An exhibition which explores universal concepts of space and cross-disciplinary approaches to its interpretation. A possible clarification of the ambiguous phrase the act of space with the following, cited in the exhibition brochure:

"What is space says the child. And civilisations have asked themselves the same question. They have looked out at the stars and inward to their sacred traditions. Architecture emerged and building traditions. And this was the act of space."

The organisers ask whether "perhaps it is not time to reconsider how we see space", in the light of which they offer an insight into some building values of pre-industrial societies.

The Exhibition is organised around fourteen categories, deriving from the Sanskrit space-word... - kham -

Space is a simple word, but it has many meanings and multiple dimensions. The awareness of space begins with the beginning of time, in most primitive cultures. Its genesis is in mythic memory, ritual practise, traditions of thought, social patterns, and the organisation of the city and sacred structure.

The exhibition on Space and The Act of Space in New Delhi in November 1986 became something of a revelation - even to those who had conceived it. Planned by designers, architects, linguists, archaeologists, historians and art historians, it grew out of their discussions and interaction for five months. Ultimately, it extended the horizons of space into diverse areas of knowledge.

Intended to be a cross-cultural approach, it introduced the architecture of Egypt, Mesopotamia, ancient Mexico, China, Japan, Bhutan, Nepal, Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, Spain, Morocco, Nigeria, Africa and the Meso Americas - among other countries and cultures.

At the same time, it focused on a profound understanding of space in the Indian context. KHAM, a single word in the sanskrit language, resonates with infinite meanings and nuances. The dictionary of Monier Williams, tracing its usage through the Rig Veda, the Atharva Veda, the Satapatha Brahmana and many other texts, gives it twelve meanings. This becomes the logos, the word, the name for the exhibition.

Space is boundless. Space is the sky, all-encompassing, with the stars stretching unto infinity. The whole universe. Space is the primordial sea and the mountains which reach up to the sky, and the clouds constantly moving...

Space is also the dark recesses of the cave, the grotto, the first inhabitations of man - reaching into our innermost psyche. In another meaning of kham, space is the opening up, the aperture, the penetration of stone; and thus the threshold which leads us into the temple.

Space is not only without, but within us. Man the microcosm extends himself in movement, in measurement, in relationship to the world surrounding him.

The space you occupy is full. The space surrounding you links you to the universe. You are a definite form in limitless space.

Thus the macrocosm, the universe, is conceived and measured in terms of cosmic man, hero or god or founding father, in architecture. The earliest mathematics of space are body measure.
Space, of another metaphor, is also the axis, the hub of the wheel which rotates, or the centre of the earth. The Greek notion of the omphalos is not far different from the Indian concept of nabhi, the navel of the world. From this centre rose the axis mundi, the central pillar of the world, reaching up to touch the sky. In Hindu cosmogony this is the yupa or sacrificial altar of the Vedas; transferred in Buddhist symbolism to the central pillar which runs through the monumental edifice of the stupa. In Islamic thought, we discover the minarets of the masjid that stretch again from earth to sky, that call out the message of God.

The cross-cultural concurrences, of a certain understanding of space, are truly remarkable. Ancient civilisations, different cultures and religions, the world over, express a universal idea — but in different ways. This then becomes the contribution of the Space exhibition; to make us aware of the essential similarities in conceptualising space; and the inherent differences in medium, in technique, in meaning and in practise.

An exhibition of photographs, blown up, mostly in black and white, has its own limitations of the two-dimensional and the static. This is overcome here with the designing of photographs interspersed with calligraphy. Cloth banners that stretch from floor to ceiling move softly in the wind, in space, bearing meanings and messages from Heraclitus, from Lao Tzu and Jalal ud din Rumi, from James Joyce and Fyodor Dostoevsky and Carl Gustav Jung, from the ancient tablets of Babylon and the Upanishads of India and the initiation ceremonies of the Eskimo Shamans. These pure white banners, floating, touch a chord here and there; they provide insight, they provide relief, they provide that added dimension. Our latent thoughts and responses are quickened into movement.

The layout of photographs is carefully structured, to move from one concept of space to another. We stand before the overwhelming possibilities of space in the universe, filtered with the litany of a celestial music. We weave our way through corridors of walls that curve and narrow and widen, that draw the viewer into the black depths of the great rock cut cave at Karla, or confront him with the towering pillars of Rameses II at Thebes. When the penetration of space is considered, it is discovered through actual apertures in stone — through the monolithic stone walls of Uxmal in Mexico, or through a delicate lacing of patterns in Islamic windows, jalis. The potentials of space, and of how it is construed with man’s imagination, are unlimited.

Many questions are raised in our minds, many that are not answered. A beginning is made with some profound thoughts inscribed on these moving tablets. For instance, the question occurs, why caves? Why, so many centuries after the construction of temples in brick and stone, why were caves scooped out of living mountain rock? Were they merely retreats from civilisation, or did they serve another purpose? The Indian word for the cave, guha from the root meaning to hide (a secret) gives us some clue as to how caves were intended to plumb the innermost depths of our being. Carl Gustav Jung echoes a similar notion in his observation:

One small door in the innermost recesses of the psyche opens onto cosmic night.
This idea is paralleled in interviews with the Huichols of Meso-America “who represent the nierika with a weaving of coloured yarn on straws”. They claim:

The nierika
it is the doorway
of the mind
The nierika opens
from reality-as-we-know it
to the Real of visions
and the afterlife
This door is closed
until you open it.

