

Block by Block

Architect Hasmukh Patel's painterly and sculptural treatment of his many public and private commissions has been brought together in a generous book

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AMONGST THE many varied professions in urban India, architecture is a rare calling that falls squarely in the slot of unnoticeability. This is particularly ironic since, by itself, architecture is such a big, physical thing whose presence on the street and in the city can hardly be ignored.

Perhaps it says something about India's own slack urbanity that people don't care for their buildings, and, consequently, asks so little of them. For most people, buildings are formed out of necessity. They are like electrical lines, to be tapped for illegal connections, or railway tracks and parks, to be used for defecation. A house is similarly a storehouse for personal processions, a public building — besides an invitation to spit and urinate — a place to pay a bill. In cities where people are privately demanding and publicly indifferent, it is impossible to create less virulent definitions of architecture. So, any serious practice is most often shielded behind high walls.

Is this a failure of the profession, or just public ignorance?

Modern architecture's failure in India is all the more profound and begs to ask a more pertinent cultural question. In a country where public acts and sights are confounded by incessant motion, over-decoration, and are often loud and supercilious, how can modernism's abstraction ever be acceptable? It can't. Even though the modernist movement grew out of the uncertain political call to freedom, Nehru's philosophical approach and Le Corbusier's monumental presence were not enough to propose a long-term future for its survival. The abstraction of concrete forms, the simplicity — often erroneously viewed as simplification — were to forever remain in the shadow-line of a culture prone to exuberance and exaggeration. Pretense and celebration were sure winners when the city was occupied by wedding halls, five star hotels, shopping centers and the other commercial ventures that passed off as the public life of Indian places. To look

then at validating modernism, the architect worked in private pockets and at a time when the style's appeal had not waned.

Hasmukh Patel belongs to the generation of architects who not only felt Nehru's winds of change, but followed it up with a testimony that was both serious and thoughtful, building, as he did at a time when India was an experiment of public institutions — colleges, banks, schools — and bereft of architectural direction. Modernism had, for the most part, bequeathed an unerringly simplified vocabulary to the practitioner: brick and concrete surfaces, flat ceilings and columns, stone floors. The monastic austerity of shapes and materials only recalled and overplayed the roughness of textures left in their natural unfinished state. Sadly, the result of such a frugal kinship with design left a lasting legacy of shabby and utterly simplistic formulations of post-independence buildings: broken-down markets, drafty office buildings, derelict schools, airports and bus terminals.

However, in the hands of its more sensi-



THE ARCHITECTURE OF
HASMUKH C. PATEL
CATHERINE DESAI & BIMAL PATEL
Mapin Publishing
394 pages
₹ 4,500

20170325_INDIAN EXPRESS_PG.17



Canna-Mukesh residence in Ahmedabad built by Hasmukh Patel

tive practitioners like Patel, the simplification produced thoughtful, lyrical results. After a career that spanned over four decades, Patel's painterly and sculptural treatment of his many public and private commissions has been brought together in a generous book. Far from being a mere catalogue of projects, the carefully collated writing and black and white photographs draw upon the architect's own meticulous reading of people and urban landscapes to convey something of his understanding of modernism. A quotation at the beginning sets the tone for the chapters: "I don't have a particular theory...my designs generate vitality and the joy of being, this is the only thing I practice."

In keeping with the humanitarian and caring intent of his work, the book's many photographs are happily peopled — kids running around in school projects, college dormitories with bell-bottomed students, and public buildings with the screech and disorder of pedestrians and traffic. The houses detailed use their easy outlook to connect with the surrounding green; each displays a private complexity drawn from its suburban lo-

cale and furnished with a family domesticity that is altogether cultural and indigenous. Many larger projects display the actual drawings used for construction, along with the budget proposal submitted to the client. Such honesty in practice is obviously the work of a man deeply contented and comfortable with himself. The book, consequently, is not justification for work done, projects built, but a testimonial to a truthful and rigorous engagement with life and buildings.

In a profession that is all too often ignored by the public, the need for architects to be overly self-conscious has produced pretentious biographies of often mediocre work. By contrast, Patel's architectural distillation of cultural complexities comprehensively captures the long forgotten era of Indian modernism. His work is suffused — like the gray light that falls on concrete walls — with a quiet resonance that tells you more about the people that inhabit his buildings, the multiplicity of orientations and landscapes available to them — and less about himself.

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