

# THE CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND ACTIVITIES

POONA

*Christopher C. Benninger*



## Project Data

*Location:* Poona, India.

*Architect:* Christopher C. Benninger.

*Architectural Team:* Manisha Boradkar, Rajiv Vishwas Rao, Madhav Joshi, Gautam Balsekar, Nikita Oak.

*Prime Contractors:* Dinshaw and Dinshaw.

*Structural Engineers:* C. E. Godse and Associates.

*Electrical Contractors:* Maintain.

*Fenestration:* Jogo Engineers.

*Covered Area:* 743.5 sq.m. (existing); 720.3 sq.m. (planned).

*The Centre for Development Studies and Activities was founded in 1976 by Christopher Benninger and his wife and colleague, Aneeta Gokhale, with Barbara Ward as the Founder Patron. Through the medium of the Delos Group, Margaret Mead, Buckminster Fuller, Arnold Toynby and others contributed to formulating the founding principles of the Centre, which instigates and analyses development work throughout India, Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. An autonomous centre for advanced studies of Poona University, sponsored by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, it carries out research and advisory functions for community groups, development authorities, financial institutions, the UNO and the ministries of national governments. A two-year postgraduate programme in development planning and management, sponsored by the CDSA, is based on the campus, and attended by students from Africa, America, Asia and Europe.*

With Independence, India became free, and the pace of transformation hastened. Urbanization, industrialization, and the introduction of high technology all placed new pressures on a growing, multi-racial, multi-linguistic nation. Pandit Nehru pondered a new society with the new purposes of secularism, planned progress, and constitutional rights. As architectural artefacts reflect the intentions of each era, so research institutions emerged in the subcontinent, reflecting the intentions of this new society, whose purpose is symbolized more by a question mark, than by an exclamation. If previous societies were characterized by a sure direction towards a vision of the future, India is characterized by a search, and a re-search for what it is, and what it wants to be.

The Centre for Development Studies and Activities (CDSA), Poona, is one such expression of this great quest. Rather than a laboratory of experimentation, it is a place of exploration and reflection on the great laboratory that is India. The villages, towns and regions are a complex socio-economic context, from which the Institute gathers information, analyses it, and attempts to improve the emerging development scenario. Most of the Centre's work is field-based, and action-orientated. The campus is a place of retreat, analysis, debate, intellectual

*1. View up the hillock towards the east-facing elevation of the Institute for Rural Development.*

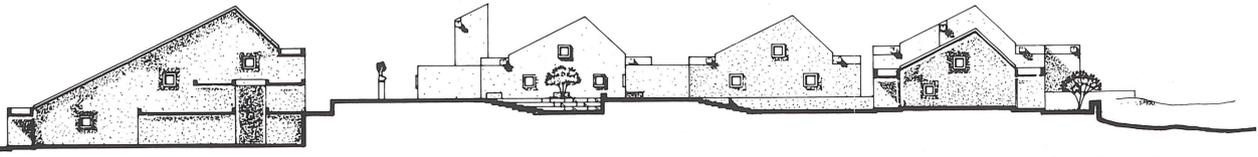
proposition; and for the preparation of proposals for action.

Unlike cultural artefacts of the past, which reflected a Utopia, or a slice of paradise, the environment at the CDSA campus is an enclave which represents just one possible arrangement. But it is not a passive reflection; it is an intended response, which expresses the concepts of sustainable environment through its forest and orchard, planted on its one-time wasteland site; in the water harvesting of the hillside; in the use of local materials; and in the crafting of structures by local artisans.

The Centre is located on the periphery of Poona, an industrial and educational centre in western India with about two million inhabitants. The climate of Poona, about 200 metres above sea level, is mild the year round, except for a hot period in April. During the rest of the year it is either rainy, during May to September, or balmy, from October to March. A great deal of the life of the Institute therefore takes place out-of-doors, or under semi-enclosed spaces. The campus sits on a terrace, along the fall of a hill, where the slopes of India's Western Ghat Mountains meet the great plains of the Deccan Plateau. Such a location provides vistas up into the mountains, or down a valley to the city.

