If Only We Had Listened

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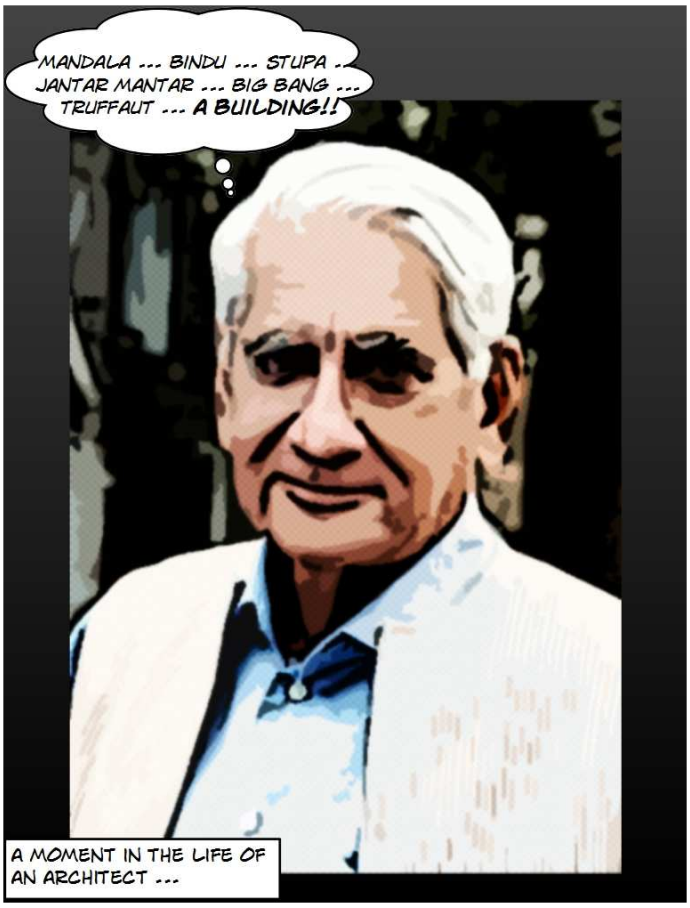
On 1 September, Charles Correa turned 80. By any measure, it has been an extraordinary life, marked by uncommon professional success and international recognition as one of the great designers of the world. A week earlier, Ratan Tata released Correa's new book, *A Place in the Shade*, a collection of essays and lectures spanning several decades and extending his previous book, *The New Landscape*.



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A Place in the Shade should be required reading not only for students of

architecture and planning, but also every bureaucrat and minister in every municipal body and state government planning department. For anyone concerned about our cities, the book is an invaluable primer that shows just how far wrong we have gone.

Why is architecture important? The best answers to questions like this often come from the most unexpected sources. When Tamerlane built the Ak Sarai or White Palace in Shakhrisabz in modern Uzbekistan, he said, “Let he who doubts our power look upon our buildings”; a phrase that captures architecture’s soul. The state of a nation is nowhere better mirrored than in its architecture. Our buildings reflect our economic and social strength, our values, our concern for environment, art, culture and beauty. Architecture reflects power. This is why the great buildings of history—the Taj Mahal, the pyramids, the Sphinx, the Great Wall, Isfahan —continue to hold us in awe.

[2]

Kanchanjanga Mumbai

In nearly sixty years after 1947, Mumbai has produced only one truly iconic, and iconoclastic, piece of architecture, and that is the one Correa designed at Kemps’ Corner, Kanchenjunga. That design re-imagined space, volume and form in a way that no other has done before or since. True, there are now other buildings that are bigger, taller, higher; but none show its leap of imagination, and all are simply variations on a tired

theme. Builders—and some industrialists—fail to see that size does not matter. Ever-bigger erections are not so much about design as pandering to an edifice complex.

