A Place in the Sun*

**The Thomas Cubitt Lecture for 1983. The lecture appears here exactly as it was delivered on January 31, 1983, at The Royal Society of Arts in London, to an audience of architects, planners, civil servants, and architectural correspondents. The lecture is published in the May 1983 issue of the Society's monthly journal,* The Royal Society of Arts Journal.

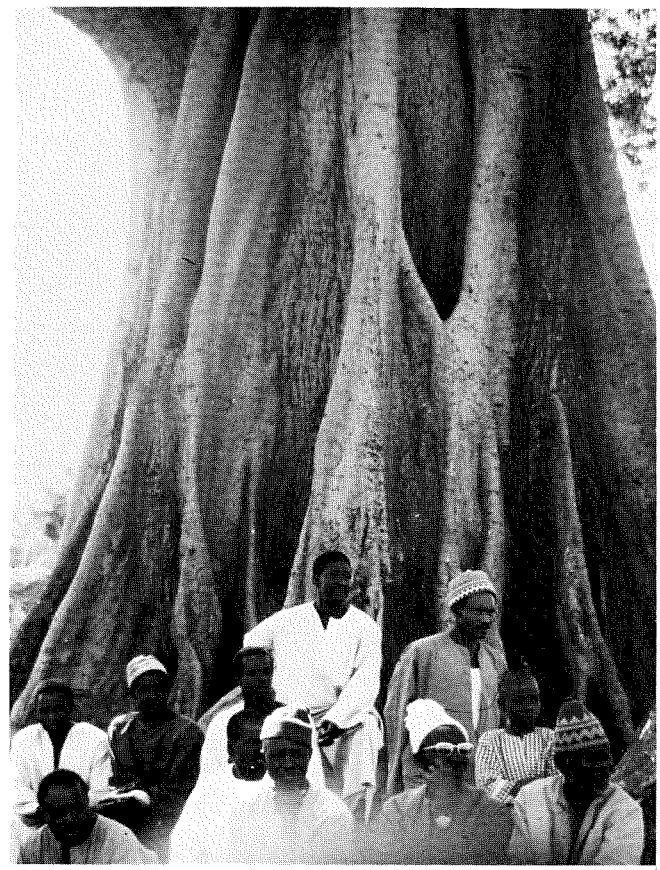
Text and Photographs by Charles Correa

My subject is concerned with building in a world far removed from Britain. India—where a great many things are quite different: the climate, the energy resources, the social patterns, the cultural ethos.

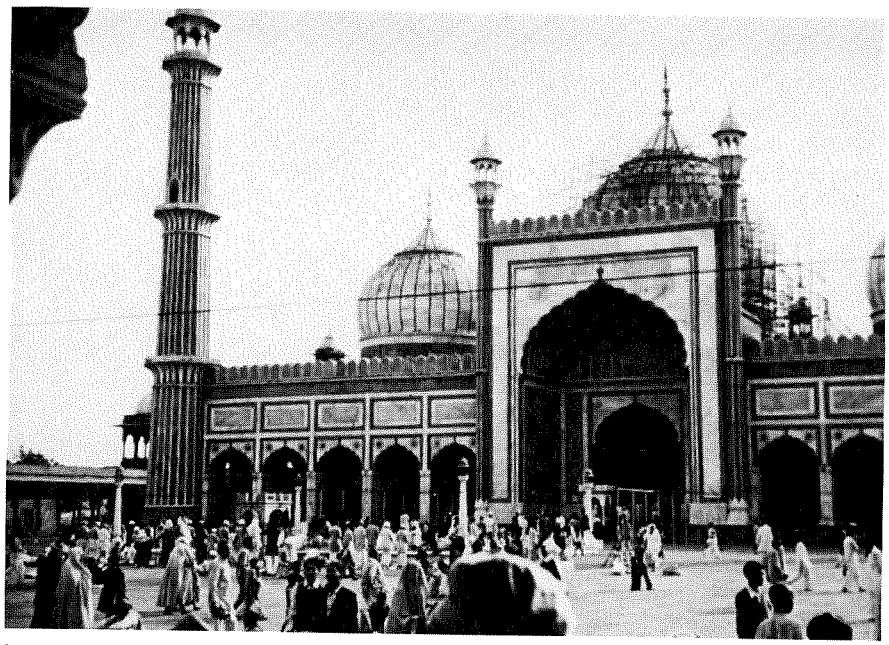
Hence my title: A Place in the Sun. In actual fact of course, as Mr. Sherban Cantacusino has already so obligingly pointed out to me, my talk should really have been called: a place in the SHADE—since that presumably is the prime purpose of shelter in India. (And had I to deliver this talk in the heat of a Delhi summer, I might well have called it just that.) However, here we are in the middle of a London winter and I rather hoped that this phrase, "A Place in the Sun," does what I wish it to do: namely, in one fell swoop, lift us out of this freezing North European weather into a faraway clime, swing us into another state of mind, into another ambiance, where warm and languid breezes blow.

