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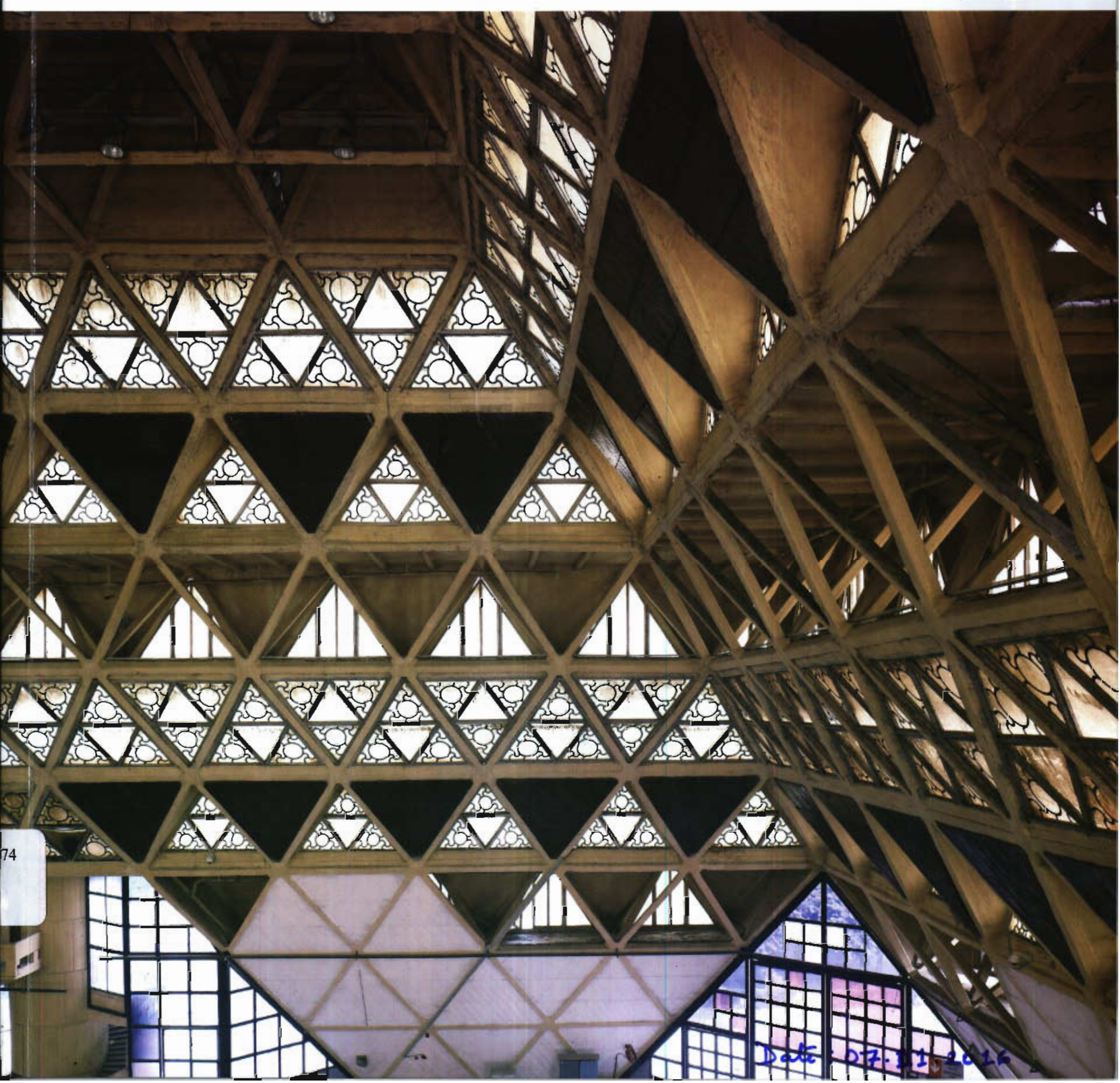


A TURN IN ARCHITECTURE

A recent book outlining the oeuvre of Hasmukh Patel's practice documents and analyses his most iconic buildings; each as a built manifestation of India's drastic, transformative modernisation efforts in the post-Independence era. The book is an important attempt at documenting one of the long-standing practices that produced a critical body of work, contributing towards India's physical fabric as well as its intellectual history

Catherine Desai, Bimal Patel, Arindam Dutta

The Architecture of Hasmukh Patel

Hasmukh Patel's architectural practice spanned four decades, from the early 1960s to the mid-2000s. During this period, he designed over 300 buildings of many types: private bungalows, theatres, speculative office buildings, apartments, banks, schools, religious buildings, factories and many others. Many of his buildings are well known and deeply admired, and Patel's architecture is widely acknowledged to have helped define modern architecture in post-Independence India. This book presents 51 of Patel's most significant projects. The drawings, photographs, project descriptions, contextual information, essays and his own recollections are intended, first of all, to provide a record of this work. They also help elucidate his architectural style, situate his work in the social and economic context in which it was produced, and assist in interpreting its meanings and significance.

Patel did not often speak about his architectural philosophy. When he did speak, he preferred to focus on how his buildings pragmatically solved the practical problems that client requirements or the technicalities of building construction posed. Perhaps as a consequence of this, he is admired first and foremost as a conscientious and skilful professional, and his architecture is applauded for being deeply pragmatic and well constructed. As the projects presented here show, Patel relished exploring how the many programmatic and technological challenges that his widely differing projects posed to him could be creatively, deftly and economically tackled. In his designs he explored how, by providing the right facilities and appropriate layouts, traditional Gujarati families could be made comfortable in their new modern houses. In his banks and office buildings he explored how they could be functionally and logically organised, how the movement of people within them could be made most efficient and their layouts most coherent, and how the use of space could be best economised. When designing mixed-use developments for real estate developers, he explored how newly emergent needs for commercial and retail spaces could be met in a functional and commercially viable manner. In his row houses and apartments, he explored how developers could supply comfortable housing that met the aspirational needs of middle-class households at an affordable cost. In all his projects, he kept in mind how good construction, climatically correct building orientation, adequate natural light and ventilation and other such features could be used to make buildings comfortable and economical. Skillful resolution of practical problems was at the heart of Patel's architectural endeavour.

