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THE RITUALISTIC PATHWAY —FIVE PROJECTS BY CHARLES CORREA

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# The Ritualistic Pathway – Five Projects by Charles Correa

AA EXHIBITION GALLERY 3 NOVEMBER – 18 DECEMBER 1993

Charles Correa received the RIBA Gold Medal in 1984 for a body of work which included houses subtly attuned to climatic conditions, elaborate urban design accommodating disenfranchised urban immigrants, as well as commemorative and institutional buildings. The material for this exhibition of five projects emphasized issues of iconography and the explicit representation of meaning, which began to appear with the Hotel Cidade de Goa, of 1978–82. The exhibition was supported by the British Council, whose Delhi headquarters were prominent among the projects. It was supplemented by a pamphlet of plans with brief commentary by Correa and a lavish 'Portfolio' of photographs and essays. The importance to Correa of this group of buildings may be measured by the appearance of four of them in a recent television documentary on his work.

The title of the exhibition arises from Correa's rendering of the term *pradakshina*: 'a movement through the sacred open-to-sky spaces [of the temples of South India] that lie between [the shrines and gopurams] . . . a ritualistic pathway . . . a pilgrimage . . . towards a sacred centre.' His interest in this pathway derives from the more general concern to reconcile India's traditional culture (Hindu and Muslim) with its participation in political, economic and technological modernity — a programme seen as India's destiny by Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore.

Understanding the issue in terms of ancient and modern testifies to the discontinuity or estrangement, and experience has taught us how very difficult is this intention to fulfil. A proposal for its architectural interpretation was laid out in an earlier exhibition (Bombay, 1986) on the architecture of India, called *Vistara*, of which the Chairman of the Exhibition Committee and author of both the Introduction and the Traditional Section was Correa. The opening paragraphs of his introduction are quoted in the Portfolio entry on the Jawahar Kala Kendra, a new museum in Jaipur. Correa argues that, with the metamorphosis of the myths in history, 'a new area — *vistara* — opens up to our sensibilities . . . expansion outward into space is also, simultaneously, a journey inward into our own selves. Experiencing these expansions, these *vistaras*, heightens our consciousness' (p. 6). The metamorphosis itself is identified as *Manthana*, 'the resulting conflict, tension, churning'.

Correa continues: 'in this churning, it is crucial that we distinguish between a process as basic and structural as a Transformation, and one as superficial as a mere Transfer' (p. 9). For Correa the exemplary case of Transformation in architecture is the Diwan-i-khas in Fatehpur Sikri, where the Mogul emperor Akbar positioned his throne 'at the centre of a *mandala* on a column which clearly represents the mythic axis of the universe' (p. 11). Conversely, the exemplary case of superficial Transfer is Lutyens's Rashtrapati Bhavan at New Delhi: 'a mere transfer of some imagery from Buddhist



Installation in the AA Exhibition Gallery

architecture without any care whatsoever for the profound mythic values from which it sprang.'

According to Correa, therefore, the violent conflicts of historical renewal must be negotiated with care, and the more profound interpretation results in a heightening of consciousness. The profound interpretation depends upon a proper attunement to archaic material and its capacity to sustain our relationship with origins, both temporal and ontological. 'Proper' attunement resides in the distinction between Transfer, the unmediated importation of iconography, and Transformation, a reinterpretation of the issues. With Correa's criteria in mind, we may turn to the exhibition, where the viewer's attention was called to:

a nine-square mandala set in a circular perimeter wall referring to the stupa at Sanchi in the plan of the Vidhan Bhavan (new State Assembly for the Government of Madhya Pradesh),

the high boundary walls making a nine-square mandala in the plan of the Jawahar Kala Kendra (one segment inflected to recall that of Jaipur, where it is located), with each square named after

a plant (two supplied by Correa) and such secondary articulations as a nineteenth-century Jain cosmological map on the inside surface of the dome at the centre of the administrative square devoted to textiles and costumes; as this is an arts museum honouring Nehru, it is perhaps not accidental that the planning within each square derives from the earlier work of Correa himself,

what Correa terms the three 'axes mundi' of the British Council headquarters, which are intended to mark a linear historical regression through the site, celebrating the three most important of India's *Manthanas*: a floor pattern from Lutyens (via the chapel at Anet), a four-quartered garden recalling a Mogul Chahar Bagh, and a Vedic Bindu, carved by Stephen Cox, set over a pool by Correa, the spiral portion of which is possibly a recollection of the Mogul appropriation of the Hindu spiral snake pools at Mandu (*Vistara*, p. 76),

icons invented by Correa attempting to reconcile traditional themes with twentieth-century astrophysics at the Pune Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics: black masonry

(‘the colour of space’), courtyard paving laid according to a fractal pattern, a dome perforated to give constellations, and another mandala — conforming to Correa’s interpretation from the *Vistara* catalogue: ‘its centre is “both *shunya* (nothing) and *bindu* (the source of all energy) — a truly mind-blowing concept, astonishingly similar to the black holes of contemporary physics”’ (p. 8).

