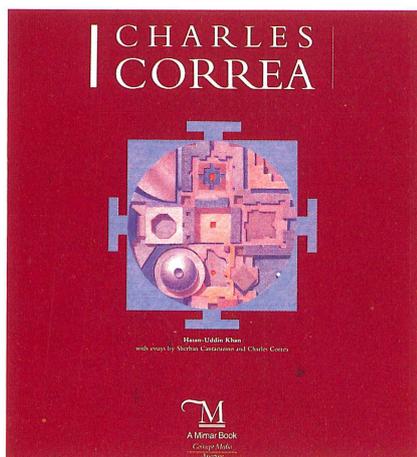

The Fate of Man and Architecture in the East

By **Kenneth Frampton**



Charles Correa

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A critical review

When Charles Correa was awarded the RIBA Gold Medal in 1984 there was considerable astonishment on the part of the architects in the Anglo-American establishment. For while many of them had heard of Correa and a considerable number had even heard him speak, his production as an architect remained largely unknown. In part this surely stems from the solipsistic arrogance with which the West still insulates itself from the emerging power and vitality of the East. In part, however, it also derives from Correa's personality for until recently he has displayed a marked disinterest in any kind of publicity other than the charismatic intelligence that emanates spontaneously from his presence. He has been a latterday paradox of a public architect who refrains from talking directly about his own work; a figure, one might say, more concerned with the concepts than with the realisations. In today's media

world, Correa, despite his early predilection for film, remains an Arendtian man of action and speech, rather than a McLuhanesque figure preoccupied with the image.

Some of the ignorance about Correa's work can no doubt be attributed partly to the nature of his architecture, which, with the singular exception of his recent preoccupation with *trompe l'oeil* effects, could hardly be considered fashionable. For Correa's architecture is primarily organisational, rather than formal or technological in character and while it inevitably entails both form and technique, it is hardly concerned with either art or technology as ends in themselves. Indeed, the strength and consistency of Correa's architecture surely stems from its anthropological base and its ecological predisposition. There are the cognitive modes, so to speak, that have served to liberate his thinking from the unduly abstract and even mystical paradigms occasionally advanced by Buckminster Fuller and Christopher Alexander, both of whom have exercised a formative influence on Correa. Like Fuller, Correa is a lateral thinker but he does not share his obsession with technology; like Alexander, he is a pattern-maker, but he does not regard the pattern as the necessarily embodiment of some kind of transcendent meaning. On the contrary, Correa seems to ground his work in the obduracy of the eco system and in the life forms that derive from its cultivation. And while Correa, like all contemporary architects, remains conditioned in his practice by the reality of the universal Megapolis, his fundamental inspiration lies elsewhere, above all, perhaps, in the still rooted rural life of Southern India. This is clear from the very first building of his career, the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya, Ahmedabad, realised in 1963 and it would be hard to find another commemorative work where the monumentality is so inseparable from the village analogue that underlies its clustering form. Indeed, the appearance of cattle

in its formal courtyards would hardly engender surprise.

Four Indian paradigms may be said to be the key to Correa's architectural imagination; Fatehpur Sikri, Jaisalmer, Jaipur and last, but not least, the ubiquitous *maidan* or green sward of the traditional Indian village. All four of course are not equally evident in every work. In the case of the Gandhi memorial, the inspiration seems to have been drawn as much from the enlightened Mughal city, founded by Akbar, as from the typical Indian village that played such a salient role in Gandhi's thought. Nevertheless in this instance, the image of the village seems dominant in as much as the surrounding earth is constantly emphasised.

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A Western influence of primary importance in Correa's work is the cluster, matt-building, paradigm developed by ATBAT Afrique and Team X in the 50s; above all the low-rise Moroccan settlements projected and partially realised by Bodiensky, André Studer and Shadrach Woods. This influence is evident, for example, in Correa's projected Punjab Housing Complex of 1966 or in his Previ Experimental Housing, partially realised in Lima, Peru in 1973.

