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The Public, the Private, and the Sacred

Author(s): Charles Correa

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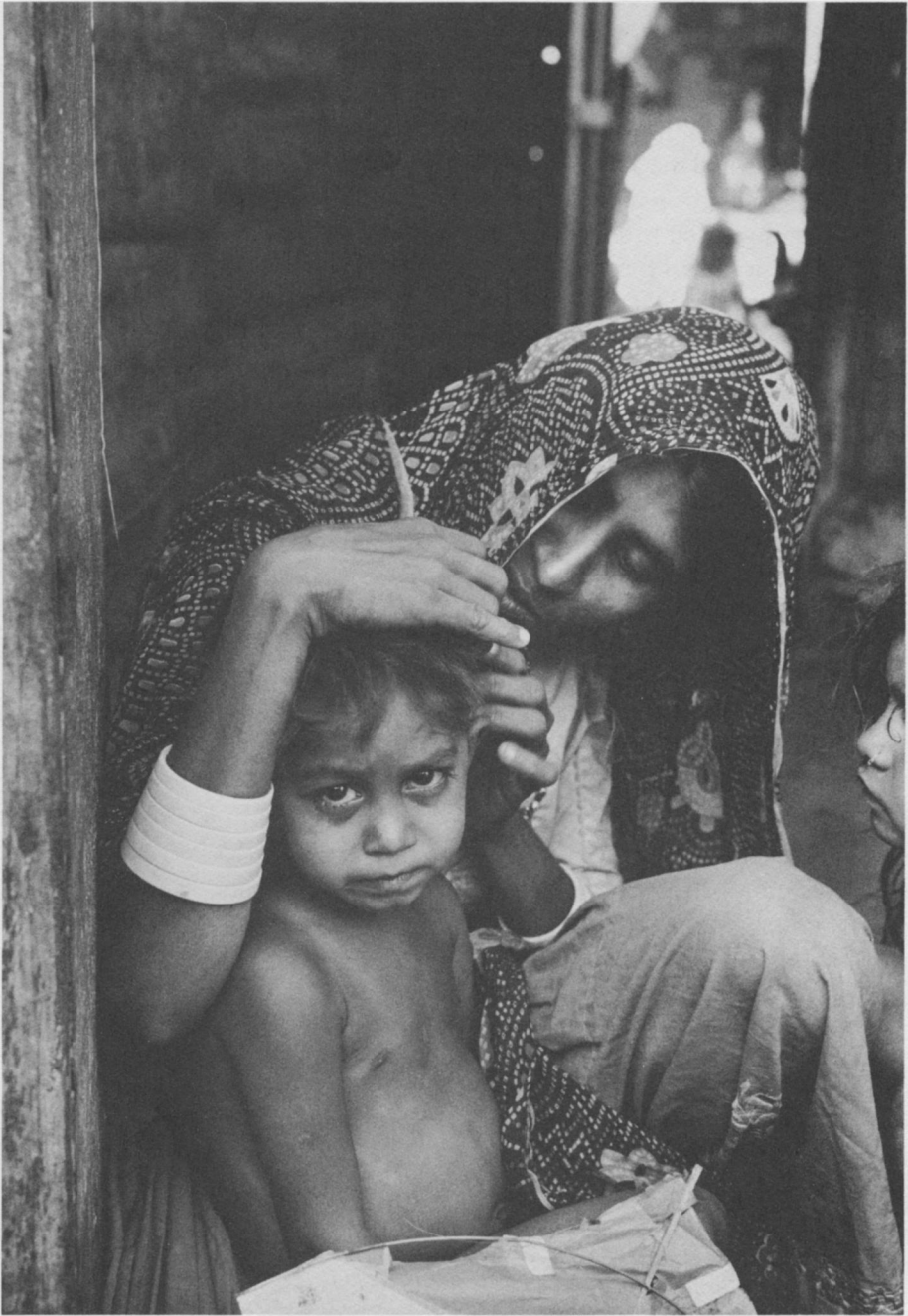
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# The Public, the Private, and the Sacred

Charles Correa

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**F**or the Indian architect, every builtform is a mandala, a model that represents the nature of the cosmos. The architect creates public as well as private spaces that symbolize and incarnate the nonmanifest, which we glimpse through religion, philosophy, and the arts. From ancient sacred structures like stupas to modern low-rise housing, Indian architecture reflects forms found in India's geography which have meaning for another landscape: that of the Indian consciousness. Indian architects today face the challenge of designing forms that can both accommodate the masses and express their commitment to the mythic.

## I

We live in a world of manifest phenomena. Yet, since the beginning of time, man has intuitively sensed the existence of another world: a nonmanifest world whose presence underlies—and makes endurable—the one he experiences every day. The principal vehicles through which we explore and communicate our notions of this nonmanifest world are religion, philosophy, and the arts. Like these, architecture too is generated by mythic beliefs, expressing the presence of a reality more profound than the manifest world in which it exists.

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*Charles Correa is an architect in Bombay.*

In India, these beliefs are all-pervading. They surface everywhere since they are not confined to formal art and philosophy but thrive in popular incarnations as well. Even in the overcrowded commercial center of a metropolis like Bombay, every twenty feet or so we find a sacred gesture—a *rangoli* (a pattern of colored powder) on a doorstep, a *yantra* (a geometric depiction of cosmic order) painted on a wall, a shrine, a temple.

These gestures are a crucial and an integral part of the spaces we inhabit. Although there is much discussion among social theorists, politicians, city planners, and a great many others about the public and the private realms that constitute our habitat, there is hardly any attention paid to this, the sacred, realm.

