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Play of sunlight and shadows

Louis I. Kahn, who designed the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, loved ruins, particularly Roman ruins. Nothing could be farther from the desired can-do spirit of the manager than the message of the ruin. Yet, typically, Kahn produced a magical campus, one that is built as much of glowing discs of sun and the soft depths of shadows as of exposed brick walls. Kahn always sought to achieve a sense of monumental presence in architecture through anonymity—hence the

repetition of basic units, often enlivened by the play between intimate and overscaled elements. Thus, at IIM-A, the huge circular openings are regularly complemented by low dark passages. But the buildings have tended to elicit extreme reactions: The wonderstruck architects on pilgrimage have often been told by hostel dwellers and others about its many practical difficulties! If that has dimmed the enthusiasm of architects for this classic, they certainly do not show it. HIMANSHU BURTE

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EXTENDING AN ICON

The design for the new campus at IIM Ahmedabad, by architect Bimal Patel, reflects both continuity and departure from the old one—a classic by American architect Louis Kahn

By HIMANSHU BURTE

Few iconic institutions live in iconic buildings. The Indian Institute of Management (IIM) at Ahmedabad is among those few. As the leading management school in India, its campus was designed in the 1960s by American architect Louis I. Kahn and is one of the classics of modern architecture. The project for a major extension just across the road—a new campus in itself, actually—was recently completed by architect Bimal Patel of HCP Design and Project Management Pvt. Ltd.

Patel, a designer in his mid-40s with several awards to his credit (including the Aga Khan Award for architecture), was given the commission in 2000 after a nationwide search. He must have known that this was one project that would always be looked at through the filter of its iconic predecessor, never entirely on its own terms. So, how has the interplay between the old classic and the new offshoot turned out?

Description

The new campus comes close to the old in scale. Set on 38 acres (the old spans 59) fronting two busy roads, the 600,000 sq. ft of built-up area houses an academic block with new classrooms and seminar rooms, an International Management Centre, hostel accommodation for 340 students, workspaces and other facilities. The public areas of the campus are designed to be accessible to the disabled and adequate land has been reserved for future expansion.

Though separated by a road, the old and new campuses are meant to work like one. Students and faculty are expected to move freely across the two plots throughout the day. Of course, the actual connection had to be modest as the municipal authorities wouldn't allow any major element to bridge the road.

As it happens, an almost umbilical underpass connects the two campuses. The new campus had to be two very different things at the same time—new, but also an extension of the old. No wonder the location of the underpass became the fulcrum of Patel's layout.

It is located so that the "classroom spine" (or street) from the old campus goes straight under the road and continues into the new campus. This makes pragmatic as well as symbolic sense. On the one hand, students and teachers have to walk the shortest possible distance. On the other, the continuity of the street also signals a continuity of spirit from the old to the new.

As you emerge from the underpass (which also houses an exhibition on Louis Kahn's work at the old campus) into the new one, the hostel blocks clustering around a series of courtyards are to the left. The courtyards are aligned along their diagonals.

"We wanted continuity with Kahn's work at IIM," says Patel, "but we did not want to imitate his palette or grammar." So, the new campus has been built in exposed concrete (and not the exposed brick of the old campus) cast fairly smooth and crisp, looking new, but never spanking. To offset, and at the same time heighten, the austerity of the concrete forms, Patel also introduced large

metal screens, designed by Walter D'Souza, into the fabric of the building. Why hang art on walls when it can make up the architecture?

Meeting the challenge

The new campus is an extraordinary effort. While talking about what it takes to build in exposed concrete, Patel jokes that it is like playing a difficult instrument—the violin than the guitar. The challenge of shepherding Kahn's ideas across the road with an original grace was incomparably greater. It is too early to make conclusive noises about the campus—that will have to wait till the trees grow to 30ft or 40ft, when they will add a layer of complexity to the simple forms with their colour and uneven shades.

Yet, some things are already clear. At the broadest level, in the evocation of lilt and monumentality, Patel has been exceptionally successful. His sense of order, neatness and, simply, of not leaving any loose end, is forbidding.

