



Figure 4: New Gourna Village
(Source: World Monuments Fund)

social ethnographers to study the community better. The amount of design specifications from unit to unit in terms of form, ventilation, material usage, transition, voids, etc. had enhanced and uplifted the morale of New Gourna village.

Despite the paramount planning and design interventions, local, national and international interest towards the project, New Gourna is regarded to be one of the best planned failures. A few of the reasons that added up as reasons for the failure of this project were that the transportation of the villagers from Old Gourna to New Gourna had affected the settlement pattern. Also, unconventional utopian designs of individual houses without a common prototype tampered the feasibility of the project. Over-usage of vaults resulted in structural damages and on top of all, poor governance and management of resources collectively contributed to the colossal failure of such a phenomenal project.

Fathy, in his book *Architecture for the Poor*, explained that what could have been a ground-breaking low-cost housing project enveloping social, economic and aesthetic aspects



Ar. Arun Shankar M. is an architect and urban planner by profession and an architectural journalist and an academician by passion. As an architectural Journalist with *Creative Group*, an architectural firm in New Delhi, he reported to national newspapers on various types of projects. He has held workshops and lectures on Architectural Writing for many architectural institutions. Currently, he is pursuing an M.A. in Journalism and Mass Communication, alongside teaching at Asian School of Architecture and Design Innovations, Kochi. archmas95@gmail.com

misfired because of the village not being completed due to construction being halted. The theory of mud brick construction was looked down as undoable and impractical.

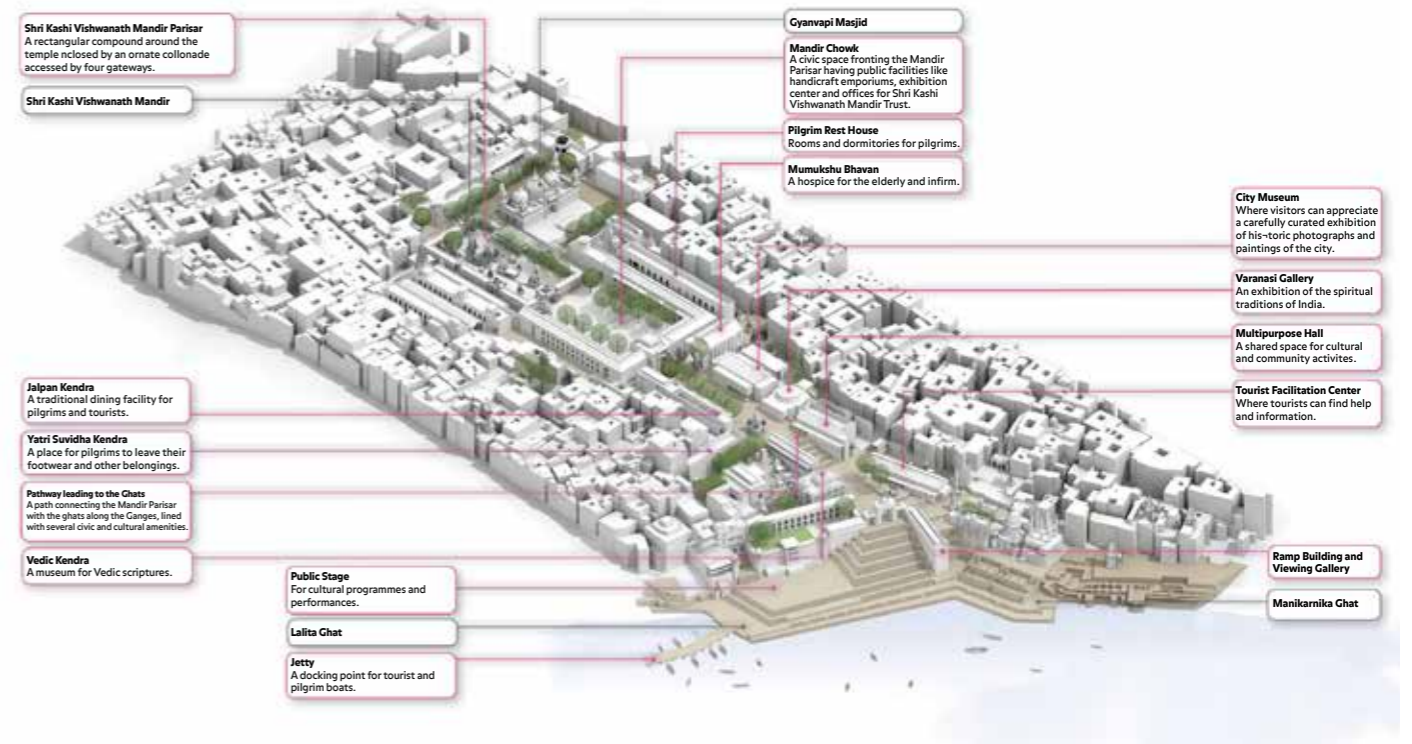
Only two things flourish. One is the trees I planted, now grown thick and strong, perhaps because they were not subject to the administration, and the other is the forty-six masons we trained, every one of whom is working in the district, using skill he learned at Gourna- proof of the value of training local craftsmen.

