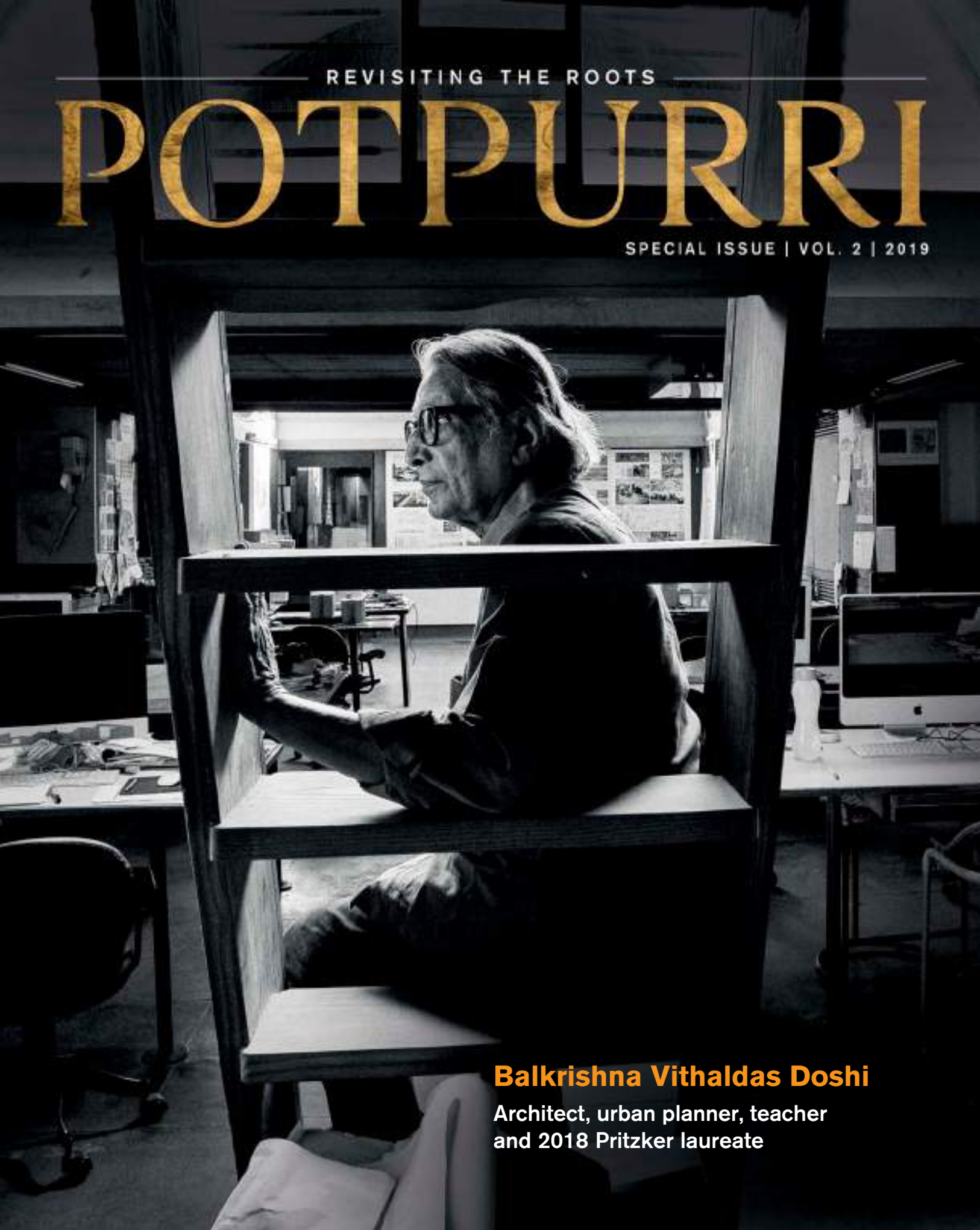


REVISITING THE ROOTS

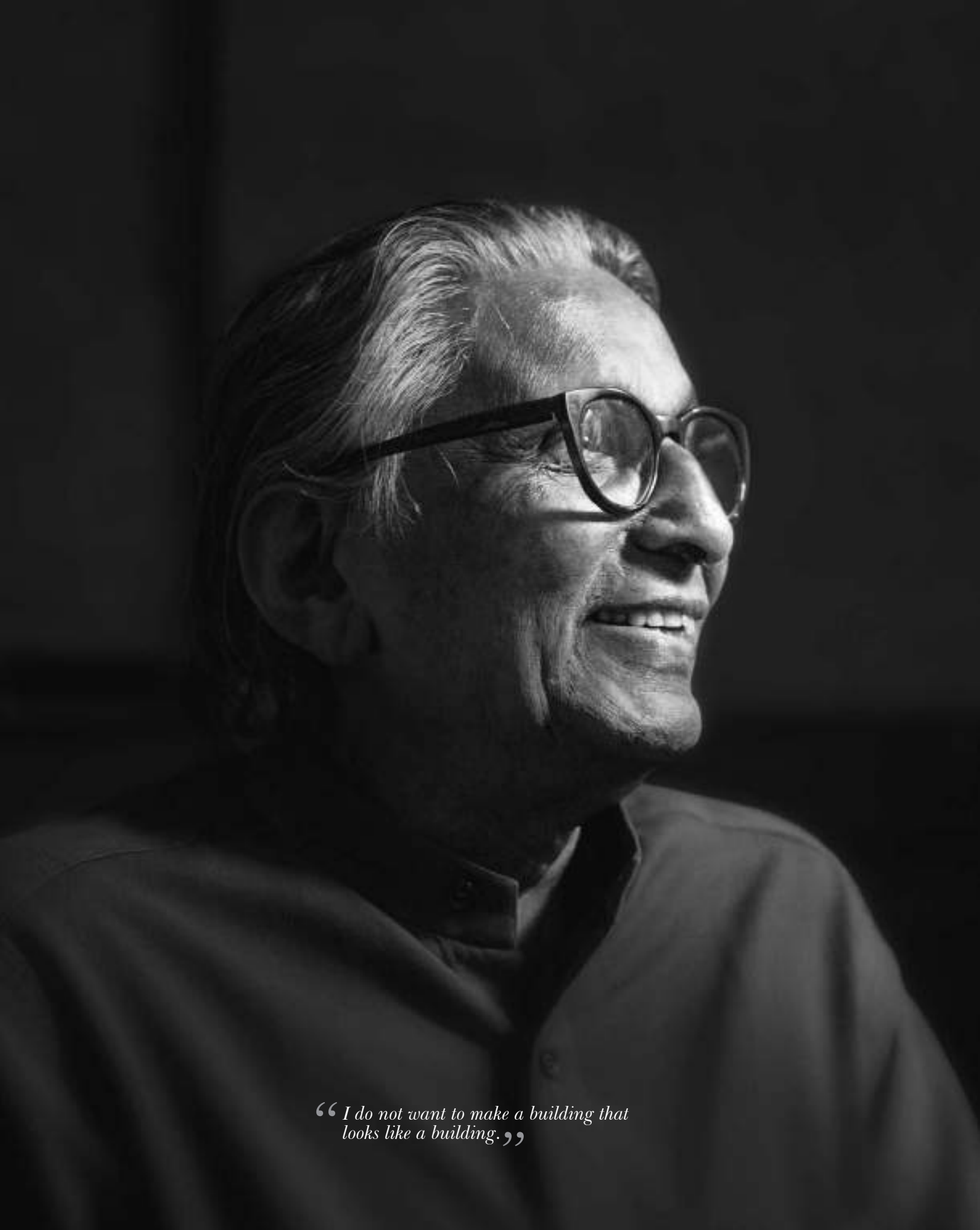
POTPURRI

SPECIAL ISSUE | VOL. 2 | 2019



Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi

Architect, urban planner, teacher
and 2018 Pritzker laureate



“I do not want to make a building that looks like a building.”

Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi

Born in Pune on 26 August 1927, Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi is today celebrated as an architect of international repute. Doshi's grandfather owned a furniture workshop, and Doshi initially believed he would take up that profession as well. However, he became interested in architecture and in 1947 joined the JJ School of Architecture in Mumbai before going to Paris to work with Le Corbusier between 1951 and 1954. Returning to Ahmedabad to supervise Le Corbusier's projects, including the Mill Owners' Association Building and the Villa Sarabhai in Ahmedabad, he eventually settled in that city, where he designed his own residence named Kamala House after his wife.

Doshi also set up Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design and his work today is considered noteworthy for his pioneering effort in making low-income housing a reality. He is noted for designs which incorporate concepts of sustainability in innovative ways. In addition to addressing practical needs, Doshi's work could also be playful, as seen in one of his most experimental projects, Amdavad Ni Gufa, in Ahmedabad. The art gallery features the colourful work of artist Maqbool Fida Husain within an underground space. The cavernous interior uses irregular columns that resemble mineral deposits and, like a cave, offers a cool refuge from India's heat.

Doshi has worked closely with Louis Kahn and Anant Raje, when Kahn designed the campus of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. In 1958 he was a fellow at the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. He then started the School of Architecture in 1962.

Apart from his international fame as an architect, Dr Doshi is equally known as an educator and institution builder. He is a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects and as an academician he had been visiting the USA and Europe since 1958. He has an honorary doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania and was the first Founder Director of the School of Architecture, Ahmedabad (1962–72), first Founder Director of the School of Planning (1972–79), first Founder Dean of the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (1972–81), founder member of the Visual Arts Centre, Ahmedabad, and first Founder Director of the Kanoria Centre for Arts, also in Ahmedabad.



BV Doshi at the Pritzker Prize ceremony in Toronto, along with Tom Pritzker, chair of the Hyatt Foundation, which sponsors the award

In recognition of his distinguished contribution as a professional and as an academician, Balkrishna Doshi has received several international and national awards and honours. He has been a recipient of the Padma Shri conferred on him by the Government

of India in 1976. He received the 6th Aga Khan Award for Architecture for Aranya Community Housing in 1993 arguably his best-known project that showcased a township for low to middle-income families. France's highest honour for arts, the 'Officer of the Order of Arts and Letters', was given to him in 2011. And in 2018, he was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the Nobel equivalent for the field, thus becoming the first Indian to receive the honour. The Pritzker jury announced that Doshi 'has always created an architecture that is serious, never flashy or a follower of trends,' and noted his 'deep sense of responsibility and a desire to contribute to his country and its people through high quality, authentic architecture.'



