

Building

How do you view the cumulative work of your life—the record of which is far more complex than what a studied view can provide? All lives have their own history, geology and archaeology, and any written record can only be a self-conscious, visible and conspicuous scaffold on which a selective history is constructed. This is not a planned architecture book, the kind with wide-angled double spreads of photographs and plans that make architecture a seductive picture. No, in India, such a perfect picture is elusive and often a complete lie. The real record of Indian architecture is the gut-wrenching reality of rooms filled with too many people—people whose habits don't lend themselves to photography, and for whom architecture stands for nothing more than a place to settle in for the night.

Anthropology gives an altogether different reason for architecture. In fact, in the course of building, for better or worse, so many peripheral activities take place. I always feel the need to account for the many decisions I had to take in order to arrive at the construction that stares me in the face. The seeming arbitrariness of most of those decisions makes me want to apply some design logic to the social and cultural incoherence. Writing is a way of understanding your intentions: why you did, what and when. Unlike medicine or accounting that are processes towards specific ends, getting well, fudging books, architecture is just a process towards yet another process, a social structure of life that is never ending, but is itself used to construct a physical structure, that too, is often unending.

Architecture draws inspiration from ordinary life, and gives it back with equal maladjustment. I find that the only reason for writing a book on architecture is to record a static design idea that turns into a dynamic process. Others may see it as self-indulgence, but for me, a profession that doesn't go by the book deserves a book that traces ideas and the upheaval they cause in the process of construction.

This is a book of uncertain ideas and mixed sources. It emerged untested, as a collaborative of personal applications that straddle art, architecture, sketch and writing. Much of its content has been derived from my own professional practice, the written diaries, and the speculative sketches and artworks that support particular architectural projects and conceptions. In the search for a method to building, I have been a reluctant problem solver. It is in the nature of any work in India, a country that has an unwieldy, shifting population and few material resources, that everything is seen as a problem. Yet for me, that narrow path of conventional practice remained elusive. I was never at the receiving end of large commissions or a participant in urban resettlement programmes. Instead, the institutional and private work that came my way contained precise and limited building programmes. In it, beyond the resolution of stated requirements, I found possibilities of raising

a variety of architectural questions related to modernity, to the architect's treatment of history and archaeology, to forgotten and misplaced attitudes to design. All this, beyond conventions of style and theory, the lies and evasions which have become a false measure of architecture.

The continual presence of people, techniques and places imposes arguments whose validity is constantly tested on the architectural idea. Such contamination is not always a magnification of the initial thought, but it does perform the useful task of giving it due respectability, or denying it a place on the trophy shelf. Most of the time the architect himself takes the added precaution of isolating the work behind high walls and hence invokes professional privilege. Such a luxury is not accorded to buildings that involve themselves in the structure of urban life. For me, working on architecture commissions was the most legitimate way to trespass into the private terrain of family life, institutional set-up, domesticity, and even into the business structures of politics and administration. To use architecture as an instrument of sociology was the greatest gift of the profession. Within the practice, architecture had become not just a mode of personal expression and a method of experiencing building as a momentary spectacle, but a sustained thrill over time. At every stage of building the profession would assert its own design morality and impose a conscience on people who were too used to their own private ways: regionalism, vernacular traditions, globalization, green architecture. To be true to a collective destiny, you were expected to build within the chosen framework of the moment.

Architecture's place was in an automated brain-wash that cleansed private sins as it emerged, glistening and packaged, on the other side. I chose instead to adopt a private method to this, the most public of professions, and even allow explorations in art and drawing to encroach on building. The foundation of architecture was the loose chain of ideas expressed in charcoal or pencil, ink or bronze. They came from the exponentially invasive, unregulated way of Indian life that was the background in which I lived; India loomed as large as an untameable beast, baring its fangs with regularity, leaving me reeling, and sometimes wounded in retreat. Everything outside the boundary wall of my house was an exaggeration, a place filled with daily upheavals—migrations, *puja* rooms on the road, pavements for defecation or selling orchids, incomplete buildings, piles of refuse, human debris and construction matter; I witnessed it all every day. Its influence on my architecture was but natural.

I suppose in every society, the middle class bears the burden of dysfunction. People are forced to belong out of human needs



Devigarh Palace Hotel, Udaipur, Rajasthan, 2000



collections and ensuring them public support and longevity. Many resources remain happily obscure in the English countryside, located in small villages and towns, making them truly a part of the peoples' heritage.



