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TIMELESSNESS OF THE WONDERS OF ARCHITECTURE



INNOVATIVE ARCHITECTURE THROUGH THE AGES

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This impressive book containing 11 chapters covering a vast territory beginning with 'Early Innovations' to 'Architecture of the Future', is like a personal encyclopedia of the works of architecture, that the author found 'overwhelming', 'exhilarating', 'spellbinding', 'amazing' in scale, materiality, craft, detail, and contextuality.

Prof. Ram Sharma, amongst the most senior and respected architects-teachers in the country, takes us on a tour along with him, as if in a time machine, traversing through the wonders of life explored in architecture all over the world through ages. He lovingly unfolds these to the reader, nudging them to look, observe, experience holistically, without dogmatically adhering to a particular theory.

The preface by the author, is a brief biographical narrative about how he began to take a delight in experiencing the world of architecture, since the late fifties in New Delhi, and how these unfolded as he practiced it. Prof Ram Sharma is a prize-winning architect in design competitions for almost three decades from the sixties, when he began his practice in New Delhi. The fact that he is also one of the earliest of modern landscape architects and urban designers, endows him with acute awareness of the interconnectedness of environment, nature and architecture.

In the preface he says, "Over 15 years of hard work, I managed to cover a large number of buildings of exceptional architectural value. I visited their sites and conducted on-site investigations and evaluations. This was backed by extensive research covering their historical and architectural significance, stylistic characteristics, and the degree of their impact on succeeding architectural developments. About 160 were listed for their excellence".

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A Chronicle of Faith

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In the Chapter 1, the author defines innovative architecture thus: “*Innovative architecture is a not known or constructed before its appearance: it is original, fresh and distinctive, and the creation is the first of its kind to gain attention*”. So, naturally, indigenous architecture built by repetition over and again is not part of the author’s collection in the book, unless innovatively explored for a new avatar. The sense of wonder is the thread that runs through the narrative but only after undergoing scrutiny by the seasoned academic in him. Architects of Prof Sharma’s generation were trained in the era of modernism, wherein major transformations occurred in European cities with urbanization and industrialization, like never before. All forms of arts, fine arts, theatre, poetry, were experiencing a certain discomfort and discontinuity, as it were, with the historical and traditional.

The Independence ushered a new enthusiasm in India when “*Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s progressive industrial and urban policies provided Indian architects the opportunity to design and build*”. The discussion in Chapter 6 takes us through some of the works of Achyut Kanvinde, Joseph Allen Stein, Habib Rehman, Louis Kahn, Shivnath Prasad, and others. Also discussed are a few cooperative housing projects of New Delhi in the late seventies-early eighties, including the Yamuna Apartments by The Design Group (Ajoy Choudhury and Ranjit Sabikhi), and the Dilshad Garden Housing, by the author himself, that stood the test of time, also the iconic Hall of Nations (by Raj Rewal), unfortunately now erased ruthlessly from the history, and the IIM, Bengaluru (by Balkrishna Doshi), among others. Chapter 7, contains works of the ‘The Early Modernists’, like Peter Behren, Luis Sullivan, Walter Gropius, and others, followed by the ‘Pioneers of Global Modernism’. It narrates how the influence of Antoni Gaudi, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van den Rohe, and others spread around the world. ‘The Shaping the Modern Imaginatively’, in the Chapter 8 is illustrated with examples from Japan, Brazil, Finland, in the works of Kenzo Tange, Oscar Neymer, and Alvar Alto.