Harshavardhan Neotia called on BV Doshi to offer his respects upon being conferred the Pritzker Prize

CHAIRMAN'S NOTE



Harshavardhan Neotia
Chairman, Ambuja Neotia

I had been following the Pritzker Prize, the most coveted award in the field of architecture, for some time now and it was always a private desire that an Indian should acquire it some day. Therefore, it gladdened my heart when I came to know that our very dear Balkrishna bhai Doshi had won it last year not only because he was an Indian, but also because I had the privilege of working with him on some of our projects and getting his blessings as a mentor and a philosopher.

The Agha Khan Museum in Toronto was the venue and I was aware that it is a very exclusive event with around 200 invitees – a galaxy of eminent architects and some important persons. I did not have the courage to ask Balkrishna bhai for an invite. But I remembered that Tom Pritzker, the Chairman of the Foundation, had visited our Jnana Pravaha project in Varanasi. I wrote to him after almost ten years, reminding him about his visit. To my great pleasure I heard from him and got an invite.

I decided that I would keep this a secret and give Balkrishna bhai a surprise. When I arrived at the hotel where everyone was staying, I called up Rajiv Kathpalia, his son-in-law, who was accompanying him. I told him I was just a few rooms away and asked him not to spill the beans. When it was finally time to go to the venue, Balkrishna bhai saw me waiting at the lobby and was completely delighted and surprised!

The ceremony, of course, was very crisp, with just three speakers – Tom Pritzker welcoming the guests, followed by the Chairman of the Jury on why Doshiji was selected; and then Balkrishna bhai's response that was truly inspiring as he spoke about how his architecture had been influenced by the various moments of his life. All of us in the audience were deeply moved.

As Gurudev Rabindranath had put it so succinctly, 'It is through art and architecture that a man reveals himself.'

Harshavardhan Neotia

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Harshavardhan Neotia

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(FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION ONLY)

Potpourri is traditionally a mixture of dried petals and spices often placed in beautiful bowls to perfume a room. When the fragrance spreads, it encompasses, most magically, a medley of emotions. We have given this name our special twist and believe that the pages of Potpurri will bring for our readers interesting and diverse reading material with aplomb.

EDITOR'S LETTER



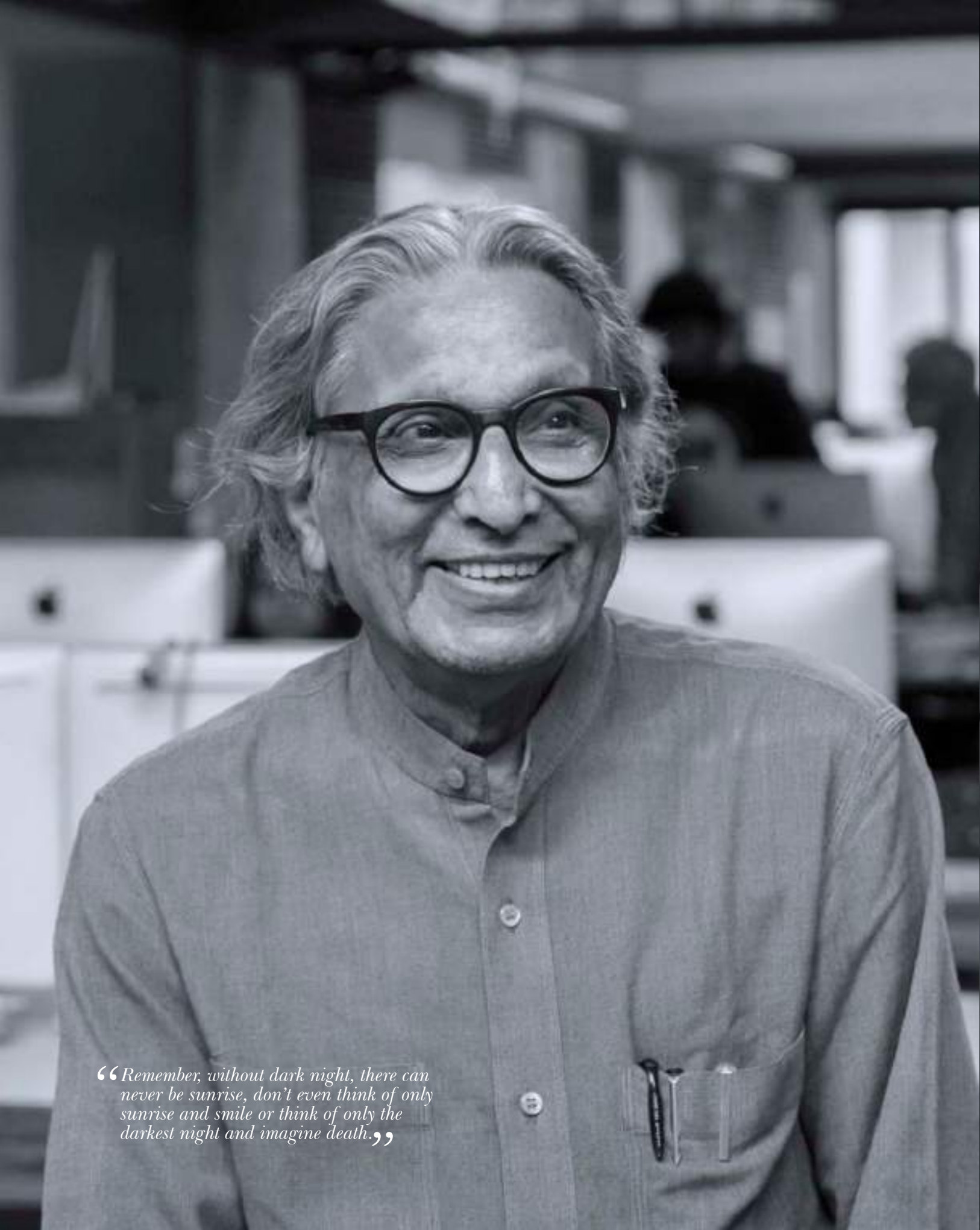
Jayabrato Chatterjee
Managing Editor

I am privileged to count Balkrishna Doshi among those who have impacted my life in many different ways when I had an opportunity to interact with him closely during the time he was working on the Udayan project for Bengal Ambuja in Kolkata. Not only is his humanist approach to architecture thrilling but also his attitude to life itself has enriched my repertoire as a writer and filmmaker in more ways than he will ever know. There are about him multiple qualities of an academician, a builder of institutions, an architect and a mystic. And yet he often displays an almost childlike innocence filled with excitement at any new idea that fires his imagination. It is a rare quality he sticks to, almost stubbornly dare I say, at a time when the world around us is fraught with uncertainty and terror.

The internationally renowned Vastu Shilpa Foundation for Studies and Research in Environmental Design that he had established in Ahmedabad in 1955 is, today, a living testimony to his philosophy of architecture that infuses compassion with practicality. Recipient of numerous accolades over six decades of his professional career, in March 2018, Doshiji was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize, the Nobel equivalent for the field – the 45th Pritzker Prize laureate and the first Indian to receive the honour.

It is time for celebrations with this special issue dedicated to him!

Jayabrato Chatterjee

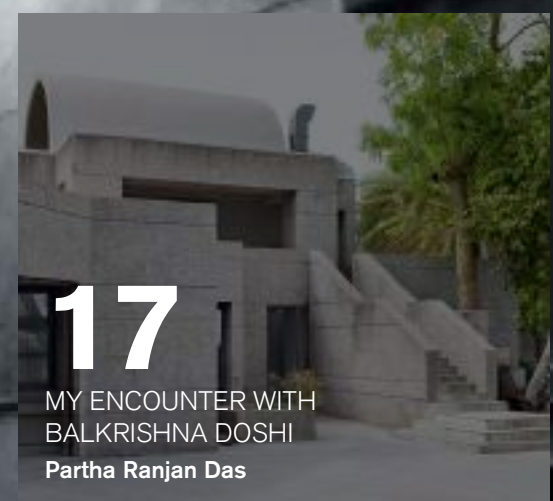


“Remember, without dark night, there can never be sunrise, don't even think of only sunrise and smile or think of only the darkest night and imagine death.”

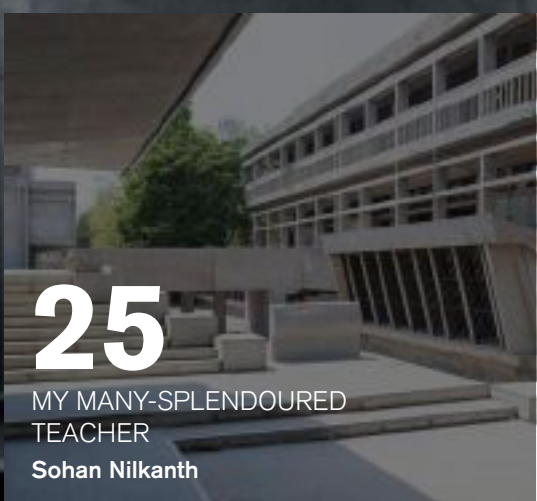
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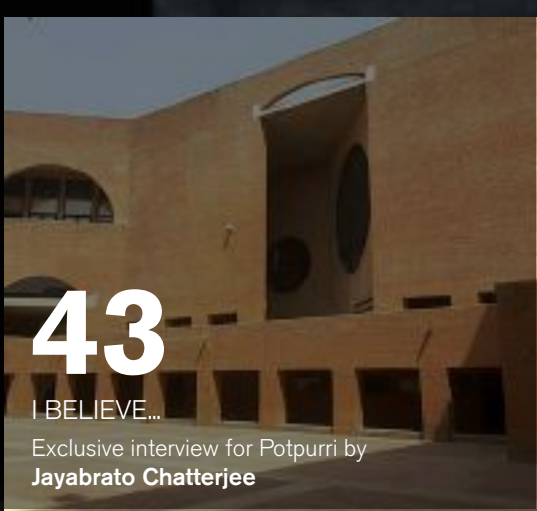
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Upohar - The CondoVille, Kolkata designed for the Ambuja Neotia Group by BV Doshi



“There is no greater teacher than intuition.”