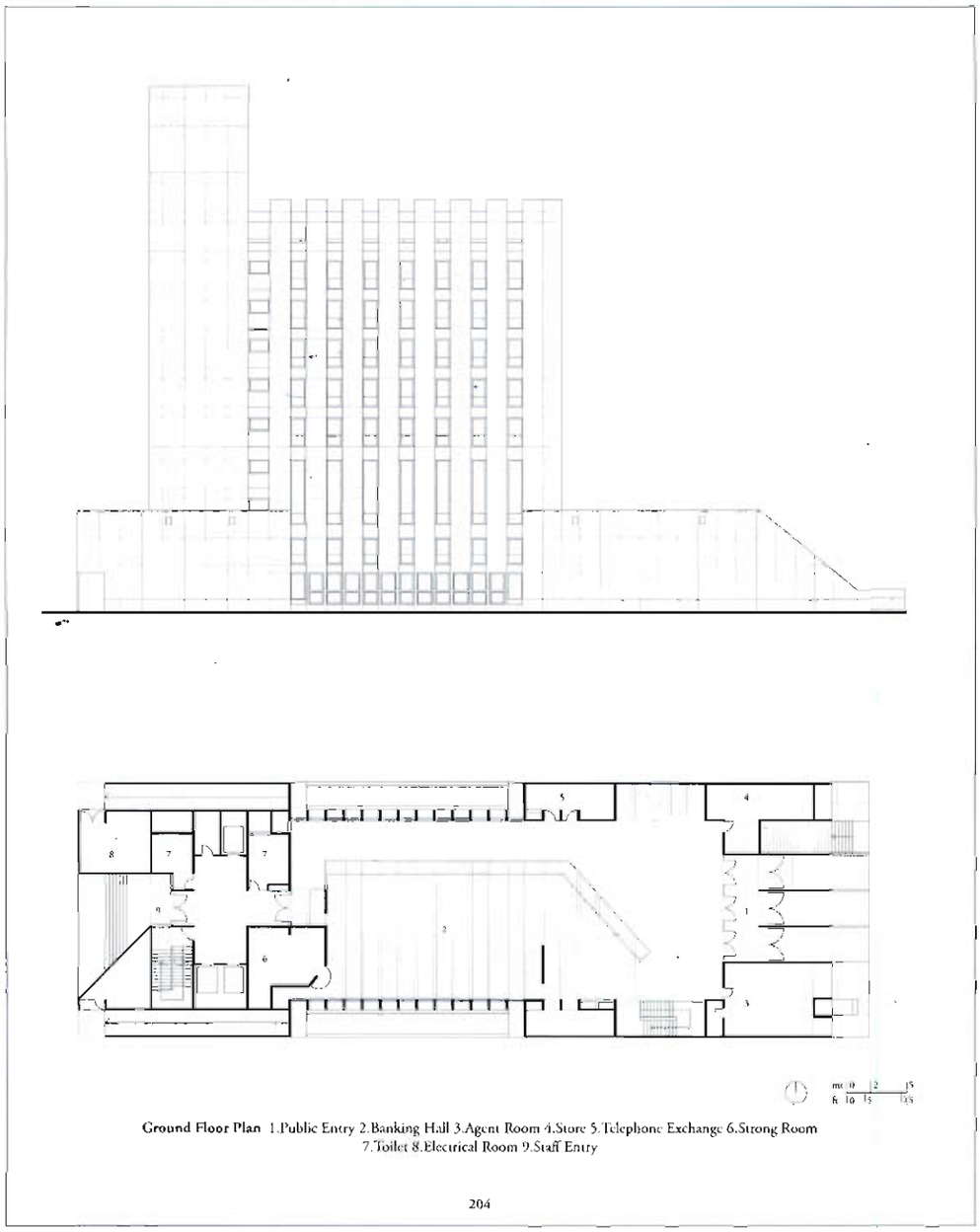
Patel rarely, if ever, discussed his aesthetic quest or his architectural style. Yet, his designs, besides being explorations in pragmatic problem solving, were also investigations in aesthetics and style. They explored how complex programmatic requirements could be cleverly met by plans that were strikingly clear, highly rational, aesthetically spare and geometrically elegant diagrams. They investigated how form, proportion, placement, colour and other such devices could be used to make the austere and abstract language of modern architecture intuitively understandable and aesthetically pleasing. Like many architects of his generation, Patel was highly committed to the rationalism and abstraction of modern architecture and preferred to stay away from the use of vernacular idioms. They all seemed to want to develop a locally rooted but secular, universal, modern and internationally recognisable architectural lingua franca that could replace the many historical, vernacular or formal architectural languages of India's numerous aesthetically insular communities. And, as the projects presented here show, his designs were a major contribution in this direction. Patel's designs also explored how architectural features such as double height spaces or verandahs, or art, could enrich life in his buildings. When designing public buildings, he attempted to expand the public realm by providing publicly accessible plazas and many community facilities in his buildings. Regardless of whether resources were ample or constrained, or, whether he faced unforgiving commercial considerations or enjoyed the freedom that typical public sector commissions of that time allowed, formal rigour and restrained aesthetic play remained the mainstays of his architecture. Patel's unspoken commitment to architecture's formal and civic ambitions was central to his work.

Patel also never articulated his social or political philosophy. Even now, when he looks back, he does not speak of his work in such terms. Yet, when one views his body of work it is clear that his practice was undergirded by a strong social commitment and guided by a clear mission—that of helping people in India's emerging middle class to invent a new, modern, cosmopolitan, urban way of life. His practice was not a boutique pursuit and his architecture was not meant to enhance elite pleasures. Neither was architecture, for him, an indulgent, self-absorbed artistic pursuit. It was also not an instrument of state policy meant to aggrandise the state and to further its cultural or political missions. As the projects presented here show, Patel's architecture was an enthusiastic and empathetic response to the needs of the gradually prospering, urbanising and modernising middle-caste and middle-class Indians. These were people like him, who came from a background similar to his. Often, they were first-generation city dwellers, people who had experienced hard or harsh living conditions. Patel's architecture was

Previous spread and this spread: the Dena Bank building, Ahmedabad (1974). Previous spread, left: Members of Hasmukh Patel's office in the 1980s when the practice was located in HK House. Ravi Hazra can be seen on Hasmukh Patel's right in one of the pictures; right: the north facade of the building. This page, left: the skylit banking hall within the building. Below: the dramatic entrance of the Dena Bank building as seen from Ashram Road, during its final stages of construction. Opposite page, top: the sitting area of the banking hall, with its skylight; below: drawing from the book – ground floor plan of the Dena Bank building

a part of the project of gradually transforming India to be a more comfortable, secure, industrial, modern, secular and confident society. Almost all his projects dealt with enriching life for them: their houses, row houses and apartments; their schools; and the places where they would work, shop, entertain and relax. 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 millions of people who are moving into cities. The modernising zeal implicit in the social and political orientation of Patel's practice went hand in hand with his enthusiasm for technology. He viewed technology as a force for good. It could liberate people from drudgery and discomfort and therefore it was a force to be harnessed for solving problems and enriching life. He was not averse to letting technology lead architectural decision-making. Many of his projects explored the use of new technologies such as precast concrete, slip-form construction, advanced theatre projection systems, advanced acoustic systems and space frames. However, the advancements in technology that his projects explored were made in the context of India's considerable technological backwardness. The problem of technological backwardness was compounded, throughout a large period of his practice, by the government's autarchic trade polices and India's stagnating growth, which practically halted the technological development of India's construction industry. One can only wonder what turn Patel's architecture would have taken had the context in which he practiced been more favourable for technological advancement. **Bimal Patel**