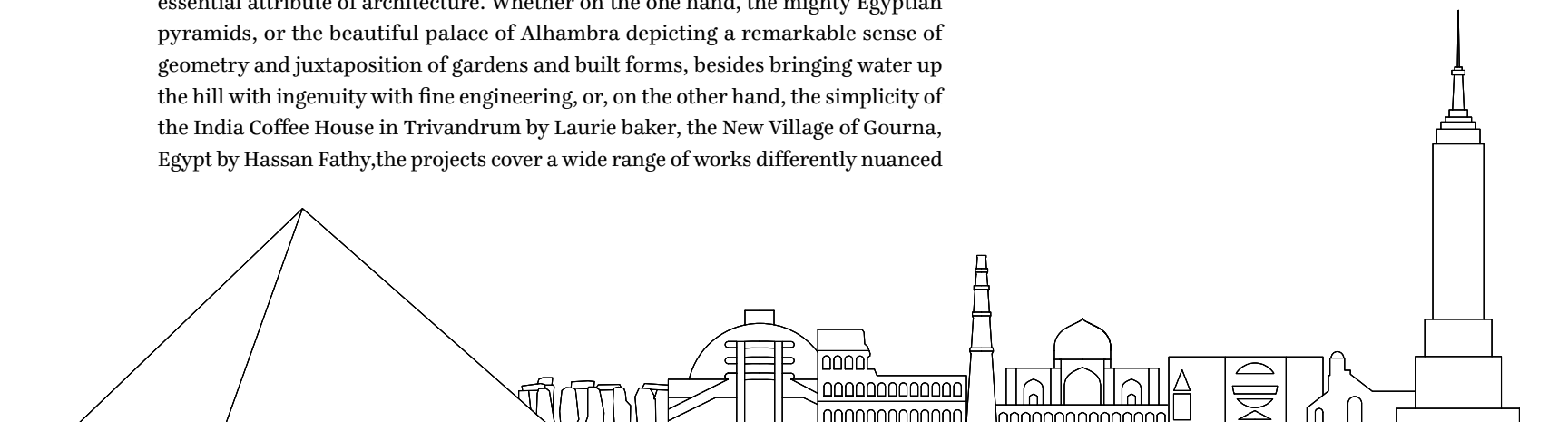
A work that gets termed ‘original’, stands for novelty, or rebellion against the earlier works. Creative energy is restless and wanders freely with *le sprit nouveau*. It can be ‘awe inspiring’, ‘sublime’, in its manifest form, and inspirational for many. A shift in the paradigm of perception is rather like a rediscovery, in gradual transformations in craft, and the ideas grafted on the past discoveries like in the sciences. It may also be because of the fragmentary way in which cities



are built, abused, showing disregard for spatial equitability, or from the lessons from the evolution in scientific researches. This shift in the perception is noticed in languages, arts, and the expression of architecture which is never static. After all, inventiveness was one of the gifts to mankind. It was neither a result of the machine age, nor the digital age or the AI, but rather the very source of these. It is another matter that humans often sacrifice this gift at the alters of their role models-political or professional, or outdated ideas of development, but those aware of this gift have always cherished it in arts, and sciences, throughout human existence.

On the other hand, awe inspiring works may also result owing to deviant, egotistic indulgence, or wanton imagination in fantasy, or a strategy for survival in the competitive market, or treating all architecture as a fine art whether peoples' housing, institutions, or monuments all alike, which can certainly be problematic.

Prof. Ram Sharma looks at all types of works in varied cultures, without being judgmental about their ethical or moral bases. He is looking for the projects that are experientially delightful and strikingly different in appearance. Delight is an essential attribute of architecture. Whether on the one hand, the mighty Egyptian pyramids, or the beautiful palace of Alhambra depicting a remarkable sense of geometry and juxtaposition of gardens and built forms, besides bringing water up the hill with ingenuity with fine engineering, or, on the other hand, the simplicity of the India Coffee House in Trivandrum by Laurie baker, the New Village of Gourn, Egypt by Hassan Fathy, the projects cover a wide range of works differently nuanced