BALKRISHNA DOSHI: ARCHITECT EXTRAORDINAIRE

Harshavardhan Neotia

The news was indeed thrilling. Reading about Balkrishna bhai Doshi being conferred the Pritzker Laureate – the first Indian to receive this honour – filled my heart with gladness. Even as I offer my respectful pranaam to this visionary architect who remains in many ways my guru, my mind goes back to 1994, when I first met him at the Vastu Shilpa Foundation office in Ahmedabad. I had gone to invite him to participate in a large social housing project we were about to embark upon in Kolkata. Balkrishna bhai politely declined, stating two reasons. In those days there was no direct air connectivity from Ahmedabad to Kolkata and one had to come via Mumbai. He said that this could prove to be cumbersome and extremely time-consuming. Besides, he also expressed his hesitation at being involved with commercial property developments as his past experience had not been too rosy. My disappointment must have been palpable as I had set my heart in getting Balkrishna bhai to conceive this project as its architect. I had studied his other works and felt that he would do complete justice to my maiden but, for me, a major venture. I, however, kept our contact alive. I would write to him and speak with him

“A great part of my sensibility vis-a-vis architecture, the importance of the play of light and shadow, the seamless integration of the inside with the outside, the harmony that needed to be established between built up space and nature are some of the manifold ideas that he instilled into me. I was like a curious student chalking up every nugget of wisdom from all our interactions.”

over the phone occasionally, even as I initiated discussions with various other architects for the project for which I had set my heart on Balkrishna Doshi.

A few months later, I learnt that he would be visiting Kolkata for an architectural conference. I immediately called him to request him to give me the pleasure of hosting him at our home for a meal. It was my good fortune that he agreed and the bond between us further strengthened as my entire family instantly warmed up to him. I asked him to visit the site that I had in mind the following day and persuaded him to reconsider my initial request. Finally, a few months later, to my utmost joy and delight, he agreed to come on board.

From 1995 to 2010, Balkrishna bhai and his wife, Kamala bhabi, would visit Kolkata every year and stay with us for a couple of days. The times we spent together were very special not just for me but also for my entire family. Over breakfast, lunch and dinner we would remain enthralled by his conversations, laden with simple thoughts but profound meaning. His worldview, his faith in community living and his marvelous philosophy of inclusion and aesthetics, without doubt, transformed him from an

From 1995 to 2010, Balkrishna bhai and his wife, Kamala bhabi, would visit Kolkata every year and stay with us for a couple of days. The times we spent together were very special not just for me but also for my entire family. Over breakfast, lunch and dinner we would remain enthralled by his conversations, laden with simple thoughts but profound meaning. His worldview, his faith in community living and his marvelous philosophy of inclusion and aesthetics, without doubt, transformed him from an

Architectural Consultant to a Life Guru as far as I was concerned.

A great part of my sensibility vis-a-vis architecture, the importance of the play of light and shadow, the seamless integration of the inside with the outside, the harmony that needed to be established between built up space and nature are some of the manifold ideas that he instilled into me. I was like a curious student chalking up every nugget of wisdom from all our interactions.

An important incident comes to my mind. The foundation stone of Udayan, our first mass housing project, was laid in May 1995 in the presence of the then Chief Minister, Shri Jyoti Basu and the former Union External Affairs Minister, Shri Pranab Mukherjee. Doshiji was also present for this event. Soon after the formal ceremony, he held my hand and took me to relook at the project model. In a matter-of-fact voice he said, "I feel the project is congested and we need to knock off some built-up areas to give it a proper feel."

I was, I must admit, apprehensive as our plans by then had been nearly sanctioned. Balkrishna bhai explained how he would readjust a new set of plans that would reduce the built-up area by about 200000 sq ft but certainly improve the 'feel' of the endeavour. I was very concerned because it would greatly impact the viability of the project. He must have read the worry on my face as later that evening he sat me down for a one-hour discourse that changed my thinking forever. He asked me a simple question - whether our reducing the area would make the project unviable? My math indicated that it would not be unviable but, most certainly, at least 30% less profitable. I told him what I felt. He smiled and reiterated quietly, "Harsh, nobody will remember how much money you made. But they will remember how efficiently you completed the project and improved it for posterity."

That conversation was a major turning point in my career. I promptly agreed and I am sure the impact that Udayan finally had has a lot to do with this decision. 'Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark,' said Rabindranath Tagore. I could not agree more!

"...nobody will remember how much money you made. But they will remember how efficiently you completed the project and improved it for posterity."

My faith in our project must have touched Balkrishna bhai and, of course, the rest, as they say, is history.



Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore
- A BV Doshi Creation



Kamala House: BV Doshi's Residence in Ahmedabad



BV Doshi with Harshavardhan Neotia



BV Doshi gave Kolkata its first socio-economically tiered housing at Udayan - The Condoville



MY ENCOUNTER WITH BALKRISHNA DOSHI



Partha Ranjan Das

As students of Architecture, we had very little exposure to the works of contemporary architects in India in the 1970s. Our window was limited to western publications showcasing designs of European and American masters. We did not even have Indian journals and magazines on architecture and design till the 1980s when *Inside Outside* and *A+D* started publishing works by Indian architects and designers. MARG, which was established in 1945, covered Indian contemporary architecture, but was available only in libraries. I first came to know about the works of Joseph Stein, Anant Raje, AP Kanvinde, Charles Correa and BV Doshi from the pages of MARG.

Once *Inside Outside* started covering our Indian master architects, we were excited and amazed to see the efforts of the three superstars of our field. They were Kanvinde, Doshi and Correa. Their works were truly contemporary and related to our own culture, climate, values and material palette. Doshi and Correa's designs stood out as they were able to establish their own vocabulary without compromising on their modernistic outlook. We had finally found our 'gurus' we could look up to.

This distant Eklavya-like admiration went on for quite some time before I got an opportunity to meet Balkrishna Doshi when he was invited by the

Bengal Ambuja Group to design a mixed income housing complex in Kolkata that was christened Udayan. I was assigned to accompany him to the airport and see him off as he was travelling alone. I had a thousand questions for him but had the time to ask only a few hundred. Yet he was patient and answered all my queries. It was my first exposure to Doshi the teacher, and I was amazed at his ability to look at my questions from many angles and answer them as if he were telling me a story.

I met him again at the Delhi Airport after the first design for Udayan had been presented in Kolkata. He enquired after the project and I could make out that some changes were in the offing. A revised blueprint was sent to Bengal Ambuja Group soon after, which was much better than what was submitted earlier.

In the meantime, I became involved with many architecture colleges as a visiting faculty and as an external examiner. None of the colleges had a proper campus. The buildings were poorly designed and none of them offered the vibrant environment of CEPT, Doshi's own school of architecture at Ahmedabad.

I spoke to many Principals and Directors of architecture colleges to propose a campus designed by eminent architects of India. Only the Director of Pilo

“Doshi and Correa's designs stood out as they were able to establish their own vocabulary without compromising on their modernistic outlook.”



Sangath Studio with its sunken vaults sheathed in China mosaic

Mody College of Architecture agreed to my concept when they were allotted a 5 acre land for their new campus at Cuttack. I wrote to Mr Doshi, requesting him to draft a master plan for this new campus where he would design only one building. Four other buildings would be designed by other eminent architects of India. I suggested that these buildings – each designed by Doshi, Correa, Stein and Kanvinde, and the hostel blocks designed by Laurie Baker and Anant Raje would be the highlight. Mr Doshi agreed to this concept. He asked me to talk to the Director of Pilo Mody College of Architecture who was supposed to write a two line request, as the concept had already been discussed. Unfortunately, no such request was sent and I lost a great opportunity to work with Balkrishna Doshi on a unique project.

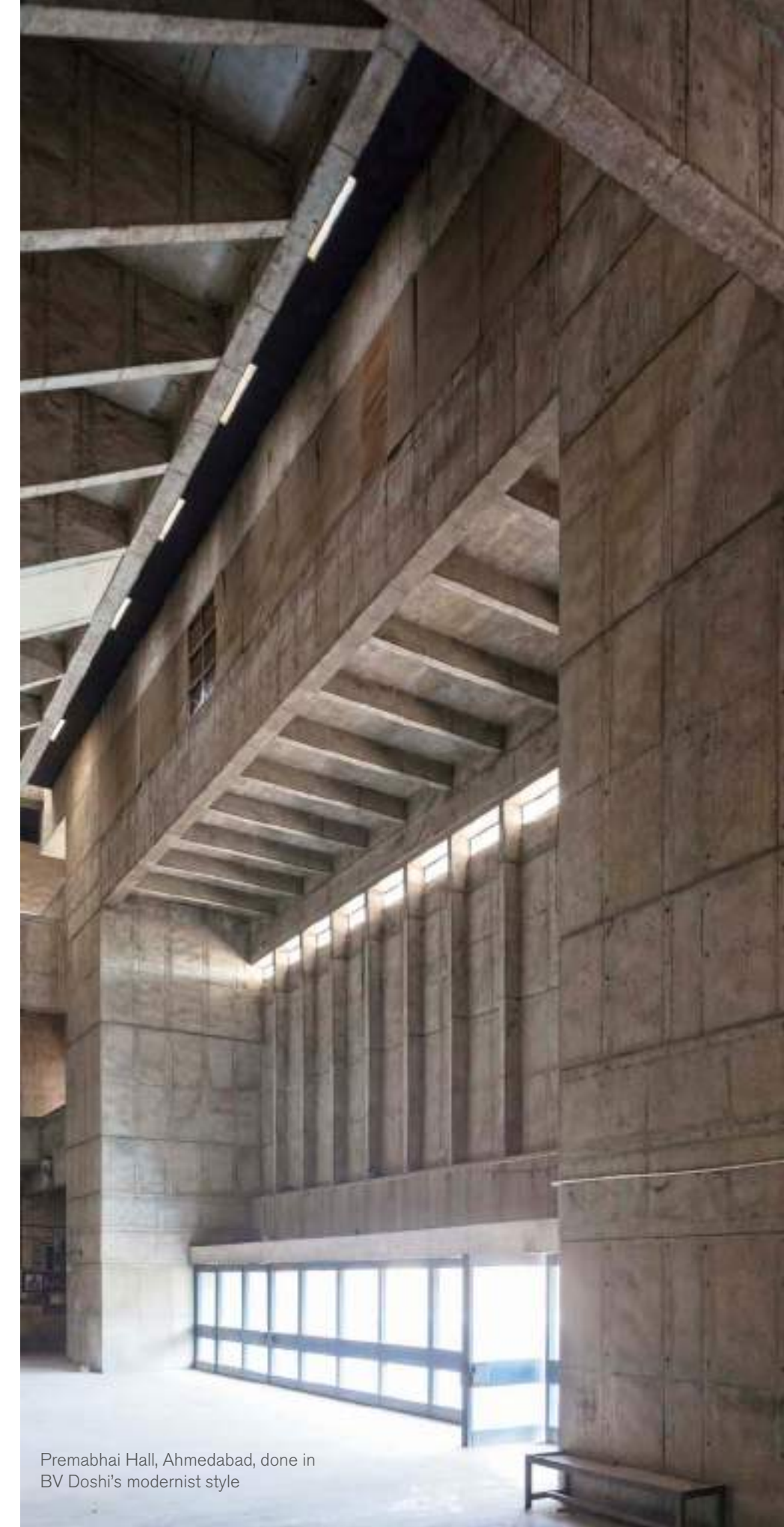
After my involvement with the Ambuja Group came to an end in 2005, I kept meeting Mr Doshi at different

programmes in Kolkata, New Delhi and Ahmedabad. I had visited some of his major works on my first visit to Ahmedabad. It was also the beginning of my personal collection of photographs and sketches of his buildings. I visited CEPT again as an external examiner for their Urban Design programme and he introduced me to the Director of National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in New Delhi. I visited the NIFT's Delhi campus on my way back from Ahmedabad and was given a guided tour by a staff member.