Most visitors to the exhibition seem to have regarded these quotations or citations as examples of Transfer (even Kenneth Frampton, in his essay for the portfolio, identifies the *pradakshina* with Le Corbusier’s *promenade architecturale*, although without further comment), whereas the entry of the British Council Headquarters with Howard Hodgkin’s stone mural was regarded as exemplary of Transformation. Is this a judgement which reflects upon the viewers or upon the architecture?

In large measure, the exhibition placed such great emphasis upon the referential aspect of the work that other aspects of meaning — for example, social or ecological issues, construction, the orchestration of ‘background’ sequences — were suppressed. The strategy inhibited proper appreciation of the work, which is often highly successful in just these areas.

It was possible to visit on the same day both this exhibition and that at the RIBA of work from the schools towards the RIBA Silver and Bronze Medals, selected by Daniel Libeskind and Nigel Coates. Obvious differences: the Correa exhibition comprised a selection of recent buildings presented in sumptuous photographs and models, the work of one of the world’s distinguished architects, whilst the second comprised speculative studies with an emphasis upon drawings and analogical models, produced by several students who could not have been born before Correa’s office was already a dozen years old. Correa’s Post-modern ironies, diversions, allusions and complexities arise from an architecture of authority and the integrity of old myths, which the students evidently take it as a requirement scrupulously to avoid. The implication is that the two exhibitions embodied contrary approaches to architecture.

The contrasts between the two exhibitions cannot be written off to a coincidence of gallery schedules in the museum culture of infinite possibilities, nor are the exhibitions usefully dismissed as mere reminders of generational differences or of recent architectural history. With respect to architecture, rather than authors, both exhibitions comprise ‘recent work’, both also make a case of being concerned with meaning, Correa with the reinterpretation of traditional material, the students with the possibilities of creating more implicit contexts centred on their own projects.

Similarly, the question of East and West is more

ambiguous than it perhaps appears. Correa’s assimilation of Western representational procedures is a phenomenon familiar enough throughout the East. More significant are the profound similarities between, say, Western and Indian philosophy, which affect any judgement regarding rupture or reinterpretation of the traditions. Without wishing to discount either the differences or the complexity of the debate on this issue since ancient times, we can say that the similarities arise from the fundamental, ever open issue of accounting for the relation between particular situations and their universal context. This is the issue to which all others may be related.

To the extent that representation provides a mediating structure for this relation, the repertoire in recent Western architecture includes the persistence of formal preoccupations augmented by post-colonial morality, the pleasures of the text and the unfolding of iconography into the nuances of media culture. These strategies have, through sustained attention to the problem of freedom, managed to make clear its limits, and therefore helped to prepare the ground for a renewal of interpretation of the deeper context.

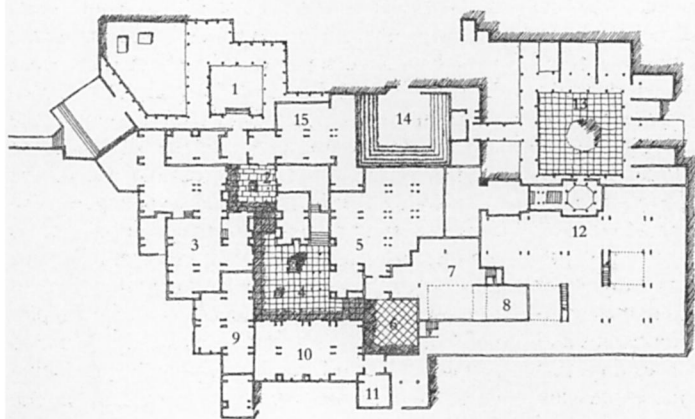
With respect to the buildings of Charles Correa, therefore, the choice is not between the architectural equivalent of Tandoori cooking in Tottenham and some radically different authenticity imprisoned in gods unlike our own (a fantasy detectable in the argument attending Foucault’s conception of a Chinese encyclopaedia). Regrettably or otherwise, we have allowed historical circumstances to present us with issues such as the possible ground for the mutual illumination of, for example, the Aristotelian rendering of temporality and Kala’s dialogue with Mahaveda (the Hindu four-faced god of time and the Great God, respectively), or even the possible necessity of Descartes to a proper understanding of the Upanishads.

For the most part, this sort of issue is ignored, or negotiated at a superficial level of representation (Correa’s justifiable disdain, in the *Vistara* catalogue, regarding the banalities of air-conditioned tower blocks in Islamic countries, originates with the social and architectural vacuity of the originals). Since Francis Bacon, science and technology have been able to pursue their hypotheses and procedures without regard for ontology, however much the regular moral and epistemological queries may seem to require it. Adherents of the market economy have generally taken the same line, in so far as any effort is devoted to the matter, with the result that a fantastic playground is offered to semioticians and cultural anthropologists. Roughly speaking, this playground is what is meant by the expression ‘the real world’; and it has become mainly of academic interest (that is, barely relevant) to acknowledge that traditionally the opposite view prevailed — that the ‘real’ was not the contingent but the eternal.

Accordingly, it is not surprising to see the students pursuing the endless possibilities of the contingent, but it is perhaps not immediately apparent that iconography can be among these possibilities. On this reading, the same problem appears in both exhibitions, whose visual differences help to document the potential scope of the emancipated contingent.