Yet, when we look at human society across history and around the planet, the sacred is perhaps the most important realm of all, for it expresses the invisible passions that move us. Consider, for instance, the various countries of Europe. Do we not find Italy (which, like India, is filled with sacred gestures) the most compelling? When we arrive in France, the Catholic religion and the Latin culture are similar, but the gestures are less frequent. France is more secular, so it does not move us quite as much. When we get to Switzerland, we find hardly any sacred gestures at all. Is this why Switzerland can never be as riveting, as evocative, as Italy? Swiss chocolates are delicious, the people are polite, the scenery is beautiful, but it is not quite the same. To the Japanese, Mount Fuji is sacred; to the Swiss, Mont Blanc is just a very high mountain. This difference is of decisive importance to their architecture and to their lives.

In Japan, indeed, the public, the private, and the sacred realms all hold together like a three-legged stool, to give strength and stability to society. Almost every visitor comments on the changing face of Japan; how then does Japanese society, living at the cutting edge of new technology, remain stable? Perhaps because most of the rapid changes we observe are in the public realm. For the vast majority of Japanese, the private and the sacred realms have remained quite intact (as a visit to the shrines at Kamakura or Nāra will confirm—every few meters there are sacred gestures: the stones placed in the moss beneath a tree, the white paper prayers fluttering in the wind, the students practicing the solemn ritualistic choreography of Zen archery).

So also with India. The British, through their massive intervention in the fields of law, administration, transport, and communication, initiated a great many changes in the public realm. The other two realms stayed untouched, so the essential values of Indian society remained stable—not just for the rural masses but for urban dwellers as well. (If in doubt, glance at the matrimonial ads in any of our newspapers!)

Of course by *sacred*, one does not mean only the religious but the primordial as well. Religion is perhaps the most facile path to the world of the nonmanifest, but it is not the only one. In fact, as Europe has increasingly distanced itself from religion over the last two centuries, the primordial has become a fecund source of the mythic. This is why Picasso and Matisse in their paintings, Stravinsky in his music, and Le Corbusier in his architecture intuitively searched out the primitive. They wanted to find the sacred.

Another fertile breeding ground of the sacred is nature. There is something intrinsic to awesome mountain ranges like the Himalayas, and to great seas and oceans, that triggers the metaphysical in us and turns our thoughts toward the nonmanifest. Certainly the love of the English for their landscape and their sensitivity to it (perhaps harking back to the tree worship of the Druids?) is arguably one of the most mythic and sacred of their values. And in Scandinavia, the wellspring of the metaphysical is not only landscape (e.g., the fjords of Norway, the northern lights of Lapland) but also climate (hence the dark winters of Sweden reflected in the brooding films of Ingmar Bergman, with their epic struggles of Good and Evil). So also for us here in India, the word *aakash* conveys much more than just “sky.” To walk on a seashore in the evening, or to cross a desert and arrive at a house built around a courtyard, is an extraordinary experience. At such a moment, subtle responses are set off in our minds, responses conditioned by thousands of generations of life on this planet. Perhaps they are the half-forgotten memories of a primordial landscape, of a paradise lost. In any event these spaces, open to the sky, condition our perceptions very powerfully, bringing a sense of the ineffable into our lives. While the symbol of education in North America has been the little red school house, in India—as in most of Asia—it has always been the guru sitting under a tree. Not only is this image of the Lord Buddha under the peepul tree more sensible than the idea of sitting

inside a stuffy room; it is also far more evocative, more conducive to enlightenment.

In Hinduism, another source of the sacred is the ecstasy of physical union. This has always been central to Tantric philosophy. In *Sri Yantra*, the greatest of all the geometric depictions of cosmic order used as aids for meditation, this ecstasy is depicted as the interpenetrations of nine triangles, four facing upward and five downward, together symbolizing the union of Shiva and Shakti and representing the creative energy that created the manifest world. In this century, these ancient sources of the nonmanifest were reincarnated in the novels of D. H. Lawrence, who through sex, through nature, through the primordial, strove to rediscover the sacred in the midst of an industrialized society.

All these sources of the nonmanifest are also present in Hinduism, which can be described as a general theory incorporating in a pluralistic fashion a great number of subsystems, including animism and nature worship. Thus, to the Hindu, there is not only a sacred geometry (e.g., the *mandalas*, which we will examine presently) but a sacred geography as well, consisting of mountains, lakes, the confluence of rivers. Each of these makes the presence of the sacred vivid within the context of our everyday lives.

It is the main purport of this essay that the sacred realm is of fundamental importance to any understanding of Indian architecture (and, by extension, to the rest of our built environment). The sacred is neither public nor private, though it qualifies both immeasurably by engaging the mythic dimensions inherent in the nonmanifest. Mankind has always been fascinated by the invisible, the unknown, the unknowable.

Perhaps, as the economist E. F. Schumacher has pointed out, it reflects the hierarchy we experience in the very process of living, as we move along the natural progression from stone to plant to animal to human being. Stones are by our definition no more than the material they comprise (if there is a secret life of stones, we are unaware of it). Plants, we say, consist of physical materials, with a new entity added—life!—and the journey toward the invisible has begun. Animals consist of materials plus life plus motivation. With humankind, there is yet another entity—self-awareness—which puts us in the world of the unseen, for everything essential in our fellow human beings—their thoughts, emotions, aspirations, fantasies—are

invisible to us. These “invisibilia” are of infinitely greater power and significance than the “visibilia” of everyday life. Strange indeed that, since the beginning of time, man has used the most materialistic of elements, like stone and earth, steel and concrete, to convey the invisible and compulsive myths that obsess him.

## II

In India, the mythic beliefs that generate the deep structure of builtform go back thousands of years. Since according to Vedic thought, the world we see is only part of our existence, the forms and events we perceive are significant merely to the extent that they help us understand the nonmanifest layers that lie beneath; the magic diagrams, the yantras, explain the true nature of the cosmos. Of these, the *vastu-purush mandalas* form the basis of architecture. Thus buildings are conceived as models of the cosmos—no less!