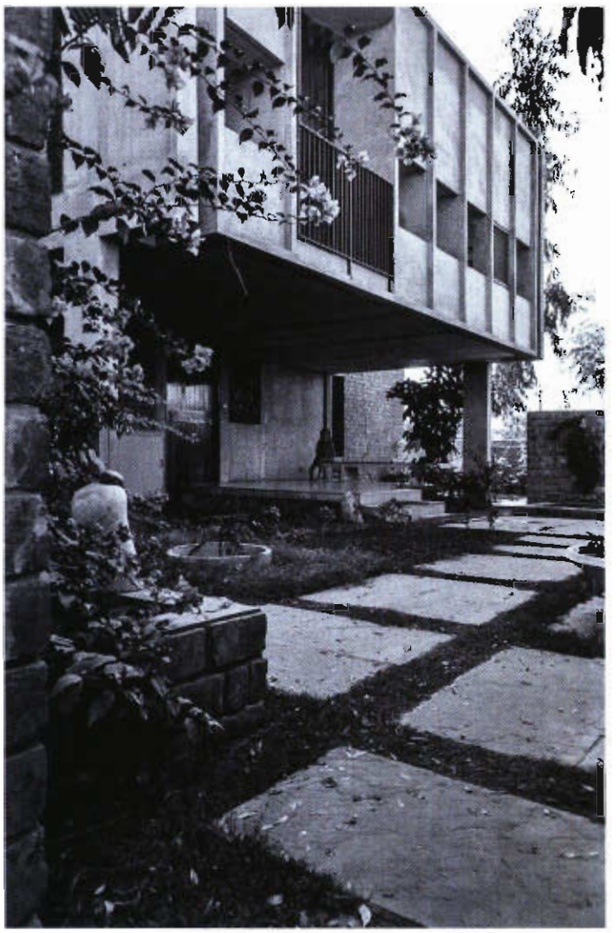
Following are a few selected projects and pages from the book, published in Domus India *with the permission of the Authors*



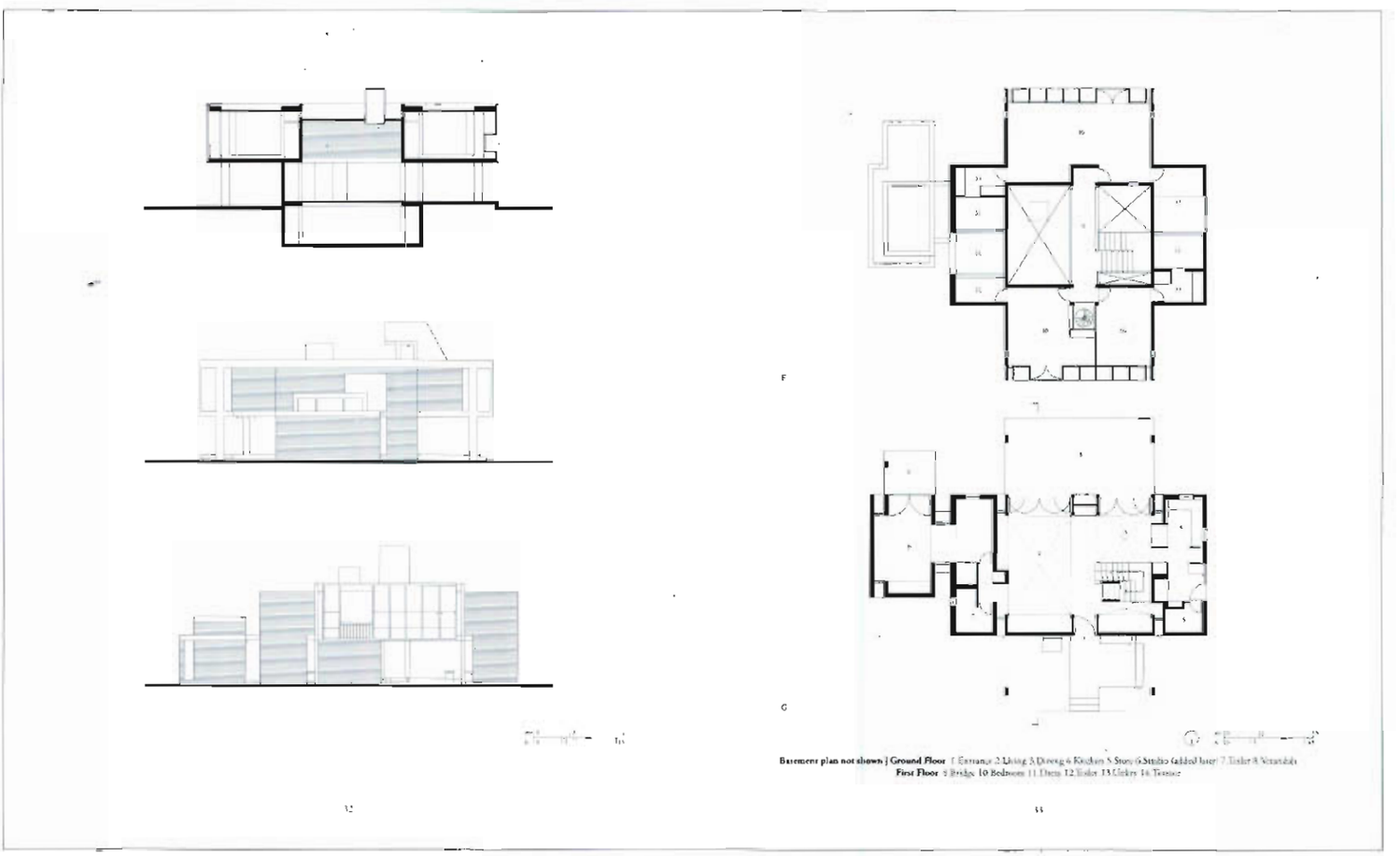
Ground Floor Plan 1.Public Entry 2.Banking Hall 3.Agent Room 4.Store 5.Telephone Exchange 6.Strong Room 7.Toilet 8.Electrical Room 9.Staff Entry

ELEVATION AND GROUND FLOOR PLAN - DENA BANK

Dena Bank, Ahmedabad, 1974
The stark massing and generous volumes of the Dena Bank suggest the power of its client, while its detail, both programmatic and aesthetic, is often engaging. It is a curious and powerful combination. The building takes as its starting point a simple tower, podium and terrace organizational strategy. Its plan is logical, simple and largely symmetrical, however this strategy is broken in a few deliberate places. A good example is the dramatic entrance to the building. The front face of the podium is steeply sloped; it is broken into a series of massive, narrow concrete fins. The entrance doors to the banking hall are set back into the shadows between the divisions, with the main door on the central axis of slab and tower. At the right edge, the fin and void are replaced by a single steep stair which is set into a solid mass. This leads to a second, upper plaza, in front of an office tower and auditorium which sits above the banking hall. The symmetry overrides the orderly logic of the greater plan, bringing a picturesque overplay to the otherwise logical composition. Like Newman Hall, the Dena Bank uses narrowly spaced, repetitive structural elements from which the building derives much of its impact. Inside, these are fine and beautifully finished. Externally, they are robustly proportioned. The side façade was perhaps the most iconic element of the building. Now unfortunately over-clad, the narrowly spaced concrete piers stretched from ground to sky, neatly banded and plain, save where they touched the ground. Here they rest on hollowed-out neat square ends. Standing besides this side elevation the building appears to soar above its actual height. The project architect, Jayant Gunjaria, who meticulously drew the project's precise and elegant construction drawings, described the process of achieving this effect. "Actually, the regulations at this time required that the plinth should be expressed all around the building. We were adamant that the side walls of the office tower should be carried to the ground instead and we applied for an exemption in the centre of the side elevation."