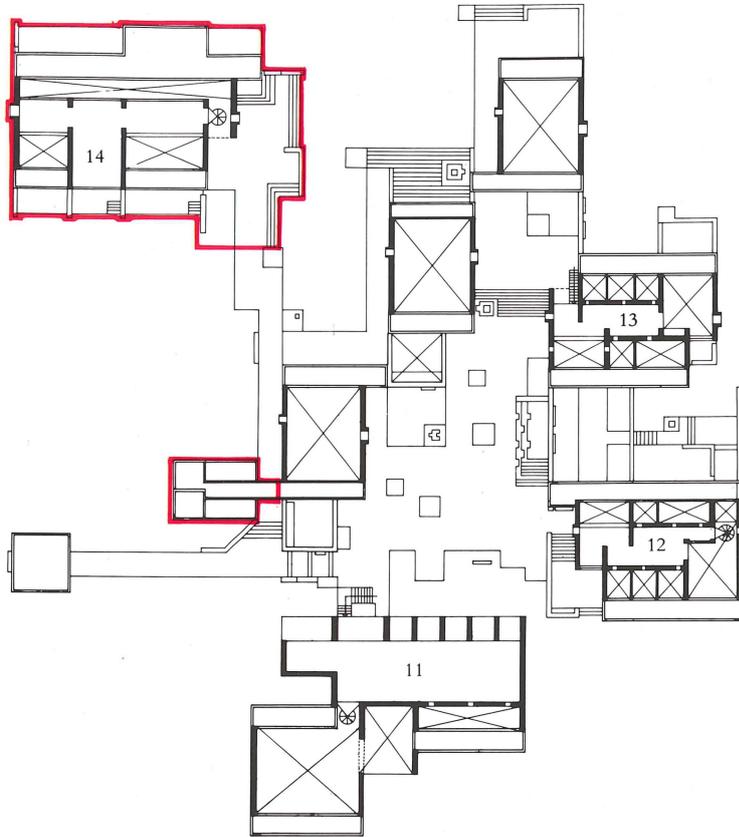
A fabric of build has emerged from the assemblage of three generic elements. Stone, which has been cleared off the land, where terraces are planted with orchards, forms a strong pattern of east-west parallel walls. They shade the interiors from the southern sun, and are punctured by framed views into the bucolic valley below. Reflecting the ancient terraces of the region, the walls provide a clear structure to the fabric.

The north-south enclosing elements are of transparent sliding panels, shaded by large verandahs. These screens can be adjusted in individual spaces to regulate the breeze; hence there are no electric fans in the complex. They also provide