If we can conjure up such a fantasy in our minds, I think we might begin to experience new attitudes to many things around us: to the clothes we wear, to the room we are sitting in—in fact, even to our manner of sitting in it.

For climate makes a fundamental difference to our need for—and perception of—built-form. In these northern regions, where the cold is so severe, the architect has perforce to stay within the design parameters of a totally insulated, weather-resistant box. One is either *inside* this box, or *outside* it. The transition from one condition to



1 African kapok tree
Senegal



2

2 Borobudur
Java, Indonesia

the other is through a hard, clearly defined, boundary: the front door. Inside or outside exist as opposites, in a simplistic duality. (A proposition lucidly expressed in the Miesian equation: a steel-and-glass box set in a sea of open space.)

Compare this to the complex manifestations of built-form in a warm climate. Between the closed box and open-to-sky space there lies a whole continuum of zones, with varying definitions and degrees of protection. One steps out of the box to find oneself . . . in a verandah, from which one moves into a courtyard, and then under a tree, and beyond on to a terrace covered by a bamboo pergola, and then perhaps back into a room and out on to a balcony . . . and so forth. The boundary lines between these various zones are not formal and sharply demarcated, but easy and amorphous. Subtle modulations of light, of the quality of ambiant air, registers each transition on our senses.

I believe that this pluralism—this ambiguity—is an essential characteristic of built-form in a warm climate. I believe that this is precisely the quality that classical European Architecture lost as it moved from the Greek Islands, up through Rome and the High Renaissance, to lodge finally along the banks of Threadneedle Street.

Furthermore, I believe that for us in India, an understanding of this spatial pluralism is of prime importance since it is the key to several of the most vital issues we

face. This evening we shall concentrate on three of them. The first concerns our relationship with built-form; the second, energy-passive architecture; and the third, housing the urban poor—i.e. dealing with the enormous migrations which are changing cities all over the developing world, from Jakarta and Caracas to Calcutta and Bombay. Looking back on almost three decades as architect and planner, I find these three seemingly disparate issues have been central to my work. In this survey, I shall try to relate them, one to the other, and set them in the context of a fourth issue—one that is crucial to India (indeed, to the entire developing world)—and that is the nature of change.

Let us start with the first: our relationship with built-form. To summarise what I was just saying: life in a warm climate makes use of a much wider range of physical conditions than it does in a cold one; furthermore, the boundaries between the various gradations along this spectrum (between room and verandah and terrace and courtyard) are blurred and casual, so that one passes easily from one zone to another.

In such a situation people develop totally different attitudes to architecture. They find that for a great many activities, over much of the year, the "box" is neither the best nor the only answer to their needs. This has profound implications—in pragmatic and functional terms, and in meta-physical ones as well. Thus, while the Little Red Schoolhouse is the symbol for education in North America, in India—as in most of Asia—it has always been the guru sitting under a tree. Not only is this image of the Lord Buddha and the peepul tree more evocative, more conducive to Enlightenment, it is also—as far as physical comfort goes—far more sensible than sitting inside a stuffy old box. So these variations of open spaces (verandahs, pergolas, etc.), are not just cheap ad-hoc substitutions for solidly built construction—as is too often misunderstood by the casual observer. On the contrary. At certain times of the day, and at certain seasons of the year, they provide the most pleasant—and most appropriate—environment for our activities.