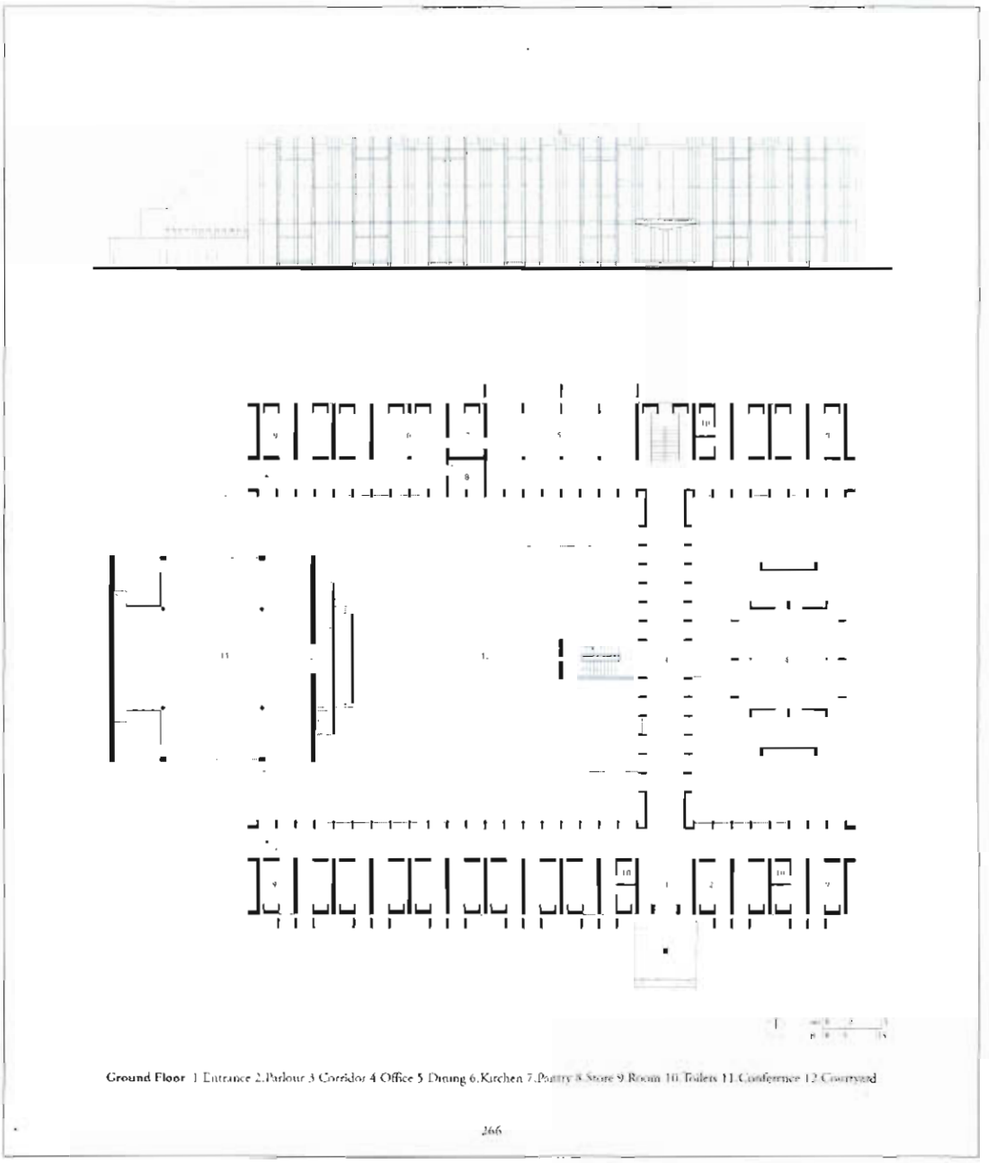
This page: the house for Bhakti and Hasmukh Patel, Ahmedabad (1966). Left: the entrance verandah of the house. Below: Hasmukh Patel descending the staircase to the living area. Far below: drawing from the book – ground floor plan of the house for Bhakti and Hasmukh Patel, Ahmedabad



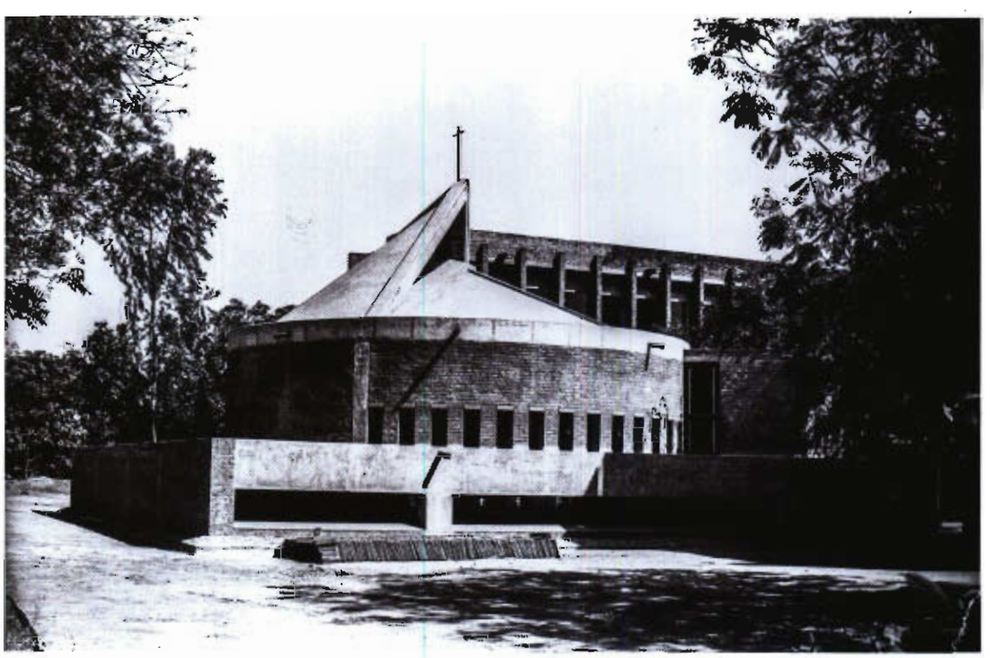
SECTION, ELEVATIONS AND FLOOR PLANS - HOUSE FOR BHAKTI AND HASMUKH PATEL

This page and next page: Newman Hall, Ahmedabad (1963). Above: the front facade and entrance of the Hall when newly constructed. Left: the first floor colonnade. Following page, below: drawing from the book – ground floor plan of the Newman Hall; far below: in the 1970s, a chapel was added to the Newman Hall