Unique to Correa's thinking and integral one might say to his work is his concept of the so-called “tube-house”. First formulated in 1961 for an Ahmedabad low-income housing competition in which Correa received first prize, this climatically and culturally conditioned concept was to be initially realised in his

luxurious Ramkrishna House built in Ahmedabad, in 1964. This sectional type is so central in Correa's architecture that it merits characterising in generic terms. Basically it comprises a narrow-fronted cross-wall unit, lit from the two ends and from a broken, double-pitched roof above. The ground floor (shielded from the heat and glare by the roof) is conceived as a subtly manipulated podium-cum-patio. Discrete changes in level accommodate sitting positions in close proximity to the cold mass of the floor while cool low-level, ventilation rises off the shaded patio. This last is induced by the venturi-effect of the sloping roof, cut-open at carefully selected points in order to light the patio and ventilate the upper part of the house. This so-called "open to the sky" space is occupied by a bedroom floor which, in turn, leads to balconies, terraces and eventually to the traditional roof-top, *barsati*, screened by a pergola.

This hot/monsoon house-type is so central to Correa's domestic work that variations on it crop up throughout his career, irrespective of whether the commission is low-cost, low-rise cluster housing, as in the Cablenagar Township proposal of 1967, or whether it is a one-off middle class dwelling, as in the superbly detailed Parekh House of 1966 or in the unrealised house designed for his own occupation in 1968. The Parekh and Correa Houses represent the most subtle development of the "tube-house" form, the type being rendered two narrow fronted sections situated side by side, Parekh House, or end to end as in the case of the Correa House. These adjacent sections feature a "winter" section where the upper bedrooms close over the lower volume and a "summer" section where the upper part steps back as a series of sleeping terraces covered by a *barsati*. A version of this winter/summer alternating principle was applied to the low-cost housing that Correa designed for the Cablenagar Township in Kota and Correa has since applied versions of the same section to densely packed public

structures, such as his magnificent Kovalam Hotel, built in Kerala, near the old Kovalam Palace in 1974. The most recent incarnation of this idea may be said to be the Belapur Housing, completed in 1986, where regrettably the concept seems to have degenerated into ingenious clusters of somewhat "westernised" housing units. Little is left here of the introspective Indian form save for the elevated, external sleeping terraces. Aside from these the rhythm of the tiled, pitched roofs, the pierced fenestration and pop-out balconies recalls nothing so much as Anglo-Saxon, middle class housing estates. While the interlocking matt-layout remains (combined with a Radburn plan for the accommodation of cars) much of the earlier autochthonous rigour seems to have been sacrificed for the sake of achieving a popular image. Like Correa's Cidade de Goa Hotel (1978-82) the result is seductive to the point of being sentimental. This seems all the more unfortunate once one realises that the Belapur Housing is intended to serve as a demonstration neighbourhood type for New Bombay.

The evolution of an appropriate plan for New Bombay has been a central preoccupation in Correa's thought for almost a quarter of a century and the entire corpus of his work, as an architect, has to be set against the larger perspective of this total proposition, for Correa has been instrumental in initiating a strategy for *diverting* rather than *stemming* the global urbanisation of the Third World. One can hardly improve on Correa's succinct formulation of the scope of the problem and its potential strategic solution.

"By the year 2000, there will be almost 50 cities in the world each with over 15 million inhabitants: 40 will be in the Third World, most of these in Asia: and one of them will be Bombay. Between 1900 and 1940 Bombay's population increased marginally to about 2.8 million. By 1960 it had shot up to 4 million and today it has crossed 9 million. ... By the year 2000, these demographic

changes will have begun to stabilise; what we need during the next two decades is a holding action which involves increasing employment and incomes at the village and small town level and stimulating the economic growth of middle-sized towns and cities to act as counter magnets to the big metropolis. Because both of these strategies would have a take-off period of at least 10 to 15 years, action must simultaneously be taken to restructure the existing metropolis so that they can function during this interim period while their growth rate tapers off. If the two strategies fail, it is possible that a city like Bombay will grow into a vast conurbation containing 30 to 40 million by the turn of the century. Even if they are successful there still remains the problem of making Bombay function with as many as 15 million inhabitants."

"Correa understands that the great task which confronts us all today, East and West alike, is to accept that progress has its limits, while still attempting to maintain and improve the general quality of life."

Correa's plan for New Bombay, worked out with Pravina Mehta and Shirish Patel and officially adopted in 1970 by the government of Maharashtra, involves developing the coastline lying on the mainland to the east of the Bombay peninsula and simultaneously linking this hinterland, by transit, ferries and bridges, back into the existing conurbation. In all this the salient factor is Correa's proposal for re-distributing the ever-growing migrant population over an adjacent, virgin region by creating continuous looping necklaces of low-cost settlements. The scheme proposes linking these by bus to catchment points, which, located on the rapid transit sys-

tem, would provide easy access to jobs in Bombay while simultaneously opening up the entire coastal region. In this way, as Correa put it, rapid transit can be used to increase the supply of urban land commensurate with the demand.