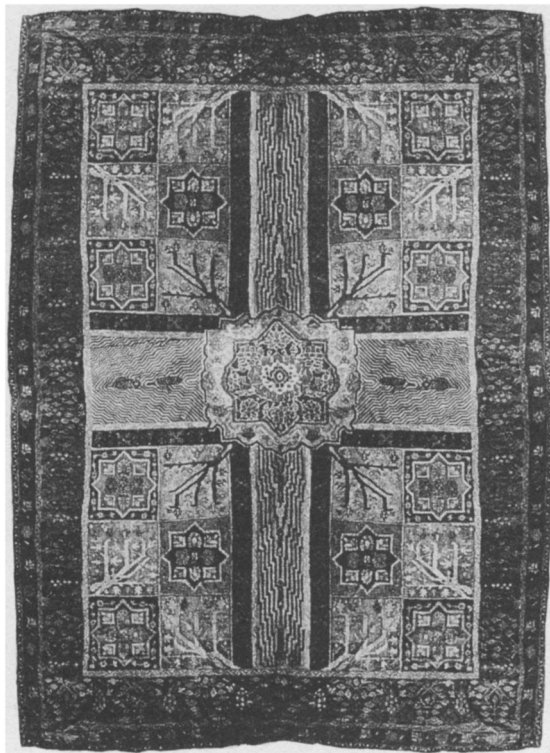
Each *vastu-purush mandala* is a perfect square, subdivided into identical squares, creating a series which starts from 1 and goes on to 4, 9, 16, 25 . . . right up to 1,024. (See the next page for an example.) In temple architecture, the most commonly used mandalas, or patterns symbolic of the universe, are those of 64 and 81 squares, with the various deities allocated places in accordance with their importance and with the mystical qualities inherent in the diagram.

The mandala is not a plan; it represents an energy field. Its center signifies both *shunya* (the absolute void) as well as *bindu* (the world seed and the source of all energy). In all mandalas, at this center is located Brahman, the Supreme Principle. According to Hinduism, when the cycles of reincarnation are finally over, and the *atman* (the individual soul) is released from each of us, it goes to Brahman (to the center of this energy field).

The analogy to the black holes of contemporary physics is astounding. Energy devours itself, and the individual soul (after completing all the cycles of reincarnation) goes not to an eternal reward in Heaven or the Garden of Paradise but down the vortex at the center of a black hole. How incredible that such a concept should have surfaced so many thousands of years ago. As the noted French academician Gaston Bachelard has pointed out, the intuitive insight of the artist (or for that matter, the seer) cannot be explained through the cause-and-effect structure of scientific reasoning but, like a depth

charge, explodes in the center of our being, releasing to the surface the debris of our unconscious. This is why the invisible, the mythic, the sacred, will always be central to art—and to our lives.

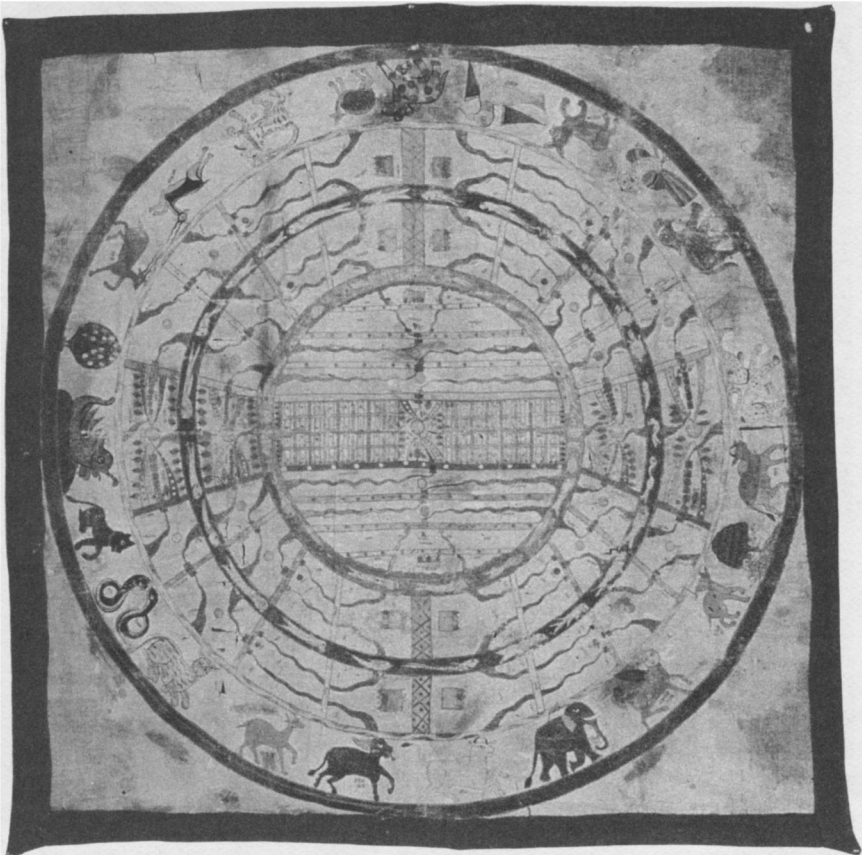
Another reservoir of mythic images is the Jain cosmograph, depicting the manifest landscape of the middle world. Cosmographs usually represent the continents inhabited by man, with all the various species of animals, the encircling waters, and the long rivers. In the center is Mount Meru, the sacred mountain. This powerful Vedic archetype is directly translated into builtform in the Buddhist stupas, among the most perfect examples extant of architecture as a model of the cosmos. (See page 100 for an example.) Their very form symbolizes Mount Meru. The central wooden post buried within the masonry is *yupa*, the *axis mundi* (the column that passes through the center of the universe). Around the stupa (the dome-shaped mound) is the open-to-sky *pradakshina*, a sacred circumambulatory pathway



