Housing and Urban Planning

I t is in Correa's consideration of issues beyond those normally associated with architecture and design that one finds evidence of his efforts, over the past twenty years, toward the amelioration of human poverty through planning and urbanism. He pays great attention to housing — perhaps the single greatest challenge facing activist designers in the Third World today.

An important formative experience was the invitation from Professor Anderson in the full term of 1962 to be Benois Professor at M.I.T. This was a graduate studio which Correa taught with Donald Appleyard and Imre Hallas on the "Cidade de Goyana". The students were supposed to develop conceptual ideas for the city as an academic exercise (the actual city was already under construction in Venezuela). The experience high-lighted key urban issues connected to land tenure, location, and land use. When he returned to Bombay he realised that the shorness of supply of urban land there necessitated a redefinition of the city, an interest which continues to preoccupy him.

Correa began discussing this with the structural engineer Shirish Patel and planner Pravina Mehta. At about that time in 1964 the municipality published their Master Plan which stretched the city further in a north-south direction. This group of three produced an alternative set of ideas which were published in the Times of India and later as a special issue in the magazine MARQ. Their proposal, featuring the opening up of new land and greater access to jobs, postulated a new city across the bay — New Bombay — in an attempt to re-structure the city. In 1979 the Government of Maharashtra accepted this proposal and set up CIDCO (City and Industrial Development Corporation) with Correa, in an honorary capacity, as Chief Architect for the new city. "Unfortunately, however, many of his ideas for reorganising Bombay have been ignored ... We should blame the authorities for having denied him the opportunity to humanise Bombay," 3

This direct involvement in the city where he lives and practices was a milestone in Charles Correa's life, as it created a schism in his professional life between his humanity and concern for sheltering the urban poor, and his work as a designer and form giver. It is his paradox but also strength that he has devoted himself to both with his characteristic energy. These two sides to the man make it harder to either judge his work or to conveniently label him — in this he is a most unusual architect. It is likely that this dichotomy has also drawn him to likeminded architects such as Sunet Jumsai of Thailand, William Lim of Singapore and Fuhinoku Maki of Japan, all of whom perceive and act on this dual role of the architect in the Third World. (I use the term "Third World" here as it is Correa's preferred phrase, which he says symbolises a third choice — Capitalism and Communism being the other two — for a form of development.)

Down from the macro scale of the city, Correa's own practice in urban design concerns itself primarily with the street and the neighbourhood. His designs for living environments have changed significantly over the years. Illustrated in this section of the book are a few such schemes, starting with his competition entry for the PIEVI Housing in Peri, the Tara middle-income level scheme, and the Malabar Cements Township. Here the concern for the progression through space (seen in his Early Work) is apparent in the particular way he arranges streets and houses to form both roads and communal spaces. The emphasis is on a linear development, as evidenced by his concern for services, infrastructure and the most economical use of resources.

In his later work, this concern is developed further to encompass his more intellectually articulated ideas. To quote from his book: 2 "If there ever is a Bill of Rights for housing in the Third World, it would surely have to include — evaluated — the following cardinal principles: Incrementality, Pluralism, Participation, Income generation, Equity, Open-to-sky space, and Disaggregation." These factors sum up Correa's lifetime lessons for housing.

These are fully explored in his Housing at Belapur of 1985, which he considers to be his most robust scheme to date. Belapur uses cluster planning and incrementality as its starting point, recognising the importance of individually-owned plots to encourage improvement of living conditions by the habitants themselves. The introduction of social responsibility into a low-income scheme starts here in the physical planning itself.

Since 1985, as Chairman of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's National Commission on Urbanisation, Correa has turned to issues related to the built environment of settlements based on economic and macro analyses. This has led him to consider urban-rural relationships in a regional context and questions related to social responsibility in the environment.

He still retains an interest in the neighbourhood scale of events — perhaps due to his deep roots as a designer above all. The recent schemes after Belapur, such as the ACC and Bagalkot Townships, illustrate his move away from a pure cluster grouping to that of row-houses strung together along the periphery of a site, like a necklace, along a spine that acts as private space (as opposed to spine as circulation space), arranged in clusters with connected central communal gardens. This combining of his earlier approaches — row-house and cluster — is leading to a new series of solutions, the synthesis or success of which is yet to be made evident.

The single family villa, which played an important role in his early development, no longer remains a building type for major experimentation, although he still designs houses from time to time.

One scheme, amongst a number of others of a similar nature, which does not fit into Correa's usual housing concerns is that of the high-rise Kanchanapura Apartments started in 1979 and finally completed in 1983. These apartments are for very high-income families and emphasise ideas on form, view, life-style and comfort. These apartments carry out ideas on climatic design treated in section, echoing Le Corbusier's experiments with the "atrium-section" dwelling unit, best illustrated in his Unite d'Habitation in Marseilles (1945-52), and to a lesser extent Safdie's Habitat in Montreal. Correa first tried these ideas with the Cosmopolitan Apartments in 1955 but later with the Boyce Houses of 1962, but it was not until the 1970s that he was able to realise these ideas in an actual project, i.e. Kanchanjunga. These explorations stand as yet another example of the architect's vast spectrum of interests.