“It is to Correa’s great credit that he has situated himself on the world stage without relinquishing any of his intellectual and moral commitment to the plight of the Third World.”

If one who has not lived in Bombay nor seen Correa’s 1976 film documenting the urban conditions of the city, one may not be able to appreciate the magnitude of the holding operation proposed in the New Bombay plan. In this regard priority must be given to his ideas for ameliorating the desperate living conditions of the present urban population. I am alluding to Correa’s proposal to modify the wider streets of the city so as to provide, on a diurnal basis, for two different classes of marginal pavement users. The first of these are the hawkers who obstruct the sidewalks during the day; the second are the low-paid office workers of the city, who sleep on the pavements at night. Correa’s description of his proposal is self explanatory:

“What was proposed was a line of platforms 2 metres side and 0.6 metres high with water taps placed approximately at intervals of 30 metres.

During the day these platforms would be used by the hawkers, thus clearing the pavements and the arcades for pedestrians ... In the evening, at about sunset, the taps would be turned on and the platforms washed clean by municipal sweepers. They would then provide convenient *otlas* (platforms) for people to sleep.”

That this Fuller-like “re-arrangement of the scenery” (a slogan that Correa in-

variably cites in support of his ideas) necessarily involves considerable reduction in the average road width and this may well explain its failure, so far, to elicit adequate support.

Correa’s practice has expanded of late as we may judge by comparing the production of the last ten years to the output of the previous decade. And while the number of works realised may have remained fairly constant, the scale and importance of the commissions has grown in both size and stature. I have in mind in the first instance, the relatively large residential complexes completed in Delhi (1978) and Kerala (1982) and the residential hotel built on the Andaman Islands, in the same year; his lyrical and diminutive Bay Island Hotel, built at Port Blair for the Indian Tourist Corporation. As to this last it would be hard to find any modern, all timber building which would be capable of equalling its elegance.

In the second, one has to set in contrast to these achievements, the important public buildings that he has completed since 1975, beginning with the Crafts Museum in Delhi. Of these the most important have been the Salvacao Church built in Dadar, Bombay (1985), the Bharat Bhavan arts centre completed in Bhopal (1981), and the Kala Akademi performing arts centre realised in Panaji, Goa, in 1983. In most of these works Correa has tried to create precincts rather than buildings in an accepted sense, so that the conical concrete shells of the Salvacao Church find themselves anchored to the site by a series of outriding, flanking courtyards, while the Bharat Bhavan depends for the poetic quality of its organisation on a series of counter-changing courts and podia. Like Kevin Roche’s Oakland Museum in Berkeley, California, the Bharat Bhavan has all the appearance of being a colossal earth work, reminiscent in certain aspects of the belvedere-gardens, capping the Red Fort in Agra. Here too, one surveys the panorama of a vast river from the confines of a

complex, terraced labyrinth; ascending and descending from the internal auditorium to the open-air amphitheatre situated at the water’s edge.

As Correa tries to make clear in his seminal postscript “Transfers and Transformations”, the Mughal civilisation is never very far away as a source of inspiration for his work. He cites the Red Forts at Agra and Delhi as typifying the perennial tendency to *disaggregate* architectural form in the Indian climate. Thus, we find him writing of the Mughal forts; “... the lower levels were used for defence, stores, etc., but at the top, on a terrace was constructed an elegant pattern of free-standing pavilions, placed in immaculate gardens, inlaid with fountains, canals and running water. These pavilions were differentiated as to use ... But how could such a disaggregated pattern be made visible in the cold of the northern Indian winters and the annihilating heat of the summers? The answer lies in the sunken courtyards, which give access to a lower level of rooms. In the early morning of the summer months, a velvet *shamiana* (canopy) was stretched over the rim of the courtyards trapping the cold overnight air in the level of the rooms. This is where the Mughal emperor spent his day. In the evening the *shamiana* was removed, and the emperor and his court came out on the gardens and pavilions of the terrace level. In the cold but sunny winters, this pattern was reversed: the terrace gardens being used during the day, and the lower level rooms at night”.

