

The everyday as muse

A recent monograph draws attention to the life and work of the lesser-known but significant modernist architect, Hasmukh Patel

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A side view of the Reserve Bank of India, all designed by Patel in Ahmedabad. Photos Credit: The Architecture of Hasmukh C Patel, Mapin

Imagine being brought up in a two-storeyed house made of exposed concrete and brick. The living and dining areas are airy, double-height rooms with a bridge that runs across, connecting the two wings of the home, but more importantly, a bridge that plays the perfect escape route for hide-and-seek games. Light streams into the living quarters through the French windows. A deep veranda connects home and garden and provides shelter from the sun. Imagine going to a school where each classroom faces an open-air courtyard and concrete benches line the courtyards, doubling up as table-tennis tables. These are the built works of 83-year-old architect Hasmukh Patel; a modernist

reformer, pragmatic designer and long-standing educator, yet a figure fairly unknown beyond his native Gujarat.



Hasmukh Patel.

Monograph of Indian modernism

The buildings described above—Patel’s home and St Xavier’s Primary School in Ahmedabad—were built in the 1960s. Five decades later, they continue to be relevant. “The architecture (of the house) makes it very clear: Weave your pleasures into the ordinary rituals of life, and you won’t have to spend your life searching for them high and low,” says Patel’s son Bimal, an architect himself. He enjoys family lunches at his father’s home every day. Patel is retired but actively mentors students and young architects, and is also a keen painter.

Both the home and the school are featured in a monograph on Patel’s works, *The Architecture Of Hasmukh C Patel—Selected Projects, 1963-2003*, published by Mapin in 2016. Co-authored by Bimal and Catherine Desai, a Melbourne-trained architect currently based in Ahmedabad, the monograph presents 51 of Patel’s “most significant projects”, says Bimal.

The book seeks to serve a dual purpose: shine a light on Patel’s architectural legacy, and equally, to provoke a conversation on its relevance to contemporary life, in order to encourage young architects to think more deeply about their profession and their practice. “Access to a canon of works from the previous generation is essential to architectural education, and to the development of the architectural profession,” says Desai.

Patel’s legacy consists of more than 300 projects, spanning all building typologies, largely in Gujarat, over four decades. A curated set of 264 largely black and white photographs, along with 150 detailed architectural drawings and a few short essays, bring Patel’s work to life. Although the book stumbles on the quality of some of the photographs—some are far too old and grainy—the resuscitated architectural drawings make his work accessible in granular detail. The essays are particularly illuminating, for they capture his layered approach to his profession and to his projects. They explain the how and why behind the what, offering lessons to anybody interested in learning about how our built environment takes its form.



Hasmukh Patel's home.

Everyman's architect

Patel was born in 1933 in Bhadran, a small village in Gujarat, and his civil engineer father Chandubhai encouraged him to study architecture. Having graduated from the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda with an undergraduate degree in architecture, he went on to do a master's degree in architecture from Cornell University in the US. That's where he imbibed his lifelong lessons in the modern movement in architecture. The rejection of traditional ornamentation, innovating with new materials and technologies, an emphasis on functionality, grounded by a human-centred outlook: Patel grasped the basic tenets of modernism and applied them to the Indian context in his own unique way. When he returned to Gujarat in 1959, as one of a new generation of architects in post-independent India, his architectural practice flourished.

Patel's trademark dexterity, in working with an enviable mix of clients, is inescapable throughout the book. There are a few skyline-defining projects, including the Chinubhai Centre and the accompanying Patang revolving restaurant, a city-centre commercial development in Ahmedabad. But the book is dominated by the quotidian—developer-led residential complexes, state-owned banks and trust-funded educational institutes—reinforcing the modernist notion that good architecture is for public consumption and not purely an elitist concept.

For Rahul Mehrotra, a prominent Mumbai-based architect and educator interviewed in the book, Patel “redefined the mainstream”. He continues: “The reason that he could define the mainstream was that he had an interesting hybrid situation in terms of patronage from trusts, banks that were state-owned, educational institutions and some developers, who were a first generation of developers that were not as ‘greedy’ as the developers now. He was also cultivating, educating, nurturing and mentoring the developers just as he was his other clients.”

Patel's modernist leanings as a thinker are just as visible. His buildings express “an abstract, international, liberal, modern outlook, rejecting

vernacular language, which was natural for its times, whilst remaining contextual to local climate”, says Bimal.

Being ahead of his time had occasional drawbacks, as Bimal acknowledges. “Sometimes his technological ambitions completely fell apart as he tried to leapfrog technologies. Some projects suffered as resources were stretched thin. Many did not end up being as robust as they could have been.” Despite these, Patel’s canon of work is progressive. Yet, he does not figure highly in a list of luminary architects of his generation.

Part of the reason is his inherent pragmatism. “His career has not been about fame or fortune or what is called ‘signature architecture’. It has been about how you make good cities by getting the small things right, in the urban fabric, that adds up to a greater whole,” writes Christopher Charles Benninger, a Pune-based architect and long-time friend of Patel, in the book’s foreword.

Bimal echoes this point. “Patel’s architecture was a part of the project of gradually transforming everyday, middle-class India to be a more comfortable, secure, industrial, modern, secular and confident society. Almost all his projects deal with enriching life for them; their houses, row houses and apartments; their schools, and the place where they would shop, entertain and relax,” Bimal writes in the book.

This is also why his architectural legacy matters most. “It is perhaps this aspect of his practice that makes it particularly relevant to the architectural profession in India today, as it continues to grapple with the urgent and important problem of inventing a new way of life for the millions of people who are moving into cities,” Bimal states.



The St Xavier's School' Bhakti

The 'triad' of contracts

If inventing new ways of life for millions of citizens is a somewhat daunting prospect, the monograph outlines how Patel negotiated some of these territorial hazards.

For Benninger, Patel's success lies in his "charter of values and principles", which allowed him to be committed to "a triad of professional contracts": first between himself and his clients, then himself as an architect and businessman, and finally as an architect working within the public realm. "These three 'contracts' clearly grounded the way Hasmukhbhai worked, designed, built and lived," he concludes.

Maintaining the "triad" of contracts—with client, self and the public—has always been a challenge, and it is not getting easier, as Mehrotra points out. "I believe as architects we can only be effective in society if we can influence the mainstream, otherwise we are on the fringes. Our generation today is

struggling with finding these forms of patronage. We are at a transitional moment where the state is absolving itself of its responsibility and the private sector is obsessed with capital accumulation. For our generation to operate in this way, in the mainstream, is much more complex,” he says.

Patel’s legacy is then clearly more than his buildings; it is a reminder that architects must be able to define and shape briefs, and partner with their clients, not simply provide solutions, to be able to nurture social fabric and define urban skyline, if we aspire to build the cities we truly deserve.