Compare this to routines in an Indian town. City life is firstly an outcome of physical distress: the painful stratification of its residents, the disparity of slum and baroque mansion, the overrun streets, broken roads and encroached sidewalks, open defecation, the absence of utilities. Certainly all these

contribute to the Indian city's unmade and incomplete character. But these are the mere fallout of civic inadequacies that are being constantly fixed by urban budgets and municipal manifestoes. The real stench of despair rises from the stifling lack of civic activity—the city is a place bereft and deprived of participatory life. All primary civic sensation is formed out of acquisition of land and

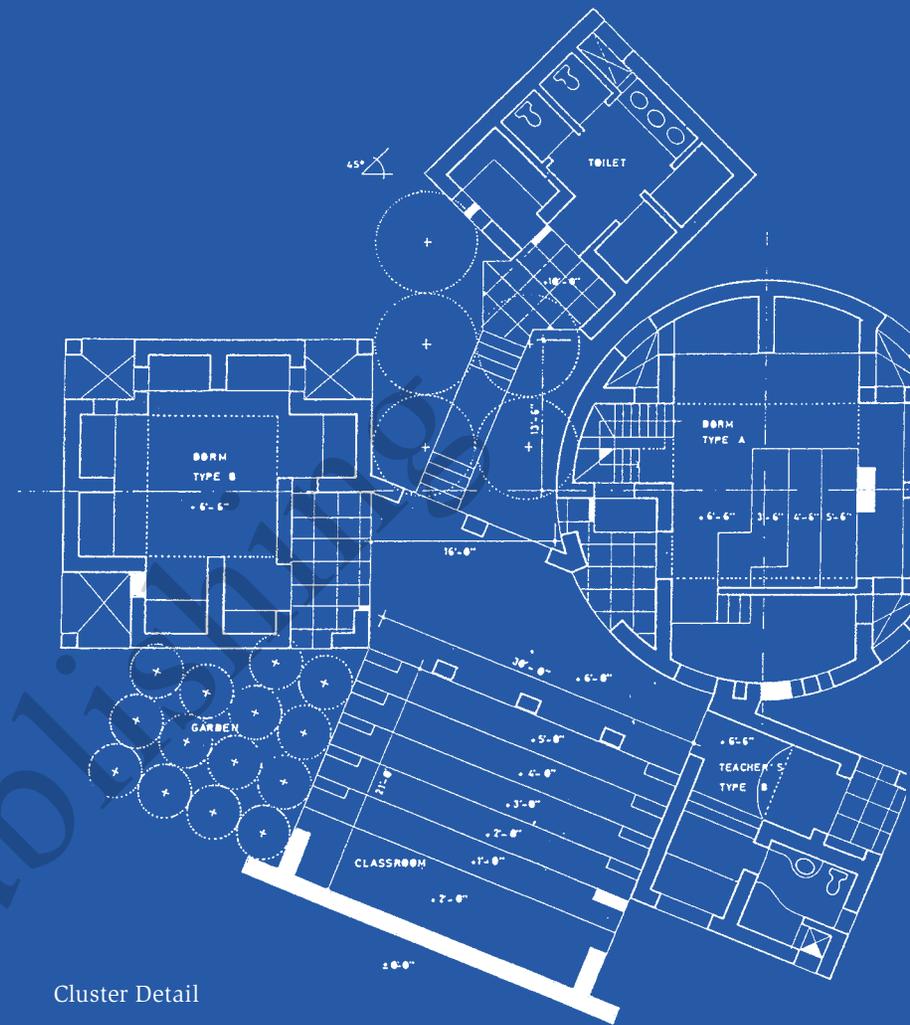
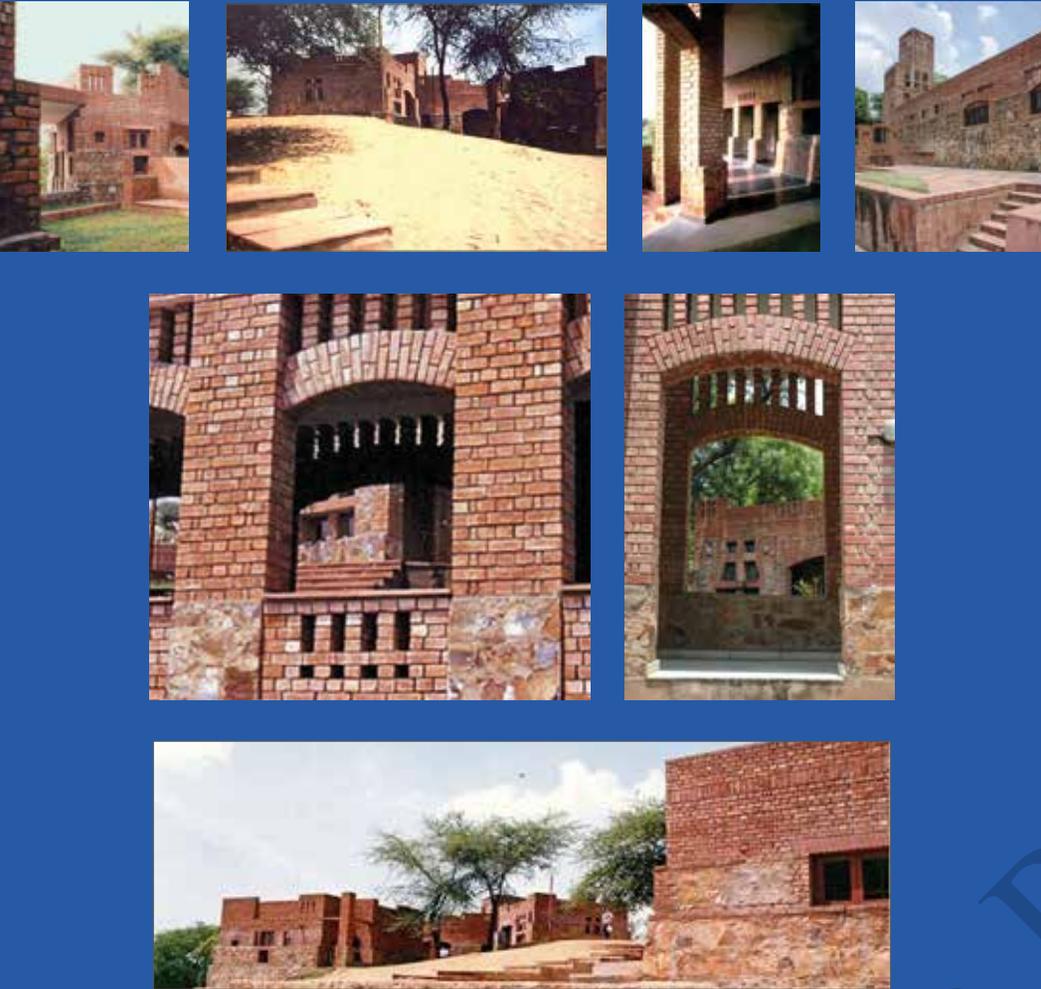
home; civic activity is contained within the superfluous borders of shopping and eating.

