



A brick dreams

A vision of light and shade, texture, pattern and form.

A lone brick was lying on the empty plot, somewhat chipped and broken, forlorn, forgotten. All around the brick, a new settlement was beginning to take shape. A settlement of the poor from far corners of the city, who had seen their homes crumble under the might of the bulldozer. Helpless poor who had been loaded onto trucks and dumped onto empty land

such as this, on that bitter December night, like so many cattle.

They called this place Seemapuri.

Now it was spring and a new life was beginning. The trees of New Delhi were bursting into flower. But at Seemapuri, the chalk lines on the barren ground, lines which contained twenty-five square yards



The humble brick comes into its own at Seemapuri.

Below: Sculptured windows with corbelled brick and stone sills.

Right: Brick arches spring diagonally and reduce large squares into smaller ones.

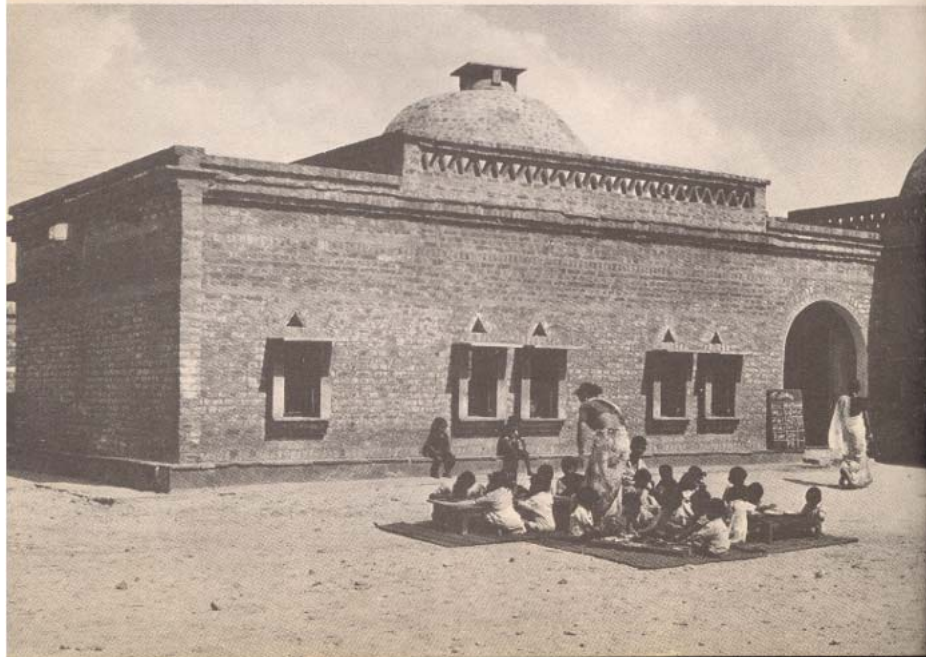
of land, were painfully being transformed into walls and roofs, shelters and homes. Amidst the crowded pattern of tiny plots and narrow streets, were occasional larger patches of empty ground. No one knew who they belonged to and no one cared. In the grim struggle to piece together a new life, no one had time to care. On one such empty plot lay the forgotten brick, unseen and uncared for.

The brick watched the houses grow and reflected. The people around him were from many parts of the country and of all hues. They had been thrown together by circumstances. Each had belonged to a rich tradition of beauty, subtly

different from the other. The growing number of mouths to be fed had forced them all out of their village homes into this alien culture. Abject poverty was their common denominator now, and cultural memories were dimly distant. Gone was the loving care and attention they had lavished on their village homes; the attention to detail and the joy of enrichment through texture, pattern and decoration. The luxury of the impermanence of their old homes, a luxury because it impelled them to indulge themselves in the pleasure of re-creating from time to time as the seasons changed, had given way now to the cold logic of permanence. Besides, they had not the time or the spirit

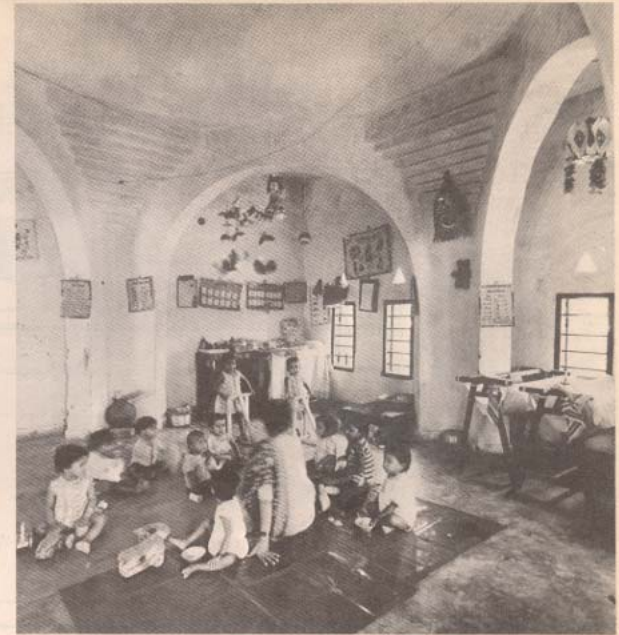
now to enjoy the creation of their homes. Their souls were shattered, their senses numbed, and their hands worked like machines, nailing together scraps of wood and tin or listlessly laying one brick over another.