The door, the “threshold” revolves around another question of the rites of purification before entering the sanctus sanctorum. In every religion, be it Islam with the water that cleanses, or Christianity with the baptismal font, or the doorways of Hindu temples guarded by door keepers and by the divine river goddesses, the door has a significance and purpose: it serves as the threshold. This is suggested here in the exhibition with models of a centric diagram of the Vastu Purusa Mandala. Awareness of space brings an awareness of the stars, the sacred sun and the moon, and the cardinal directions. Space is ordered according to their movements. Stonehenge demonstrates an acute awareness of the sun cycle. The Mayas and Aztecs built space into their monumental edifices and altars. Inti is the sungod of the Incas, and Surya of the Hindus, with four temples built to him that survive today.

The crests of mountains, closer to the gods, becomes the natural site for temples, as seen with the Parthenon in Greece, with Jain temples clustered at Satrunjaya, with Buddhist stupas and ziggurats and churches. Kalashnath, the mountain abode of lord Siva, became the name for countless temples in India built to him. Macchu Pichu was a model of the sacred mountain.

This concept is concretely found at the exhibition with models of a centric pattern. In one hall are aligned models of sacred structures from all over the world, along an axis: of Borobudur, of the dance hall at Konarak, of Prambanan in Java, of Chartres cathedral in France. The accent in these medieval structures moves steadily upwards, to be climaxed by a crescendo of Islamic minarets which aspire to the same ideal.

Space orientation also brings with it an emphasis on the sacred structure as being the epicentre of the world, the hub of the wheel. As mentioned above, this is one of our definitions of space, epitomised here by the radiating spokes of a wooden wheel. The circling, hallucinating rhythms in colour of mandalas spin outwards from the ceiling of Buddhist monasteries in Bhutan.

Most of us know that the orientation of all mosques in the world is towards Mecca, with its Ka’aba. But few of us are aware that Mecca is also considered to be the epicentre of the world, with the countries spinning out from its central axis. This is how Mecca appears in the frontispiece of an Arab atlas, in the medieval world-view.

In Islam, the Ka’aba, the centre of the terrestrial world, is the point intersected by the axis of heaven. Ka’aba, the cube crystal, is a concrete synthesis of the wholeness of space, with each face of the cube corresponding to the primary directions of the zenith, the nadir, and the four cardinal directions. “The rite of circumambulation (tawaf) around the

Mandala: Simtokha DZONG, Bhutan.
Ka'aba is seen to reproduce the rotation of heaven around its polar axis. Circumambulation around the sepulchre of the stupa is also done by Buddhist pilgrims, along the pradakshina patha or stone path that simulates the movement of the earth around the sun. At the Great Stupa at Sanchi of the 1st century, this circumambulation is arrested by four gateways (toranas), exquisitely carved, which each face the four directions of the south, north, east and west. Again in the Hindu pilgrimage, the first ritual is to move around the temple following the sun's orbit. Thus the initial ritual gesture in each of these religions brings us a recognition of space, of the cardinal directions, of the movement of the sun through the universe.

The sacred edifice assumes its sacred character by being based on the structure and order of the universe. One meaning of Khām as the city space is singled out for interpretation in the exhibition, with an entire section devoted to urban settlements. Models and plans of Hasanlu in Iran of the 9th century BC., of Isfahan in later Persia, of Fatehpur Sikri in Mughal India, of Tenochtitlan in Mexico, and of the Acropolis in Athens, form part of this display. The focus of the city settlements changes from being nomadic and transitory in pattern, to assuming the character of a permanent civic space in stone, at the Acropolis in Greece and at Rome. Finally, the fortress citadels of Islam and of Medieval Europe move towards the concept of the urban city as a whole, raised on the summit of hills.

Religious and monastic establishments are depicted in their isolation, as part of the settlements. They include the notion of the "Heavenly City", such as Jerusalem and the pilgrimage centres and holy cities such as Puri-kshetra and Kasi-kshetra in India. It may have been relevant here to include variations and designs by Leonardo da Vinci and other masters, of the Ideal City that was often planned, but never built. The exhibition however, is planned only to cover the ancient, pre-modern and pre-industrial period.

The geometry of architecture is clearly based on an elaborate symbolism. In Islam, the dome, the minaret, the arch, the quinch vaults and pendentives do not stand for themselves, as invented forms, based at times on engineering feats; but for another, supra-reality which cannot be depicted in any other way but pure geometry.

The dome for instance, is associated with the Spirit which pervades all beings, as indeed the vault of the sky embraces its enclosed space. The dome unifies space and encompasses it. The arch expresses the human soul, repeated ad infinitum soaring and aspiring towards the heavens. The iwan, the arched doorway or corridor, is viewed as the locus of the soul, moving between the room, seen as the body, and the garden or courtyard which is taken as the spirit.

The enclosed garden or courtyard, laid out with canals and water fountains, forms an essential component of Islamic buildings, even at Alhambra in Spain. Water and greenery provide relief in the harsh desert sun — as much as the brilliant tilework gleaming on the domes. But the garden of course, has another implicit meaning in being associated with the Islamic notion of paradise — so much so that in another culture, the word for garden has become 'paradiso'. Water is the life-giving force. Hence the layout of canals and qanats and fountains has a symbolic reference as well as a practical purpose.

Water, the purifying factor, is another extended meaning of Khām. This is beautifully depicted in the large earthen vessels storing water, placed before the exhibits; in the layout of entire water gardens such as at Nishat Bagh in Kashmir; and by the most subtle play and usage of water in Japanese gardens, for meditation.

The exhibition of Space opens with one of the banners carrying an eloquent message:

*We shall show them
Signs
on the horizon
and within themselves.*

The signs are all there, with their symbolic meanings, manifest in the created structures, the wonders of man. This is the extended meaning of Space — without and within ourselves, relating us to the whole universe. Ranesh Ray, designer and architect, has guided viewers around the exhibition. In doing so he discovered that there not only with ancient civilisations but with different people, but "there are different ways of perceiving the same reality".

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