonder if, for your architectures of resistance to become actualised, you have to subvert that power. Either you insert these stories without the client's knowledge, or you occupy and appropriate existing structures that the forces of capital no longer see as valuable?

That's really fascinating – you're making me think about something I haven't thought before... I probably had a bit of conflict with doing the red window, for example: am I supposed to disclose my motive to the client and say, "I did this window and it's because of *this*," but I didn't do that – so why not? I think it's because I was scared – that the client would say "No way, I don't want some reference to political prisoners in my kitchen, thank you very much!"

I'll give you another example. Professor Saibaba has written to me that he loves parakeet green; and now parakeet green comes into my work more and more. At the moment, I'm working on a house, and I was thinking, to use a very cheap brick to keep it economical, and make the mortar a parakeet green colour for Professor Saibaba. And at the same time, as an architect, I don't think I've seen that before: where the primary material is very cheap, and it's the mortar that you spend the money on.

Now, do I need to tell the client what the green mortar refers to? I don't know, and I'm scared that if I do they just won't want to build it. So then I have this conflict in myself about disclosure and subversion. And so you've helped me, because you've made me realise that, well, one must *also* be subversive in order to get these things to happen.

It's an element of activism: It's about pushing things to the edge. One example that my uncle gives as a journalist is that, first, you've got be bloody good at your job. And, second, you've got to know to push as far as you can without getting burnt. Because once you get burnt, you've gone too far, and a dead martyr is no good to anyone. It's about pushing to the limits all the time.