[3]

Sabarmati Ashram

Buildings do not have to be big to be great. Correa's most moving work is, I believe, the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, a memorial to Mahatma Gandhi. In a section of a long and brilliant 1998 lecture at MIT entitled, simply, "Zero", Correa describes his approach to this commission: capturing the spirit of the Mahatma, reflecting it in the materials used, marrying the traditional and the modern, and providing spaces for rest and contemplation. Of the design, Correa writes: "that meandering pattern was not the result of some elaborate analysis, but the compulsive groping of a beginner towards something he didn't quite understand, but which he sensed might be of profound importance." The result is an architectural form that is gentle, meditative, introspective. No tall monument, no overpowering concrete or stone mass could pay greater homage.

II

Public buildings—I include institutions, museums and structures for public sector companies—are a significant, even disproportionate, amount of Correa's work. A commission by a private client gives an architect great latitude. Resources are less restricted, there are fewer constraints and an architect has the liberty to unleash his imagination. The result is often a structure of quite breathtaking beauty.


[4]

Falling Water by Frank Lloyd Wright (click for a two-image slideshow)

Frank Lloyd Wright's Kaufmann House ("Falling Water") in Pennsylvania is perhaps the most well-known example of a private house that rapidly attained general renown. Set in hundreds of acres of gorgeous forest, Kaufmann House sits right over a stream and natural rock pool, and uses vast areas of concrete and layered decks to create a built form that mimes *falling water*.

Public commissions are infinitely more difficult. Clients are usually indecisive committees, decisions (and payments) take forever, new management is constantly changing specifications, and there are very tight budgetary and cost constraints. In a situation like this, it cannot be easy to visualize, let alone create, structures that are at once monumental, functional, unusual and yet capturing an ethos and a spirit. In a very large

number of such public commissions, Correa achieves all this: the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur, Bharat Bhavan and the Vidhan Bhavan in Bhopal, IUCAA in Pune and, quite unbelievably, the British Council in Delhi though that is not, strictly speaking, a public commission. All of these capture *ideas*; all travel beyond a mere client brief. In each of these buildings, there is engagement with science, knowledge, mathematics, mythology, history, culture and climate, and each building is extraordinarily sophisticated in the way it melds a concept rooted in deep tradition with a completely contemporary vision. The Vidhan Bhavan in Bhopal has strong echoes of Buddhist architecture and the great stupa at Sanchi not far away.

[6]

British Council Delhi

The British Council in Delhi was a pedestrian brief: a library, an auditorium, an art gallery, some offices and conference rooms. A straightforward concrete block would have done. Correa took the opportunity to envision something entirely different and backed, as he says, by an equally adventurous client, attempted something more than a stack of spaces: a statement of what life in India means, pluralistic, multi-layered, open to influence.

Correa writes:

> "It seems to me that one the pleasures of architecture is that the commissions you undertake allow you to examine the issues that absorb you … In this, India has been exceedingly kind to me and to my generation of architects. It has encouraged us. Not by handing out large projects—but by providing the opportunity to ask questions. … Too often, you don't find the answers—but just the process of searching for them makes you grow. No architect could ask for more."

All true; but this assumes that the architect does in fact have issues (other than fees) that absorb him. Or even knows what questions are worth asking in the first place. There are not many who do, and *A Place in the Shade* makes for provocative reading precisely because we see Correa grappling with demanding questions.

III

A Place in the Shade shows us a mind of astonishing range, depth and versatility, one whose influences are catholic and eclectic: from cinema to Indian mythology and the epics, from toy trains to Mahatma Gandhi, from religion to gardens. But Correa is much more than a great architect and designer. The best pieces in the book are the ones on urbanization and planning. Here, there is a generosity of spirit, a breadth of mind and vision, a concern with the role of architecture in shaping a just and humane society.

In two essays on public transport and the Tulsi Pipe Road area, Correa shows how our planning has, criminally, neglected the very constituencies who most need it. It is fashionable to talk of the Great Indian Diaspora, of Indians leaving the country and settling elsewhere. But the real Diaspora is here, within the country, in the unending migration from villages to cities. There are things we know to be true, but with incessant political propaganda, soon forget. "Migrants don't come to cities looking for housing. They come in search of work." That comment alone skewers the ideological underpinnings of at least one political party. It also points to

the complete moral and ethical bankruptcy of a civic administration which, by its own admission, has no policy for public/affordable housing.