The problem arises in the relation of architecture to language, and the manner in which this problem in turn depends upon the relation of the particular to the universal. If the universal is by definition transcendent, and therefore can be manifest only within the particular, the relationship itself is always open, non-dogmatic. Architecture is, similarly, more permanent (more universal or eternal) than language, which is more volatile, ephemeral and precise (more particular or temporal). This relation has been obscured by conceptions of language which see it as some variety of code (with the emphasis upon quasi-grammatical interactions among linguistic objects, leading, in architecture, to comparisons with the interactions among architectural elements) and by efforts to circumscribe architecture by written discourse, most notably architectural theory. The alternative is to regard architecture and discourse as aspects of a broad representational spectrum whose continuity depends fundamentally upon the differences between, for example, architecture and language: architecture establishes the conditions for the practical life and reflection upon it.

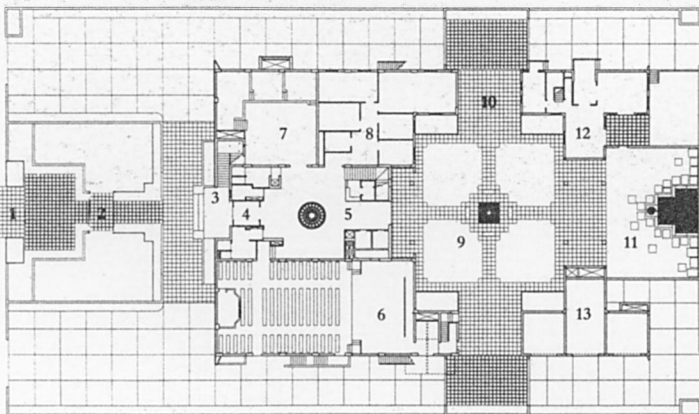
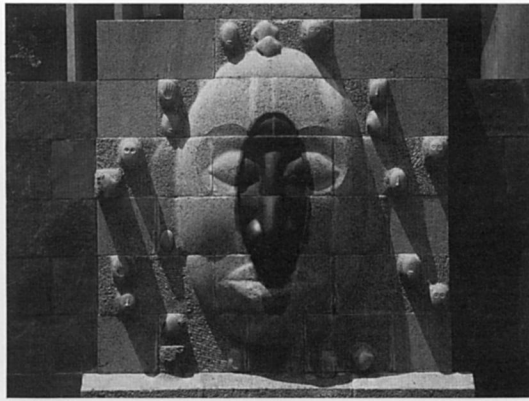
The anti-theoretical stance of much of the student work has the effect of preserving theory as the primary reference, and iconography displays in its very name the degree to which it seeks to pre-describe the behaviour of images (*eikones*) by writing (*graphein*). It is among the lessons of post-modernism that the discontinuity between the laconic space of modernist architecture and iconography from more embodied cultural contexts leaves the iconography stranded, reduced to the status of allusion. Similarly, it would seem that the history of the mandala confirms it as a vehicle of understanding or interpretation before it could be made the basis of an architectural plan — the more the mandala is seen to signify, the less its own pattern can be read literally (the same could be said for Kahn’s possible use of the Sephirothic Tree in the plan of a synagogue). The universality of a religion or the profundity of its temples lies less in their own inherent attributes than in the life of the secular world they seek to illuminate (an issue confused by, for example, Le Corbusier’s effort to ‘make the home a temple’, which effaces the reciprocity by reducing its other half, the temple, to a metaphor). The transformation of tradition into a past susceptible to dogmatic prescription in writing deflects attention from the real source of authority in the openness of the relation between historical conditions and possibilities.



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|----------------------|------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Entrance court    | 5. Temple crafts | 9. Library               | 13. Craft workshops |
| 2. Village courtyard | 6. Shekhawati    | 10. Temporary exhibition | 14. Amphitheatre    |
| 3. Village crafts    | 7. Darbar crafts | 11. Toilets              | 15. Administration  |
| 4. Temple courtyard  | 8. Haveli Zanana | 12. Visual stores        |                     |