HASSAN FATHY

However, even today, New Gourna Village stands as one of the best examples of materialistic innovations, technological approaches, inclusive planning strategies, public participation, stakeholder involvement throughout the process and many astonishing experimentations. The ceaseless crusader carved an example for architects to ruminate over their scope and relevance in giving back to society what is received. Irrefutably, Hassan Fathy's contribution to architecture is incomparable for which, he is rightly called "Architect of the Poor".

VISHWANATH DHAM PROJECT

Dr. Bimal Patel



Several new amenities added to make a visit to Vishwanath Dham a better experience overall



A grand gateway atop the ghats announces the presence of the Temple

Background and Objectives

Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple was built in 1780. Over time, the Temple and many others surrounding it were hemmed in on all sides by very dense and haphazard development. Many temples and fine houses in the area were insensitively built over and public spaces were encroached upon. The area became exceedingly difficult to service and keep clean, resulting in an unkempt and unhygienic neighbourhood. Access to the Temple was severely constricted, unsafe, and unfriendly to those with mobility issues.

In 1916, when Gandhiji visited the temple, he remarked: *I visited the Vishwanath temple last evening, and as I was walking through those lanes, these were the thoughts that touched me... Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as they are? The houses round about are built anyhow. The lanes are tortuous and narrow. If even our temples are not models of roominess and cleanliness, what can our self-government be?*

More than a century later, in 2018, the area between Shri Kashi Vishwanath Temple and the Ganga was cleared for a comprehensive redevelopment called Vishwanath Dham. The Shri Kashi Vishwanath Special Area Development Board was constituted in 2018 and was entrusted with the task of planning and overseeing the project. HCP was hired as the architectural consultant in late 2018.

The primary objectives of the development were:

- 1) To create a processional route for pilgrims between the Ganga and the Temple.
- 2) To create a befitting temple precinct, with necessary facilities for the comfort of pilgrims, visitors, and temple priests.
- 3) To make the temple accessible to all, including those with restricted mobility.



The pathway from the Temple to the Ganges, under construction

Architecture that Reflects the Spiritual Experience

The path from the River Ganga to the Temple is an architectural realization of a journey towards self-discovery. It is designed in such a way that each step of the journey is gradually revealed, and the Temple is the ultimate pinnacle. From the river, the Temple's presence is announced by a gateway atop a pyramid of steps. The gateway leads to the precinct of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. Once through, the land rises more gradually. The buildings and pathway are designed to direct the gaze towards the next gateway. Through this gateway, one can see the shikhar of the Kashi Vishwanath Temple. One is drawn up the pathway and the vistas slowly unfold as one approaches the shikhar. This gateway opens in the Temple Chowk, which is the civic space outside the Parisar, at 100 ft



The temple chowk, with the viewing gallery atop its gate

elevation. From here, to reach the temple, one must descend 15-20 feet. After entering through the gateway, the Chowk, which is centred on an axis with the gateway, guides one towards the temple. From here, one descends to reach the gateway of the Parisar, which is also centred on the same axis. The experience of the pathway is, in a sense, a slow unfolding of the journey of self-realisation.

Pilgrims spend barely a few moments in the temple, after travelling long distances from all over the country and the world. The bank of steps leading up to the temple allows them space, to be in the presence of the temple - the sacred precinct - for a while longer, adding to their spiritual experience.

A Befitting Architectural Vocabulary

Varanasi, although ancient, is composed of many layers of blended architectural styles. For the Vishwanath Dham development, we created a much-needed new typology of buildings and urban spaces that serve the temple well and blend with the context.

We collaborated with temple architects to create an ornate, traditional inner court, Parisar, around the temple, to ensure that its sanctity and dignity were upheld. This part of the development adheres to the architectural vocabulary of Hindu temples of north India. The Parisar is made entirely of stone, without any steel or concrete, so that it can last for as long as the temple itself. It is built entirely in Chunar stone from Mirzapur, which is the same stone used in the Temple.