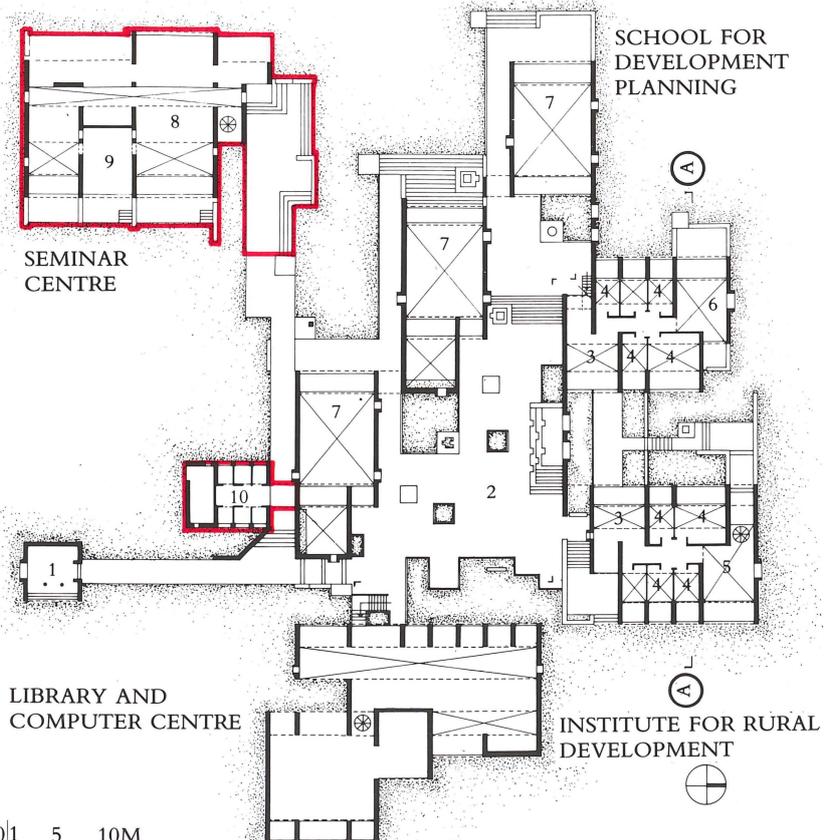


SECTION AA

0 1 5 10M



MEZZANINE FLOOR



- 1 ENTRANCE
- 2 ACADEMIC QUADRANGLE
- 3 OFFICE
- 4 STUDY
- 5 SEMINAR
- 6 DIRECTOR
- 7 CLASS ROOM
- 8 DINING ROOM
- 9 KITCHEN
- 10 WET CORE
- 11 COMPUTER LABORATORY
- 12 STUDIO
- 13 ADMINISTRATION
- 14 RECREATION

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

GROUND FLOOR

0 1 5 10M

## BUILDINGS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH



energy-free lighting during the day.

The third element is that of tile roofs, which slope more steeply towards the west, from whence strong winds blow, bearing the heavy monsoon rains off the Arabian sea. Facing east, they slope more gently against the delicate morning sun. This asymmetry, which is used throughout the fabric, reflects the thoughtful mind which is always wondering. The three elements are held together by a system of courts, or *chowks*, stone stairs and paved pathways. Staggered steps, sitting blocks, or *ottas* and lotus ponds all reflect local forms of space moulding, common in the village squares, mosque courtyards, and temples of this mountainous region.

All of the elements are patterned into a language in which functional spaces can be conceived of as nouns, and visual-spatial links become the verbs, connecting the whole into various graphic ideas, which change their tone of meaning with the variable light of day, and the transforming colours of the seasons.

2. *The academic quadrangle is arranged around a podium. (This view is looking towards the west.)*

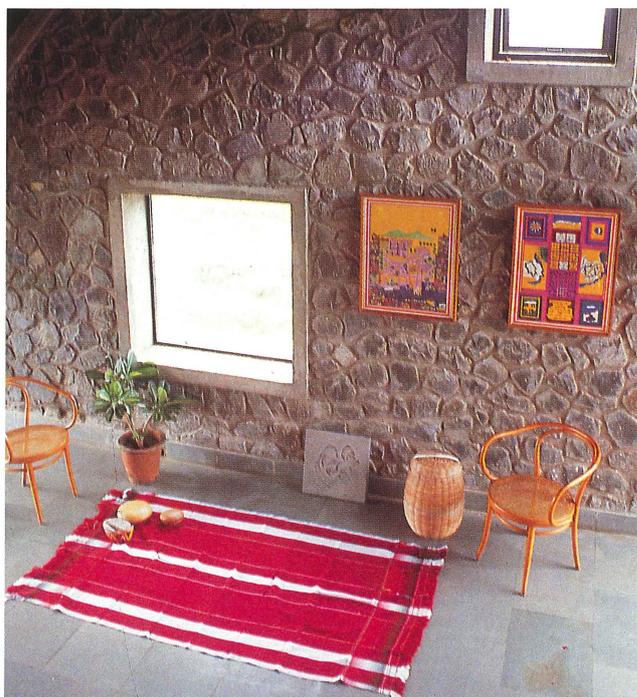
3. *A view from the entrance forecourt of the Institute for Rural Development across a podium towards the classroom.*

