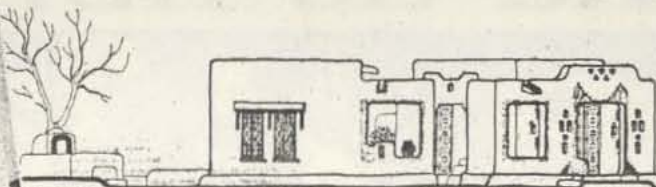


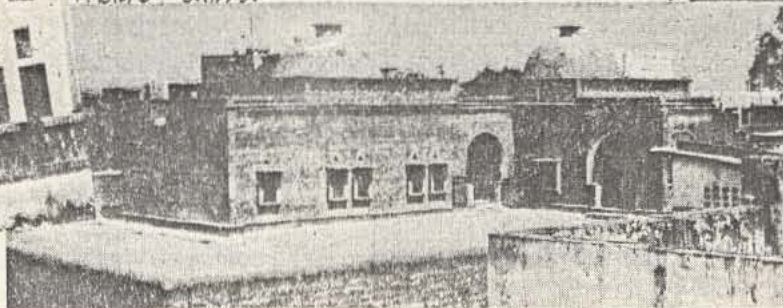
# Building Tomorrow with Yesterday



AN ESSENCE OF TRADITIONAL MOTIFS IN A CONTEMPORARY HOUSE.



ABOVE: ANANDGRAM - THE HOPE OF A COMMUNITY.  
BELOW: SEEMAPURI DAY CARE CENTRE - USAGE OF TRADITIONAL SKILLS.



BUILT BY THE VILLAGERS WITH ASSISTANCE FROM A VOLUNTARY AGENCY.

Photo: Revathi Kamath

**M**rs. Pupri Jayakar, in her book entitled *the Earthen Drum* says, "India is a country of tremendous survivals and she carries her Stone Age along with her. The atomic age exists alongside the chalcolithic..... The refusal to reject, and the capacity to transform archaic myth and ritual into the living present is purely a characteristic peculiar to the Indian ethos."

Why is it then that the contemporary architectural ambience is incapable of accepting this fundamental cultural characteristic? In order to accommodate and not exclude why does it not respond to the diverse cultural and economic complexities of our society, by widening its range of expression.

The characteristic of the ability to assimilate the knowledge, symbols and techniques of the past was apparent in architecture, until the coming of the industrial age. The contemporary architectural vocabulary has limited the function of architecture to merely shelter and store.

Architecture is rarely seen as an extension of the human being into the environment physically, socially and spiritually. It has always been and will be the main indicator of the relationships of human beings, to other forms of life and most important of all, the relationship of the human being to the elements — earth, water, air, sky and

energy. The importance of architecture as a means of expressing these relationships cannot be understood, and this must also be understood by politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, industrialists and others who are controlling the built environment by their decisions in other fields of life. It is true that the human-being moulds architecture but it must be realised that architecture and the built-environment also moulds the human-being. If the forms, components and organisation of architecture and the built environment are determined mainly by forces, devices and systems invented to serve the human-being and not by forces that originate directly from the creativity of the human being, it will result in an ambience that will mute and distort the human sensibilities that have evolved as a response to the conditions on the surface of the earth.

**B**ut if we look around us at the physical realities created by contemporary builders what do we see? The all purpose multi-storied super blocks to serve as housing, offices, markets, factories, the acres of faceless housing estates alienated from the vital urban activities of which they are a part, a diminutive Spanish villa in the suburbs of the city's vast tracts of what was once agricultural land dotted with rows upon rows of the ready made international dream home, set in a garden, complete with a sloping roof of reinforced concrete, painted a murky red — the remains and memory of the

roof tiles crafted by the potter once upon a time.

Where is the potter? Where is the carpenter carver? Where is the mason who crafted the brick or stone arch before the magic material of concrete began to replace his craft? Where is the muralist painter who created the evolution of the universe on our walls, before the synthetic paint industry took over to finish them a purely smooth uniform instead? Where is the unknown woman who moulded the walls of her house into a home and wrote on its surfaces, the stories of the nuances of life? Are a chosen few master crafts people to be preserved as relics in museums and displayed at appropriate occasions and the rest to languish and then disappear into the current of industrialisation? Does the acquisition of a new technology mean that the entire past is to be discarded as obsolete? Does it mean that there is only one uniform 'quality of life' that should be adopted by all so that the process and problems of development can be simplified for the authorities to undertake? Is there no way in which the vast store house of human knowledge, skills and resources can be utilised to create a built environment? An environment that is more meaningful to its users today, an environment that will actively assimilate the past and ensure its presence in the future — an environment that is human.