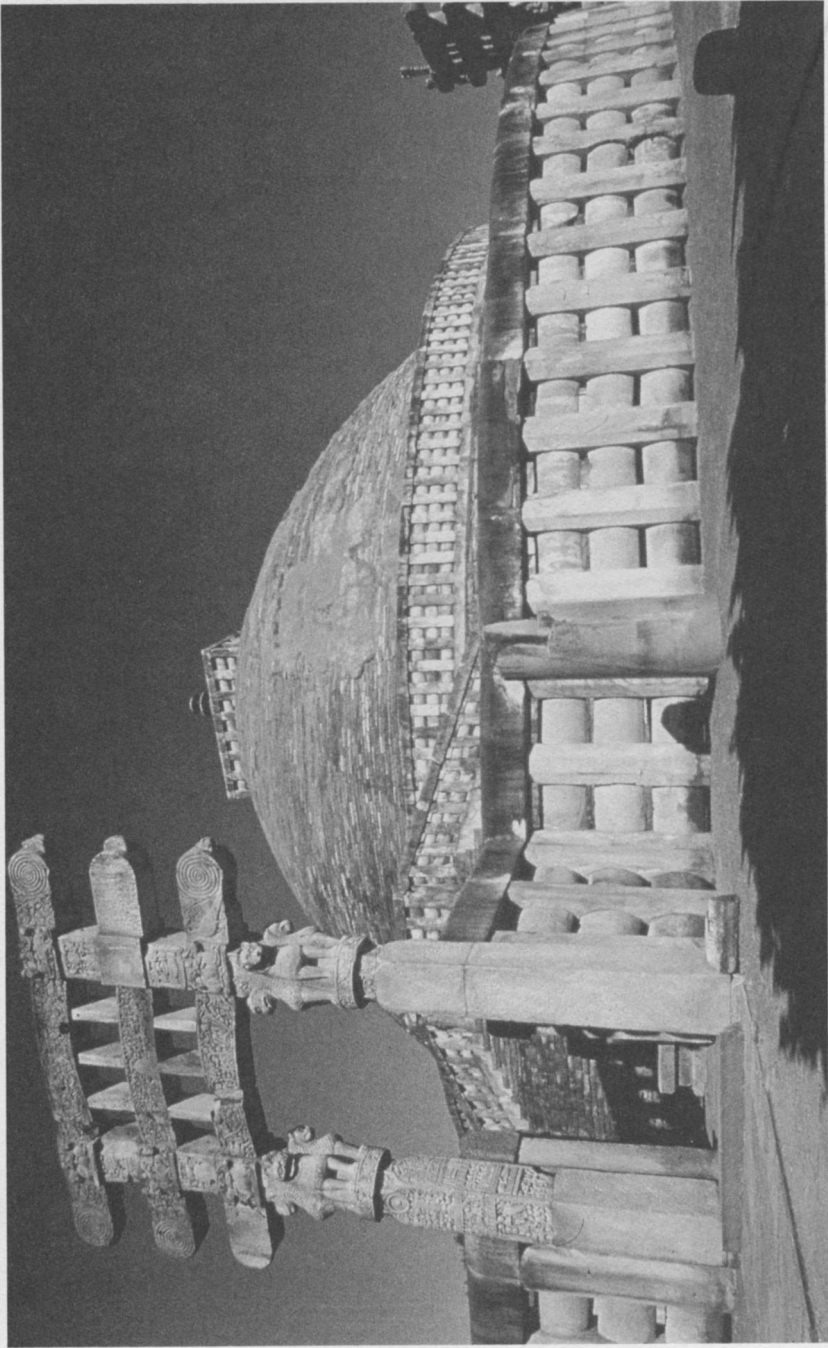
Vastu-Purush Mandala

through which the pilgrim walks and feels he becomes one with the cosmos that the stupa represents.

These metaphysical concerns are clearly articulated in Jain icons of Purush (man), depicting his two principal aspects: human and cosmic. This is a paradigm we can perhaps extend to represent the more generalized condition of man and his context (i.e., the mythic beliefs in which he perceives himself to exist). Man, in all probability regardless of time or place, does not change—but his context changes. Thus with the coming of Islam, the context of the cosmos is replaced by new myths. In part, these are a personal relationship with a judgmental divinity, and in part these are a social contract (as in the Christian precept “Love thy neighbor”). The mythic images change



**Jain Cosmograph**



**Buddhist Stupa at Sanchi**

also, from the vastu-purush mandala to the *char-bagh* (the paradise garden of Persia, a concept that goes far back into history and is an enduring feature of Persian art and architecture). Linked with a love of trees and flowers, these gardens reflect the harmony between man and nature; symbolically and physically, water is the source of life, and the four water channels meeting at right angles in the center symbolize the meeting of man and God. The builtform generated by these new myths changes dramatically. The austere severity of cosmic analogues is replaced by a new architecture of sensuous form and surface, of exquisite and hedonistic delight.

A peerless example of the *char-bagh* as architecture is Humayun's tomb, built in memory of the emperor Akbar's father. Constructed of red sandstone with a dressing of white marble, it was the first substantial example of Mughal architecture. Here the *char-bagh* motif has been enlarged and repeated in intricate patterns, generating a whole new world of architectonic concepts, and making this a work of seminal importance to the other great masterpieces of Mughal architecture that were to follow. The extraordinary power mythic beliefs and images exercise on architecture is evident in a comparing of the Jain cosmograph with the Islamic *char-bagh*. Both are metaphysical landscapes, but since they are based on profoundly different concepts of the essential nature of man and his context, they each lead inevitably to a totally different architecture.

With the arrival of the European colonialists, the myths changed again. The Europeans brought new values: science, rationalism, progress—fallout from the Age of Reason. These found an enthusiastic response in India—possibly because considerable capability in mathematics, astronomy, and science already existed there. India was affected in profound ways. First, there was the impact of nineteenth-century high tech (railways, post and telegraph services) crisscrossing the subcontinent with dazzling speed, changing irrevocably the poorest Indian's sense of mobility, communication—and hence, aspirations.

