

forms, being subsumed under gigantic flashing billboards, writes Edwin Heathcote

The medium is the message." Marshall McLuhan's irresistibly slippery aphorism, coined in 1964, keeps popping back. Architecture was once the medium of public life — cathedrals as bibles in stone, civic buildings as representations of urban identity, houses as expressions of wealth and taste. But the medium is changing. The architecture of culture, once the fundamental expression of human identity, is fading beneath a barrage of LEDs into the immateriality of pixels. Architecture itself, once the ultimate art of three dimensions, is being reduced to two.

The vanguard here is Las Vegas, where architecture has always played second fiddle to branding and, in the process, some of the most memorable images of pop iconography have been created. In one recent landmark, any pretence of an architecture has been stripped away entirely to leave only the representation. Sphere (there is no definite article, this is brand more than building) is a vast dome of LEDs, 112 metres high and clad in 54,000 sq m of lights, an immersive auditorium seating 18,600 spectators.

The enormous glitterball was set to gain a twin in Stratford, east London, but proposals were withdrawn earlier this year after objections from mayor Sadiq Khan and locals anxious (understandably) about light pollution.

There is something deeply unsettling about seeing Sphere illuminated as, for instance, a monstrous eyeball, as often happens in a display of its capabilities. Perhaps this is because it makes manifest that just as we direct our gaze towards the screen, it is watching us too.

There was some surprise recently in London when the immersive "art" attraction, the Outernet on Charing



Above: Las Vegas's Sphere is a vast dome of LEDs. Left: TeamLab's immersive 'Flowers on People' show at Superblue in Miami — Chancan Khanna/Getty, Taylor Coskun/Getty

Cross Road, a free attraction with open walls, announced it had had 6.3mn visitors over the year, an astonishing statistic for a relatively new attraction and half a million more than the vast British Museum a few blocks away, according

to The Art Newspaper. How then were these visitors counted? It was via an AI-powered surveillance system. Never forget that this sort of immersive attraction is really an enormous billboard and some do not just beam ads

at you but may also capture your image or harvest your data.

In the quest for immersiveness, these 2D creations are made to seduce us into thinking we are perceiving depth as opposed to surface. Social media is saturated with images of billboards, featuring astonishing visual effects. The screen on Kuala Lumpur's Pavilion shopping mall beams dazzling animations with effects on the public almost akin to the Lumière brothers' 1896 film of a train arriving at a station, which reputedly scared the audience out of their seats. Others, including billboards in New York's Times Square, Tokyo's Shinjuku and Omotesando districts and London's Piccadilly Circus, have transformed simple screens into immersive "experiences". Seoul has, arguably, gone one better with its Nexen UniverCITY Infinity Wall, a lobby installation which comes through to the street with remarkable animations.

This slow erosion of architecture by media was foreseen in the 1960s by speculative Pop designers and in the 1980s with science fiction. British provocateurs Archigram designed an "Instant City" in the late 1960s, a kit of parts that could be assembled to create megamedia: massive screens, blimps, balloons and canopies, all of which acted as surfaces for projection. It had the capacity to remake a village into Times Square for a few days and then move on. It foreshadowed both the media city and the contemporary pop tour with its vast, truck-borne paraphernalia, a pop-up pop spectacle.

Those projects in turn inspired the Centre Pompidou in Paris, which was originally to have been wrapped in screens and scrolling text à la Jenny Holzer or the Times Square stock-ticker.



A tiger appears to emerge from a Kuala Lumpur shopping mall — Wong Fok Loy/Alamy

The explosion in digital displays and the advances in animation are simultaneously dispensing with interior architecture too. Digital experiences, sometimes the animated works of artists (Van Gogh, David Hockney), have become blockbuster immersive events. They require only black boxes and can be underground, in leftover spaces or now-emptied office blocks, then globally licensed. Artists such as Refik Anadol and teamLab mine a lucrative market in artworks which replace architecture, needing no natural light, no quality of space — only screens.

Superblue in Miami is sited in an anonymous converted food distribution

casinos, theme parks, megamalls, stadium rock spectaculars, are nothing new. That is, to some extent, true. What is, however, new, is that these kinds of architectures were once confined to edgelands, sites by the sides of motorways or in deserts, far from the messy unpredictability of the city.

Now they are coming into the centre, while the city itself, with its generic brands, privately policed BIDs (business improvement districts) and POPS (privately owned public spaces), is being mollified and flattened into an idea of a city.