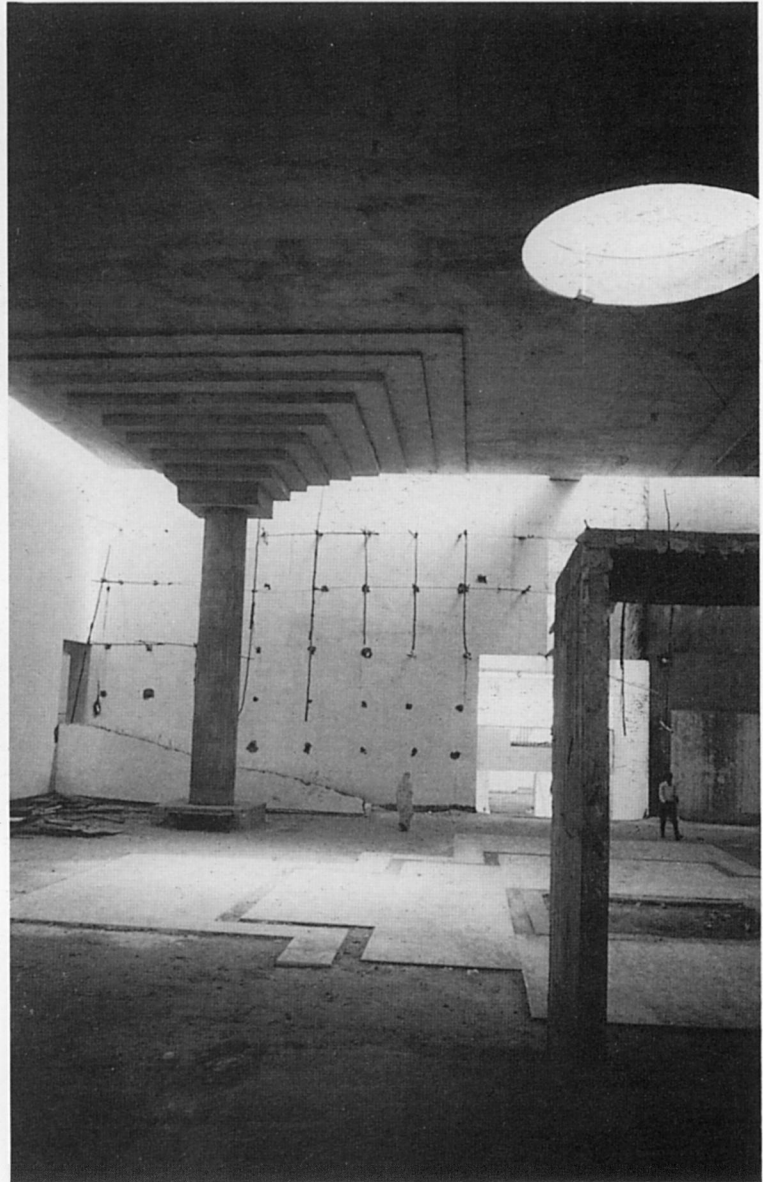
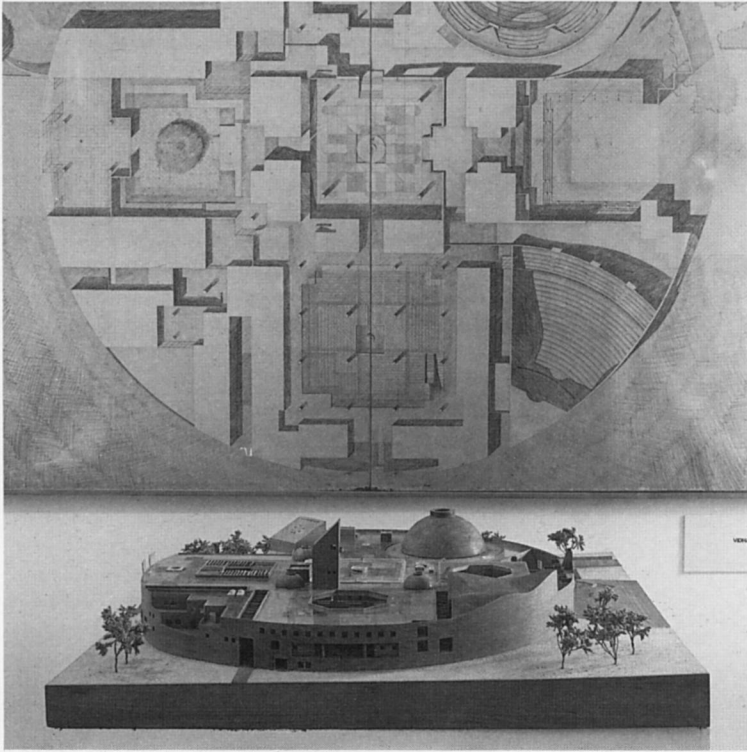
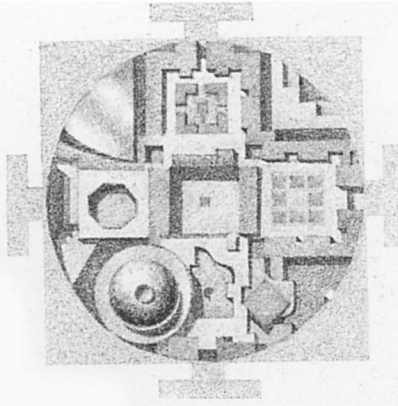
BRITISH COUNCIL HEADQUARTERS,  
DELHI