Each of Doshi's buildings had a story to tell. It was my job to identify the story and absorb its meaning – an exercise in distant learning. In 1998, it was the MP Electricity Board office complex in Jabalpur where I coaxed an employee to take me through the site, pillion-riding on his scooter. In 2008, it was a visit to the Academy of Development Administration in Pune. This year, it is going to be the Aranya housing



BV Doshi heads Vastu Shilpa Consultants and Vastu Shilpa Foundation



Premabhai Hall, Ahmedabad, done in BV Doshi's modernist style



The attractive interiors of Jnana Pravaha also known as Pratchi

project in Indore. The journey continues, together with my admiration for the great designer as each visit to one of his buildings reveals a new aspect of his philosophy.

I had once asked Doshi to autograph one of his books for me. He opened a page with a photograph of Fatehpur Sikri and wrote, "When can we reach this level of excellence?" – a humility rarely seen in architects of his stature. In each of his buildings, I can now identify his striving for excellence and understand what William Curtis had elucidated in his book on Doshi. Commenting on *The Substructure of Tradition*, he wrote, "There is more to a tradition than

superficialities of style. To understand its property, one needs to dig down to the substructures and informing principles ... Certain ways of handling space, geometry, sequences, elements, etc. run right through from Buddhist to Jain, to Hindu to Muslim, to colonial and now, even to modern examples. The best recent works (by architects) touches some of these deeper patterns but also keeps the process of evolution moving. How to be modern and timeless at the same time?"

BV Doshi's works have addressed this question in a most appropriate manner.



Jnana Pravaha Centre for Cultural Studies, Varanasi



Aranya from BV Doshi's drawing board





MY MANY SPLENDoured TEACHER

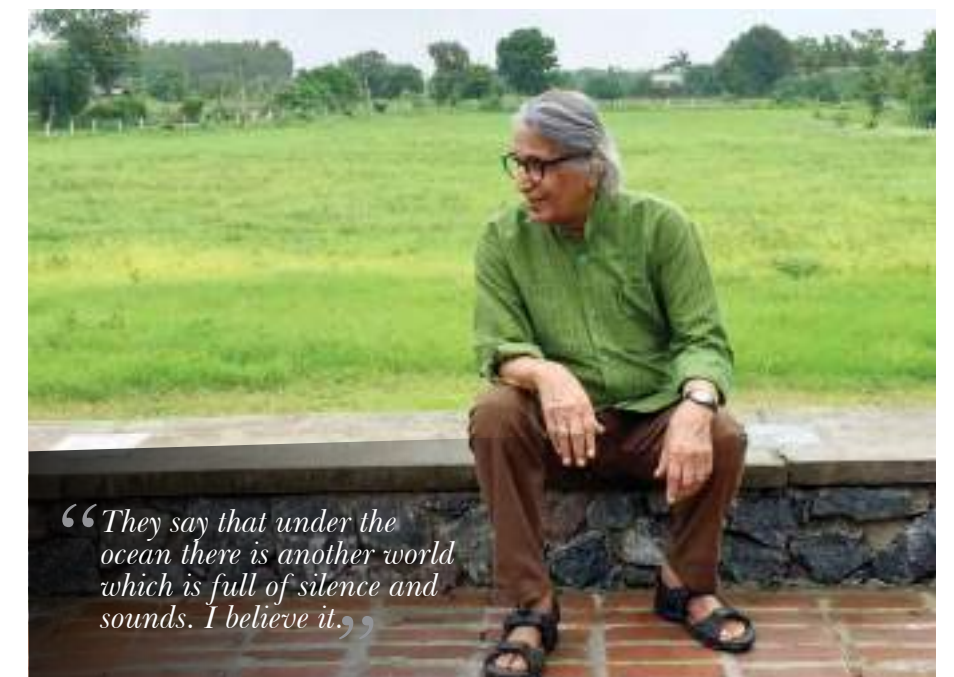
Sohan Nilkanth

My initial difficulty lies in how to address this grand Visionary of Architecture. Indeed, he is a rare phenomenon – someone who at 91 can put us to shame by the way he carries himself; someone who can be profoundly serious and wise, and yet turn child-like, full of enthusiasm, with an occasional mischievous gleam in his smiling eyes. Someone who has the generosity of an open mind, exploring what you and I would hesitate to consider.

Sitting on the stage, about to begin my sarode recital for his 90th birthday celebrations in Ahmedabad, I ask him

this question. Typically, he does not answer directly but turns the table by posing counter questions. He leads you deeper into what you are wondering about, thinking about. That is his way of teaching; of opening up more doors for you than you had ever imagined.

To have asked him questions, to have interacted with him on many occasions, is as much my privilege as writing about him. Such experiences have left deep impressions which are almost alive. So here I go, not chronologically but as things drift back to my mind...



“They say that under the ocean there is another world which is full of silence and sounds. I believe it.”

"How do I deal with these tall towers in our project, prominently visible in the skyline from a distance?" I ask him, my architectural adviser, on one occasion.

"Suppose you go to an exclusive gathering of royalty where everyone is of true royal blood, stately and dignified; everyone is dressed in sherwanis woven in pure gold thread and embellished with sparkling diamonds. Each person is more impressive than the other. How would you know which one is the king?"

I fumble. "I am not sure," I venture. "But I was actually asking about buildings."

"I know," he says with a twinkle in his eyes, "and that is what I am talking about too! The dress, the ornaments may be similar. What you should really look out for is the headgear. The royal crown. It must out-do all other headgears. That's how you know who the king is! Don't you want your buildings to command the skyline? Then think about the headgear! Make it outstanding!

And, wait, there is something more. Look at the footwear too. The king's diamond-studded footwear will be infinitely superior.

He knows people will notice them when they touch his feet. Others will not be too concerned. So think about these tall buildings and their feet. As you enter the building, its feet should be grandly displayed – entrance spaces of a scale and quality that befits only this king of a building! Got it?"

The door to his house is open. We – a batch of some of the first year students at the School of Architecture established by him – are invited to his home during the festival of Holi. We arrive and enter with trepidation. The house is so different from any other we have seen. He welcomes us warmly. His family is introduced to us as he meets every student personally. Chats casually, asks about our families, our interests. He puts us at ease and you suddenly feel a sense of warmth, a closeness. Most magically, he becomes much more than merely a teacher. It seems that a

different relationship has been founded. Later, I talk to my seniors at School about this sentiment. They too feel the same way. It is a unique bond that unfolds over time. And it lasts. The lucky ones get more opportunities to nurture it, to experience it, well beyond the days at School.

It seems that the first batch nurtures a special attachment. Like the first born child in a family. I ask them how did they get admission into School and what was it like in the early days. From what I hear, our teacher who had interned with Le Corbusier had a dream of starting a School of Architecture like nowhere else. So, what does this man in his mid-thirties do? In the hot Ahmedabad summer he goes on his bicycle from house to house, asking if the residents have children who wish to join a school of architecture he is about to start. Can you imagine his conviction and courage? He tells parents that his school is not

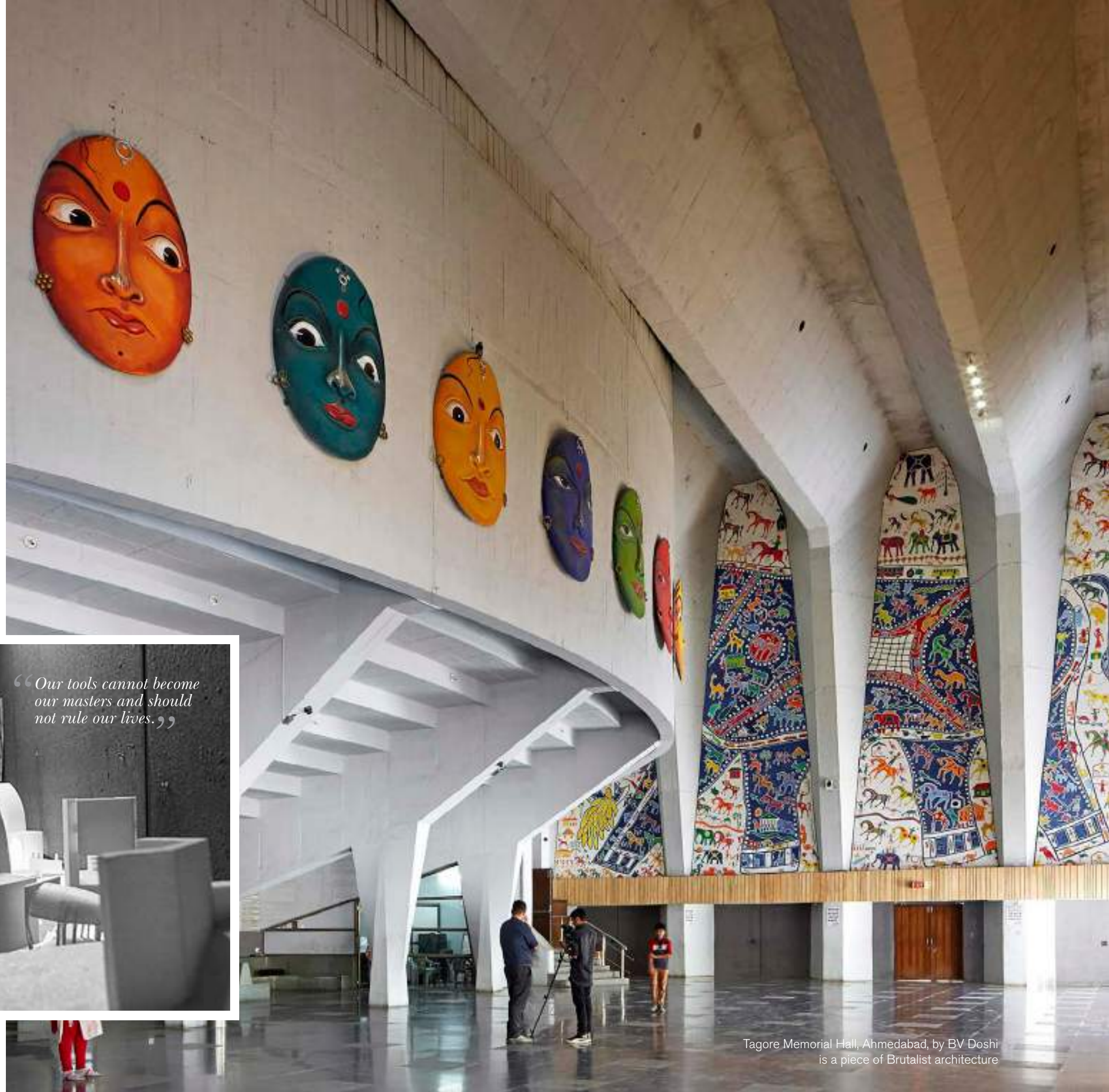
“Most magically, he becomes much more than a merely a teacher. It seems that a different relationship has been founded.”