The Mill Lands imbroglio, a three-way tussle between citizens fighting for public open spaces, mill land owners demanding development rights and a State Government that, predictably, went with the money, culminated in a baffling—but unsurprising—decision of the Supreme Court in favour of the mill land owners, represents the single greatest loss to Mumbai. The years ahead will show that that one decision of the Supreme Court broke the back of what might have been a truly great city. In every sense, it was an opportunity squandered. Here was a real chance to undertake possibly the largest urban renewal project in history (and certainly in the history of India). An entire 600 acres of land could have been sensibly divided between the landowners, the residents and public amenities.

Correa's plan for the Mill Lands area attempted the apparently impossible: equity. It recognized, explicitly, that residents—the original mill workers—were as much stake-holders in the area as the owners of the lands, as was the general public when it came to providing for public spaces and facilities. His plan had transportation nodes, identifying the area as best suited to function as a transportation hub connecting north, south, east and west. Most of all, his plan recognized the rights of citizens and of the poor.

But to acknowledge that those who live in slums and chawls have rights is good only for elections, and not of much use when the principal objective is to make money. What might we have seen under Correa's plan? Large open public parks and green spaces; civic amenities like schools, college, health care centres; public transportation nodes and hubs. What have we instead? The disaster-in-waiting that is Phoenix Mills, narrow streets snarled with traffic, the incongruity of Palladium mall and, most piquant of all, developers desperately *buying* open spaces for their residential towers—spaces that might have been available free of cost to everyone. The greatest judge of right and wrong is not a man in black robes; it is history, and history will soon judge our government, our builders and even our judges, and find them all wanting.

Correa's vision of the city as an organism in need of constant attention remains unshared by the satraps of urban planning. In the late 1960's

—fairly early in his career—he was one of a team of three who saw that if Mumbai was to survive it needed to expand across the harbour, east towards the mainland. There, a sufficiently large area would have to be developed as a twin or sister city to take the load of Mumbai which, given its geography, had a strictly limited scope for expansion. The concern here was with increasing population densities in Mumbai, a factor directly related to the quality of urban life. It now seems almost miraculous that such an idea should even take hold, but it did, and in 1970 CIDCO was formed and designated a planning authority to oversee the development of what is now Navi Mumbai.

The original scheme provided public services and facilities that were impossible in the geographically limited Island City: open spaces, playing fields, mixed-income housing, industrial and commercial hubs, mass transit systems. It also required government to shift its offices and legislature, and other power centres, to the twin city, and reasonably postulated that with this shift, commerce and industry would follow suit.

It was not politically popular, and never happened. The result was disastrous. Navi Mumbai became an unthinking mess of ugly buildings, scar tissue in a bowl of hills, and CIDCO itself turned from a planning authority to nothing more than a massive real-estate developer with land acquired cheap. The concept was founded on an ideal: serving the public, providing a better quality of life. But such nobility of purpose and selflessness is the preserve of the quixotic; it has no place in the real world where, it would seem, only financial gain matters. CIDCO has long given up even the pretence. It now describes Navi Mumbai (its “invention”) as a land of *luxuries*. The choice of words is not accidental.

Two key proposals; both abandoned, with disastrous consequences for the city. Correa was central to both, and both showed imagination and thought beyond the ordinary. At the heart of each lay a concern for the city and the citizen, a conception of social justice and equality. Both were defeated simply by money and the bottomless greed of politicians, builders and textile magnates. Correa’s Bombay—not Mumbai—might have been a city of power and style and grace, a lively, humming, thriving true *metropolis*. Instead, we have a Mumbai ravished and pillaged, a city that daily heaps ever greater degradation on its own.