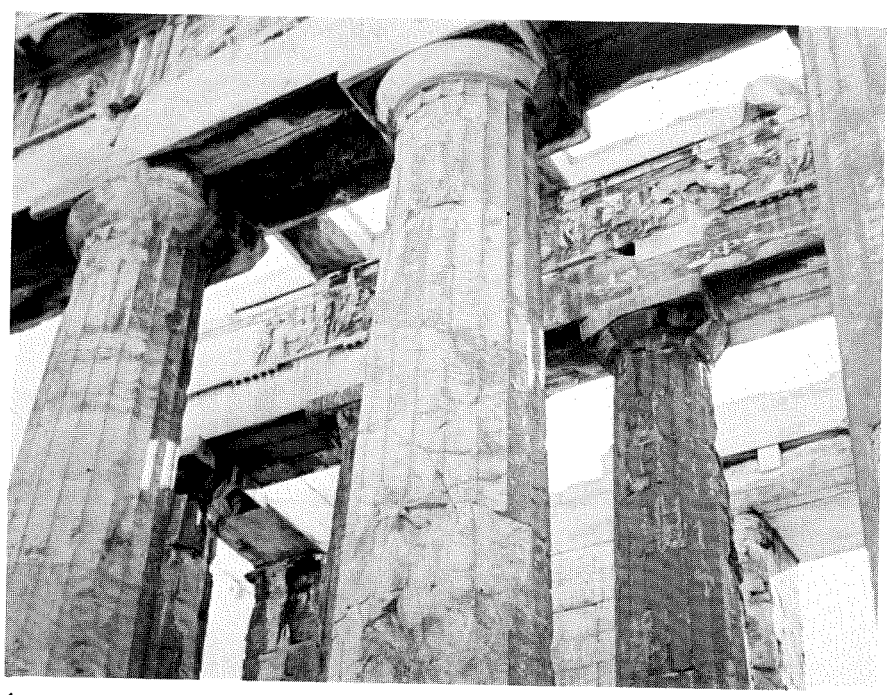
This of course makes for a difference in our perception of what is architecturally desirable and significant. If one lives in a cold climate and is continuously involved in the production of boxes (and mutants thereof), then one becomes obsessed with the surface-patterning, the coding, the tattooing of those boxes. And architectural photography, in journals and books, reinforces this obsession—since the printed image dramatises two-dimensional patterns, but is almost valueless when it comes to communicating any sense of the ambiant air.

Which is indeed a great pity. For to walk on a seashore in the evening, or to cross a desert and arrive at a house around a courtyard, is a human experience beyond the

3 Jami Masjid
Delhi

4 Transitions,
subtle and amorphous, Fatehpur Sikri

3



4

merely photogenic. At these moments, responses are triggered off in our minds, responses conditioned by thousands of generations of life on this planet. Perhaps they are the half-forgotten memories of a primordial landscape, of a lost paradise . . . but in any event, as we approach the open-to-sky end of the continuum, they condition, very powerfully, our perceptions.

This is why, here in Europe, the great wellspring of Architecture has always been the region along the Mediterranean Sea. Here the colonnade is not just a (heavily coded) screen through which you see the main building, but a perfectly pleasant spot to saunter around for much of the day. And the monumental Hindu temples of South India—at Madurai, at Tanjore, at Srirangam—are experienced not just as a collection of gopurams and shrines, but as a pedestrian path (a pilgrimage!) through the sacred spaces that lie between. In fact, this open-to-sky processional movement is of the utmost religious and symbolic significance. It is found throughout the warm regions of the Earth, from the Sun Temples of Mexico, (which consist of pyramids, and—more importantly—of the sacramental open spaces they define), to the temples of Bali (with their ritualistic pathways up the hillside, through the knife-edged doorways).