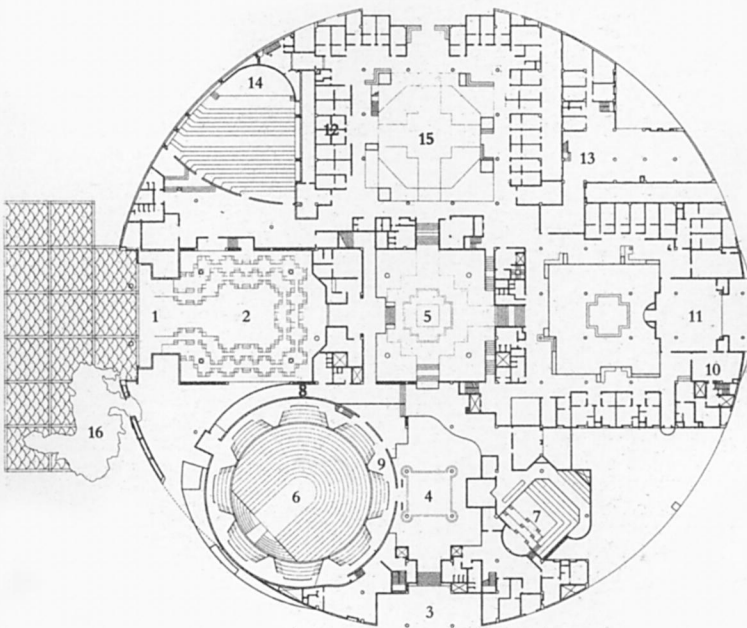
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|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1. Gatehouse         | 5. Foyer              | 9. Charbagh   | 13. Maintenance |
| 2. Entry court       | 6. Auditorium         | 10. Loggia    |                 |
| 3. Stairs to Library | 7. Exhibition Gallery | 11. Bindu     |                 |
| 4. Main entrance     | 8. Meeting rooms      | 12. Residence |                 |



**VIDHAN BHAVAN, BHOPAL**  
*New State Assembly for the Government  
of Madhya Pradesh*

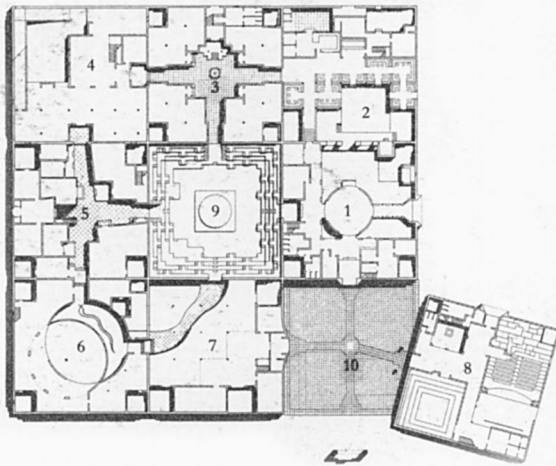
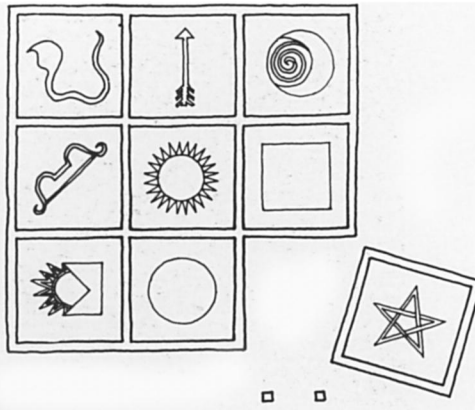


*View of the interior under construction*

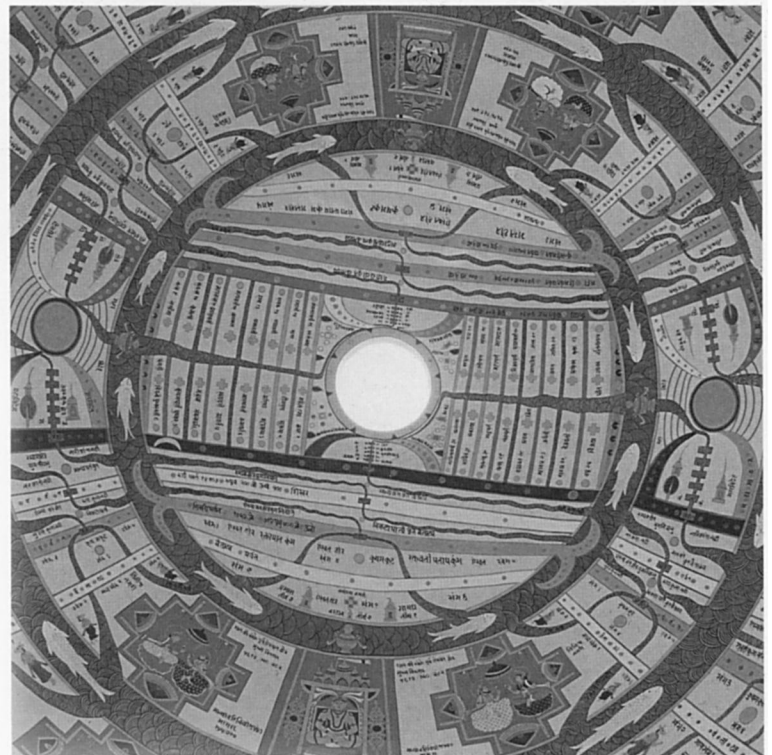


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|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Entrance            | 6. Vidhan Sabha                | 10. Chief Minister     | 15. Courtyard             |
| 2. Court of the People | 7. Vidhan Parishad             | 11. Cabinet Room       | 16. Map of Madhya Pradesh |
| 3. VIP Entrance        | 8. Ramp to visitors' galleries | 12. Ministers' offices |                           |
| 4. MLA Foyer           | 9. Visitors' galleries         | 13. Library            |                           |
| 5. Central Hall        |                                | 14. Combined hall      |                           |