From this impact followed the second consequence. To Indians (as indeed to other Asians) the scientific and technological achievements of the Europeans were primarily an outcome of their attitude toward life. In all of Asia, for so many centuries, we have carried so much luggage. Suddenly a new position was perceived: we were stronger if we did not prejudice any option, in fact, if we did not carry any

luggage at all, if the mind was a *tabula rasa*. To draw on a clean slate must have been a heady message indeed: to invent the future, or more modestly, to invent appliances for everyday comfort—mosquito nets and solar topees and extendable armchairs. Or, more grandly, to invent a new city: Chandigarh. Or most ambitious of all: to reinvent China through a structure of communes! The myths of the Age of Reason, like the ones that went before them, are truly mind-blowing.

Of course not all colonialists were fascinated by the values of rationalism and science. The vast majority were soldiers or administrators or traders, and to assert their presence (or perhaps to reassure themselves), they imported European architecture and life-styles to the subcontinent, regardless of any relevance they might have had. Architecture based on the superficial *transfer* of images from another culture or another age cannot survive; architecture must be generated from the *transformation* of those images, that is, by expressing anew the mythic beliefs that underly the images. Yet sadly, as the decades went by, European architecture in India retreated more and more into a cocoon of remembered symbols and gestures.

Furthermore, even as these influences were spreading, the intrinsic power of the *tabula rasa* was running out of steam. Life (or art) drawn on a clean slate can, in time, become quite meaningless—even nihilistic—precisely because it does not carry any luggage or have any umbilical cord. Quite soon, the rational becomes the merely commonsensical and eventually dwindles into the prosaic. In architecture, the frisson of the *tabula rasa* becomes the stupefying banality of one more high-rise glass box.

In the process, our lives become impoverished. Ivan Illich has written eloquently about the vital conceptual differences between the cleansing waters of ancient myth and the H<sub>2</sub>O that is pumped hydraulically through our municipal pipelines. The prosaic architecture we create today is not due just to the banality of the forms we construct but also to the mundane briefs we address (which in turn, I guess, reflect the kind of lives we all lead). Would the magnificent *kund* at Modhera have the same impact on us if it were built for some other purpose—say a drive-in theater? The form might be identical, but where would be the axis mundi connecting the mythic powers of the water below to the sky above? The sacred realm is a crucial part of our environment, but over the last few decades we have increas-

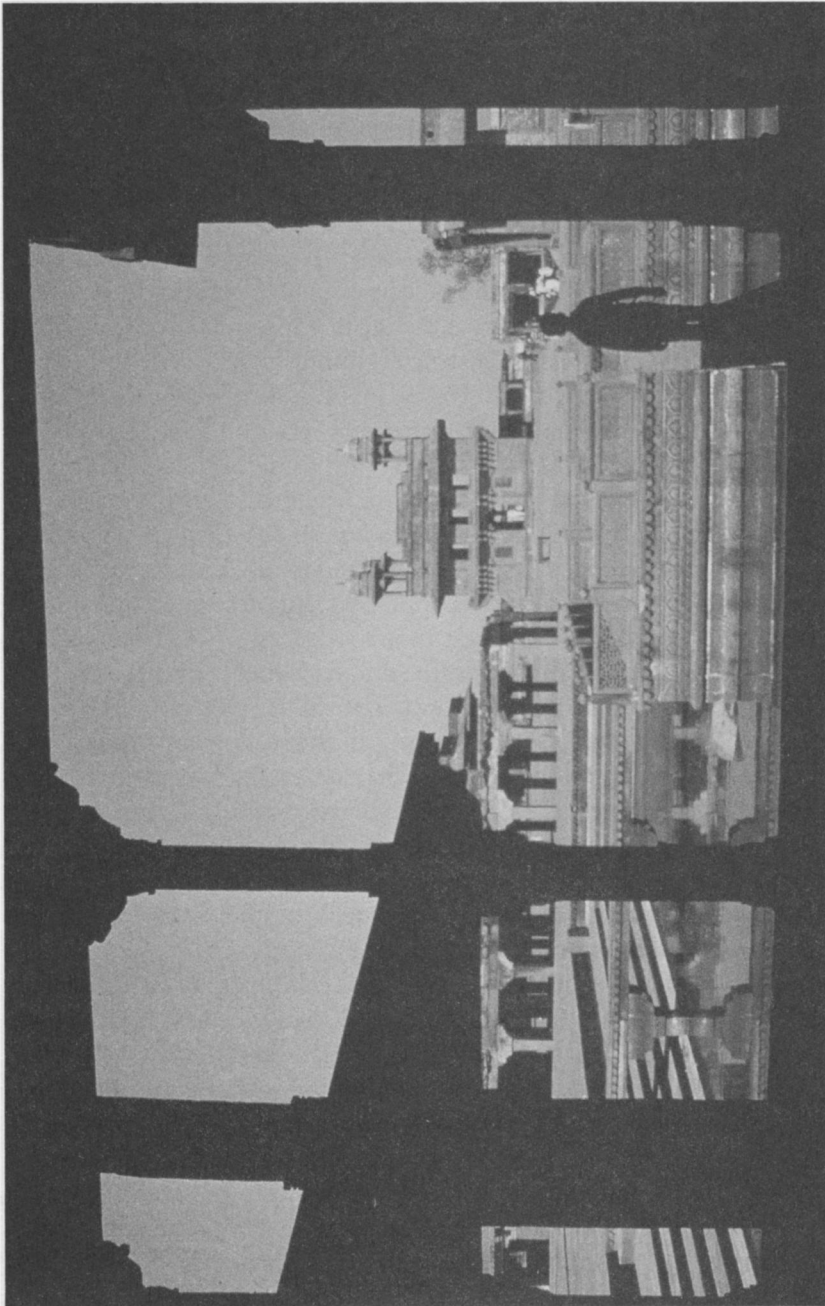
ingly blanked it out of our consciousness. The price we have paid is incalculable.