Religious ceremonies in Asia have always emphasized movement through open-to-sky spaces—and the quasi-mystical sensations these

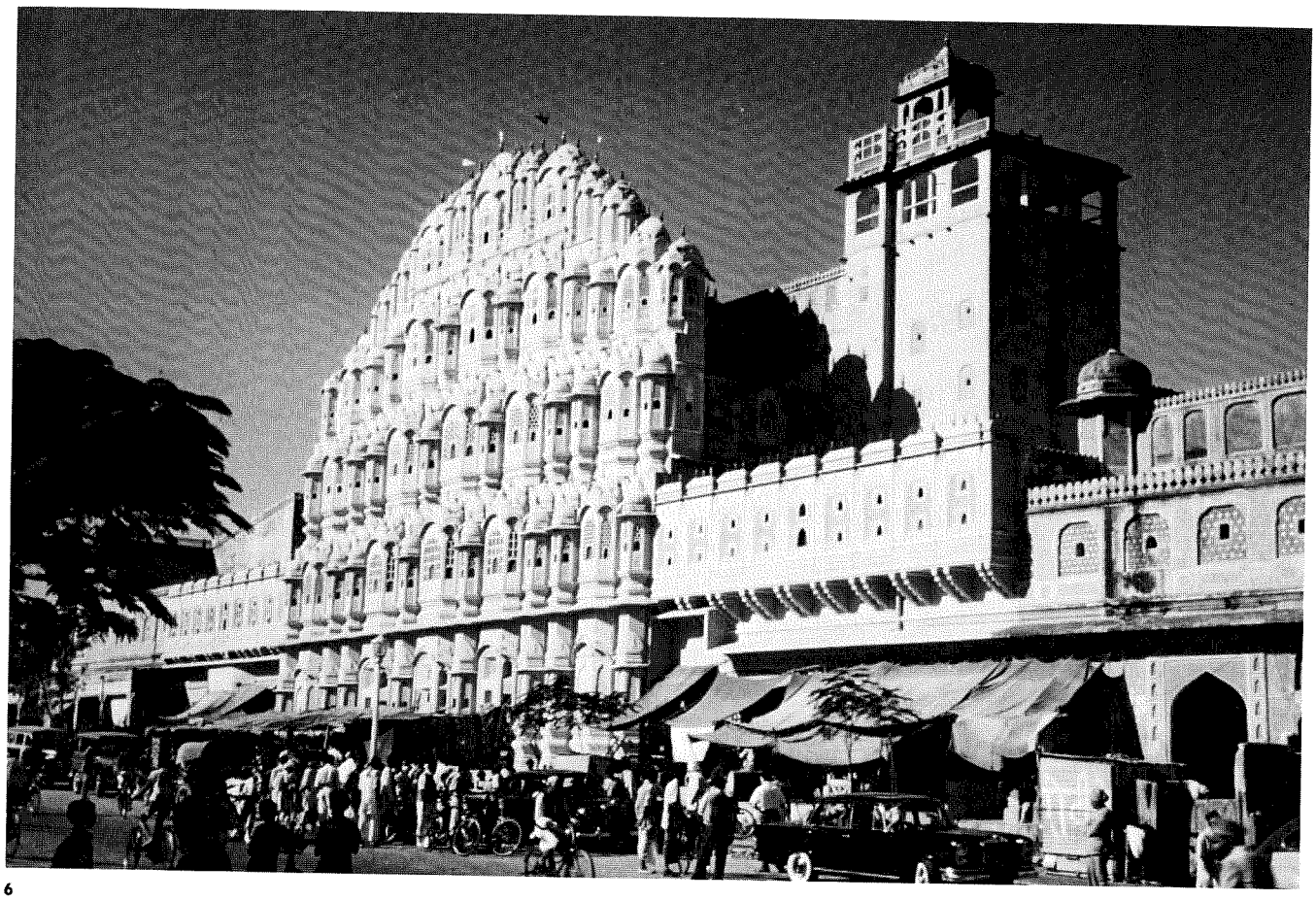
generate within us. Thus while the cathedrals of Europe are all variations of the closed-box model, the great Islamic mosques in Delhi and Lahore are at the other end of the spectrum: they consist mainly of large areas of open space surrounded by just enough built-form to make one feel one is "inside" a piece of architecture. Indeed, they exercise a rare finesse.