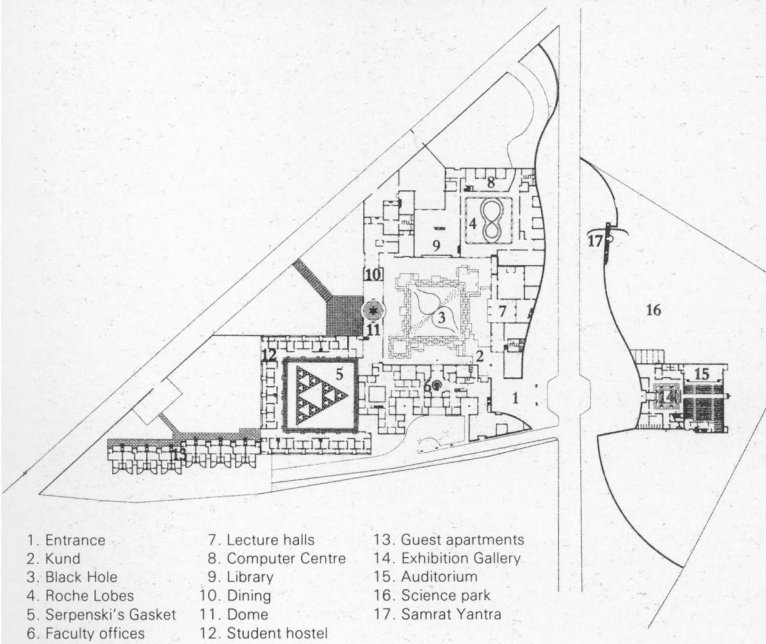
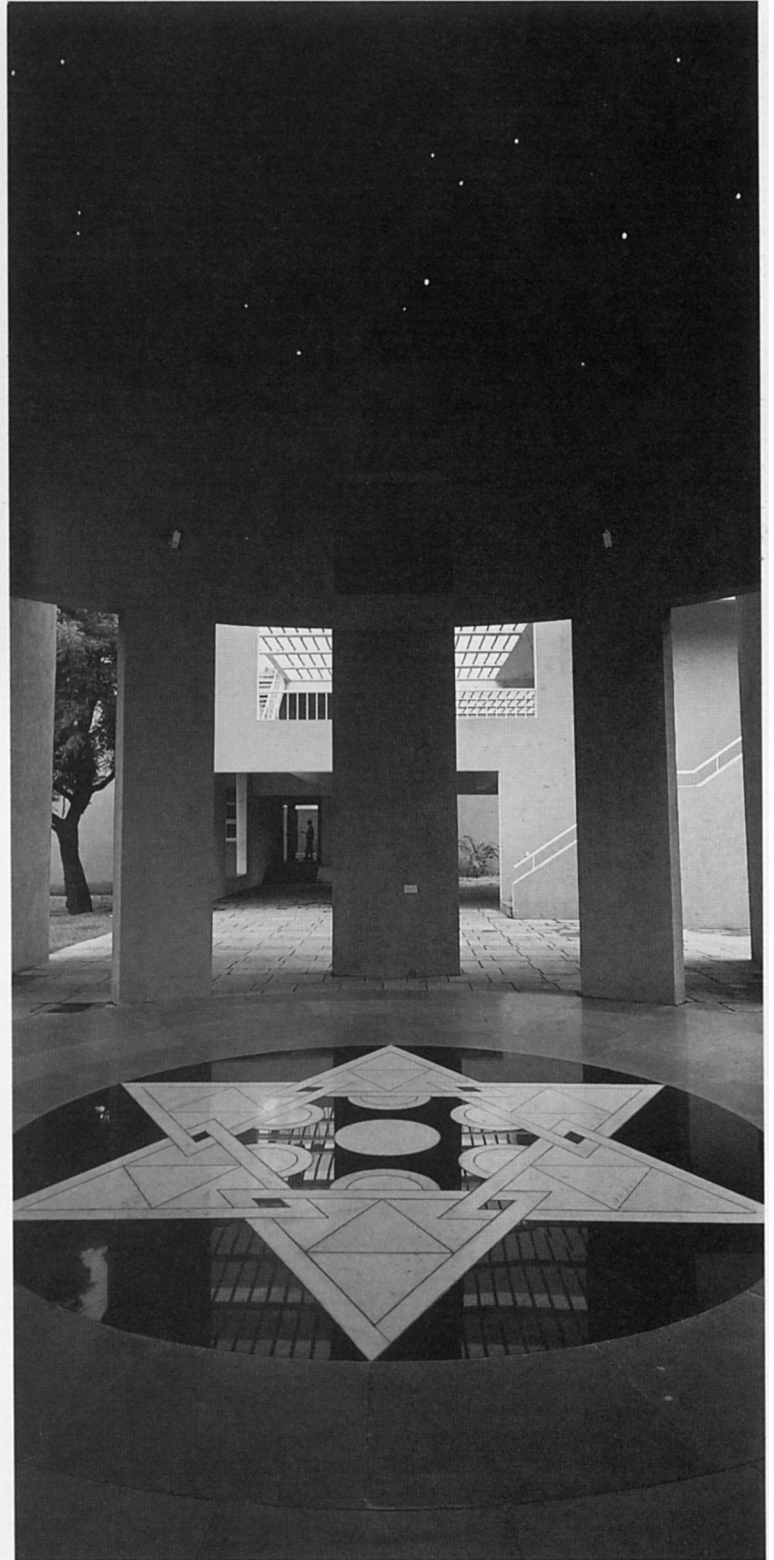
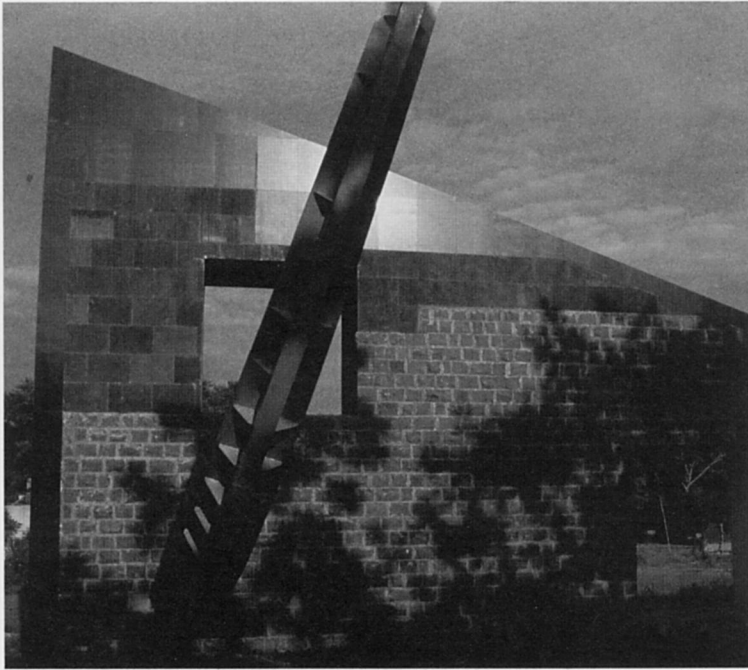
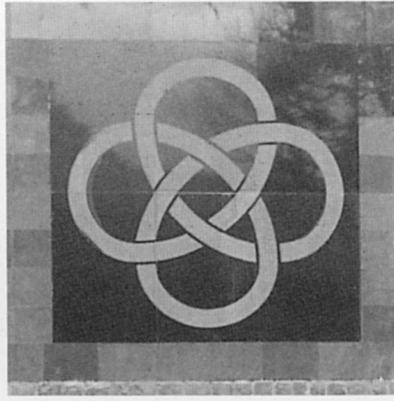
JAWAHAR KALA KENDRA, JAIPUR  
*A museum in memory of Gandhi*