In the struggle to make Indian cities liveable, there is perpetual talk of public space. The belief that somehow public space will save the city from street crime, rape, and inequities, and bring the citizens together, is an odd myth. What use is public space without public culture? A purposeless citizenry will do little but use that public space for its own private purposes—selling, hawking, encroachment, privatization and more crime. Without ascribing descriptive value and purpose to a particular amenity, public space is meaningless. The reconstruction of Dresden's public space after WWII was a civic imperative for a city that had lost so much of its cultural heritage in the rubble. The importance of baroque churches, theatres and museums of course cannot be disputed, but their real value lay in returning the city to an active cultural life. The restoration of specific activities that enhanced social conditions far outweighed the symbolic standing of buildings.

■ ABOVE Shah Jahan inspects the Taj, watercolour, 2015

■ BELOW Shah Jahan's Ambassador at the Carwash, watercolour, 2008





Cluster Detail

also meant to encourage the eye to move away and select a variety of surrounding clues that fuse the whole composition in the mind's eye.

The final scene hopes to make no distinction between what has been built now, and what has existed forever. Too often it becomes a perennial wish to help dispel architecture's newness in the hope of establishing a "fleeting eternity". At the retreat, the nature of construction was itself plastic and spatial. Not laid out in a reclusive geometry, but like its residents, free to roam among the boulders. The impregnable nature of walls, built in brick and random rubble masonry, outwardly provided the picture of a dense stronghold, even a fortress; its monolithic quality may be forbidding but in design, it refused any centralized control—a focal point that stated a singular intention. Instead the variables of protection and openness were drawn immutably into the plan.

Enclosed in a deliberate and secure form, but freed across the lake in a diaphanous extension, part open, part closed, contracting and stretching at will, ensuring that the wide expanse of lake was

within its grasp, as was the protective cocoon of the building whenever nature loomed as a threat. The willingness to be both at once engages the resident in the same instant with the site and the building. It was there that I began to read the edge of the lake as crucial to the design. What made the building clusters conscious of that threshold was the shifting water level itself; consequently the relationship between architecture and the lake was always changing.

During the monsoons, the water invaded the building, leaving a part of each amphitheatre submerged; later in the year, the waterline receded to the entrance of each cluster; in summers, at its lowest, a wide swath of earth separated the building from the lake. The narrowing, expanding, overlapping threshold was the defining moment between building and site, nature and architecture. There is a tendency then to make a place between the known and the unknown, to slide a function to the edge of some hopeful darkness. The move to the unfamiliar is the constant search to deliver a tension to space that is too often