This phenomenon is not confined to temples and mosques. Examples are found in the secular world as well: as witness Fatehpur-Sikri, which exemplifies so much of what we have been discussing here. They are also found at the scale of domestic architecture: those of you who have travelled to warmer climates might recall early mornings on a lawn, or sitting out on a verandah, when the thought of stepping back into an airconditioned box appears suddenly claustrophobic.

Perhaps the most familiar example of all might be the Acropolis at Athens, where the sensations we experience, partly tactile (air movement on our skin) and partly metaphysical (the ascending progression, under an open sky) move us so profoundly. Unfortunately, as we go northward, we lose these responses. Thus, even if there is a promenade, as for example, in Corbusier's Armee du Salut in Paris, the cold telescopes it into a hop-step-and-jump we must scurry through. The Acropolis, it would seem, is not a moveable feast.

Discussing movement patterns in a warm climate brings me to our

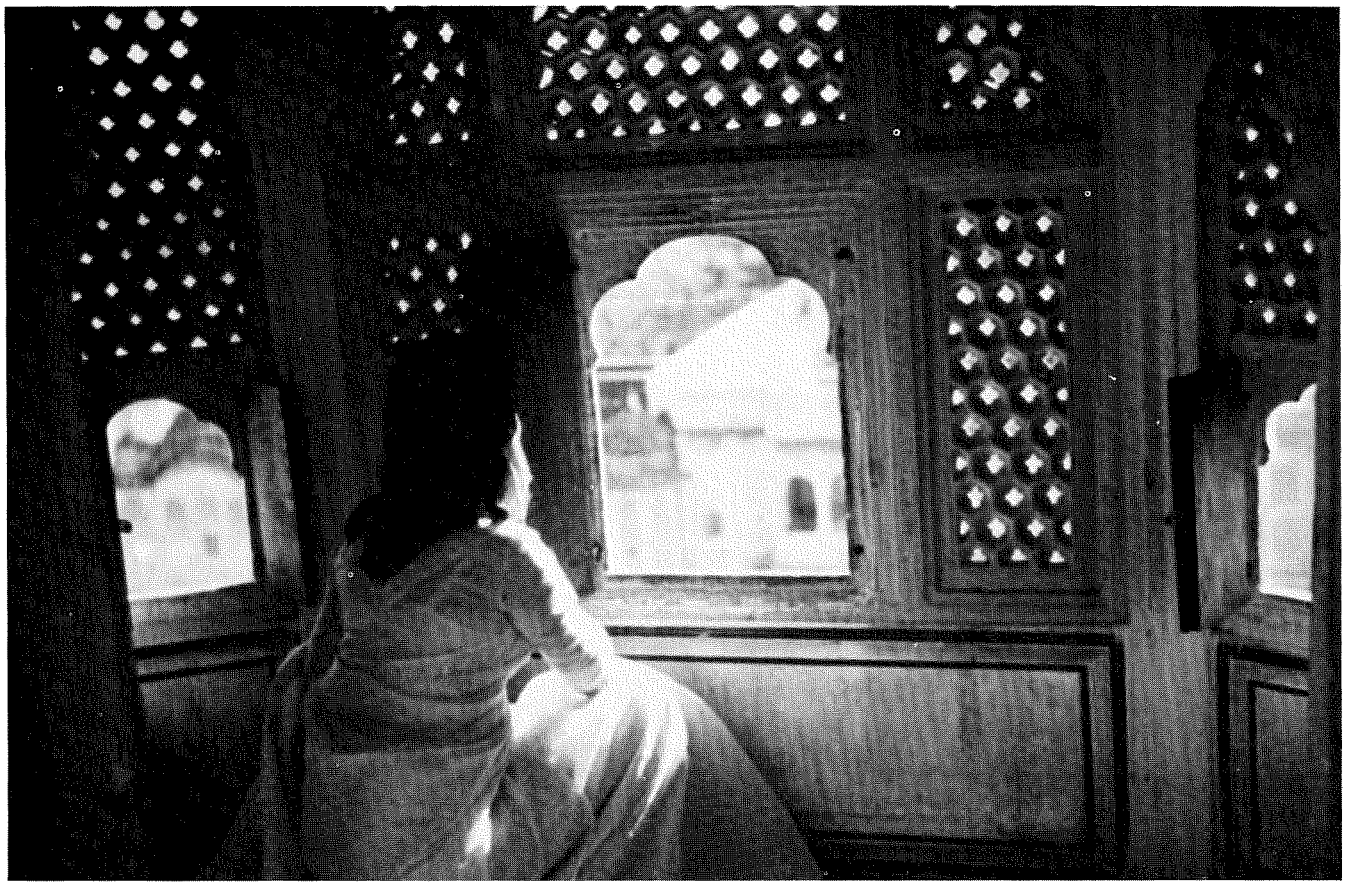
5



6

5 On its way to Threadneedle Street,
the Acropolis

6 "The machine for living,"
Hawa Mahal, Jaipur



7

7 Detail, Hawa Mahal
Jaipur

second point, viz. the importance of such patterns to the crucial issue of energy-passive architecture. For in a poor country like India, we simply cannot afford to squander the kind of resources required to air-condition a glass tower under a tropical sun. And this, of course, is an advantage. For it means that the building itself must, through its very form, create the "controls" the user needs. For centuries now, people all over India—in villages and palaces—have invented wonderful combinations of the kind of spaces (from closed box to open-to-sky) we have been discussing here. At the same time, they developed the kind of life-styles which allowed them to use these different spaces in optimal patterns. Take, for example, the Red Fort at Agra: in the early mornings of the summer months, a velvet shamiana (i.e. canopy) was stretched over the top of the courtyards—thus trapping the cold overnight air in the lower level of rooms, where the Moghul Emperor spent his day. By evening, the shamiana was removed and the Emperor and his court came out on to the gardens and pavilions of the terrace level. In the cold (but sunny) winter, this nomadic pattern was reversed: the terrace garden being used during the day, and the lower levels of rooms at night.