One of the world's biggest new cultural landmarks, Hong Kong's M+ museum, is defined by its huge exterior billboard: a medium, yes, but also an elision, having its cake and eating it, stealing from the commercialised skyline as if afraid that it will be subsumed if it does not compete.

The night-time city of the mid-20th century with its buzzing lightscape of neons was once only visible after dark, transforming the architecture visible by day into something else. Now the LEDs work all day as well, dazzling and overwhelming. Urban architecture is in danger of becoming a substrate, a screen for display rather than a medium in its own right: not a cityscape in which we are free to interpret and create narratives but one in which we are fed animated stories, scripted spaces, advertising and images seductively designed to be recorded and disseminated.

Our lives are increasingly lived online, subsumed into the screen. The city must be allowed to remain a bastion against that, a place of messy, unscripted humanity and determinedly three-dimensional, a last refuge into the real.

These 2D creations are made to seduce us into thinking we are perceiving depth

warehouse. It looks like a generic shed on a movie backlot but the constantly changing magic happens inside, a garish, nauseating albeit dazzling visual artscape. Its first installation was designed by Es Devlin, queen of the stagy spectacular. In these black boxes, the dematerialisation and alienation are enhanced by visitors whose principal mode of consumption and communication is the screen, so these non-spaces are legitimised by being recorded and viewed second-hand, then disseminated to be seen on other screens. Their authentic life is fundamentally digital. The medium is still the message.

You might argue that the prototypes for these scripted spaces, the



Barbara Kruger's 'Silent Writings' at Outernet in London — Stephen Chung/Alamy



BIS

General Manager

Basel, Switzerland

The mission of the Bank for International Settlements (BIS) is to support central banks' pursuit of monetary and financial stability through international cooperation and to act as a bank for central banks. Our head office is in Basel, Switzerland, and we have two representative offices, in Hong Kong SAR and in Mexico City, as well as Innovation Hub Centres around the world.

We are seeking a highly qualified and visionary leader to join us as the General Manager. As the chief executive officer of the BIS, you will work closely with the Board of Directors to determine the Bank's strategic and policy direction and lead its implementation. You will represent the BIS at the highest level in the global central banking and financial community, hosting important meetings and engaging with key stakeholders. You will also represent the Bank at key international forums such as the G20. This is an exceptional opportunity to contribute to the pursuit of monetary and financial stability through international cooperation.

You will lead the Bank's senior management team, to ensure the effective day-to-day management of operations and foster a positive, diverse and inclusive working culture through strong inspirational leadership. You will ensure that the BIS remains at the forefront of the central banking community in areas such as research, risk management and financial innovation by chairing the Bank's Executive Committee and providing intellectual leadership to all workstreams within the institution.

The successful candidate will:

- have extensive experience in central banking at the highest levels, in particular as Governor, and/or experience in an international financial organisation at the highest levels;
- be a visionary leader with a proven track record of setting and implementing strategy and transformation;
- be fully familiar with issues faced by the global central banking, financial stability and financial supervisory/regulatory community;
- possess analytical skills and in-depth knowledge of macroeconomic issues; and
- have excellent interpersonal, diplomatic, collaborative and influencing skills and the ability to provide a collegial atmosphere to stakeholders and colleagues.

The BIS is fully committed to equal opportunity employment and strives for diversity among its staff.

The Bank for International Settlements (BIS)

Promoting global monetary and financial stability through international cooperation

To find out more, visit www.bis.org/careers

Deadline for applications:

14 June 2024

Puzzle game's beguiling paper chase

GAMING

Paper Trail

PC, PlayStation 4 and 5, Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch and Netflix Games

★★★★

Chris Allnutt

Paige's parents don't want her to go to university. But Paige doesn't want to live on the stormy coast forever, eating boiled eels and going to bed when the sun sets. Paige wants to be an astrophysicist. And it is your job, in the beguiling puzzle game *Paper Trail*, to help her get there.

Which is frankly a more difficult task than it has any right to be. Not because of spiralling student loans or campus protests, but because Paige lives at some remove from her planned place of study and the journey is impeded at every turn by swamps and caves and treetops that simply weren't designed as commuter routes.

Each level in *Paper Trail* is composed of an array of pages (Paige Turner's quest is an example of nominative determinism at its finest), across which you must direct your rosy-cheeked protagonist. But sometimes there are obstacles, and the sheets need to be folded — pulled in from the sides or corners — to reveal elements on the reverse that can help clear a path.