affiliated to any university, it will not give any degree, it has no campus. That the students will be taught in the unused badminton hall of a college.

Yet the School takes off and becomes



“Our tools cannot become our masters and should not rule our lives.”





The blue doors at The Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad

like no other, establishing itself as one of the most prestigious institutions of architecture anywhere in the world!

The story of how the School was established is, of course, hearsay. But I have personally heard several accounts from the founder

who is full of surprises and very fond of stories that include mysteries, legends, fantasies and epics. Maybe they provide food for his imagination and dreams. After all, every architect

wants to realise his dreams but that is easier said than done. Hence I complain, "When you tell a client something, he accepts it, however unorthodox or difficult your idea might be. He agrees to your point of view. However, when I try, he simply hints at sacking me! So where does one start? Many have the ability and imagination. Yet they cannot get things done their way!"

He smiles and unfolds another unique tale.

"When I was young and trying to find my feet, I was asked to do some work

“most people will show respect for someone who struggles and makes genuine efforts to do something meaningful though it may sound unusual at the start. One has to build up on one’s convictions to reach a certain position.”

for the family of a reputed industrialist. I toiled over the plans for a month before going to meet the the client. Even as I started to open the rolled-up drawing on his table, he said 'This is not going to work; it is wrong!' The client had noticed

some problem in the partially opened drawing. I was stunned and had no idea what to do next. I needed the job desperately. I needed money for my medical treatment. But in a moment I made

my decision. I folded back the drawing, joined my hands into a namaskaar and started to walk out of his office saying, 'Since the drawing is wrong, there is no point wasting your time. But, I have been working on this for a month. I only wish you had given me ten minutes to explain what I have been trying to do for you.' A few days later the client's secretary called to say that his boss would see me for ten minutes, like I had wished, though what I had tried to show him was incorrect. You see, this is how things could start. This is how people begin to listen to you. Of course, you must be convinced that what you are suggesting is the best for your client. A serious client will always give you an ear. In fact, most people will show respect for someone who struggles and makes genuine efforts to do something meaningful though it may sound unusual at the start. One has to build up on one's convictions to reach a certain position." Needless to say, he went back to see that client and eventually did many significant projects for the family.

Something similar was destined for my partner and me. It happened while my teacher was an architectural advisor for one of our projects. We were in the office of a young client – a distinguished industrialist. The elders of the family were also present. We unpacked and opened up the site model. Somehow, this once, my teacher had not been able to see the model beforehand and comment on it. He now looked surprised



BV Doshi with Charles Correa

and obviously disliked what we had unravelled. His thoughts raced fast. There was tense silence as he gave me a look that would make anybody's heart sink. "Could I, please, be alone with my team for a moment?"

he requested. The client most graciously agreed. As soon as the door was shut, he turned around and asked me, "Sohan, do we have tickets to return to Ahmedabad?"

"Yes, we do," I said. "OK, one hassle less! I am going to tell them that this site cannot take up so much built-up area. We need open spaces, greens, trees. They may say it is not commercially viable. Well, if that happens we simply pack our bags and go home!" He had made up his mind and we had nothing further to say. So when the meeting began, he lifted one block off the model and put it aside. "We have to build less," he remarked. "We can't afford to fill up the site like this. We need open areas, we need breeze, we need trees. People are going to live here with their families. Do you want to create a concrete jungle for them? Please think of what you mean to do; please think of your reputation. Shouldn't one be proud of what one does? Why do you need to invite architects all the way from Ahmedabad to design concrete jungles?" The silence was deafening. The client and his family now retired to the anteroom. But when they finally emerged, they encouraged us to do what we thought was best, and what would make all of us proud. That is my master's power of persuasion!

Later, he told us, "You should always carry a signed resignation letter in your pocket when you go to meet your client to discuss your ideas. You must be convinced about your vision. If things are just not going to work, you simply give the letter, get up and leave."

But my teacher is not only about work and architecture. His genuine warmth and affection touches all those who interact with him. Despite such a gap in age, he treats you like a friend.

I remember him complaining that I didn't ask him for dinner when he heard that I liked to cook. Now, whenever I invite him, he comes all enthused and shares precious moments with us.

"We have to build less. We can't afford to fill up the site like this. We need open areas, we need breeze, we need trees. People are going to live here with their families. Do you want to create a concrete jungle for them?"

On his travels abroad, he calls up a past student, asks him to gather as many past students as possible and meets them over a meal. Just as he shares your happiness, he also shows great concern

when you are feeling low. Here's an example:

I had once cancelled my slideshow-lecture at the International Studio that he runs as his office because my aunt who lives with me was seriously ill. I informed his office formally and out of the blue he just dropped into my home unannounced, as if it were the most natural thing for him to do. I was deeply touched. He had never met my aunt, but that hardly mattered. He knew me, and that was enough. He sat with us for quite a while, just like a family elder, and when he departed he left behind a fug of warmth.



BV Doshi sharing his design thought process



A view of the staircase at Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore





ARCHITECTURE AS A WAY OF LIFE

Channa Daswatte

For any architecture to be meaningful one has to engage with the people you are working for; the kind of persons who are going to use the space you have designed. I have always tried to create spaces that allow people's lives to be enhanced and enriched. Very often, I try to use local materials and local skills because architecture is quite a large proportion of any economy. And that is why I find Balkrishna Doshi's work so exciting.

I have had the good fortune to see some of his creations and meet him a couple of times. I'll never forget a moment in 2004; I was in Ahmedabad making a presentation at an event at the Centre for Environment Planning and Technology. Mr Doshi happened to be in the audience which, for me, was a huge privilege. He is a very gracious man. Walking up to me once I had finished, in front of all the students he said, "Your work is so beautiful!"

Some of that graciousness comes through in most of his work. I particularly admire the philosophy behind his approach to the Aranya Community Housing project where he truly believed that people could be left to build the environment for themselves, using materials that are around them. With simple instructions and advice from architects, they had the ability to create communities that could flourish.

It is a very admirable position that he took, especially because Mr Doshi came

from a formal, modernist background. His initial work reflected that training – an effort to create architecture for India that somehow looked forward, without engaging with the past; the reason why Pandit Nehru brought Le Corbusier, under whom Mr Doshi had trained in Paris, to build Chandigarh, a new city that looked ahead to a new India, freed from all baggage. In those early days, Mr Doshi truly believed that a 'new India' could be expressed through architecture that was fresh and clean, that looked at space and light to create work without the implications of the past intruding to colour ones judgement. These were certainly strong beliefs. But you also see moments when he was able to move away. Aranya Community Housing was one such landmark moment!

I recall another time when I was visiting Ahmedabad for a very short while. As I had met him earlier and he had asked me to call him when I was next in his city, I phoned him, despite initially hesitating that a renowned architecture of his stature may not receive my call. To my great delight, he picked up his phone and said, "Oh Channa, how lovely that you are in Ahmedabad! Do come along. I must show you my Gufa (The Husain-Doshi Gufa that was later christened Amdavad ni Gufa)." I managed to find my way to the venue. He came in a humble auto rickshaw and I had the utter joy of being personally shown by the great

“Mr Doshi truly believed that a 'new India' could be expressed through architecture that was fresh and clean, that looked at space and light to create work without the implications of the past intruding to colour ones judgement.”

architect this completely pleasurable and mad creation that he had done, letting his mind roam free in a world of fantasy, along with the renowned artist, MF Husain, who had painted the murals.

It was a wonderful hour that we spent together. What was delightful about the Gufa was that it was done for its own sake. It was pure architecture. With childlike pleasure he kept exclaiming, pointing at some distance, "Oh Channa, you must go there and look at the way the light hits the walls! Look at the play of shadows!" His innocent enjoyment in showing me how architecture works, how light pours in and how it shapes and forms the space

around us, made me in that moment realise that I was in the presence of a great architect; someone who understood architecture as an innovative craft that extended well beyond the basics – seamlessly sculpting light, sculpting form and sculpting space.