### III

Today, perhaps because of modern communication systems, there are many diverse cultures, life-styles, and value systems simultaneously operative in almost every society. This state of affairs—perceived to be unique to our times—causes confusion and despair. Yet was life in India really much different in earlier centuries? Perhaps because of its pluralistic construct, Hinduism has always had an astonishing ability to absorb diverse myths—to reinvent them, so to speak, so that they gain new currency. This ability has been of decisive importance to India's history. With time, as man's perception of his context changed (the cosmos replaced by the *char-bagh*, the paradise garden by the Age of Reason, and so on), the new myths had to be absorbed, ingested, internalized—and finally transformed into a new architecture. India offers countless examples of such transformations; we shall point out just two.

The first is the *Diwan-i-Khas*, the audience hall for nobles built by the Moghul emperor Akbar in Fatehpur-Sikri. (See pages 104 and 105.) It consists of a small cube, in the center of which is a monumental column connected to the corners by four bridges. It is generally believed that Akbar used this structure for special audiences. Akbar sat on top of the column with his principal advisers at the far end of each of the bridges. The visitor came in at the lower level and explained the problem he faced or the favor he sought. Akbar could then summon any one of his advisers for conference (without the others intriguing with each other). If, as Le Corbusier said, a house is “a machine for living,” then we may say that the *Diwan-i-Khas* is a machine for governing an empire.

But it is much more than this. For though the square plan came with Akbar from central Asia (the square being inherent in the deep structure of the human mind), to the Hindu craftsmen constructing the building the square would have represented a mandala, a model of the cosmos. To them, the presence of the central column must have been devastating, for in the center of the mandala in which bindu, the source of all energy, is located, there was not Brahman but the emperor Akbar. Furthermore, in case anybody missed the point, the

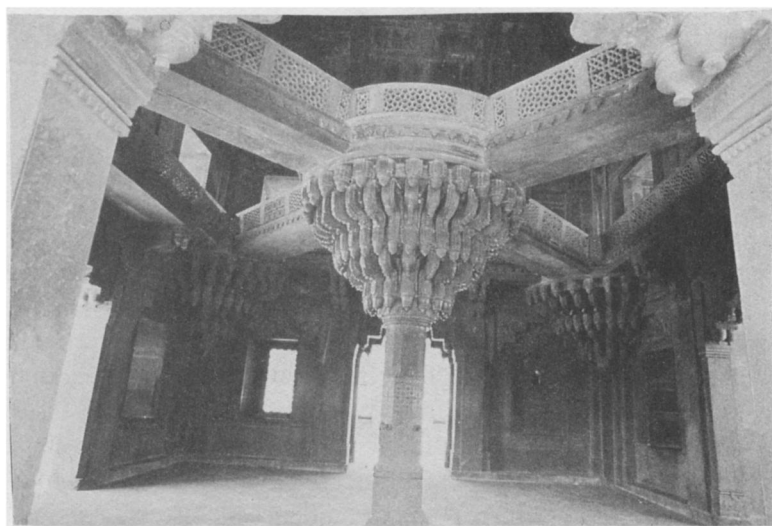


**Diwan-i-Khas at Fatehpur-Sikri**

column he sat on is clearly Buddhist-Hindu in form and, as such, cannot help but signify the center of the Buddhist-Hindu universe.

We perceive, then, that the Diwan-i-Khas is a transformation of staggering metaphysical and political impact. In it, Akbar was using the myths of Hinduism and Buddhism to proclaim that a new political order had arrived. Yet he did so not in a gigantic, intimidating structure but through a small, humanly scaled edifice. He was acting with great finesse, almost with love—as though he wanted to heal the differences that separate (as in the new religion he synthesized—Din-i-Ilahi).

The second example of transformation is the plan for the city of Jaipur, built in the eighteenth century in Rajasthan. Jaipur represents a transformation of another kind. Maharaja Jai Singh, who founded the city, was also the renowned astronomer who built the five *jantar mantars* (observatories) at Delhi, Jaipur, Ujjain, Banaras, and Allahabad. In the planning of Jaipur he embarked on a truly extraordinary venture. He sought to combine his passion for the latest tenets of contemporary astronomy with the most ancient and sacred of his beliefs. The plan of the city is based on a nine-square mandala corresponding to the *navagraha*, or nine planets. The void in the central square he used for the palace garden. (Because of the presence of a hill, a corner square was moved diagonally across.)



**Detail of Diwan-i-Khas: The Char-Bagh**

Jaipur's plan is worthy of admiration and emulation: for the clarity of its main arteries, the efficiency of its water-management system, the understanding of essential socioeconomic patterns, and above all, for the startling relevance to us today of the transformation between past and future, between material and metaphysical worlds, among public, private, and sacred realms, that Maharaja Jai Singh sought to synthesize.

The *manthan* (churning generated by seemingly conflicting systems of thoughts) is not just a contemporary disturbance; it has always existed, producing one of the prime sources of energy for man's will to act. At times, even when the mythic values and images remain unchanged, this energy is generated because the building technology alters. When such change occurs, the architect must transform, must reinvent, the old images in terms of the new technology. What he must not do is merely transfer the old mythic images despite their irrelevance to the changed technology—which today is so debilitating both to the architect and to the society in which he builds. This distinction between *transfer* and *transformation* is of fundamental importance. For instance, all of Le Corbusier's buildings clearly are the work of a Mediterranean man, yet in none of them did the architect ever use a sloping roof of tiles. Instead, Le Corbusier seems to have taken the age-old images and values of the Mediterranean and (perhaps unconsciously or compulsively) reinvented them in the twentieth-century technology of concrete and glass. This is true transformation. It places architecture where it rightfully belongs: at the intersection of culture, technology, and human aspiration.

Another obvious example of transformation is the work of Aalvar Aalto in Finland, but the one I would particularly draw to your attention is Frank Lloyd Wright and the truly extraordinary houses he created around the turn of the century in the midwestern states of the U.S.A. It would seem that in that oeuvre, Wright singlehandedly invented the way the American middle class was going to live. The builders' houses constructed in suburbia over the last three or four decades are really just hand-me-down versions of Wright's Usonian prototypes, with all the compulsive imagery intact: the two steps up to the raised dining area, the carport, the picture window. How did Wright do it? Not because of any dependence on historic "quotes" or "references" (surely architects who study only history are condemned to repeat it?) but because he understood well the culture and the

technology of his time and—most important of all—because he could read perfectly the aspirations of the middle Americans he was addressing.

