



## A CONCISE HISTORY OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA

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### THE VERNACULAR REVIVAL

Vernacular Revival work is a step more basic than the work of Uttam Jain or Laurie Baker although the line between the Neo-Traditional, Vernacular and Revivalism can indeed be blurred. The Vernacularists have, however, been particularly concerned with methods of construction and building.

A number of architects whom one does not usually consider to be Vernacularists have experimented with the vernacular in specific situations. Charles Correa's first architectural commission was the Delhi Handloom Pavilion (1958). It consisted of sixteen squares sitting on an open 'labyrinthian podium' and built of sun-dried bricks. The open spaces were shielded from the sun by sixteen cable-supported parasols with an open square in the centre. Later in his career, in 1975, Correa designed the National Crafts Museum which is a 'village' consisting of a series of buildings and courts—village centre, temple, etc.—based on vernacular types (Khan, 1995; Correa, 1996). Like his *Artistes' Village* (1983–6) in Navi Mumbai, it will continue to be changed as necessity demands. Despite these examples, Correa can hardly be described as a practitioner of the vernacular although his work shows that he respects it.

The architects in India who might be considered to be practitioners of the vernacular include Rajendra Desai (b.1949) and Rupal Desai (b.1946) from Ahmedabad, Nari Gandhi (1943–93) in Mumbai, K.T. Ravindran and the Kamaths from Delhi. A number of the architects who have explored the use of the vernacular in India are foreign in origin (see Bhatia, 1994a). The focus of attention of architects of the Vernacular has been primarily on the provision of low cost buildings using local labour, materials, and building procedures.

Nari Gandhi, who only completed a dozen odd buildings in his thirty-year career, did his design work on site in much the same manner as the traditional *mistri*. Most of his work was domestic so he was able to eschew drawings and work directly with craftsmen using the building materials that they knew how to use. Much was left to craftsmen: they could decide what to do and how to do it. The houses, nevertheless, also reflect Gandhi's association with Frank Lloyd Wright.

In his designs Gandhi strove for a sense of the natural and the marvellous, using mythological symbolism. The Sadruddin Daya houses in Versova and Madh Island, Mumbai and the Patel house in Surat show the diversity of Gandhi's work. The Versova house consists of stonework arches, a sloping roof and various textured surfaces while the Patel House uses a controlled, largely orthogonal, geometry. The Versova house nestles in a green, luxuriant compound that penetrates the house's interior and denies its backdrop of high rise buildings.

Possibly the closest a recent architect-designed vernacular building complex that one can come to is the work of Gerard da Cunha (b.1954) at Nriyagram Village (1992+), near Bangalore. This centre for the study of dance, created by Promita Gauri (Bedi), the late Odissi dancer, represents an effort to maintain a way of life and learning. It was built using traditional building forms and





The School for Mobile Creches,  
New Delhi

built in a style that has already been introduced, the Modern Indian Vernacular.

#### THE MODERN INDIAN VERNACULAR

The Modern Indian Vernacular is the architecture of popular middle-class taste. To most academic architects, its exuberance and the eclecticism of its mixture of components is an anathema. They find the mishmash of styles in these buildings deplorable. The results have been dismissed as 'kitsch', something that arises when genuine emotion becomes debased. Yet the work is extraordinarily widespread and should not be lightly dismissed.

The Modern Indian Vernacular is an architecture of display. There are two basic types. The first consists of elements from India's architectural past be it Hindu, Islamic or colonial; and the second is a modernesque form. This latter form is a mixture, not an amalgam, of glass and other shiny materials—marble, polished granite and metals. Often the two types are integrated into what might be called a 'Las Vegas modern'.

Modern Indian Vernacular houses have become an important part of most large and medium sized Indian cities. Plotted houses in areas such as Greater Kailash and other parts of South Delhi, Salt Lake City on the periphery of Calcutta and parts of the Jayanagars in Bangalore exemplify this work. The houses typically

(Chandavarker, 1991). Nriyagram proved to be neither comfortable nor climatically suitable given contemporary expectations. It has evolved into Kuteeram, a resort hotel, a complex offering much greater comfort for visitors.

In Delhi, Vasant and Revathi Kamath designed buildings showing a similar design philosophy: day-care centres in Dakshinpuri and Seemapuri (1982) and the School for Mobile Creches (1981–3). In form, the school consists of a number of squares and courtyards. It has domes, constructed without shuttering, brick tiles and sandstone elements. They have also designed a number of farm houses—retreats for the urban wealthy—within vernacular traditions, making them unlike most such buildings. Most have been



Houses, Greater Kailash, Delhi

have sloping concrete chhajjas, concrete balustrades, projections at floor or parapet level and pitched Mangalore-tiled roofs. Some even have large picture windows facing directly into the western sun. The image sought varies considerably from house to house. Some are neo-Italian Renaissance, others have British colonial antecedents and yet others look back at a host of Indian traditions. Gautam Bhatia (1994a) sarcastically refers to the styles as Punjabi Baroque, Bania Gothic, Early Hardwar, Marwari Mannerism, Sindhi Hacienda, and Anglo-Indian Rococo.

Prior to 1980, the interiors of houses tended to be conservative in plan. Even the nouveau-riche were modest in displaying their wealth. Over time, the ways of day-to-day



Naimesh Park, Ahmedabad