It is a mesmerising experience, thanks to an impossibly dainty soundtrack and the game's cutesy, watercolour styling. Every scene is an interactive artwork, peaceful and wholesome and

all too easy to stare at without ever attempting to make any progress.

Each page packs a great deal of nuance into its diminutive frame, such that solutions seem deceptively simple after you've been obsessively folding and refolding the world like a commuter trying to read a broadsheet newspaper on a crowded train.

The levels aren't the only things that need folding — cutscenes progress by putting together pieces of Paige's past into a coherent image. The effect is of turning the pages of a beautiful book, only the printers keep swapping their orientation around and you're having to tilt your head or work origami on the paper to keep going.

It all adds to the sense of displacement that recurs throughout the world. Paige might seem lost at times, but no more so than the adults around her — a wistful

bunch of lighthouse keepers, frog-hunters and birdwatchers. They speak, despite the intelligible speech bubbles you read on screen, in charmingly garbled soundbites. Their sense of their surroundings is limited, never knowing what lies beyond their little homes and never aspiring to Paige's curiosity. Even her parents appear perplexed at the prospect of living their lives without her.

Your and Paige's endeavours are the remedy to all that inertia. *Paper Trail* is fairly short, but as a result its tricks never overstay their welcome and its protagonist never loses the spring in her step.

The mark of a good puzzle game is one that can make you feel like a fool for just long enough until something clicks and you get to feel like a genius before the next obstacle comes along. And *Paper Trail* has that in spades — well, sheaves.



Paige's parents are perplexed at their rosy-cheeked daughter's desire to broaden her horizons in 'Paper Trail'

Is the 'cult of Modi' losing its lustre?

When India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to Varanasi to file his candidacy for a third term last week, tens of thousands of people waited patiently in scorching heat for a glimpse of him.

Jostling for a view, some balanced precariously atop concrete road dividers, or crowded on to rooftops and balconies. As the sun fell low in the sky, the 73-year-old, dressed in an orange kurta and white vest, appeared and waved from a platform wrapped in orange, the colour of his Bharatiya Janata party. People cheered and lifted their arms to capture the moment on their phones.

"Narendra Modi is the *avatar purush*, an incarnation of deity human form," declares Abhinandan Pathak, a look-alike of the prime minister who is following the real Modi on the campaign trail for a third time. "He will definitely win again handsomely."

Modi bestrides the world's most populous nation with a mass following and a potent political brand, giving him power that few other world leaders can match.

But opposition figures and some independent commentators have seized on initial figures from the six-week election that show turnout is lower than in 2019, speculating the BJP will fall short of Modi's ambitious goal of further increasing its majority in parliament.

They say many ordinary Indians are increasingly focused on day-to-day issues such as soaring food prices and unemployment, not the country's rapid

'Modi's persona is very well crafted, a kind of product – a very well groomed, well chiselled product put on the stage'

growth and rising global stature. If they are right – the results of the six-week poll will be released on June 4 – it would indicate that the Modi wave had peaked.

During a decade in office he has promoted a Hindu-first agenda and reached the homes of hundreds of millions of poor Indians with massive welfare schemes branded in his name. In campaign speeches, he speaks of his vision to make India a developed economy by the time of its centenary in 2047.

Whether performing yoga on the lawn at the UN or attending a vegetarian banquet at the White House, abroad he is courted as the living symbol of India at a time when its geopolitical status is increasingly recognised.

At home, his office presides over a carefully curated image-making operation involving multiple daily changes of clothes or headgear and a robust communications machine. He also enjoys praise from a support network of politicians and businesspeople.

"Modi's persona is very well crafted, a kind of product – a very well groomed, well chiselled product put on the stage," says Nilanjan Mukhopadhyay, author of a Modi biography. "He is performing at every moment; he is one of the most performative leaders in the world."

On the campaign trail, the prime minister is continuing a series of roadshows under the main slogan "Modi's guarantee". Another BJP slogan is "Modi's family", presenting the prime minister as a benevolent paterfamilias.

Indians say one of Modi's most powerful assets is that he is single and childless, making him a symbol of ascetic moral probity in a region known for corrupt political dynasties.

"The head of the family wants to leave a legacy for their heirs," he declared during a recent speech in West Bengal. "Who do I leave anything for? For me, all citizens are my heirs."

Sugata Srinivasaraju, an analyst and author, says Modi "has a halo where the people tend to believe he is selfless... He has nobody to promote."