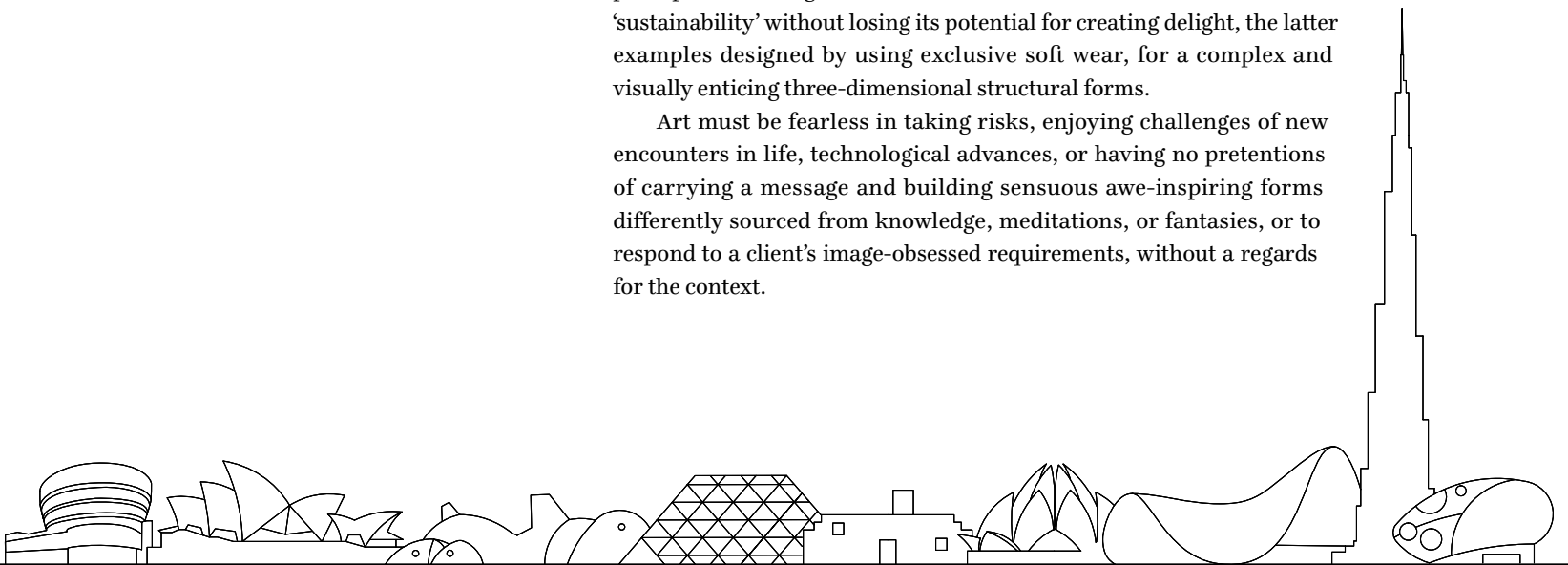




in concept, context, scale, materiality, and processes. The author writes, “Fathy often lamented that modern architecture in Egypt provided alien images instead of Egyptian ones, much to the dismay of the inhabitants,” and applauds “The interplay of values ingrained in Nubian architecture and his exceptional innovative skill culminated in an architecture for the village that was economical, functionally efficient, and climate friendly”. At the same time, the author is also appreciative of the Museum of Future, in Dubai by Killa Architecture Studio, for “its beautifully structured built up form and gleaming stainless steel façade rendered with Arabic calligraphy...” or the Aquatic Centre London, by Zaha Hadid, for its “... graceful curvilinear form of the Center’s building is outstanding”.

The aesthetic criteria of the two genres mentioned above are diverse, even perhaps contrasting one another. While the former seems concerned about ‘sustainability’ without losing its potential for creating delight, the latter examples designed by using exclusive soft wear, for a complex and visually enticing three-dimensional structural forms.

Art must be fearless in taking risks, enjoying challenges of new encounters in life, technological advances, or having no pretensions of carrying a message and building sensuous awe-inspiring forms differently sourced from knowledge, meditations, or fantasies, or to respond to a client’s image-obsessed requirements, without a regards for the context.



In the Chapter 9, termed as 'A More Eclectic Architecture' we find a number of interesting projects that include the author's Indira Gandhi National Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal planned in the rich landscape up the hill, "...*descending gently into a spacious central court, the outdoor exhibits are a prelude to exhibits within the building*". The curvilinear half-domes used for admitting natural light into the inner modules lend a formal character to the campus. There are also a few examples in this Chapter, whose forms directly correspond to forms in nature –for example, Lotus Temple, New Delhi, or the Matri mandir, Auroville, although engineering feats, one wonders if they are either delightful or innovative. It is said that there is no symmetry in nature, and it is the asymmetric that has the capacity to accept symmetry within its fold, but never the vice versa.

In the Chapter 10, 'The Turn of the Millennium', the author states in conclusion 'Architecture is Art'. This chapter discusses some projects that include Charles Correa's stunning complex Champalimaud Centre for the Unknown, Lisbon, Portugal, at the site where the Tagus River meets the Atlantic Ocean. In Tadao Ando's The Hill of Buddha, Sapporo, Prof Ram Sharma compares this hill top monument with the Gandhi Memorial at Rajghat, New Delhi, by Vanu G. Bhuta. He points out, "*the difference between the two creations is that while Raj Ghat is a truncated pyramid, the hill of the Buddha truncated cone*".

In the Chapter 11 entitled 'Architecture of the Future' there is a curious blend of handmade and digitally designed buildings. Prof Sharma sees the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, as "*the elegantly sculpted worlds' tallest building... with the excellent use of digital technology*", but along with such expressions of exuberance of power, he also sees the contextual relevance of buildings that are not only sustainable but are skillfully built and wonderful to experience. In the latter, of Rajkumari Ratnavati Girls' school in Jaisalmer, he says, "*the indigenous of the golden stone jalis that extend all over the wall of the building attributes delightful character to the building and stands in harmony with the vernacular architectural setting of the Thar desert*". One nevertheless wonders, why the innovativeness in indigenous buildings built by any traditional communities, without drawings, anywhere in the world could not find place in the book.

Prof Sharma perceives the future architecture representing a dual view of the world –one driven by chasing the technological prowess, however, never will it be devoid of the handmade, participatory works by communities, contextually reverential yet delightful to live in. In a way it assures that both have the capacity to nurture innovativeness!

This well written, excellently edited, and illustrated ode to the innovative spirit of architecture, should be a helpful source for a long time to appreciate architecture all over the world.



Architect, conservation architect, author, and educator **Narendra Dingle** is widely known for his contributions to architectural conservation and the documentation of India's built heritage. His writings and projects have helped deepen understanding of historic environments and traditional building practices.