For the United States, another great generator of populist mythology has been the Hollywood studios. “There is no myth known to the human race,” wrote Gore Vidal, albeit ironically, “which did not achieve its apotheosis in the Hollywood films of the 30s and 40s.” Certainly, to a visitor like me, the recent waterfront renewal schemes in Boston, Baltimore, and New York read as transformations of old MGM musicals like *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Singin’ in the Rain*: an innocent all-singing, all-dancing America for which perhaps the majority of citizens yearn.

Thus does architecture recycle myth. To build similar waterfront scenes in London or Yokohama would be mere superficial transfer—for Gene Kelly and his ilk are not part of the mythology there. But in downtown America one could argue for their legitimacy, though obviously they lack the spiritual content that is seemingly a prerequisite of the sacred.

Indian cinema has produced its mythic images as well—images that seem to haunt the collective imagination of this subcontinent. In the sparse fare available on the government-controlled television network, the Sunday evening movie is watched by millions and millions of families across the nation, with the whole household, including retainers and servants, forming a small community around the set. In such a context, it is indeed chilling to realize how inherently vicious and unjust the relationships between landlord and serf are—rich and poor, powerful and meek.

Furthermore, as an architect who has been influenced by the double heights and spatial pyrotechnics of Le Corbusier and Wright, it is particularly mortifying to note the entrance of the grand villain. Usually played by an actor called Pran, he almost always lives in a duplex apartment, or a house with several double-height spaces, so that he can come prancing down the stairs to deliver a particularly cruel line. Architecture as the expression of power—monetary, political, physical—is a nexus not perceived by most architects, but one which is palpably vivid to Indians gathered around a TV screen.

Another area where the built triggers subtle and metaphysical feelings within us is the phenomenon of open-to-sky spaces. In fact,

because of their extraordinary qualities (which we have discussed earlier), these spaces provide the key to one of the most daunting issues facing the nation—the task of providing an environment for the urban poor. Today our towns and cities, like those elsewhere in the Third World, are being engulfed by a tidal wave of distress migration from the rural hinterland. Their growth rate is phenomenal. Over the last decade or two, many of these urban centers have doubled in population. In the process, the squatter colonies have increased tenfold. Twenty years ago, the city of Bombay had a population of 4.5 million of which half a million were squatters. Last year, they numbered well over 4 million persons—out of a city population of 9 million!

Attempts to deal with this phenomenon through the construction of “low-cost” housing built of brick and concrete have proved abortive, since they are far beyond the earning capacity of the poor and so end up being transferred (often illegally) to the middle class. Nor is it possible to subsidize such construction on a national scale—since there are a great many other priorities (food, health, education, job generation) competing for such meager resources as do exist.

Yet when one looks at the indigenous life-styles and builtform topologies prevalent all over India, one wonders: in our warm climate, must a family’s essential activities (cooking, sleeping, entertaining friends) really take place within the four walls of a room? Could they not occur in verandas and terraces and courtyards? Under Bombay’s conditions, where such spaces are livable for more than nine months of a year, we estimate that they have a usability coefficient of about half that of a room. Now rooms have a production cost (dependent on the amount of bricks, cement, steel, and other materials used to build them); open-to-sky space has a production cost as well (measurable in the amount of additional land, roads, and service lines it requires).

By quantifying these various costs and benefits, the points of trade-off can be determined, and the most desirable—and economical—patterns of housing identified. In most Indian cities, these turn out to be low-rise, high-density configurations, making extensive use of terraces, verandas, and courtyards (i.e., the qualities inherent in *aakash*)—for in a warm climate (like cement, like steel) open-to-sky

space is a resource, providing pragmatic advantages as well as metaphysical and sacred ones.

IV

And so we come to one of the most crucial issues facing the contemporary architect in today's India: how does one create an architecture of relevance for the millions upon millions of urban poor? What are their mythic images, their aspirations? The TV antenna? The neon light? The nylon sari? These, for the majority of our people, are powerful and legitimate dreams, coexisting in their lives with the rangoli on the floor, the yantra on the wall, the bindu on the forehead. For as we have already seen, the sacred realm does not consist only of formalized religion; on the contrary, popular incarnations of ancient and contemporary myths can also act as potent motivators in a society. In fact, just when one begins to suspect that in a modern city like Bombay, all this rehashing of Vedic mythology is a lot of elitist cant, one suddenly realizes that less than a hundred yards away, in a hovel of a shanty town, a squatter family is actually reenacting their version of those very myths in the real crunch of everyday life.

Our habitat is not created in a vacuum; it is the compulsive expression of beliefs and aspirations (implicit or explicit) that are central to our lives. India today consists of an incredibly rich reservoir of images and beliefs, like the transparent layers of a palimpsest—with all the colors and all the patterns equally vivid—starting with the models of the cosmos and continuing down to the images of this century. And it is the continuing presence of these layers in our lives that creates the pluralism of our contemporary society. In this respect, India is different from, say, the United States. For although American society can also be described as increasingly pluralistic and multireligious, these are religions with most of their myths castrated—which is perhaps why in any college chapel or airport lounge you can use the same bare table for a Christian ceremony, followed by a Jewish one, then a Muslim, then a Buddhist, and so forth. This would be impossible in India! Here one sometimes feels that no myth has ever been diluted or lost. Today they all coexist, riding together into the sunset.