But Modi's opponents say he has engineered his rise by weakening parliament, the courts, the press and civil society and jailing key opponents, including two state leaders who have been detained ahead of the vote.

Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi's chief minister, recently warned of a need to save India from "dictatorship" after a court granted him bail, but only for the duration of the campaign. His Aam Aadmi party says the corruption case against him is politically motivated.

Ramachandra Guha, a historian of modern India, described in a 2022 essay what he called a "cult of Modi" that he compared both to present-day



Narendra Modi at a rally in the northern city of Varanasi this month. The prime minister has a mass following that few leaders can match. Below: voters queue at a polling station in Ahmedabad, Gujarat
Ritesh Shukla/Getty Images; Prakash Singh/Dloomberg

autocrats like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan and 20th-century dictators such as Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

Critics also say India's 2024 elections are a referendum on whether Indians endorse Modi's model of pro-business, majoritarian strongman rule – or want a return to more traditional parliamentary democracy and India's multicultural, secular values.

Modi arrived on the national scene in 2014 when Manmohan Singh's coalition government, led by the Indian National Congress, was plagued by corruption and criticised as weak on security.

"Modi was seen as an incorruptible and decisive strongman who could boost development, guard India's frontiers and enhance the prestige of Indians globally while subduing inimical forces within," says Mukhopadhyay. "He was successful in convincing a significant section of Indians, especially Hindus, that he was the solution to every problem, the spoken and the unspoken."

This image had been cultivated during Modi's decades-long ascent in his native state of Gujarat. As a young man, he was a *pracharak* or worker for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Hindu nationalist mass movement behind what was to become the BJP.

Shankarsinh Vaghela, who would later become Gujarat's chief minister, remembers the young Modi sported a beard and wore white knickers and a white shirt to stand out from the other *pracharaks*, who were mostly clean-shaven and wore khaki.

From the beginning, Modi "demanded respect", says Vaghela, who later fell out with him. "If someone came and didn't do *namaste* [greeting] to him, he would say, 'Why don't you do

a *namaste*?' Vaghela says. "He was saying, 'I am NaMo – bow to me'."

Yamal Vyas, a BJP spokesman who worked with Modi from 1991, remembers a young man with "absolute clarity of thought". Vyas adds: "He's very clear on decision making... he'll either say yes or no. Not 'we'll see later'."

"He was aiming for the top job and would leave no stone unturned to fuel his ambitions," says Urvish Kothari, a writer and satirist based in Gujarat, who knew Modi before he rose to the state's top political position. "He had a supreme arrogance, even when he was just a party functionary and not holding any position in the government."

Modi became Gujarat's chief minister in 2001 and was in charge the following year when religious violence erupted there. More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed. Inquiries were launched and he was temporarily banned from visiting the US.

But Modi, according to historians and analysts, turned the polarisation in his favour, styling himself as the "King of Hindu hearts" and deploying police to crack down on suspected jihadists.

Modi's body language, including his voice, took on a "distinctly masculine, muscular overtone" during his time as chief minister, political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot writes in his book *Gujarat under Modi*. In speeches, he made reference to his "56-inch chest", and how it would protect the state. Modi courted big business and began hosting regular Gujarat investment summits.

Modi was innovative in his use of technology and social networks. Ahead of a 2012 state election, he held virtual meetings with voters, appearing onstage around the state in hologram form. A TV station that bore his name, NaMo TV, was launched the same year.

While in Gujarat, Jaffrelot writes,

Modi honed the notion that "the people are one and they and their leaders share the same consciousness and collective emotions". Both supporters and critics say this remains part of his appeal.

Mukesh Dalal, a BJP candidate in Surat, Gujarat, uses the word *Modimay*, which roughly translates as "full of Modi" or "fully absorbed in Modi", to describe a nation at one with its leader. India, he says, is "full of Modi's work, and full of the Ram temple" – a reference to the Hindu shrine in Ayodhya

'He had a supreme arrogance, even when he was a party functionary and not holding any position in government'

whose consecration Modi presided over. He later described how Lord Ram addressed him during the ceremony, telling him a golden age had started.

In his decade as prime minister, Modi and his allies, many of whom moved with him from Gujarat to Delhi, have further centralised power around his persona.

Modi began recording monthly radio addresses, dubbed *Mann ki Baat* (roughly "a word from the heart"), that were also available via a NaMo app. In them, Modi addresses Indians directly and takes questions from listeners.