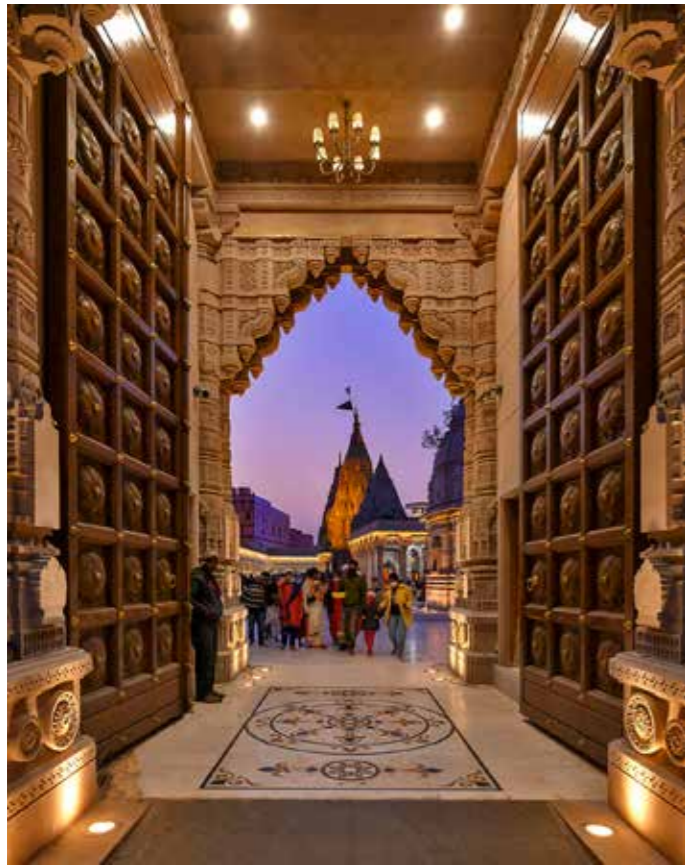
The outer court, the temple Chowk, is modern, yet uses traditional arch-shaped torans to blend in with the temple architecture. The gateway to the Chowk draws inspiration from the Ramnagar Fort gateway.

The rest of the buildings, including new pilgrim facilities that have been added, are modern and functional buildings, that match the bulk and height of the surrounding development. The redeveloped precinct provides a befitting setting to the Kashi Vishwanath Temple and upgrades this incredibly special spiritual destination for pilgrims and tourists.

Better Facilities and Accessibility

Several new amenities have been added to cater to the comfort, safety, and security of the locals, pilgrims, tourists, and temple priests. These include three pilgrim facilitation centres with lockers where visitors can leave their personal belongings and footwear, covered areas with fans for queuing, a small guesthouse for the temple trust, lodging for pilgrims, a hospice for the elderly and infirm, spiritual bookstores, handicraft shops, museums and exhibition spaces, a hall for gathering, a large kitchen for preparation of prasad and facilities for the temple priest to change clothes. There is a viewing gallery on top of the gateway to the chowk, from where one can absorb the vast expanse of the Ganga River and have a view of the Temple at the same time. The gateways are built with stone and the pathways and steps are built with granite, to ensure that the development is functional, robust, and easy to maintain.

The project has made the Temple complex fully accessible to those with mobility restrictions. It provides wheelchair-friendly access all the way from the River Ganga to the Temple. The precinct is designed to be well-lit throughout. It has high-quality and sufficient toilets, at three distinct locations. It also has dedicated spaces for lactating mothers. The development has various facilities to ensure that security arrangements can be made in an unobtrusive manner. The attempt here is to create an inclusive space for all genders and age groups.



The gateway from the chowk to the temple Parisar



The Parisar and the main temple in all its glory



A colonnade around the temple allows pilgrims to sit a while longer in the sacred precinct

Renders, drawings, and text courtesy: HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd.

Photographs courtesy: Dinesh Mehta, for HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd.



Dr. Bimal Patel is an architect, urbanist and academic who has traversed disciplinary, professional, and institutional boundaries to explore the ways in which architecture, urban design and urban planning can enrich the lives of people in India's cities. He heads HCP as its Chairman and Managing Director. Since 2012, he has also been heading CEPT University as President. Patel received a Diploma in Architecture from CEPT, Ahmedabad, in 1984. He received a dual Master's in Architecture and City Planning in 1988, and a PhD in City and Regional Planning in 1995 from the University of California, Berkeley. In 1996, he founded Environmental Planning Collaborative (EPC), a not-for-profit consultancy and policy-research and advocacy organisation.

His work has won numerous awards, including the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, the Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Urban Planning and Design, and the Padma Shri.
parizad.baria@hcp.co.in

The Manikarnika Ghat is a cremation ghat, where mourners need privacy from the hordes of pilgrims and tourists visiting the Temple. The project provides this by creating a wall, which also houses a ramp leading up from the Ganga River.

Challenges, Discoveries, and Learnings

The construction of the project was a huge logistical challenge because the only access for transporting construction material was either through a narrow 40 feet road that reached one end of the site, or on barges through the river. All the material was transported at night.

When buildings were demolished to create space for pilgrim facilities, many old temples were discovered within those buildings. Many of the temples were being used as structural supports for the concrete slabs and beams of the buildings. These temples were restored and included in the development.

The project was inaugurated in December 2021, and it makes us happy to see that the development is being appreciated by many pilgrims. Our key learnings were:

- a) It is possible to create an architectural vocabulary that juxtaposes modern with the traditional.
- b) Even in a dense urban setting, it is possible to bring about a transformative change in a respectful and sensitive manner.
- c) Seemingly impossible logistical challenges can be tackled in a straightforward manner if a problem-solving approach is applied.



Drone shot from before work on the corridor began



Drone shot of the project under development



Drone shot of the project nearing completion