Their presence decisively shapes our behavior and influences our decisions. Certainly it encourages us, even in a crisis, to take the “soft” option, since a pluralistic construct allows us to avoid having to make a clear choice (nothing is either black or white). This palimpsest allows us to avoid confrontation in other ways as well. Consider, for instance, a typical bazaar. The apparent chaos and disorder here, on close observation, actually consists of several layers of order, all superimposed. Over the centuries, this “chaos” has functioned as a self-defense system, protecting society against agents of change. After all, how does one “improve” upon chaos? If you were to enter a room where all the tables and chairs were upside down and the beds unmade, you would hardly be able to decide precisely what modifications should be carried out—for the simple reason that you would not know what you were looking at. If, on the other hand, everything was in simplistic, apple-pie order, suggestions would leap to your mind. The room would be extremely vulnerable to your intervention as an agent of change. That is why, after two and a half centuries of trying, the British were not able to fundamentally restructure India. Essentially, and for much of the time, they didn’t know what they were looking at! This is perhaps also the reason why Japan (which, as a society, has always been kept in spic-and-span order) could be changed so decisively, in just a handful of years, by General Douglas MacArthur. He could easily see what needed repositioning.

Another significant characteristic of chaos, or apparent chaos, is its metaphysical value. The Chinese have a high regard for what they call the Dragon of Disorder. They feel it helps to balance life. Perhaps it evokes in us an awareness of the nonmanifest. A few years ago, some urban design schemes were drawn up for the banks of the Tigris as it flows through the capital city of Baghdad—proposals somewhat similar to those of the beautiful manicured banks of the Seine around the Ile de la Cité in Paris. An Iraqi poet protested: where then would be the legendary Tigris of his youth, of ancient myth—a primordial river flowing through ambiguous and amorphous mud banks? His eloquence was very moving. I thought to myself: what would happen to Banaras if the Ganges River were redeveloped to look like the Seine? If you took the myriad activities that occur every day along the ghats—the ritualistic bathing of the pilgrims, the cremation of bodies, the reading of horoscopes by the astrologers, the chanting of the

Brahmin priests, and the boatloads of tourists clicking away with their cameras—if you took all these activities and placed them on the manicured quays of Paris, what would you get? The compound of a general hospital? The big scene of a disaster movie? In the context of Banaras, on the contrary, this tableau becomes a metaphor for the human condition. It makes you reflect on the metaphysics of life. Why is this? Precisely because the banks of the Ganges are ill defined and amorphous and because beyond all that human activity, on the far side of the holy river, the landscape stretches flat and enigmatic, onward to infinity.

This complex and ambiguous relationship between man and nature is central to Indian architecture. Europeans—starting with the ancient Greeks—have habitually conceived of architecture as a man-made object, complementing nature but quite separate from it. Hence, the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens: the quintessential object placed on the sacred mountain. Building and nature converse in harmonious dialogue but do not imitate each other. Most Western architecture, right down to this century, follows this paradigm. Hindu architecture never takes this extreme position; nor does it take its converse. Instead, we have the ambiguity of Ajanta—that stunning sweep of caves carved out of the mountain, each perpetually revolving in its place. Does Kailash destroy the mountain, or does it preserve it? Is it part of nature, or does it belong to man? Again, the philosophical pluralism that underlies the Vedas reveals itself, disdaining the dualities of simplistic choice.

The mythic values of the past affect us not only on issues of monumental architecture but on those concerning basic issues of shelter as well—issues of vital importance to the millions of urban poor living in our squatter colonies. In Latin America, where the phenomenon of these settlements first surfaced, you can scan the age of a colony by the stages of improvement carried out by its inhabitants. (First the asbestos roof, then the TV antenna, then the lace curtains, and so forth). This is seldom true of India. Old squatter colonies, even those which have been legitimized by government fiat, do not look so different from brand-new ones. Not that there are no improvements but just that these are not as palpable as those in Latin America. Why? Because the hedonistic images of Mediterranean mythology place a premium on the *casa* as a symbol—and a focus—of good living.

Now, as was pointed out earlier, building models of the cosmos leads to austere and metaphysical builtform; it was the paradise garden that brought sensuous delight to Indian architecture and classical music. Because we are not hedonistic, visitors assume we are not materialistic. Not true. Indians are as materialistic as anyone else. The reason the family of a very wealthy businessman is living in two miserable rooms of a crowded *chawl* in Bombay is that his symbol of conspicuous consumption is not the size of his casa but, rather, the diamond earrings in his wife's ears.

This absence of hedonism is primarily the outcome of the belief, central to Hinduism, that this manifest world is not all there is. It is mere illusion. Thus, down the centuries, the model hero in India has never been he who wins all but he who renounces all. This prototype continues to beckon to countless millions of Indians—even as they get more and more acquisitive every day (just as the image of the archetypal cowboy—Henry Kissinger's experience notwithstanding—perpetuates the myth of the heroic individual in America). *Sanyas*, the oath of renunciation, is the third duty specified in the Vedic shastras, after those of being a student and then a householder. It represents an attitude understood throughout the length and breadth of this land—one central to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and to his political appeal. It is implicit in the historic photograph of his last possessions: the pair of spectacles, the bowl, the sandals, the trio of monkeys ("see no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil"). In this image Gandhiji (who, like the great Mao-Tse-Tung, had almost no visual sensibilities), has generated an aesthetic image of the highest order—one which makes vivid to us the issues of existence. If ever we are going to be able to construct the program (and more crucially, conceptualize the socioeconomic context, the intellectual mindset) needed to address the issues of the urban poor, it is this image of Gandhiji's last possessions that will provide the key.

And if ever we can summon the political will to enact this program, the people of India will respond. We cannot get rich overnight; poverty is going to be with us for some years to come, and our twenty-first century is less likely to be concerned about electronic wizardry than about the bitter struggle for human equity. For us in India, as for those in the Third World, those colossal waves of distress migration engulfing our towns and cities are going to occupy center

stage—generating the overriding political and moral issues of the next five decades.

To deal with the questions they raise, we will have to learn how to transform mythic images and values and reinvent them in terms of new aspirations. We must enlarge our perspective so as to take cognizance of not only the public and private issues involved in our decisions but of the sacred ones as well. Together, these three realms can sensitize us not only to the manifest world that we can see and feel but also to the invisibilia that lie beneath.