In speeches, Modi orates at high volume and uses simple, sometimes coarse language and wordplay to make points. Whereas past prime ministers moved around in Indian-made Ambassador cars, Modi is often seen in a Range Rover (the company is owned by India's Tata Group) and sometimes makes a point of sitting in the front.

Modi's flair for sharp clothes was first noted in Gujarat, when he wore a short-sleeve version of the trademark Indian men's garment that his former tailor still calls the "Modi kurta". During a 2015 visit by Barack Obama, Modi wore a suit with pinstripes spelling out his full name. It was later auctioned, fetching more than half a million dollars.

The prime minister's social media operation, managed by the BJP and amplified by pro-Modi accounts, further spreads messages and images from the top: sitting in an Indian-made Tejas fighter wearing dark glasses and a green uniform, or holidaying in India's Lakshadweep islands at the height of tensions with Maldives over its election of a pro-China president. Modi generally shuns press conferences and give interviews only under strict conditions, with

his office typically demanding questions in advance and allowing quotations only from a written script afterwards.

His circle includes both political allies and top businesspeople. S Jaishankar, external affairs minister, recently described Modi as a "blessing" who asks for options before making decisions. "He consults, discusses and then takes a call... Never seen a leader like him."

India's richest man, Mukesh Ambani, called him "the greatest global leader of our times" this year. "When you speak, the whole world not only listens but applauds you."

Modi has also enlisted foreign leaders for image-boosting photo opportunities – such as when he took Australia's Prime Minister Anthony Albanese for a spin around the Narendra Modi stadium in Gujarat before a cricket match between the two countries.

Some critics have cringed at the sight of foreign officials stroking the Indian leader's ego, such as US commerce secretary Gina Raimondo, who last year described him as "unbelievable, visionary" possessed of an "indecipherable" commitment to the Indian people.

With the help of allies, even setbacks have been rewritten as triumphs. During the Covid-19 pandemic, millions are believed to have died and millions more lost work as India initially struggled to vaccinate everyone. But the prime minister grew out his beard, cultivating the appearance of a holy man, and his handling of the pandemic has been reframed as masterful.

While Modi refrained from doling out fiscal stimulus – a move his government now boasts of – it repurposed a programme of subsidised food into a free scheme. The programme still provides monthly wheat and rice to more than 800m people. Modi's image appears in the shops that dispense them and on some of the bags. Since 2014, Modi has rolled out or renamed housing, farming and other "prime ministerial" schemes for the poor. "Modi is the leader who provides," says Gilles Verniers, a senior fellow at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research. "Public spending is now a gift from the centre."

Modi also increasingly appears in the role of a holy man. Over the past year, he has presided over rituals with Hindu clerics and led the opening of parliament holding a gold ceremonial sceptre and accompanied by religious leaders.

He prepared for the controversial Ayodhya temple consecration by touring temples across India, sleeping on floors and starting a coconut water fast. In January Modi – the son of a tea seller from a "backward" class – presided over the ceremonial lamp lighting at the shrine, a duty traditionally performed by upper-caste Brahmins.

"Imagine the signal this sends out for castehood in India," says Srinivasaraju. "It looked absolutely revolutionary."

Indians describe Modi as their most powerful leader since Indira Gandhi, who was also the object of a personality cult.

Available data supports the notion that the country prefers strongman leaders. A poll published in February by the Pew Research Center found 85 per cent of Indians supported authoritarian rule – the highest rate of any of the 24 countries surveyed – and Modi has brought the BJP an unprecedented mass following.

However, other factors may sway voters this year, including an economy that is not creating enough jobs. Modi opponents have seized on polarising remarks aimed at Muslims in some campaign speeches, speculating that the BJP is underperforming and feeling insecure.

Voters also have a record of turning on incumbents: Gandhi temporarily lost power to the BJP's predecessor Janata party in 1977, while Singh took over in 2004 after voters threw out Atal Bihari Vajpayee's BJP-led government.

"Indians do not tolerate authoritarianism," insists Ajay Rai, candidate for the I.N.D.I.A. alliance in Varanasi. "Since India's independence, whenever anyone has tried to take control of the country, people have rejected them."

If Modi is feeling such insecurity, he is certainly not showing it, basking in the admiration as Indians flocked in huge numbers to see him. "Modiji has done tremendous development," says Dolly Shah, 25, a student waiting by the roadside to glimpse the prime minister, using the honorific most Indians do when referring to him. "I would vote for him again so that India can develop more. There's no one like him."

Additional reporting by Jyotsna Singh