In short: dealing effectively with climate necessitates an inventiveness about living patterns, i.e. about *life-styles*. Indeed, all truly *new* architecture and planning is, in the final analysis, concerned with the conceptualisation of alternate life-styles. This was the driving force behind Wright's Prairie Houses. It is also the real issue—and opportunity!—of the present energy crisis, both in Asia as well as here in Europe.

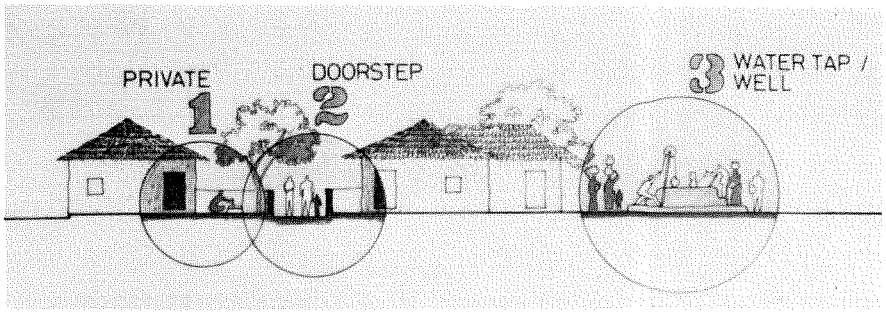
The example of the Moghuls is not such an esoteric one. Adapting in a quasi-nomadic manner to different conditions of built-form was a common practice even in the U.S., where as recently as the 1950's, families still used their porches in summer. By 1960, the mechanical engineers, (with the connivance of the architects) had changed all that. Everyone withdrew into their airconditioned boxes. Somewhere in the process, Architecture—and the issues it addressed—had become sadly diminished.

It is a dislocation apparent in formal architectural vocabulary as well. Consider, for instance, the house of Ali Qapu, facing the Meydan-i-Shah in Isfahan. An enormous roof hovers over the entrance, creating not only shade and protection, but a great evocative gesture towards the city—exactly the kind of architectural tour-de-force that made Corbusier, that frozen Swiss, come to life when he saw the Mediterranean, and later Brazil. The machine for living! Yes, and always the great sculptural decisions (the overhangs, the double-heights), were placed facing the elements—i.e. at the business end of the habitat, (e.g. the Esprit Nouveau Pavilion, the various Unités, the Shodan house in Ahmedabad, etc.). But as Corbusier's influence permeated into the colder climates, these heroic gestures had to withdraw into defensible space, into the mechanically heated (and cooled) interiors of the building. In this retreat, they lost much of their rationale: they began to appear rather arbitrary and capricious. Indeed, the bigger they got, the more willful they seemed—till finally one has the wild extravaganza of a Hyatt Regency. In those incredible lobbies, despite the spatial pyrotechnics, the ambiance is somewhat artificial, contrived, stillborn. And for a simple reason: they do not connect with the kind of open-to-sky space which could quicken them to life. Even the superb Ford Foundation building in New York suffers from this syndrome; for at its centre beats an artificial heart: a hot-house, electrically-illuminated, "garden."