In what is perhaps the most searing part of *Shantaram*, Gregory David

Roberts comments on his first impression on arriving in Mumbai:

> *What kind of government*, I thought, *what kind of system allows suffering like this?*

We ignore the ideas and thoughts of men like Correa at our peril, and so are condemned to a city that daily grows more squalid.

IV

Great builders and designers have, through the years, always planned for the public, typically by laying out gardens and open spaces. In Mumbai, our 'sacred' open spaces are the *maidans* of South Mumbai, and they were created by our British Rulers. Post-Independence, virtually none have been created and those that existed have been steadily eroded, most notably by the government's policy on slum rehabilitation. Here is a government that claims it is powerless to stop encroachment on government lands—a compelling reason to resign if ever there was one—and yet is perfectly capable of preventing 'encroachments' on those government lands it holds most dear: the lawns of the Secretariat and the High Court, the estates of the Chief Minister and the Chief Justice. But those encroachments it is 'unable' to prevent—on parks, forests, beaches, pavements and airports—must be re-housed on the commons, on lands that the government holds in trust for all.

As we watch the systematic dismantling of our public spaces, we would do well to listen when Correa talks of "sacred" gardens. Years ago, Correa's plan for Nariman Point proposed plazas, open spaces, walkways, museums, parks. The plan was not, of course, 'profitable' and was never realized. Instead, we have that mess of concrete canyons and indistinguishable and undistinguished buildings.

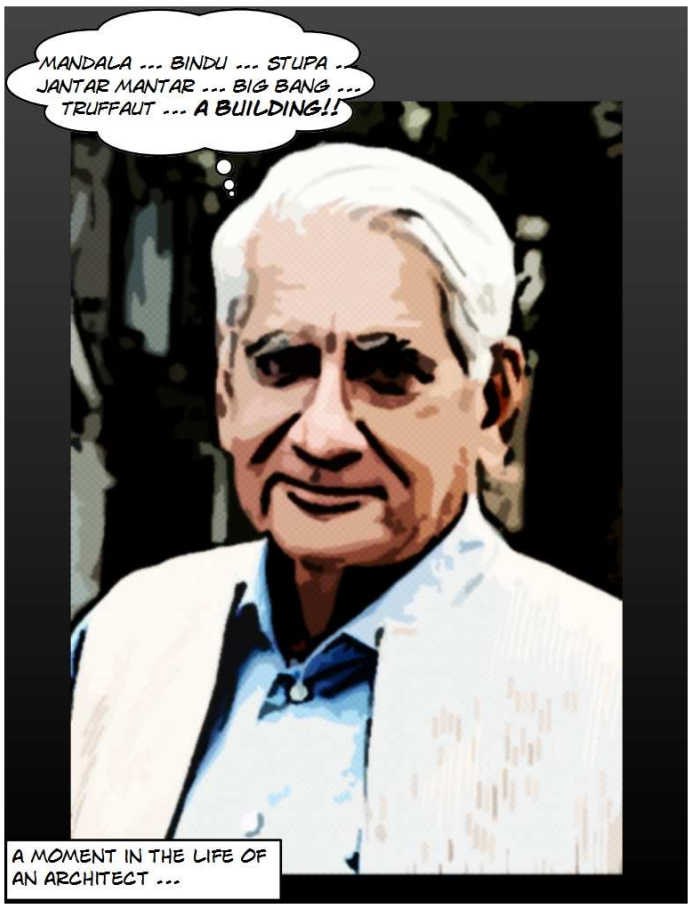
The entirety of Correa's thinking in urban planning is predicated on a single faulty assumption: of probity in public life and civic governance. That assumption drowns in an ocean of venality, and there is a sadness to Correa's book which, page after page, tells us of what might have been.

I do have a complaint about the book, and that is the lack of an index. I cannot believe an imprint like Penguin thought this was unnecessary or too much trouble. For anyone interested in the many subjects Correa writes on, the lack of an index is both irritating and an insult to the intelligence of the reader.

A shorter version of this article first appeared in the Mumbai Mirror [7] and, under a different title, the Bangalore Mirror [8] on Friday, 10 September 2010.

Links and References

[1]



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