



SPIRITUAL in ARCHITECTURE

CHARLES CORREA



View of exhibition.

From Banni Village wall,
looking through Mandala room
to *Char Bagh* (Paradise Garden)
of Islam.



Photographs courtesy of Charles Correa unless otherwise indicated.

Recently I was involved in compiling an exhibition on Indian Architecture for the FESTIVAL OF INDIA. The exhibition covered a wide range of built-form, from the earliest times right down to the present day. Since, over the centuries, India has accumulated a truly spectacular collection of architecture, the task of editing it down to a shortlist of fifty examples was indeed difficult. But even more formidable was the effort to understand — and communicate — the passion (the mythic beliefs!) that generated these magnificent buildings and cities. For whenever we construct, we are moved — either consciously or unconsciously — by mythic images and values. These are the wellspring of the architecture we create.

And these images and values permeate everything; from the mud villages of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to the giant metropolii of Bombay and Ahme-dabad. Documenting this varying habitat

Below:

Wayside shrine, Bombay

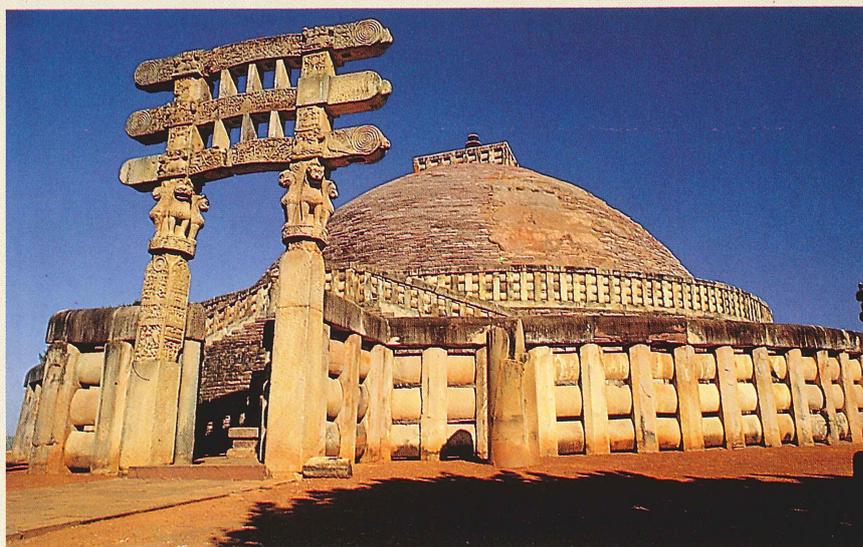
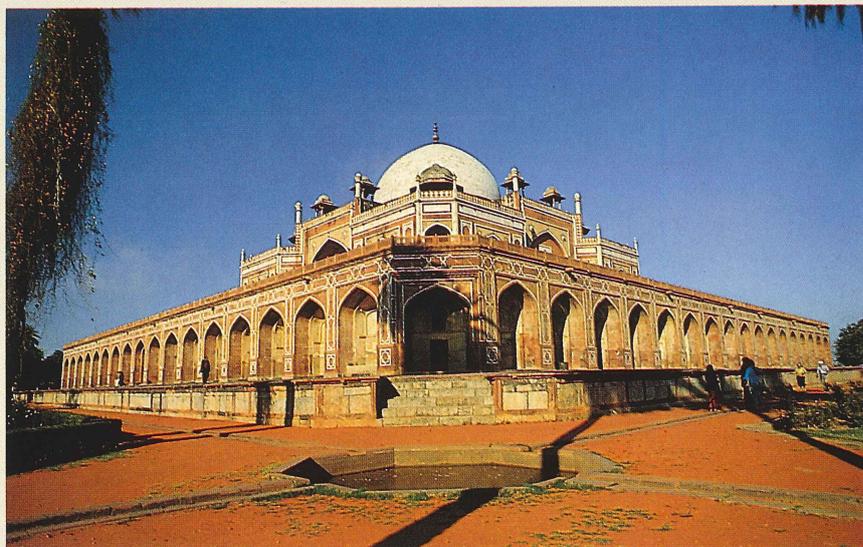
("Every few metres,
a sacred gesture.")