- 1. MANGAL Administration
- 2. CHANDRA Cafeteria, Guest rooms
- 3. BUDH Jewellery, Manuscripts, Miniatures, etc.
- 4. KETU Textiles and Costumes
- 5. SHANI Craft workshops
- 6. RAHU Weaponry
- 7. GURU Library & Documentation
- 8. SHUKRA Theatres
- 9. SURYA Kund
- 10. Entrance



INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTRE FOR  
ASTRONOMY AND ASTROPHYSICS,  
PUNE



All of this is intelligently summarized in the Portfolio essay on the National Crafts Museum by its director, Dr Jyotindra Jain, whose collaboration with Correa produced one of the most intense and successful segments of the exhibition:

Indians themselves did not have a tradition of setting up museums of fragmented sculptures, rusted swords and out-of-context paintings. Broken images were immersed in holy waters, worn out metal objects were melted down to cast new ones, and terracotta votive objects were left to decay and merge with the very earth from which they were created. Literature was composed and retained in oral tradition for centuries. . . . What was rendered into script at a later date, represented only a highly limited version of a much broader tradition. But owing to their more obvious presence and availability, the written versions were considered to be the sole sources of understanding of Indian culture. The written sources were considered to be the *shastras* or canons, theoretical or codified texts, although in the oceans of unrecorded *prayoga*, or real practice, the *shastras* were like minuscule drops. . . . As we blindly adopted the archaeological museum concept, we forgot that, unlike the West, the 'past' and 'present' are not so severely divided in our case . . .

Correa designed 'an invisible building', a building which 'defied the concept of "museum" itself', in order to resolve this conflict between a natural cycle of death and renewal and the termination of meaning in the Western concept of museum. To the historicistic understanding, it is paradoxical that this natural death of artefacts should be a vehicle for sustaining a living tradition. We seem to be dealing with two styles of death. However, the cultural conditions for which historicism is the norm account for this problem; and it is reflected in the remorse which attends the destruction of 'historic' buildings and quarters — the fear that the tradition is not renewed but effaced in the subsequent construction (thereby confirming the desiderata of certain members of the modern movement). In this context, the resort to any form of museum acknowledges the threat posed to the celebrated resilience of India's traditional cultures by the myriad charms of the Western culture emancipated from ontological concern (the museum is indeed our own customary defence against this threat, and may be seen to commemorate the problem). What grants this emancipation is the misplaced confidence in our articulative abilities, the confidence that we can comprehend, grasp, explain or possess the culture through our texts.