“Disaggregation” and “alternation” are key concepts in Correa’s architecture although he doesn’t make specific use of the latter term. For Correa, disaggregation not only means the exfoliation of a given building programme and its accommodation in a series of dispersed pavilions and courts under the sky but it also implies a distribution (or redistribution) of such flexible physical benefits for the society at large. Thus, in his theoretical essay *The New Landscape*, published in 1985, we find him writing:

"In using open-to-sky spaces, the territorial privacy of the families is of decisive importance. For as the surrounding buildings get taller, these spaces get more and more restricted in function. A ground floor courtyard can be used by a family for many purposes, including sleeping at night. Two storeys, and you can still cook in it. Five storeys, and it is only for the children to play in. Ten storeys and it's a parking lot. The old indicators of so many metres of open space per 1000 persons are too simplistic and crude, we have to go on to *disaggregate* these numbers both qualitatively and quantitatively in order to anticipate their real usefulness".

"This much surely he has profoundly understood, although he has never advanced it as a general thesis, namely, that it is in the East rather than the West that the fate of man will eventually be decided."

In this instance, Correa obviously had his extensive low-rise housing experience in mind, much of it regrettably unrealised. Clearly, the principal "alternation" is a necessary corollary to the disaggregation in as much as the "open-to-sky-space" has to be used for different purposes, at different times, in different seasons. The occupation and adaptation of the physical fabric through changes in the mode of use has implications that transcend the potential aestheticism of the object, for the alternating principle tends to emphasise the tactile appropriation of space. The seasonal and even diurnal covering-in of sunken courtyards as a device for encapsulating cold air is patently an operation that involves certain bodily intimacy between the being and the built form, as is also the case in the seasonal migration of sleeping quarters during the

transition between the Monsoon and the hot-dry periods. All of this, is, of course, deeply embedded in the tradition of Indian culture and it testifies to Correa's profound respect for history that these traditions should find themselves transformed and re-integrated into his work.

It is exactly this principle of "transfer" and "transformation" that accounts for the title of the theoretical postscript to which I have already referred. This is the *coda*, so to speak, in which Correa resumes the fundamental principles that have guided his work. It is important to note, in this regard, that except for the witty indulgence in *trompe l'oeil* effects and the occasional nostalgic reference, as in the bar mural in the Bombay Gymkhana, depicting the first Indian test match, Correa never resorts to historicising. By and large he abjures stylistic quotes, concentrating on the principles sedimented in the past rather than on the specific forms. Thus, he writes of his predilection for the square or nine-square system of organisation (e.g. the plan of Jaipur):

"The reference to the *mandalas* is not done merely in an archaeological sense — grave digging — for it also reflects contemporary sensibilities. The *mandala* is a timeless and universal form, in fact found in many other cultures around the globe and across history. Perhaps it is the direct outcome of something physiological in the deep structure of the human brain. Certainly, looking back at my own work, I find a reappearance again and again of the square plan (commencing with the Handloom Pavilion and the Bhavnagar Houses) and yet I hope these are also very much buildings of their time; for I believe that an architect can use the past only to the extent that he can re-interpret it; re-invent it."

Nothing perhaps captures the essence of Correa's position so well as this succinct passage, in which he declares after Aldo Van Eyck, that one can no more be avant-gardist today than one can indulge in antiquitarianism. For Correa, as for

Van Eyck, one has to start with the timeless unchanging condition of man: that is to say, one needs to recognise that the occidental project of the Enlightenment has reached its historical dead-end. Correa understands that the great task which confronts us all today, East and West alike, is to accept that progress has its limits, while still attempting to maintain and improve the general quality of life. The problem is, of course, in what specific ways may society still be managed and developed without indulging in demagogic and reactionary political policies. It is to Correa's great credit that he has situated himself on the world stage without relinquishing any of his earlier intellectual and moral commitment to the plight of the Third World. With this publication we have to recognise not only an architect of consummate ingenuity, but also an emerging figure of the establishment; a culture-diplomat of whom one can say that despite his privileges he has never forgotten the harsh reality that faces the man in the street, particularly if that man happens to be of working-class origin and living in Bombay. But the message Correa has to convey goes well beyond this "City on the Water" for it runs out to touch the limits of the continent of the future. This much surely he has profoundly understood, although he has never advanced it as a general thesis, namely, that it is in the East rather than the West that the fate of man will eventually be decided.

Kenneth Frampton is a trained architect from the U.K. where he was once editor of Architectural Design magazine as well. Chairman of the School of Architecture at Columbia University in New York, he is one of the foremost historians and critics of modern architecture in the world today. This critical review was written specially for MIMAR.