Precisely the contrary is true of the Alhambra; here a structurally-decadent, rococco building generates a truly extraordinary experience in us. Why? Because the basic premise of the Alhambra, viz. axially-placed courtyards, inlaid with fountains and water channels, under an open sky, evokes an echo in the deep-structure of our minds.

"Fiction" said Cocteau, "is primordial memory." Perhaps so also built-form. Certainly Architecture is concerned with much more than just its physical attributes. It is a many-layered thing. Beneath and beyond the strata of function and structure, materials and texture, lie the deepest and most compulsive layers of all. And these can manifest themselves not only in epic monumental architecture, but in

8 System of Spaces



8

projects of a much smaller, more humble, scale as well.

We now turn to our third issue, viz. housing the urban poor. It is indeed a wrench, for this is an area involving totally different kinds of knowledge and skills: in economics, sociology, land policies, mortgage rates, and so forth. Yet even here, we will find that the spatial continuum we have been discussing is of decisive importance—not only for housing, but for the very survival of the cities themselves.

Most of you are already aware of the scale of the problem. All over the Third World, from Africa to Asia to Latin America, migrants from the rural areas are pouring into towns and cities to find work. I don't think the world has seen such epic migrations since the 18th and 19th centuries—when Europeans, through their military prowess, re-distributed themselves around the globe, for much the same reasons. This is an option not open to most Third World countries today, and hence we must see our cities, like Jakarta or Bombay, for what they are: mechanisms for generating employment (especially in the tertiary and bazaar sectors), growth centres for absorbing distress-migration on a scale which is truly mind-boggling. Bombay, for instance, as recently as 1965, had a population of about four million; today it is over eight. By the turn of the century, it is expected to cross fifteen million. To generate urban land on a scale commensurate with this demand, necessitates a transformation of the transport network, the job locations, the desire lines, etc. in short: a re-structuring of the city.

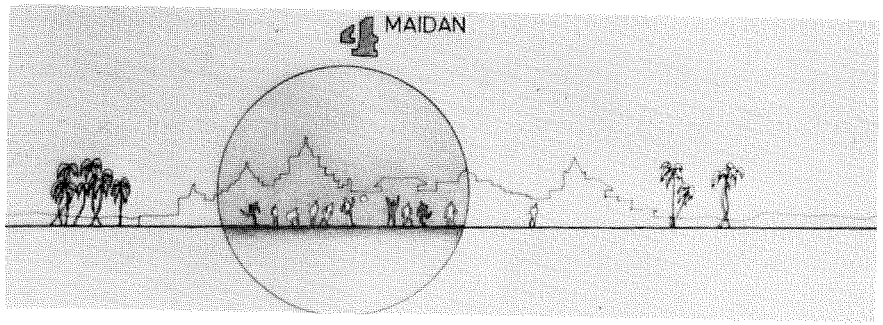
In this process, I believe that the architect has two crucial roles to play. Firstly, in conceptualising the new growth options; and secondly, in establishing the ground rules which will generate the housing. Now both these tasks necessitate an understanding of space (and its alternate uses); but of course it is the second which relates so clearly to the continuum we have been discussing here.

For there is much more to housing than just building houses. The room (the box) is only one element in a whole system of spaces which a family needs in order to live in a city. This system is usually hierarchal, starting with the private family zone, and moving on to the doorstep (where you greet your neighbour), then to the water tap or village well (the community meeting place), and finally to the great meydan (the principal focus of the city).