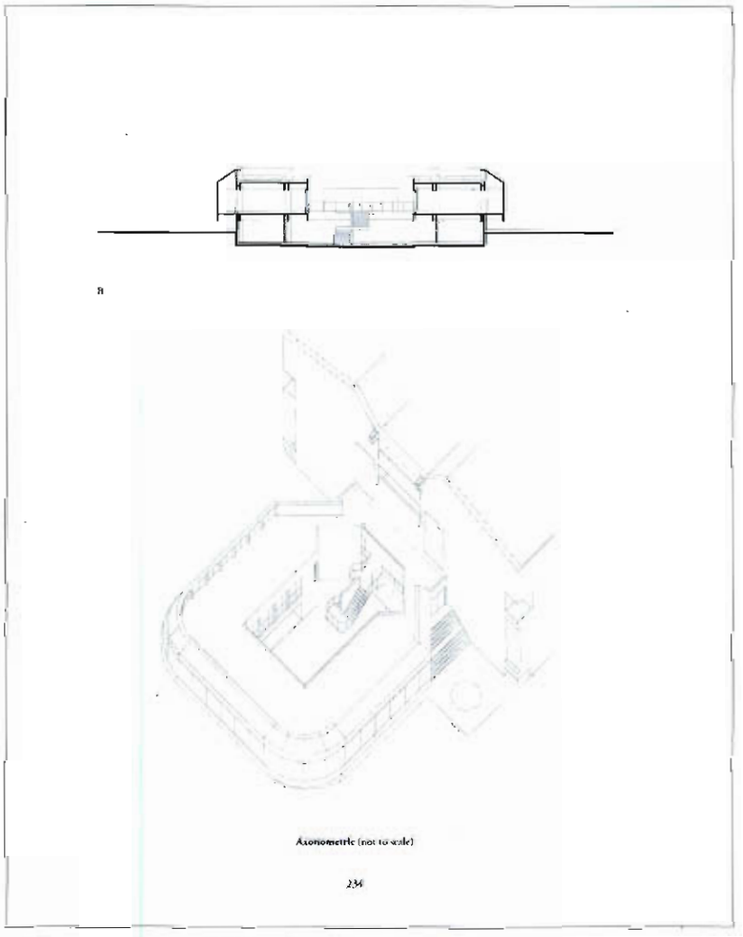
Newman Hall, Ahmedabad, 1963
When the Jesuits commissioned Newman Hall, it was Br. Martin who briefed Hasmukh Patel on the few requirements of the building. Patel said, "So I was thinking what could be the simplest solution? I told Br. Martin that I would like to do a brick exposed building. I think at that time there was a shortage of cement. Br. Martin agreed, he had seen and liked some brick buildings in Ahmedabad, including some of B.V. Doshi's work. He said he would do the contracting job. I had no objection to that arrangement but I knew that it would be a difficult building to construct. The reason for this was very simple. The columns I imagined were 9-inches wide, the same width as a brick and as they were freestanding, all four sides would need to be fair-faced. How could we build these columns perfectly? So we both thought carefully. These columns were required because of the morning sun, but we could not decide whether they could be constructed. Finally, I suggested that we make a formwork of 2 or 3 feet which could be used to align the bricks and moved up one section at a time. We decided to build a trial column. If it was not successful we would have had to revise the design, but it came out so beautifully." The narrow faces are stacked alternating courses of stretchers and headers and the sides are Flemish bond.



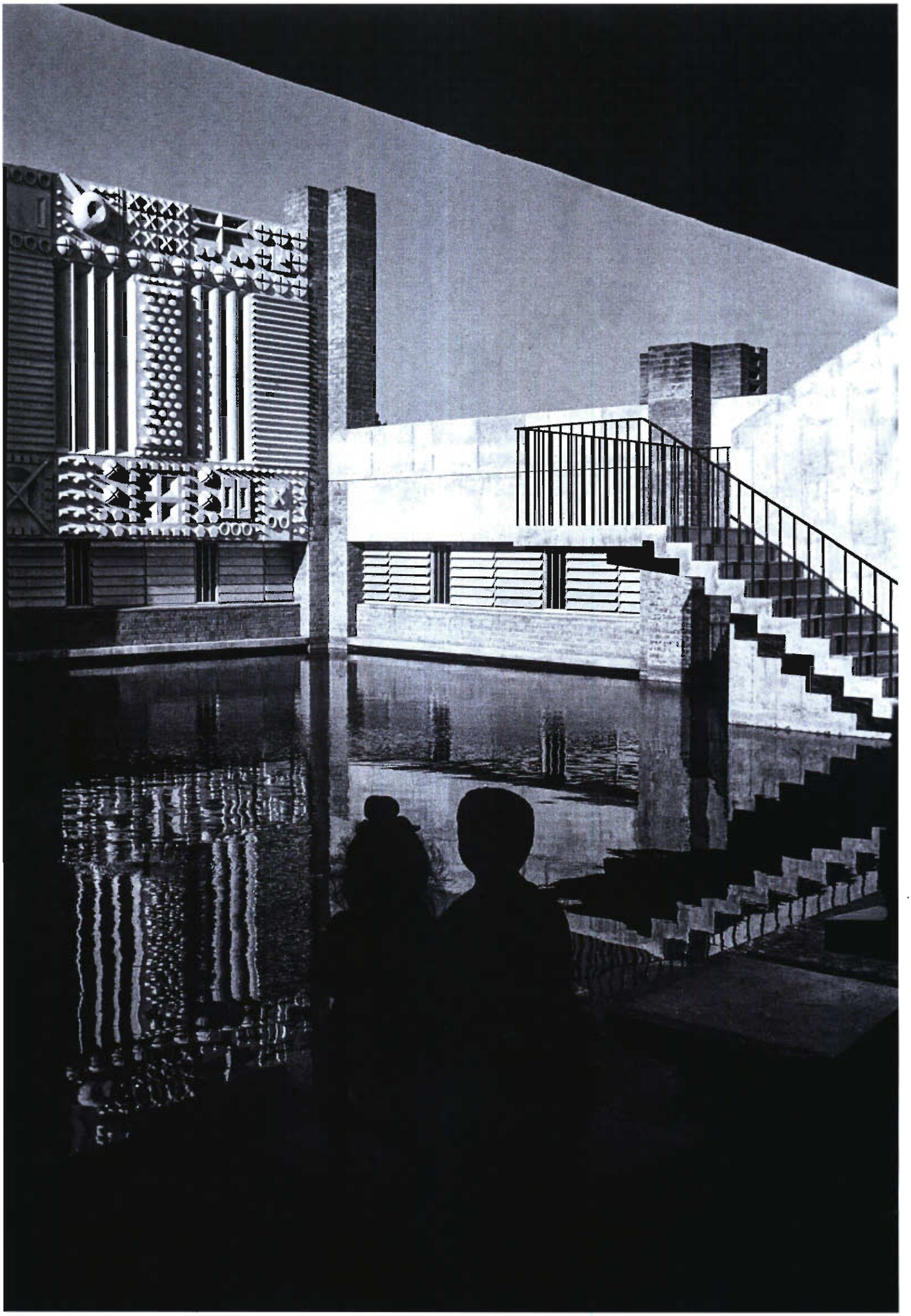
ELEVATION AND GROUND FLOOR PLAN - NEWMAN HALL