Bottom:

Sacred images in tribal hut.

Photograph: J. Jain.



Top:

Humayun's Tomb, Delhi.

Photograph: Joseph St. Anne.



Above:

Buddhist stupa at Sanchi,

Madhya Pradesh.

Photograph: John Panikar.

was indeed a revelation. Even in a crowded commercial centre like Bhuleshwhar or Manek Chowk, we found, every 5 or 6 metres, a sacred gesture: a *rangoli* (pattern of coloured powder) on a doorstep, a *yantra* painted on a wall, a shrine, a temple.

The presence of these gestures was so overwhelming, I was astonished that it has not been more central to the work of contemporary planners and architects. For although today there is much awareness (and discussion) about the Public realm and the Private realm, there is hardly any attention paid to this — the Sacred — realm.

And yet, in human terms, it is perhaps the most important realm of all. For instance, of the various countries of Europe, Italy — which like Bhuleshwhar and Manek Chowk is filled with sacred gestures — is certainly the most compelling. When you come to France, the religion

(Catholicism) and the culture (Latin) are the same, but the gestures are less frequent. France is more secular — and so it doesn't move you quite as much. When you come to Switzerland, there is hardly any sacred gesture at all! This is why, I would venture to suggest, that Switzerland can never have the same impact on you as Italy. Swiss chocolates are sensa-



Kund
at Modhera.

tional, the mountains are stunning, the people are delightful, and yet ... there is a difference. To the Japanese, Mount Fuji is sacred, is mythic; to the Swiss, Mont Blanc is just a very high mountain. This difference is of crucial importance to architecture.

Of course by Sacred, one does not mean only the religious, but the primordial as well. Religion is perhaps the most facile path to the world of the non-manifest, but it is not the only one. This is why great artists like Picasso and Matisse, or Stravinsky in his music, have constantly searched out the primitive, the primordial. It was to find the sacred. This is why, also, Corbusier usually started any statement of his credo with a pictogram of the di-urnal pathway of the sun. In the ultimate analysis, it was this profound respect for the mythic that compelled him to create the chapel at Ronchamp. (Another architect — and one closer to home — who also has a profound sense of the sacred is the great Hassan Fathy).

In the exhibition, we examined the many mythic beliefs that have found root in India, from the earliest Vedic times (when architecture was conceived as an analog of the Cosmos) down to this century (with its myths of Rationality, Sci-

ence, Progress, etc). The extraordinary thing about India today, of course, is that all these systems co-exist. They are like the transparent layers of a palimpsest, with all the colours and all the patterns equally vivid. In this sense, India is quite different from, say, the US. For although American society can also be described as multi-religious, these are religions with most of their myths castrated — which is of course why in any college chapel (or airport lounge) you can use the same bare table for a Christian ceremony, followed by a Jewish, followed by a Muslim, followed by a Buddhist, and so forth.

Yet to disregard the mythic and the sacred is to diminish life. The impoverished architecture we create today is not due just to the banality of the forms we construct, but also due to the prosaic and mundane briefs we address (which in turn are indicative of the kind of lives we lead). For instance, the magnificent *kund* at Modhera would undoubtedly have a totally different impact on our imagination if it had been built for some other purpose — say a Drive-in Theatre. The form might be identical, but where would be the *axis mundi* connecting the water in the kund below with the sacred sky above?

To try and understand the non-

manifest, the unseen, is to look deeply into our own selves. It is this that concerns the sacred — whether religious or primordial. And this is what art is about. Thus to understand architecture as history, is to search out the mythic beliefs which have generated the builtform around us. Otherwise, in searching for our roots, we are in danger of making only a mere superficial *transfer* of those forms. Instead, as I have endeavoured to explain in the essay which follows, we must seek out the underlying myths. We must *transform* them by re-inventing them, within the parameters of our contemporary technology and aspirations.

This distinction between *transfer* and *transformation* is of fundamental importance. Throughout his work, Corbusier was “un homme mediterranean” — yet none of his buildings ever used a sloping tiled roof. Instead, he took the mythic images and values of the Mediterranean and re-invented them in the 20th century technology of concrete and glass. This is true transformation. And this, in the final analysis, is what Architecture is about.