Some day, thought the brick, their souls will awaken from this stupor and yearn for beauty again. Where will they find it? Not in the soulless modern boxes of the city they had come to, nor in their broken links with a forgotten past. Not in the crass commercialism of the urban market-place, which was unthinkable unaffordable anyway, and which even their children's children couldn't aspire to. Were they



doomed to a future without beauty? No they can't be! Their souls will struggle out of this grave, their imaginations will soar, their minds will find solutions and their hands will create objects of beauty again. Their poverty will force them to use the humblest of urban materials ... Hey, that's me, the brick!... The realisation dawned in a flash!

The brick was excited now. His mind was racing back in time, to the days when builders had used his potential imaginatively, to ages and cultures all over the world, where he had been appreciated for both his strength and his ability to decorate, and had been loved for his colour, texture, warmth and humour.



He silently cursed the image of the God of technology, who built clean glass boxes and killed man's soul. The world has become clean-line, box-crazy since then, thought the brick, and can think of nothing better to do with me than laying me in layer upon boring layer, climbing endlessly up into the sky, only to be chopped off by a Floor Space Index here and a Height Limit there. Good God! Would you believe it? I feel as shattered as the people of Seemapuri. But one day, like them, I will also break out of these modern shackles and express myself. The Machine Age, the Space Age, the soul killing Instant Age be damned! All this high-falutin philosophising had made the brick very weary. Without realising it, he drifted into a long, deep, sleep....

The brick slept for a long time. During his slumber, he had a beautiful dream; a dream that brought an angelic smile to his chipped and broken edges.

He dreamt that on the land that he was lying on, a small, little school was beginning to take shape. He jumped out of the way of the foundations in a flash, and settled down on a corner of the site, to watch. As the brick walls grew slowly out of the ground, the watching brick's eyes widened as he realised that something different was happening. This was no modern box, where the thicker walls of the burdened foundations were hidden on the inside. Frankly and boldly, the foundations here were stepping back on the outside, forming a clearly expressed plinth. A nice place for the children to sit on, he thought. Excitedly, he waited to see what would happen next. A layer of sandstone slabs for the damp-proof course, instead of the usual concrete... That's great, thought the brick, down with the cement conspiracy! It's lime time for a fine time! Yippee...! he said, as the freshly slaked lime was being mixed into the mortar. Then came the

sculptured pairs of windows, not just holes in the wall; these windows had corbelled brick and stone sills, at a height for the children, rather than the teachers, to look out from, with projecting brick borders and a sandstone sunshade, topped off finally with a cute triangular opening for the pigeons to coo in. The brick couldn't believe his eyes! He pinched himself to find out if he was dreaming. Yes, he was! He shut his eyes tight again to let the dream continue. Why spoil it?

The dream continued and the brick saw the walls blossom out into corbelled brick and stone courses, signifying the end of the wall and the beginning of a delicate parapet of triangular openings, created out of his cousin the brick tile. Beautiful, beautiful, he murmured.

Hopping about in excitement now, he hopped into the building, and nearly hopped right out of his well burnt skin when he saw what was happening! Brick arches were springing diagonally across rooms, reducing large squares into smaller ones. Pendentives in corbelled brickwork were further transforming the smaller diagonal squares into octagons and finally, the octagons melted into the gentle curves of domes. Domes in brick, built without the shackles of shuttering, in rings that leaned inwards and closed in on themselves, till at last they were contained by the final ring, the key ring — a concrete ring — alas!

Vell, OK, reflected the brick, getting over his initial disappointment, we're in the twentieth century, aren't we? And concrete is a fact of life, difficult as it may be to accept. Settling contentedly back on his



Architecture

Octagons melt into the gentle curves of domes.

frog, the brick gazed upon his dream vision. The domes had been capped with lantern lights made of brick tiles and stone slabs, to bring in a glow of light and let out the hot air. The sandstone spouts, the orange shutters and the warmth of the brick walls, bathed in sun, completed the picture.

This is it! yelled the brick in excitement. By Jove, this really is it! My vision of strength, love and beauty for Seemapuri; my vision of light and shade, texture, pattern and form, all created out of my potential; my statement and manifesto to save the souls of the twentieth century; my vision to inspire, an affordable vision of the joy of living, dedicated to the children of squalor, who will grow up in its shadow, imbibing its messages of faith in the forgotten values of the human spirit. May they grow into beautiful beings.

Thus dreamt the brick as he slept and slept and slept...

If you happen to find yourself in Seemapuri some day, wandering through the bustling squalor, you too may sense the yearning spirit, longing to break free and you too

may chance upon the brick's vision. If you do, please take off your machine values at the gate. You will then enjoy the little imperfections of line and surface, you will not mind the splashes of rain through the roof lights, the small puddles on the floor, the streaks on the walls. These are the good things of life, so enjoy the vision and be happy.

Every brick has his day. Rest in peace.

Lest we forget: a humble thanks to Hassan Fathy, the inspirer, who fought the concrete box at a time when it was inconceivable to do so, and to Khan Sahib, the mason who revived forgotten skills to make the domes possible.

Project: School for Mobile Creches at Seemapuri, Delhi
Architects: Revathi and Vasant Kamath.
Structural Consultants: Patel and Associates.
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