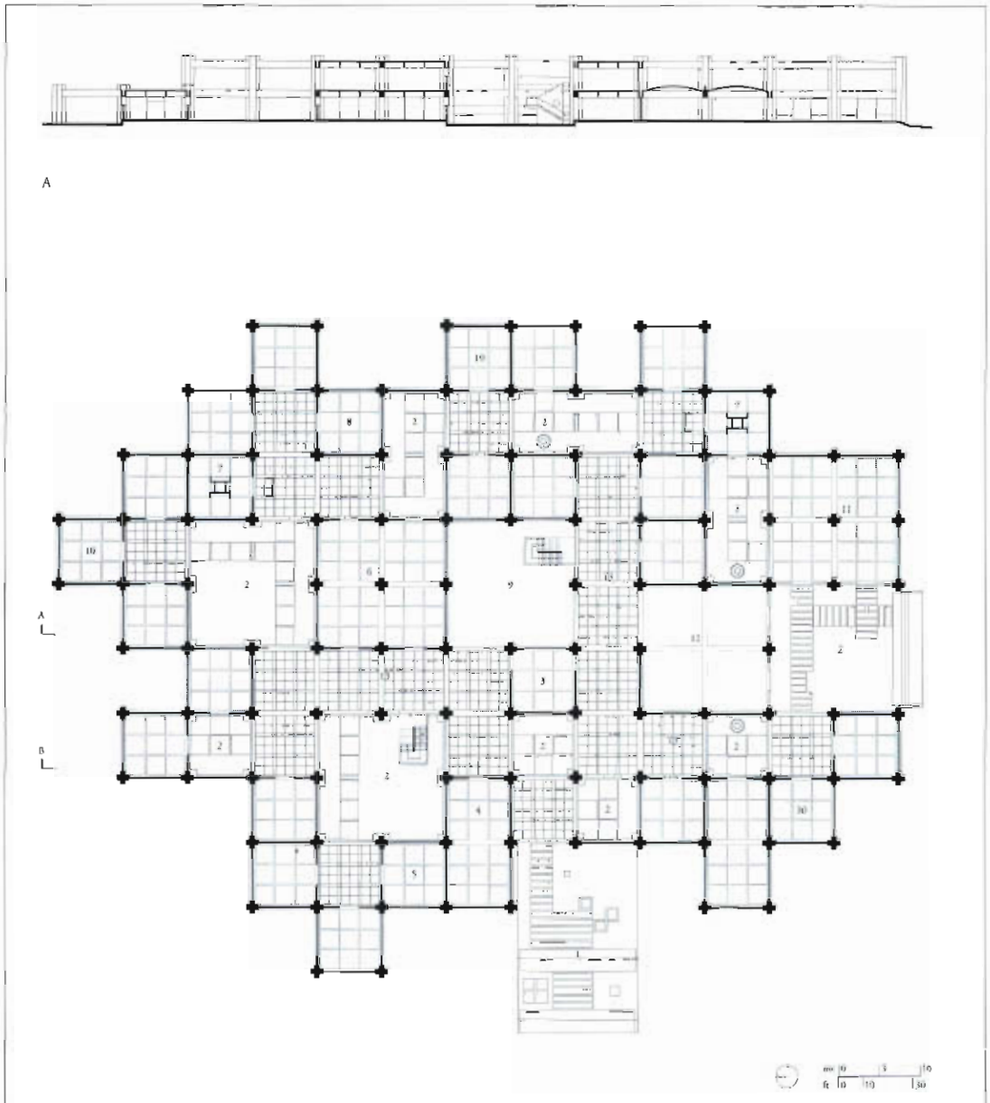


This page: the Reading Centre, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad (1975). Top: entrance to the reading centre; to the right of this entrance lies the Gujarat University Library. Above: interior of the lower level of the reading centre. Right: from the book – axonometric drawing of the Reading Centre



SECTION AND AXONOMETRIC – READING CENTRE





Ground Floor Plan 1.Entrance 2.Courtyard 3.Principal's Office 4.Staff Room 5.Health Room 6.Arts and Crafts 7.Toilet 8.Library 9.Pool 10.Classroom 11.Kidergarten 12.Multipurpose Hall 13.Corridor

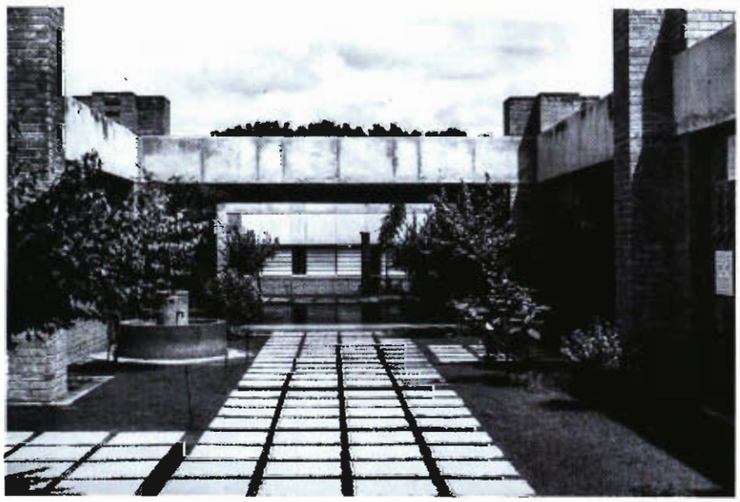
SECTION AND GROUND FLOOR PLAN - ST XAVIER'S PRIMARY SCHOOL

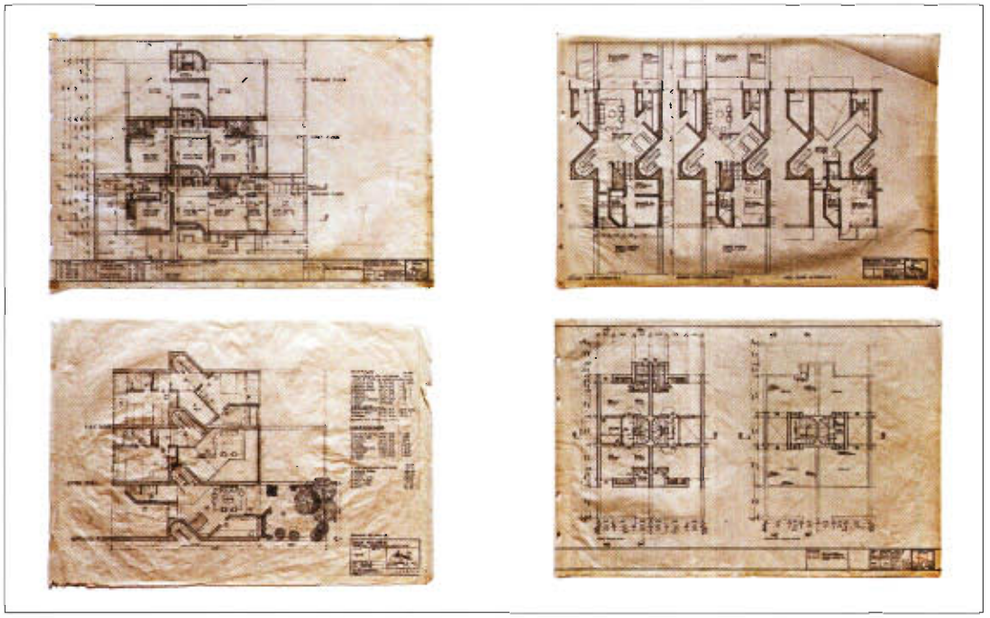
This spread: St. Xavier's Primary School, Ahmedabad (1967). Above: drawing from the book – ground floor plan of the St. Xavier's primary school. Left: the courtyard with the pool and mural. Below left: courtyard with a water fountain; right: students at one of the many converging corridors and courtyards in the school