The design of a school and day care centre in a resettlement colony, Seema Puri incorporated a

brick dome, to be built without the use of shuttering, just as a wall is built, but with the skill of a brick mason who was aware of the method and discipline involved in placing the bricks in a manner that the dome would result. For six months, as the walls were coming up, we looked for a mason, but in vain. About to give up and in desperation we talked to the mason, who had so far built up the walls. Our face to face discussion led us to discover that the very same mason possessed the skills to construct the dome and finally did so. His fulfillment was immeasurable, because for the first time in his life as a mason in the organised sector of the building industry he used a skill that was imbibed from his traditional education as an apprentice in Muzzafarpur, Bihar. This method of roofing costs about half as much as an reinforced cement concrete slab.

**M**ost architects and builders cannot afford to continue to ignore and alienate human creativity by rejecting the organisational structures developed in the traditional pre-industrial societies, by labelling them all irrelevant. They cannot continue to work with their existing two dimensional tools of the T-Square, set-square and drawing board. They will have to learn to work consciously with the complex multi-dimensional realities that have, always, moulded, built form — realities that go much beyond the realm of the efficient logical and rational decision mak-

ing for which computers could be used.

Never before in the history of human kind have centralised authorities been in a position to dictate all the architecture of cities, towns and even the remotest villages. Today we see the house for the houseless programme manifesting itself in the villages, as small cramped, so-called *pukka* pre-constructed rows of houses, reminiscent of the world war camps for P.O.Ws. or refugees.

The concerned and sensitive architect is left wondering how to communicate to the rural development authorities the need to respect the morphology of the spatial structures of villages, the intimate relationship of the home, the symbolic significance of every object and its position in the home. The values and uses of some of the traditional building materials, techniques and building skills, the inter-relationship of geography, climate, sociology, anthropology and history. Factors which have affected, influenced and have been synthesized into a way of life. This understanding can only come from a deep respect and understanding of the essence of the 'old' and a commitment to integrate it with the 'new' in order to enhance the life of the villager. The administration must realise that the buildings they put up in the villages and its surroundings have to be more than mere shelters. Architects have built in the villages, showing that it is

possible to build the 'new' into the 'old'. It is now for the authorities to realise its importance and act accordingly.

**T**he inability of the planning and development authorities, to recognise and accept the plurality of our society has also manifested itself in the sterile monotony in human urban development. To strait jacket people into the economic categories of the H.I.C., M.I.G. L.I.C. and E.W.S. and to use this categorization as the main criterion for social grouping in housing development schemes is to be blind to the existing informal socio-political and economic organisation and networks, the very forces that make these places liveable. All because the urban development authorities know no better than to attempt to emulate the architecture of the industrialised societies.

Take the example of the community of traditional performing artists and crafts persons, who have been living for over 25 years opposite the Shadipur Depot in West Delhi. They have been voicing the need to be settled there, wanting to help bind, practice, perform, carve, sew, embroider and paint in an environment that respects their social structure which will enhance their creativity. A place that will express their continuity of tradition. Does their habitat have to conform to the image of the 'uniform' metropolitan environment? Is it not possible that all the 'technological' needs of the urban network

can be fulfilled in ways other than the 'standard norms of housing for the economically weaker sections of society? This is not the only community in Delhi with a need for special care. There are many others whose occupations, life styles and architectural requirements demand a shift from the contemporary conventional.

**P**eoples' participation in urban management has a wide range of possibilities in the re-development and maintenance of traditional environments like Shah-jahanabad, Nizamuddin, Chirag Delhi and the urban villages engulfed by the city. Karol Bagh and other dynamic areas of the city could vastly improve the quality of their environment if the residents and shopkeepers are encouraged to invest time as well as money for improving their surroundings. Let us face it, the D.D.A. cannot do it all — it is impossible. They should begin to share their burdens with the users of the environment. The methodology of decision, process making, planning, should include the direct participation of citizens groups. The initiative to form these groups both in social and territorial dimensions, should come from the authorities. They should cease to view as a threat, the expression of concern for the environment, its organisation and its qualities, and its effect on the daily lives of the people. They should allow for peoples alternatives in plan making instead of seeking alternatives from other elitist groups. There is nothing wrong with high technology, but something wrong

about where it comes from and how it is to be used. Bringing obsolete European prefabricated technology is only going to aggravate the situation. Sophisticated prefabricated building systems have been evolved and perfected in India long before the industrial western world did so. The stone architecture at Jaisalmer is one such example where the system accommodates inclusion possibility for endless variety through of craft and allows the users working with masons to assemble the component parts in a manner that would suit their social requirements and satisfy their needs of expression and creativity. The system has helped create an environment that people can appreciate and relate to even in a new age. There are qualities that live for ever. And we have reached the stage where we need the help of foreign architectures and designers in revitalising on our crafts and material techniques. Can the European, Japanese or American engineers who design the new prefabrication system, ever hope to understand and appreciate the potential and possibilities of adopting and evolving the methods of stone prefabrication and including new materials, replacing but not destroying the spirit and qualities of the 'old'? Would he even care? But the bigger question is — Do we care?...Or are we looking for instant answers in packages that we can buy in the international market place and forget how to build our own homes?

Revathi Kamath