Mr Doshi is constantly searching for new, personal idioms. You will see this in his home. Whether it is the use of simple, basic materials like bricks or

light streaming in in a particular angle, his motive was to create a place of joy and comfort for his family. With time, it was great to see him promoting within communities an architecture that somehow connected with the past, minus the paraphernalia or the burden. He recognised that the past somehow brought people together; the formation of space did that. And Mr Doshi had no qualms about accepting this fact. In his early works there was a necessity to subscribe to the context of modernism,

“I was in the presence of a great architect; someone who understood architecture as an innovative craft that extended well beyond the basics – seamlessly sculpting light, sculpting form and sculpting space.”

a belief that a New India was possible. But the philosophy of modernism arises from a liberal foundation, based on social equitability. The burden of Partition

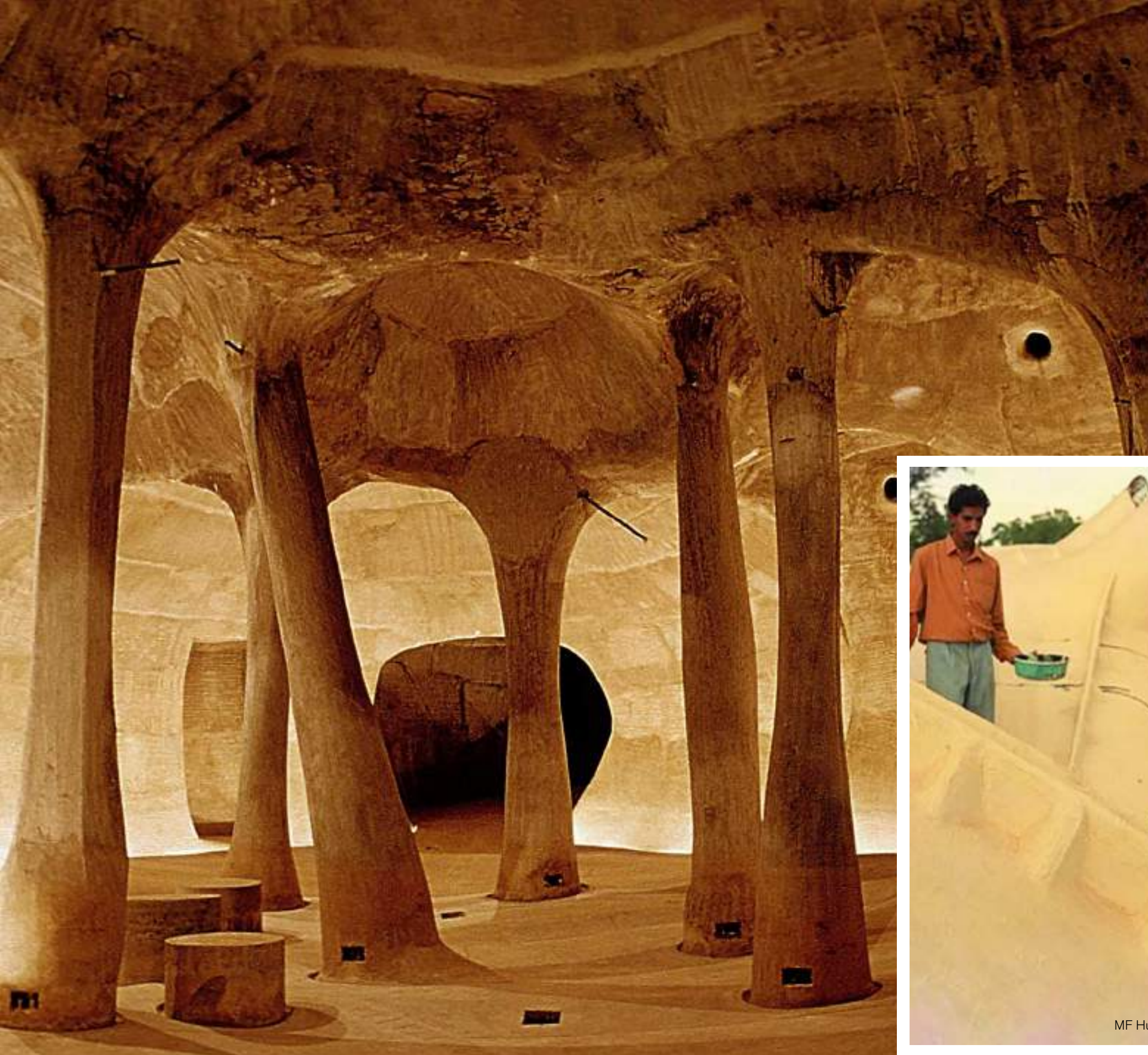
had bred so much division and hatred that, perhaps, it was necessary for a new India to espouse modernism without looking back. At that time, that was India's urgent need. It is one of those interesting things about architecture – it must be the one profession which attracts a person because it gives you hope for the future. It gives you a distinct identity. But Mr Doshi was quick to recognise with the passing



Tagore Memorial Hall, Ahmedabad



Kanoria Centre for Arts - a hub for the creative arts in Ahmedabad

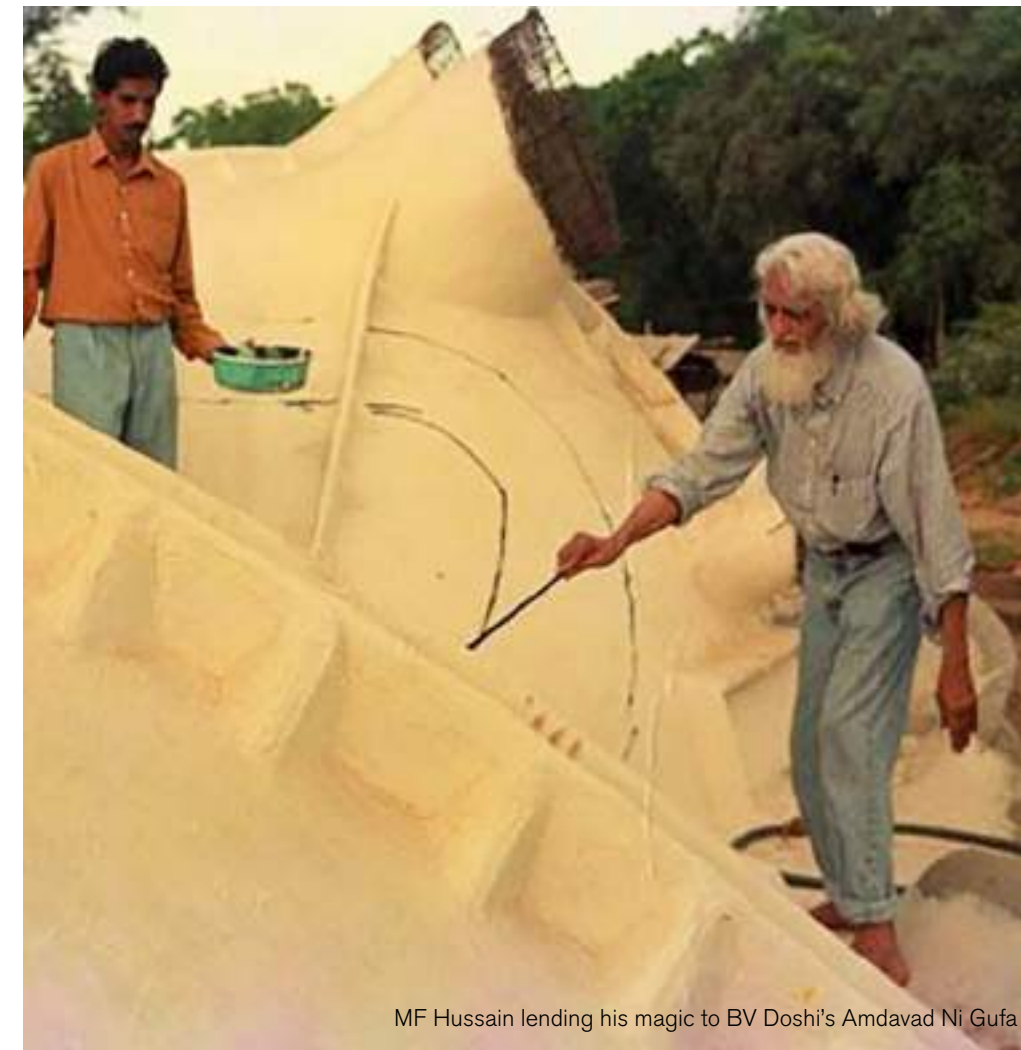


A different view of the Amdavad ni Gufa

of years that architecture had to also be grounded in the roots of our past to make sense and exude pride and character to future generations. It could never be intimidating but constantly flow around you and liberate you. The baggage had to go; but the idea of India had to remain. Architecture would have to develop its roots in the country but also exude an international appeal. That, I think, he was very clear about. He made the transition so gently, so smoothly and so delicately. With his work you never felt that you needed to lock a door or block a path. This feeling came from his highly sympathetic understanding of human life. You have to be a great humanist to be able to do that.

Hearing Mr Doshi speak recently, I was very impressed by the clarity of his philosophical decision. His architecture

was not about external form alone but about a deep internalisation of how space works and how people inhabit it. Even a monument, which may have been built for a particular purpose, needs to have emotion. That is what Mr Doshi invested in, in whatever he has done. There is a huge amount of emotion for the community that takes over in much of his work. I often find in contemporary architecture that specialists forget the people who inhabit spaces. This is what Mr Doshi transcended and it remains a significant lesson to be learnt from him.



MF Hussain lending his magic to BV Doshi's Amdavad Ni Gufa



Sculptures adorning Amdavad ni Gufa



*“If you want freedom, break away
from the normal conventions.
Break away from all the rules;
Forget history books.”*



An architectural marvel by BV Doshi

I BELIEVE...

Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi, the internationally celebrated architect-philosopher, in an exclusive interview with Potpurri's editor, Jayabrato Chatterjee, when Doshiji last visited Kolkata briefly earlier this year.

JC: Congratulations on winning the coveted Pritzker Architecture Prize! It's a huge honour not just for you but also for all of us in India. What were your feelings when you were told that you were going to be receiving this award?

BVD: Surprised...thrilled...I also felt very thankful...

One does get a lot of accolades from different places over time, but this award is internationally considered the highest in my profession. I was on the jury long back, so I was acquainted with the rigorous procedure. And I also knew that it had to be unanimously agreed upon. So I was glad that it recognised what I have been trying to do over the years because my work has deviated quite a lot from what

is normally practiced. It was very good of the jury to recognise the meaning and usefulness of the present context of my work and find it globally relevant. I think that was very important. Because we talk of cities, we talk of architecture, we

talk of education but we never talk of empowering people. That is something I'm very happy that they recognised.

JC: What memories do you have of growing up in India and what really got you interested in architecture?

BVD: I was born in Pune in 1927 and my childhood was in lots of ways very unusual. I grew up in an extended family where you have a new-born and an eighty year old grandparent, lots of cousins and relatives all living together. Sometimes there would be over thirty people in the house! When younger family members got married, we had to build an extra room for them. So, like the family, the house too was expanding and modifying. It was a very homogenous and balanced co-existence, where tolerance and acceptance came naturally. Also, I was exposed to lots of rituals like in any traditional Indian home. We went to temples, we went on pilgrimages, we knew about births and deaths, about religion and mysticism as part of life's cycle – there was nothing extraordinary about these things – and we had the freedom to begin placing our gods and goddesses, our myths and legends, fairytales and folklore told to us by elders in an imaginative space that went well beyond mundane realms of a structured reality. I think that made my life exciting and full of possibilities as a child. My earliest impression of any architecture was of a living, breathing space.