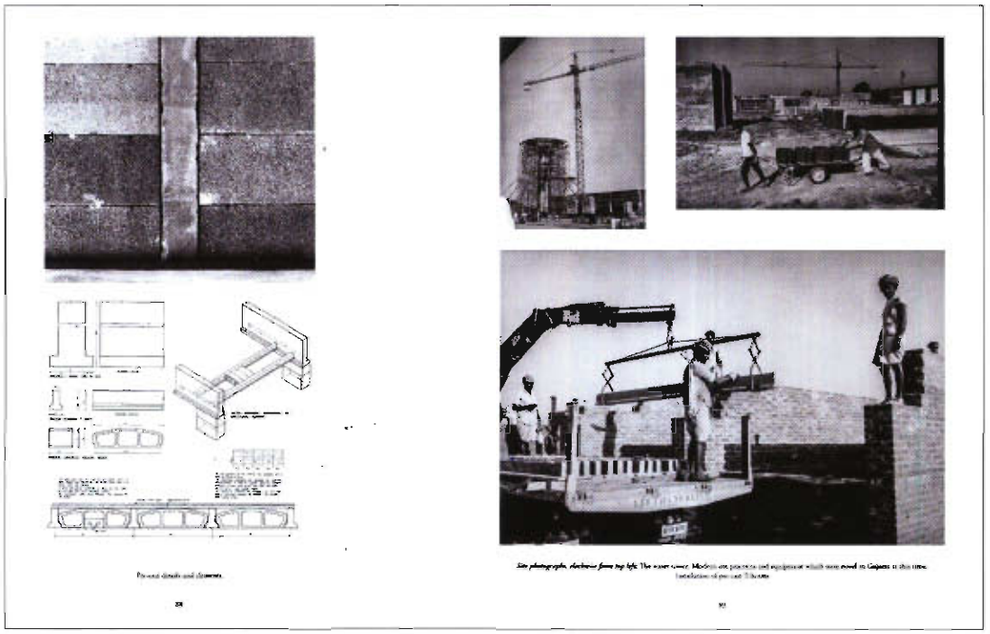
St. Xavier's Primary School, Ahmedabad, 1967

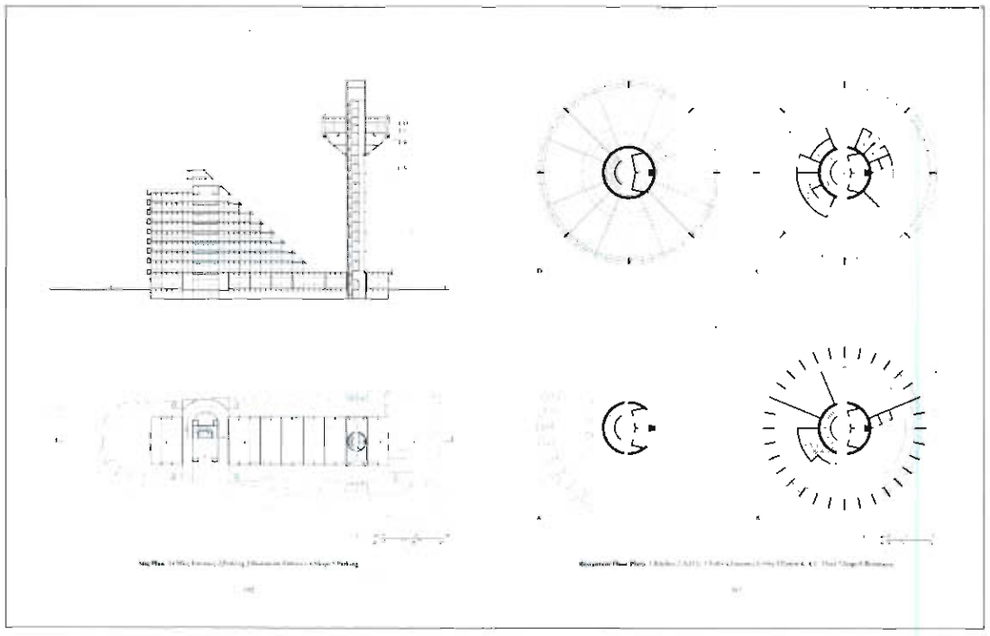
Through this experimentation, an organisational rule emerged. Patel arranged the classrooms in groups of three. Each group could share an open covered space and each classroom would have two or three external walls to increase ventilation and reduce the transmission of sound between spaces. Each cluster was also linked to a courtyard which was open to the sky. The basic module could be combined to provide halls or larger classrooms. The 25 x 25 feet pattern was also used for the linking corridors, which were covered but open on the sides, and for the courtyards. The module worked fundamentally, functionally and architecturally. This grid system shared common ground with Charles Correa's Gandhi Ashram and Aldo Van Eyck's orphanage in Amsterdam and was superbly adapted to meet the practical needs of the school and to realise the shared vision of the architect and the client. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the location of the principal's office. A neat square, identical to all the modules, it sits like an island within the corridors and courts, its doors aligned to encourage its use as a shortcut for noisy, excited pupils.

This more resolved plan was well received and Fr. Zavala became interested in developing the design for the corridors and courtyards. In a large space adjacent to the kindergarten area he suggested creating a green area with small mounds where children could exercise, draw or sit out in the winter. In another of the courtyards, Patel suggested creating a pond. "I wanted one of the courtyards to have water and I suggested that if we kept a pond 2 feet deep, the students could walk and play in it. Father must have thought that I was mad, but he agreed that it would be fun for the children. I wanted this water court to have a staircase going up from the pond and a mural on one wall. We engaged the artist Himmat Shah to cast this out of concrete panels and it was based on all of the geometric shapes that the pupils would learn about up to grade 8. Seeing this mural being installed, Fr. Zavala felt that we should also ask the children to make a mural and contribute to the building. They made 2 x 2 feet plaster tiles which were transferred into concrete."









Mixed Signals: A Research Mandate

The problem could simply be the unlikelihood that one speaks both Japanese and Gujarati at the same time. Some 30 years ago, in both India and the United States, it was quite the received wisdom that the reason that Kenzo Tange's buildings looked the way they did—monumental, large-spanned, systems-driven, as if seeking to contain entire cities within themselves—owed to the large energies unleashed by Japan's rapidly industrialising and modernising society. This sense of an unmediated relationship—between a particular historical moment and its manifestation in cultural form—was quite common in how most architects and architectural critics thought and wrote at the time, and perhaps continue to do so today. Take the following statement: "In the aftermath of independence, for architects yellow doorknobs were a preferred material of expressing the national search for modernity."

If this sounds absurd, simply substitute "yellow doorknobs" with "reinforced cement concrete," and you will find the landscape of architectural writing strewn with such reasoning, a kind of intellectual gibberish that stands in for explanation. And so Tange's buildings were explained away as "natural" expressions of a country's rapid modernisation. The monumental plasticity of the built buildings was routinely conflated with the cartoonish outlines of the unbuilt work (the Boston Harbor work at MIT, Tokyo Bay, c. 1960), and all that remained was to cap this inscrutability with the word "Metabolism"—we didn't really know what that was either—and one had had done with explanation, free to gawp at the monumental, sculptural "magic" of the architecture.

It didn't, and doesn't, help that the architects themselves enthusiastically play into this kind of exoticisation, nourishing a kind of aesthetic mystique and inspiration by this or that zeitgeist. In most architectural writing everywhere, and certainly so in/on Asia, scepticism remains sorely lacking, and taking the architects at their word was, and is, perhaps even the toll exacted for entry into some very jealously guarded salons. I start with this Japanese digression simply because modern architecture in India, too, has been written and talked about through a few pat formulas, not quite with the qualifier "yellow", but other platitudes that leave you not much the wiser. Just read any of Kenneth Frampton's many forewords to books or William Curtis's monographs and you will be provided with sundry such rationales for aesthetic motivation: tradition, culture in transformation, tectonics and craft, the weather, modernisation, the economy.