Each element in this hierarchy consists of a mix of spaces (from closed box to open-to-sky), in a delicate balance determined by the cultural and economic context of that particular society. Thus the first step towards generating economic housing is to identify the hierarchy and to understand the nature of the balances. Otherwise, one is in grave danger of formulating the wrong questions—as witness the many low-income projects which perceive housing as a simplistic problem of trying to pile up as many dwelling units (as many boxes) as possible on a given site, without any concern for the other spaces involved in the hierarchy. Result: the desperate effort of the poor to try and live in a context totally unrelated to their needs—a state of affairs not only inhuman, but uneconomic as well.

For in a warm climate, many of a family's most essential activities (like cooking, or sleeping, or entertaining friends), do not require to take place within the four walls of a box, but can occur in verandahs, and courtyards. Under Indian conditions, where such spaces are liveable for more than nine months of a year, we estimate that courtyards have a usability coefficient of about half that of a room, and verandahs about three-quarters. Now rooms have a production cost, dependent on the amount of bricks, cement, steel, and other materials used to build them. Verandahs and courtyards have a production cost as well: measurable in the amount of additional land, roads and service-lines they require. By quantifying these various costs and benefits, the points of trade-off can be determined and the most economic —and efficient—patterns of housing identified. In most Third World cities, this turns out to be low-rise high-density configurations, making extensive use of terraces, verandahs, and courtyards. For in a warm climate—like cement, like steel—space itself is a resource.

This conclusion is an extraordinarily important one. First of all,



it describes a habitat which people can build for themselves—and that means not just sites-and-services, but also the kind of indigenous vernacular architecture one finds all over, from Mykonos to Rajasthan to the casbahs of North Africa. Furthermore it is of decisive relevance to employment. For while money invested in high-rise steel and concrete buildings goes into the hands of the few contractors who can build such structures and the banks who can finance them, this low-rise pattern of housing is built by small masons and contractors—which of course generates a far greater number of jobs exactly where they should be generated: in the bazaar sector of the economy, where the rural migrants are looking for work.

Of course these and all the many other benefits (incrementality, identity, variety, etc.) become possible only when we realise that the way to low-income housing in the Third World is not through increasingly sophisticated technology but in the more inventive use of the open-to-sky end of the continuum. This is where indeed our efforts should be directed—and where the people themselves have been so incredibly resourceful and innovative. It is we architects who have been remiss.

For the developing world is eager for innovation and change. Much more so than here in the West, where the past (perhaps because it is receding so fast) evokes so much nostalgia. "I have seen the future—and it works!" wrote the American journalist Lincoln Steffens in the 1920s on his return from the U.S.S.R. A statement so optimistic, so naive, so poignant, as to be almost incomprehensible in the 1980s. For today, architects and planners in Europe and North America are an extremely cautious tribe, heads bloody and very much bowed. "We have seen the past, and it appears to have worked . . . maybe."

This is indeed ironic. For it is societies like India who *live* with the past all around, who accept it in their everyday lives as easily and casually as a woman drapes a sari—these are the societies most impatient to invent the future. They see the past everyday—and much of it doesn't work, much of the time. Thus we have Mao Tse-tung, with a kind of divine impatience, re-structuring China through his concept of communes. And we have Mahatma Gandhi with his non-violence and his Sarvodaya movement.

To invent the future . . . Architecture as an agent of change. This is our fourth issue—and perhaps the most basic one of all. Past and future, continuity and invention—how is the balance struck? If we look at Mao or Gandhi, we find that neither of them was hung up about whether an idea was new or old—or indeed where it came from—so long as he knew he could make it work in the context of his own people. Thus Mao's Communism stems from a German who lived halfway around the world and a whole century earlier, and much of Gandhi of course derives from Emerson and Thoreau. The genius of both these men was that they could stitch these ideas into an old social fabric and produce a seamless wonder. New ideas making the past work. (And vice versa!)

There are no great men, said Stendhal apropos of Napoleon, there are great events. We are only as big as the questions we define. And this, to my mind, is the central rivetting fact of life for an architect in the Third World. Not the size or value of the projects, but the nature of the questions they raise—and which we must address. A chance to grow: the abiding virtue of a Place in the Sun.