BV Doshi with Louis Kahn

JC: What about your days spent in Paris?

BVD: Though I did not know much about Le Corbusier, I applied for the job and got it. I was in Paris for four years, from 1950 to 1954. And I was not paid for the first eight months! It was a lesson in coping and learning. I did not know the language; I did not know much about architecture because I left halfway from the course I was reading at the JJ School of Architecture that I had joined in 1947. So life was very uncertain, trying to make sense of an alien place and an alien language and culture. Even in terms of architecture, it was a very different period for Corbusier. When you are in a totally unusual situation, you allow your senses to come into play. I think that helped me to absorb a lot more.

JC: Did this alienation in any way become a focus for how you were going to be looking at architecture later on?

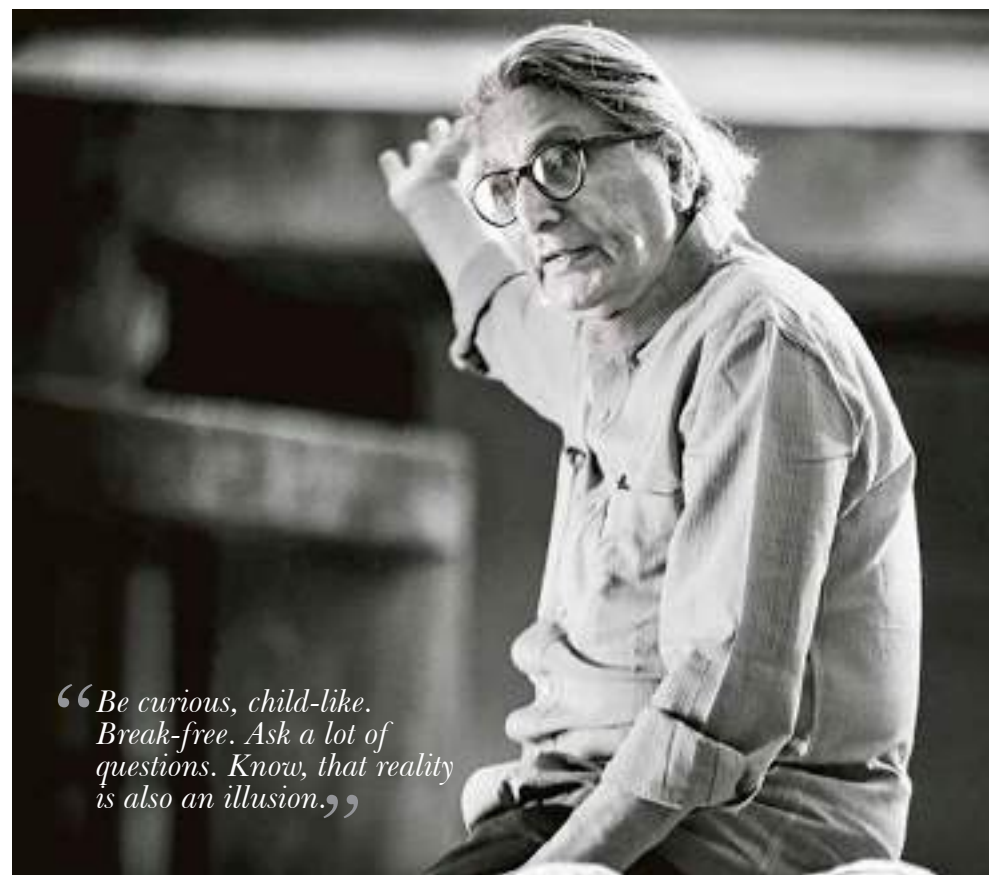
BVD: All the time! Because when I came back from Paris to Ahmedabad, I started thinking about what is really the essence of our Indian character, our Indian life – what is the Indian way of doing things. It's just not the multiple uses of space, but even the quality of light and structure, the kind of hybridisation of things – those became very important for me. We, in India, are not really very formally disciplined people, are we? Our attitudes are often an open-ended discovery of living in an anthropocentric world of space. For instance, look at this room, which is so organised. But suppose we had another fifty people here, wouldn't we remove this sofa and sit down on the floor to begin accommodating others? Therefore, acceptance, change, modification and not getting trapped into rigid rules and formalities really made me aware of our Indian character. I first got that sense of freedom in Le Corbusier's office because I did not

know the language and he was creating spaces and explaining to me, sitting next to me for hours together, drawing and animating what seemed altogether like an exciting and original universe. That is what gave me my sense of freedom in creating areas within our Indian context. I unlearned many rules to create my own that were flexible and, I hope, compassionate.

JC: So there was a sense of rebellion?

BVD: Partly, yes; more critiquing than rebellion. I came back to India to supervise Le Corbusier's projects here. Let me tell you about the time when he was building the Secretariat in Chandigarh. The structure was not working, though the drawings were all finalised. It was a long building. Some parts had been designed by Le Corbusier that didn't match with the rest of the structure. My colleagues and I were struggling hard to reconcile

“...acceptance, change, modification and not getting trapped into rigid rules and formalities really made me aware of our Indian character.”



“Be curious, child-like. Break-free. Ask a lot of questions. Know, that reality is also an illusion.”





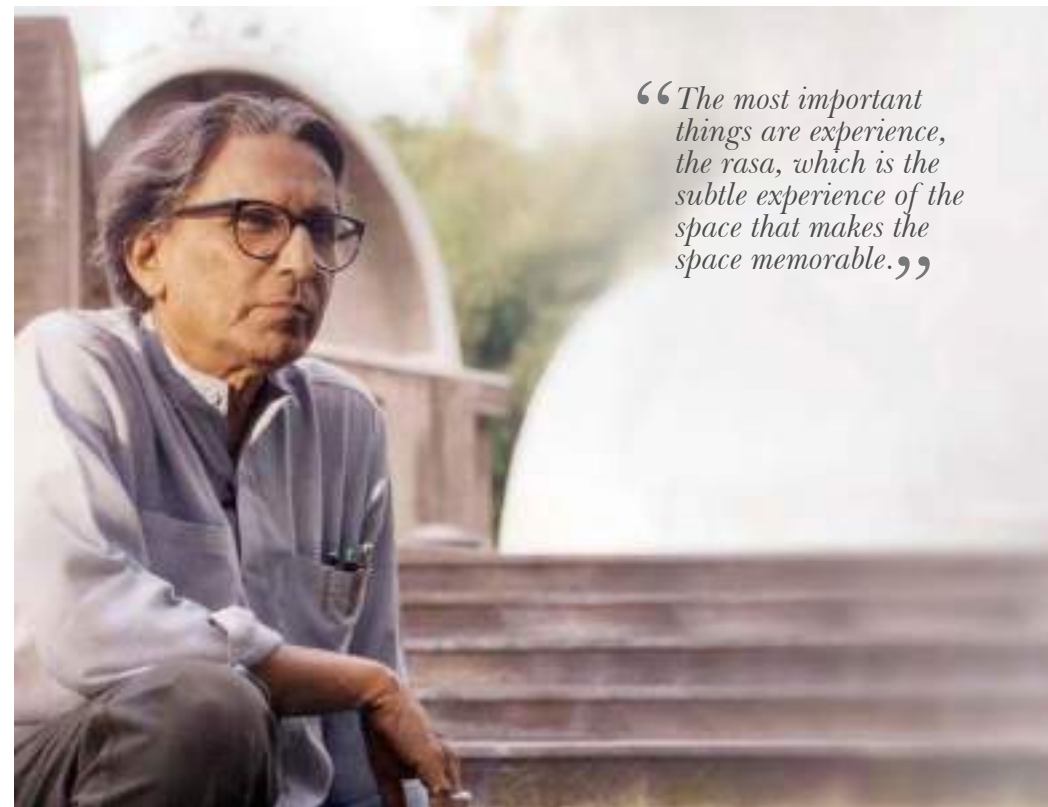
Vidhyadhar Nagar Masterplan

the disparity when Le Corbusier finally arrived after a week and said, 'What's the problem? Is it that the structure and our design don't match? Why do you bother? Just take the structure and match it with the blueprint!' Then he sketched the drawings and they became one of the most exciting elevations anywhere in the world, combining the notional and the real. That incident made me decide that every constraint is a new opportunity. Today, I don't mind constraints, I don't mind crises! In fact, I look for crises because only then can you discover innovative solutions.

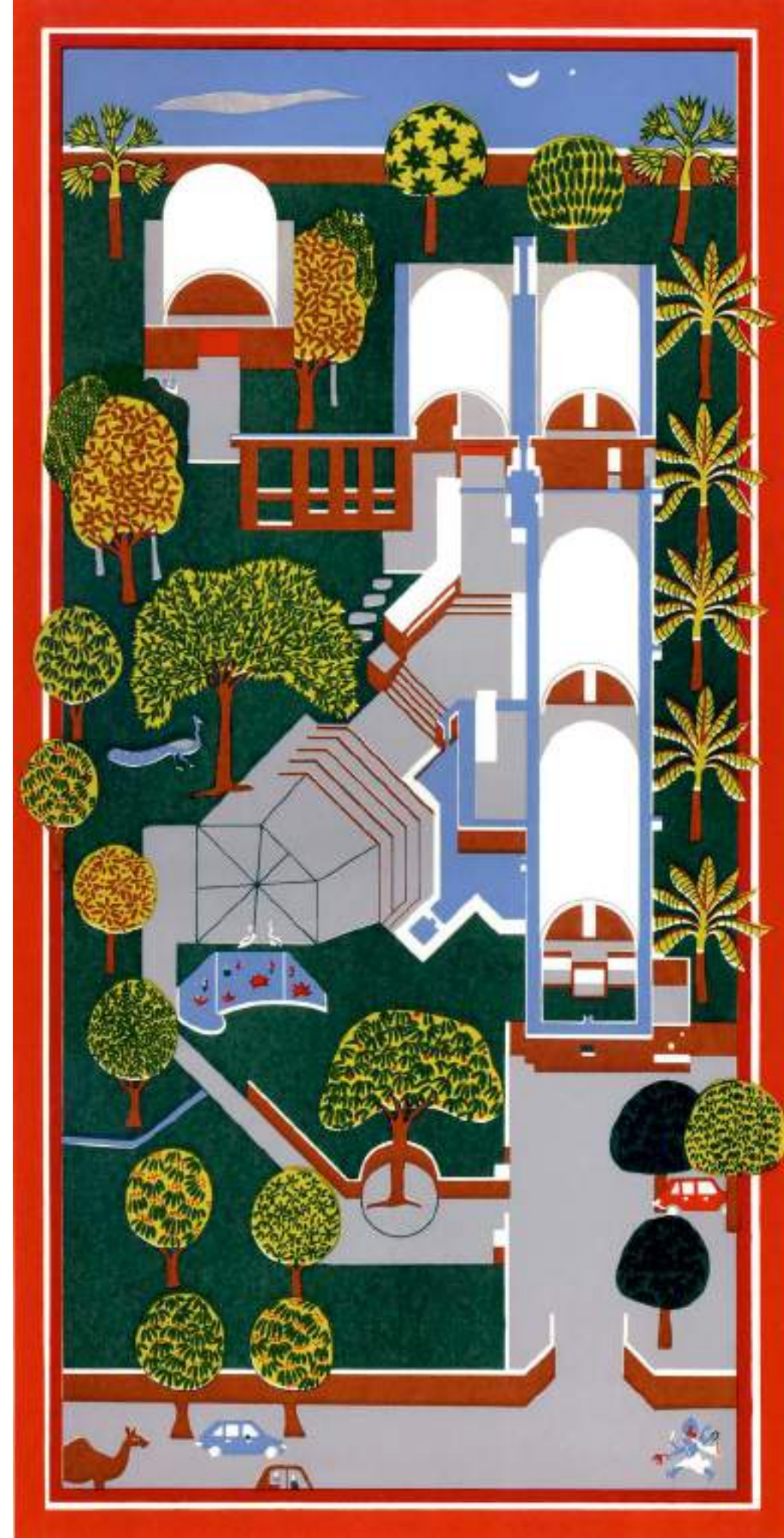
“Today, I don't mind constraints, I don't mind crises! In fact, I look for crises because only then can you discover innovative solutions.”