To return to the Japanese case, it was only after the waning of the economic phenomena that had subsidised the first generation of post-war architects that architectural scholars started delving into the client networks and forms of patronage, particularly with a view to the cronyism between the Japanese state and the large industrial cartels or keiretsu (replicated in the South Korea chaebols). That Japanese architecture was linked to this cronyism in very particular ways—as it was in Ahmedabad, with the Nagarsheths—was highlighted only very recently, when a conference at Harvard, and the subsequent publication, brought together Japanese and American scholars to confront this legacy. The clients that Tange built for, it turned out, were not the industrial conglomerates per se but rather the large media and advertising corporations, dependent on the keiretsu for patronage and whose worldviews they were enjoined to broadcast, or at least not contradict. Tange's bold modernism, expressed in these media headquarters, in that sense, spoke more

to a complex social, disciplining compact being forged by government, industry and media about the fidelity, labour and dedication owed by everyday Japanese people to their leaders. In a manner of speaking, this monumentality is through and through mediatic, with no more weight than a billboard. We are not so far from Venturi here. A direct line can be drawn between the "modernism" of a Tange and the iconological "postmodernism" of his acolyte Arata Isozaki; likewise, a similar postmodern/"mediatic" line can be drawn between the early, brutalist Doshi and the later, symbolist Doshi, the early Correa and the late Correa, between the early corpus such as Premabhai Hall and Gandhi Ashram, and the ersatz "narratives" of the later, 1980s' outputs such NIFT or Bharat Bhavan.

Here in this book one will browse through an astonishing diary of Hasmukh C. Patel's prolific life and career. What strikes one is the formal clarity of each of these buildings: crisp geometries that wrap around clearly delineated programmes; deep, evenly-spaced beams flying across large expanses of uninterrupted space; compositions that invoke the heyday of rationalism; spacious foyers are marked out by the intricate play of light and dark on concrete; swirling, sculpture-like staircases punch through slabs; sciagraphies that etch out the white Ahmedabadi sun like a scene out of de Chirico.

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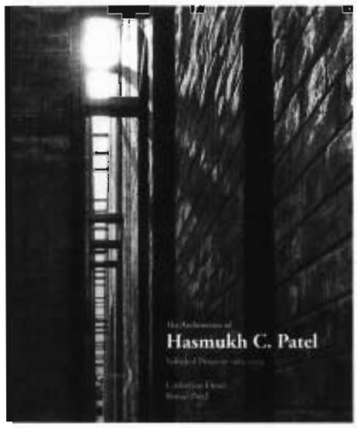
Of the triad that represent the modernist vanguard in Ahmedabad—Balkrishna V. Doshi and Anant Raje being the others—Patel perhaps is the most sachlich of the three, the least given to mawkish gestures towards iconography, preferring rather a prosaic, purpose-driven formalism of a sort. Both the garrulous Doshi and the taciturn Raje, apprentices to Corbusier and Kahn respectively, consciously cultivated charismatic personas whose desired effect on students would be an admiring, awestruck silence. Patel, more reticent on the pedagogical front, never attracted or cultivated that kind of guruvaad. Nonetheless, it was quite the manner of all three, and generally of this generation, voluble or not, to tend to speak in tongues—obliquely and defensively—intended to ward off doubting Thomases should they have the temerity to ask questions. Very few did.

In discursive terms, architecture in India was John Wayne territory: one "did" things, not "talked about" them. Most execrable of all was the vocation to write, particularly when it approached something close to critical rigour. This mix of defensiveness and insecurity of India's first generation of architects against critique was also a reflection of their good fortune, gifted as they were, by the historical circumstances of new nation-building, with commissions for and control of a cornucopia of public and semi-public institutions that most architects today can only dream of. Derision served as a great instrument for discursive control and institutional gate-keeping where patronage networks were only too visible. In India, if you want to find out who made who, look rather at the marriages, or the children's marriages: the modern is profoundly etched by the sinews of the unmodern.

In modern Indian aesthetics, or whatever passed as "theory," in the writing/talking of a Kapila Vatsyayana or a Stella Kramrisch or a Balkrishna V. Doshi, orientalisms are rife, and architects tend to eschew questions about technical and technological sophistication to cultivate instead a primitivist, craft-driven image for what they do. The intended effect of this grasping for the pre-modern may have been exactly the same as the post-war Japanese architects' embrace of the hyper-modern: the obfuscation of discreet networks of patronage by conferring on to them grand-narratives of national genius, a form of inoculation against the quibbles of those less-than-ardent defenders of the faith. Indian architectural institutions fell into line: the critical rigour that humanities programmes and their study of societies that were developing elsewhere in the world passed as if ships in the night, easily parried as symptoms of Western self-indulgence and over-compensated, elite hobby-horsing. As a consequence, buildings such as those you may find in this book appear today like the beached flotsam of some lapsed, global brutalist endeavour, as inscrutable and enigmatic today as when they were first built. Since talking-too-much was not what architects did then, one is at a loss to say anything now.

That the institutional derision against historicity and critical thinking may have come back to bite Indian architects was starkly revealed when Charles Correa jolted the general architectural scene in India when he bequeathed his archive to the RIBA. Given the lifelong pietisms of the "Third World" architect, the bad faith, if that is all it was, was rich: a little bit like the "license-raj" stratagem of pushing tor trade tariffs at home while quietly parking one's assets in offshore locations abroad. After decades of inveighing against historical scrutiny, and against institutional mechanisms that support historical scrutiny, Indian architects of the first generation today suddenly confront a potential passage into oblivion. It appears that no homegrown institutions exist that can fully take on either the material or the narrative responsibility of properly curating their work. If it is a signal ignominy that their stories will be told now more as alumni of foreign institutions rather than critically reading into the story of Indian modernisation, then this ignominy is well deserved. Looking again at this portfolio, this oeuvre complete, comprised of buildings and surroundings that I am well familiar with since I was a young Gujarati-speaking boy in Ahmedabad, I am, therefore, tempted to ask a few questions. Questions that are perhaps similar to the ones that those Japanese and American scholars were asking about Tange at Harvard, in that they are less interested in commemorating a set of masterworks than in sketching out the rudiments of what a disinterested research programme might look like, in confronting this history. Further monumentalisation of an era already given to monumentalisation would do these doyens little justice, and it is important that these archives be seen not just as ornate tombstones where one would lay worshipful bouquets, but as spurs to some tough-minded and agnostic discussion.

Arindam Dutta



All excerpts and images featured here are from the book The Architecture of Hasmukh C. Patel – Selected Projects 1963-2003 *by Catherine Desai and Bimal Patel, published by Mapin Publishing in 2016. The book includes texts and interviews by Christopher Charles Benninger, Rahul Mehrotra, Arindam Dutta, Bobby Desai, and Ismet Khambatta, among others. All excerpts and images featured here are used with permission of the Authors.*

This page above: cover of the book. This spread: layouts from the book. From top: archival plans for various row houses; (left) pre-cast details and elements from St. Xavier's Technical Institute, Sevasi, Baroda (1968) and construction images (right) showing modern site practices and equipment which were novel at that time in Gujarat – the water tower and installation of pre-cast T-beams; Site plan (left) and Restaurant Floor Plans (right) of the Chinubhai Centre and Patang Restaurant, Ahmedabad (1978). This page below: State Bank of India building (1964), as seen from the Lal Darwaja bus terminal, Ahmedabad