4. *Kund-like steps demarcate, and create an informal place to sit. (This view is looking towards the east.)*

Every institution has two contradictory aspects: its rituals and its aspirations. The rituals bring order into an architectural expression, but they can also be negative influences, in that they foster bureaucracy and stifle aspiration. So, as a counterpoint to order, there must also be mystical elements, which invoke the spirit and call out to it to be free. At the Centre, a number of devices make an entreaty to the habitués to stop 'seeing', and to 'be'. A wall which encloses, which defines, is unexpectedly interrupted by an opening, revealing the sky, clouds, hills,

villages, and the city beyond. There is a kind of rhythm between that which is sure, and that which is fleeting. The presence of pattern, of proportion, and of texture provide a constant sense of consistency, but then there are no boundaries. Just when one feels one is enclosed by nurturing roofs, one realizes it was a prelude to an invitation to the mind, to look out, away from one's self, and to contemplate the cosmos. These physical devices, which link the day-to-day work of the Centre to the spiritual, evoke the ideology of the institution, which calls upon each member to think freely, but also to make some contribution to his context, his society. Rather than a tight lattice of order, which holds things together, the lattice is used as a pattern out of which individual perogatives emerge. Some platforms are created ostensibly for an ancient brass pot to sit on, or as a base for an antique bird feeder. But these mechanisms are in fact used to attract the mind away from the core of the institute, where daily tasks, and the details of work,

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could overpower one's creative energies.

The internal spaces are closely linked with the external ones, beyond transparent screens, through verandahs, extended porches, and platforms. Under the tile, polished teak ceilings radiate a warm sense of shelter, and their slopes focus spaces inward, while the wandering eye steals distant illusions. Seminar rooms, studios, and entrance halls are double-storeyed, the upper portion often merging into a mezzanine, or higher floor space. Glass fenestration allows views through other structures, and an openness prevails. One can see what activities are taking place, yet one can claim authority over one's own privacy. This openness reveals the deep-rooted meaning of the Institute, in which the liberated mind searches for the resolution of specific problems, often through team-work, or through the exchange of ideas.

The landscaping, furniture, interiors, structures and much of the artwork, have been created by the Institute's own members. Thus, the research/action concerns

5. View across the lower court to the entrance of the School for Development Planning. An ancient brass pot acts as a focal point, around which spaces re-orient as the eye moves.

6. View between the School of Development Planning and the Institute for Habitat and Environment, towards the 'illusionary' windows into the podium. In the centre is the bird-feeder or chabutra.

7. The Director's meeting area, from the balcony in the mezzanine floor.

of the Institute range from the design of very small artefacts required in everyday life (like drawer handles, or light switches), to regional plans, and national policies which temper macro-development.

The Centre houses a major collection of Rajput and Mogul miniature paintings, silk screens by Balakrishna Doshi, ancient bronze statues, and concrete reliefs by Christopher Benninger. A statue presides over the main podium, sculptured by the famous Indian artist Piraji Sagara. Its body

represents what is nurturing, and its eyes, looking up to the sky, represent the search for wisdom. People at the Institute call it 'Karuna', which means in Sanskrit 'wisdom tempered by compassion', which is the guiding spirit of the Centre.

Construction, which began in 1988, is ongoing, and in the near future the library and computer centre will be initiated.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIKITA OAK

CHRISTOPHER C. BENNINGER STUDIED ARCHITECTURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA AND AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY, AND THEN STUDIED URBAN AND SOCIAL POLICY AT THE MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY. HE TAUGHT AT THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE (AHMEDABAD), AND LATER AT HARVARD (1969-71), AND HE INITIATED THE SCHOOL OF PLANNING AT AHMEDABAD WITH BALAKRISHNA DOSHI (1971). HE ACTS AS AN ADVISOR TO DEVELOPMENT AGENCIES, SUCH AS UNCHS (HABITAT), THE WORLD BANK, THE ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK, UNFAO, AND UNICEF. 