The determining moment in the question of Transfer and Transformation, therefore, is not accuracy of knowledge concerning ancient iconography, but rather the re-embodiment of meaning in the new cultural conditions. The Correa-Hodgkin collaboration on the British Council entry seems to offer something genuinely creative with respect to this issue.

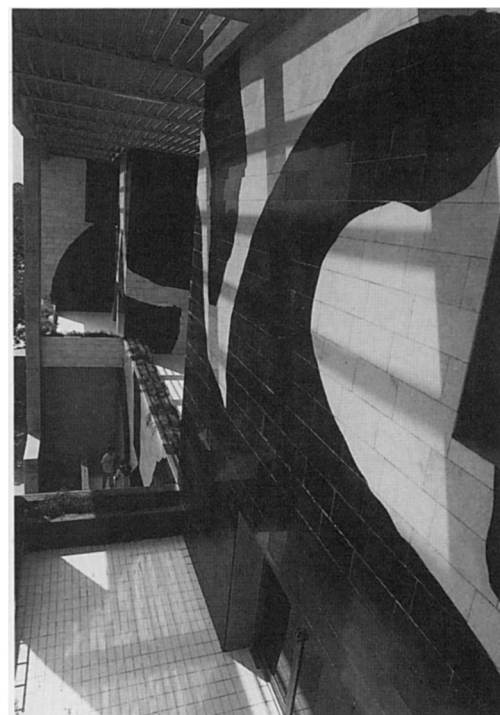
The collaboration was mediated through the British Council, and Correa's original proposal to

Hodgkin was a mosaic of a British flag dissolving into the Indian flag. Hodgkin demurred at this suggestion, and began to develop a proposal of his own. The building was designed approximately five years before construction began, and therefore Hodgkin worked on the commission at intervals over the course of several years. The design evolved in drawings and maquettes (the final maquette — white card into which the black had been laid — appeared in the exhibition with photographs of the completed portal). During this period, it was established, negatively, that there would be neither colour nor paint or ceramic and, positively, that the mode of construction would derive from Mogul inlaid stonework.

Construction began in earnest with the arrival of the British Council's Alan Dixon on the scene. The lateral of the three upper-floor windows were displaced to the corners, a small but crucial change which not only allowed the windows to participate better in the topography of black, but also intervened in the cascade of frontal recessions, creating intimations of enclosure. If this adjustment is removed, along with the other made at this time — bringing the black to the ground above the main entry — it is obvious that the outcome would have been more passive, less precisely violent, less capable of awakening the implicit spatial conditions which inundate the façade.

Although it has been called a mural, Hodgkin's work is actually the cladding for the walls, comprising large tiles of black and white marble laid to a running bond, with carefully interlocked pieces at the complex boundaries between black and white. It is a tribute to the Indian craftsmen that they were able to work this out from the maquette, since Hodgkin could not provide construction drawings. These walls meet Correa's pink sandstone screen wall at a virtual knife-edge above the second-storey level, although its full thickness is declared at the pillars which frame the entry. The reciprocity of this wall with Hodgkin's walls is crucial to the overall result. It orchestrates a sequence: from surface, where the wall acts like a colour, through thickness, where it becomes autonomous, to depth, where it participates in the illusions instigated by its great openings. The screen wall's stack-bonding (augmented at the pillars), the square openings and the flank walls at entry all support a rhythmic flatness which is received by the terraces, recesses and fragments of openings (viewed from the ground) caught up in the swirl of black, white, cast shadow and light. What launches these readings is the superimposition of two discontinuities of scale: in the architecture, between the openings and horizons of a four-storey building and a portal enlarged to the scale of the whole, and, in the stonework mural, between the intimacy of a brush stroke and something at the scale of the weather.

The coincidence of opposites in play here — red between green grass and blue sky, black/shadow and white/light, geometry and nature,



Detail of mural by Howard Hodgkin for the entrance of the British Council Headquarters, Delhi.

dignity and violence, intimate and sublime, etc. — suggests that the banian tree, taken for granted by John Russell in his contribution to the Portfolio entry for this façade, is not necessarily one of the primary readings. Hodgkin himself is willing to entertain this reading (and the possibility of teaching under trees), but relates an anecdote which suggests that the theme originated with one of the workmen. Hodgkin, who is very familiar with Indian culture, speaks of the presence of this sort of inlaid stonework in the places of water and coolness in Mogul gardens. It would be consistent with the other oppositions in this piece to imagine the most urban and vertical portion of the site transformed into metaphoric water; but the search for any single reading would seem to be misguided. Rather than references or allusions, what are in play here are questions regarding order. As the straightforward passage from a street to an internal garden, the portal is the initiation or origin of the several *coincidentiae oppositorum*, the limiting conditions or horizons of any assertion. As the entrance to a species of academy, it eloquently embodies the conditions for discourse while resisting any definitive account of itself on those terms.

Peter Carl and Eric Parry

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Charles Correa — Five Projects

Introduction by John Hanson, Director General of the British Council. Essays by Kenneth Frampton, John Russell, Jyotindra Jain, Gautam Bhatia. Photographs by Mahinder Singh, Rahul Mehrotra, Dinesh Mehta. Price £20. Distributed by AA Publications.