Traditionally, in India, we never believe in waste. In our home, when there was extra food left, we fed it to the cows or other domestic animals or gave it to somebody who was poor. We often wear garments like the dhoti or the sari

that don't need to be cut and stitched, allowing us to use them in multiple ways. I think that is also one of the fundamentals of Indian architecture and philosophy – that we waste as little as possible and are amenable to using material in several different ways. We are constantly trying to innovate with whatever is in hand and use it within the reality of space and time that has been given to us. Looking at our climate, our jharokhas have been developed because of privacy, shadow, as well as ventilation. We always think in how many additional ways we can use the same product. Our questioning is not finite or pre-determined; it allows us to add or subtract, to look at things holistically in our approach to design, where everything unexpected is finally accommodated. All my plans begin with rules before I discover how to break them



“The most important things are experience, the rasa, which is the subtle experience of the space that makes the space memorable.”



A visualisation of BV Doshi's Sangath



and find unexpected opportunities that are not simply theoretical but also culturally amenable, acceptable and homogeneous.

The only certainty is uncertainty!

JC: When you were working with Louis Kahn, did he also accept this theory of adaptability?

BVD: Not really. He accepted it partly because I was close to him. We looked at climate and available materials. But his way of working was basically organised and structured, though I must admit that he did add to or modify his site plans when I told him about the vagaries of our climate and the need for ventilation. However, once that was decided, there was no change.

We connect to our climate through our culture and our attitude. Also, are we obliged to fulfill personal needs being dictated to us by outsiders? In India, there are several things we

accept as our characteristic lifestyle – notions about living that have been passed to us through generations. Let me explain: my flight was very late yesterday. I had to wait at the airport and simply accept the situation. This acceptance, without agitation, is part of our culture. In architecture too we often have to accept certain limitations

“ I believe nothing exists in isolation. Everything has a purpose and enriches our experience. ”

or possibilities. Both unfold before us, often unasked. Of course there is a global influence on our designs that needs consideration. But we also should be open to indigenous ideas and to our particular cultural needs.

JC: What is your idea of community living, especially in the context of your work in Kolkata on the Udayan project?

BVD: I believe nothing exists in isolation. Everything has a purpose and enriches our experience. But living in a community is also connected to the uncertainties that can happen – for example, let us say that a building becomes very popular and everybody likes it. Then, one day, someone wants a variation or a way to expand his living area. What do you do? You can either create open-ended possibilities where certain changes can take place, or you stick to a rigid design. If it is a modular, fabricated structure which has been imported, there are little or no chances of making changes. But if you are working on a structure open to flexibility and suddenly there is a crisis of some kind, of non-availability of material or a demand by a client for different things, you have the scope for modifications – within limits of course – but they can be achieved. I think that is what gave a singular richness to Udayan and if you look around, you will find that richness also in nature.



Le Corbusier with BV Doshi



The Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad - the first public building designed by BV Doshi as a solo architect

That is how life has to be. In music, we use the seven notes in different ways to make a rendition unique. Similarly in art, seasons are expressed in different colours. So too it should be in architecture, if it has to be meaningful. Ultimately, what we have at Udayan are not houses but homes where a happy community lives. That is what finally matters.

JC: How does one look at discarding this baggage, this rigidity in terms of architecture and design?

BVD: Just don't blindly follow what other people have done before you. Go and be inspired by our heritage sites. Revisit our villages. See how our village folk live. Look at the comfort of what they have built for themselves and also the environment in which they thrive – the village market, the village square, the beautiful banyan tree that becomes a place for gathering and casual chatting in the evenings, very much like a city club. Learn from our history, our myths and legends, and from the power of imagination, unfettered by imported ideas. Go and seek indigenous

items you can use for construction. Why create limitations for your own thoughts?

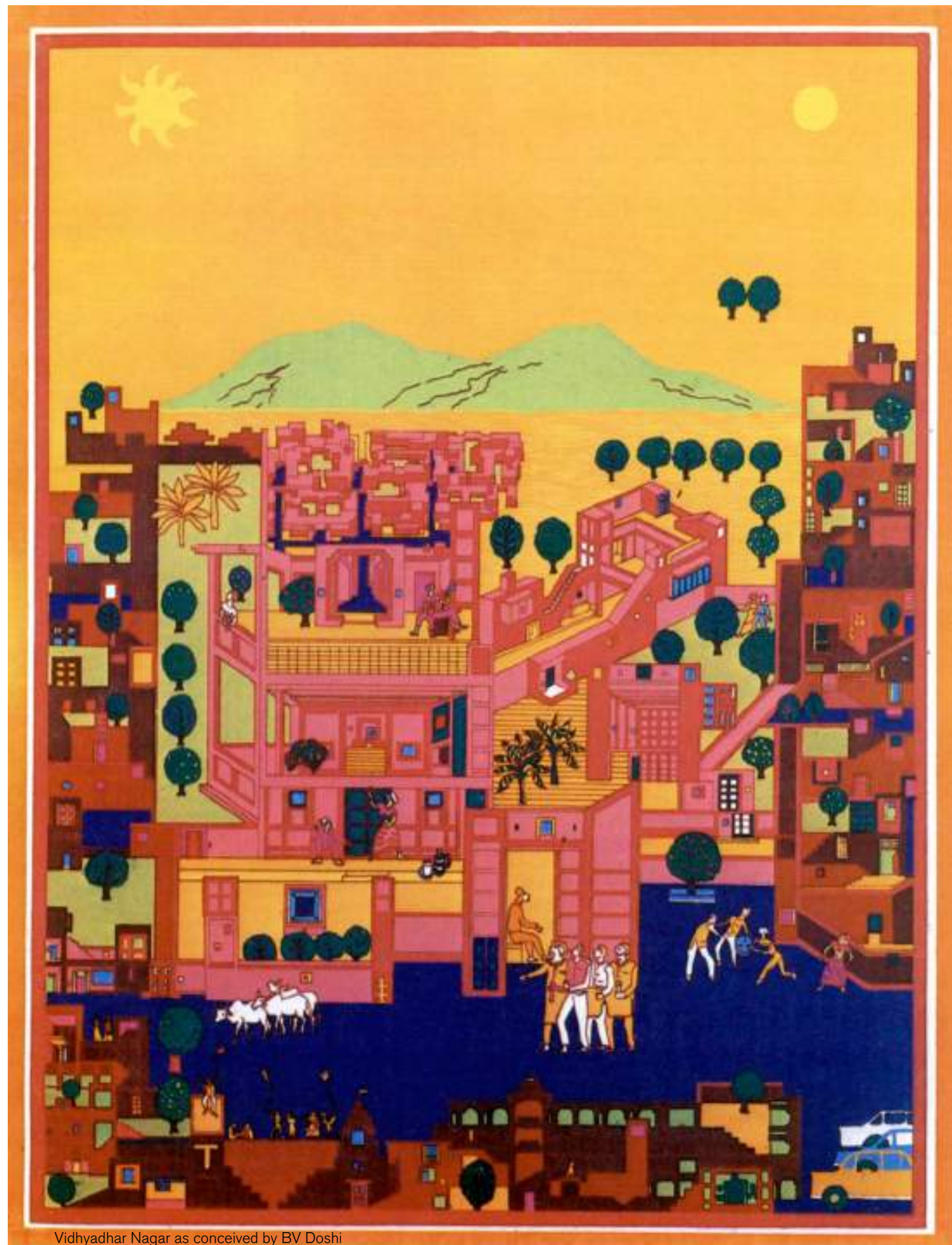
In our dharma, from childhood to sanyas, there are varying stages of human behaviour. As we grow old, we also have to renounce material things and learn the art of minimalism. The best way is to find a method that empowers not only you but also those who you are designing for – all those men and women and children who will make your project their own, who will live out their lives within what you have created for them – a space where they will laugh and cry, bring forth life and lift

“I believe you can make any space meaningful if you believe in the idea of sustainability.”

the bier of those who depart – a memorable space they can call 'home'. I believe you can make any space meaningful if you believe in the idea of sustainability, aim to root architecture in a larger context of culture and environment as well as social, ethical and religious beliefs and use an architectural vocabulary that is both poetic and functional.

You have to break the rules and deem that architecture is not finite.





Vidhyadhar Nagar as conceived by BV Doshi

“In music, we use the seven notes in different ways to make a rendition unique. Similarly in art, seasons are expressed in different colours. So too it should be in architecture, if it has to be meaningful.”

Balkrishna Vithaldas Doshi

*“I hesitate calling myself an architect
because the more I think I know
what architecture is, the less I feel I
know about its true calling.”*

Balkrishna Vitaldas Doshi

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