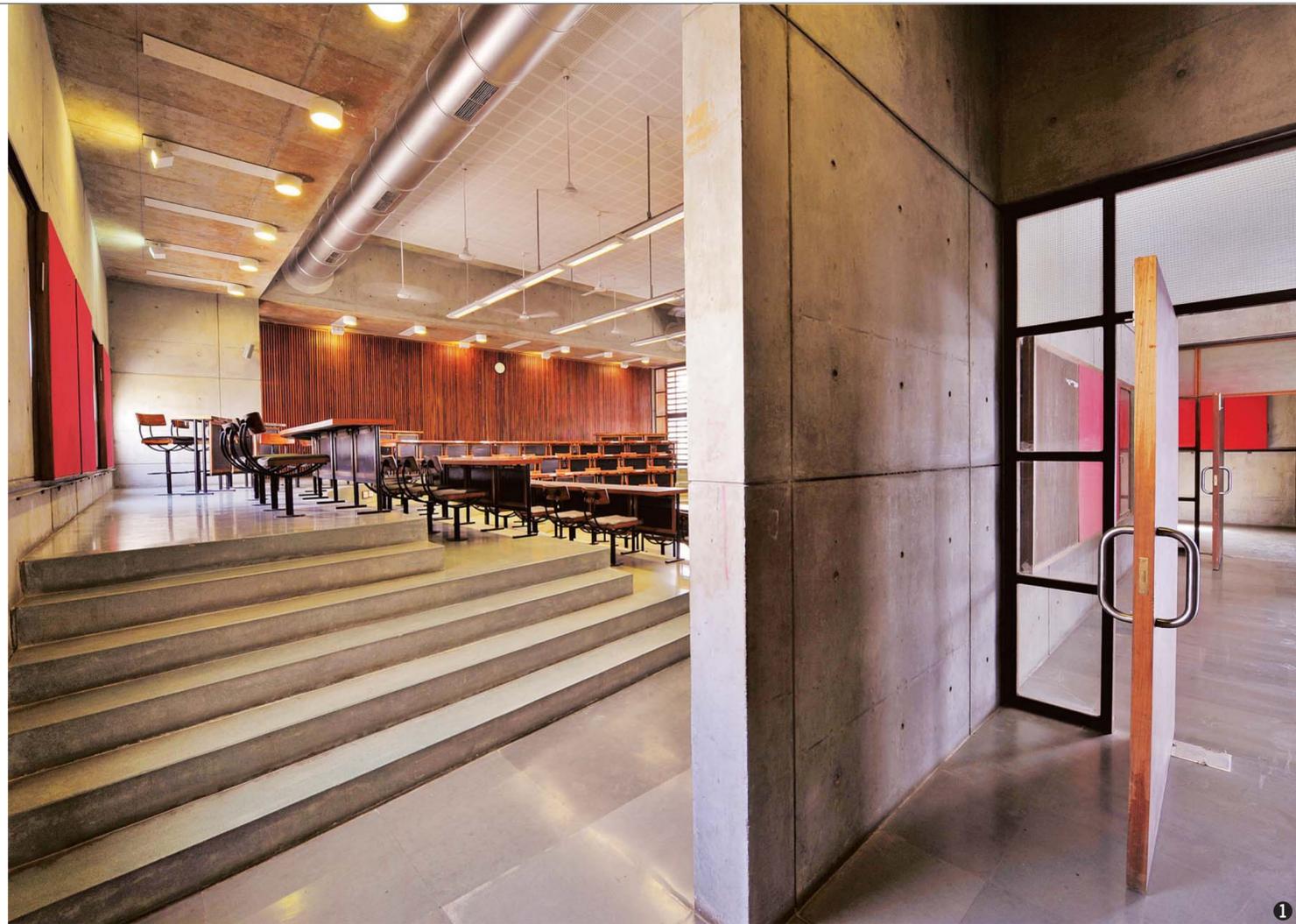
Yet, at the same time, it's almost as if a virus in the design programme is constantly nibbling at the order in unexpected ways. Possibly meant to humanize the austerity of the buildings, the small circular openings ("I am notorious for these in Ahmedabad by now!"), the weak bursts of exposed brick walls, and the suddenly angled concrete walls in the open corners of the hostels, constantly compromise the solidity of expression that Patel is fundamentally committed to. The contradictory orientations produce a tension that does not always appear fruitful.

But Patel (who, like most committed architects cannot enjoy a new building because of all the flaws that seem to jump out only at him), may not mind that too much if his design achieves a more fundamental quality he sees as being central to institutional buildings: memorability. And that is one story about this space that only time will tell.

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For more images and a conversation with Bimal Patel, log on to www.livemint.com/patel.htm



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In its own right: 1. A classroom on the new campus. 2. One of the new hostel blocks. 3. The new campus continues the tradition of passages along open courts. 4. The underpass pays tribute to Kahn's work. 5. One of Walter D'Souza's arresting metal screens.

Photographs by Dinesh Mehta Courtesy HCP Design and Project Management Pvt. Ltd



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Architect