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A N I N D I A N J O U R N A L O F A R C H I T E C T U R E



THE CATALYSTS OF CHANGE

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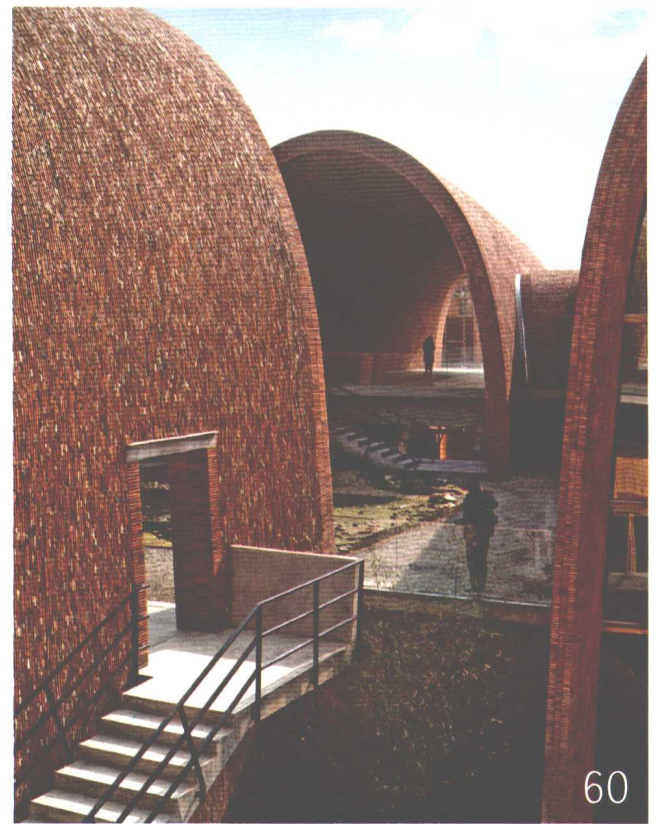
THE MASTER URBANIST DR BIMAL PATEL

Creating a Blueprint for a New India

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COVER FEATURE

The Master Urbanist

DR. BIMAL PATEL IS THE MASTERMIND BEHIND SOME OF INDIA'S MOST PIONEERING LANDMARKS. THE MULTIPLE-AWARD WINNING ARCHITECT TALKS TO US ABOUT THE NEED FOR CHANGE AND THE NEED TO ACCEPT CHANGE.

FEATURE: **SEEMA SREEDHARAN** PROFILE PHOTOGRAPH: **RAVI MISTRY**

Architect Bimal Patel's office in Ahmedabad overlooks one of his much-talked about projects – The Sabarmati Riverfront Development project. The project made it to the list of 100 'Most Innovative Projects', transformed the riverfront into a focal point of leisure and recreation and is still under progress. "It is most gratifying to see how the space is evolving, and how people are enjoying it," says the eminent creative who has this uncanny knack of remaining unfazed in the face of criticism. "There's always a need to change. You can't let heritage, culture or the sentimental value of the place hold you hostage," he says in the most pragmatic manner. "In the end, you have to find solutions."

Perhaps it is this pragmatic approach to design that earned him some of the most prestigious, multi-sectoral urban design and development projects in the country. The Post-Earthquake Walled City Restructuring Project in Bhuj; the Mumbai Port Trust Redevelopment Project, the Kashi Vishwanath Redevelopment Project in Varanasi, and most recently, the prestigious, redevelopment of the Central Vista in New Delhi. Unarguably, Dr Patel is instrumental in devising a design identity for a New India. One of his earliest projects—The EDI—earned him the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1992. In 2019, he was honoured with the Padma Shri for his contributions to the fields of architecture and planning. Yet this multiple award-winning architect wears his success lightly. "It's no big deal!"

Right from his early days, Dr Patel was drawn to the public realm. "I was born to an architect, so architecture was always a part of my life. But I credit my interest in the public realm to Fr. Erviti, a Jesuit priest in my high school who nurtured my interest in social work and development. He used to run the school's Social Service League and he encouraged us to look

beyond our sheltered lives, and got us acquainted with the problems that plagued the real world. He drew many of us into working in slums; encouraged us, at a very early age, to think about these problems and find solutions."

Dr Patel's first urban project was a street redevelopment project in Ahmedabad. "It was a project that I initiated, and I ended up managing the entire process right from designing to liaising with the authorities, getting the requisite permissions, convincing the residents. It took over a year and a half to implement the project, but it was an incredibly educative experience. It was also through this that I built my credibility as a professional who could work in the public realm. It paved the way to being commissioned for larger projects."

Architect, academician, urban planner and practitioner, Dr Patel juggles many responsibilities. But in his characteristic, nonchalant style, the visionary credits his multifaceted practice to his well-oiled team at HCP. "I have a great team. I couldn't have done it without them."

In a candid chat, Dr Patel talks about his inspiration, his vision, his thoughts on modernising Indian cities and his vision for Central Vista giving us an insight into his pragmatic and profound approach to architecture for the urban fabric.

THE BIRTH OF AN URBAN PLANNER

Seema Sreedharan (SS): Early in your career, you made a very conscious decision of practising in the public realm. What caused this shift?

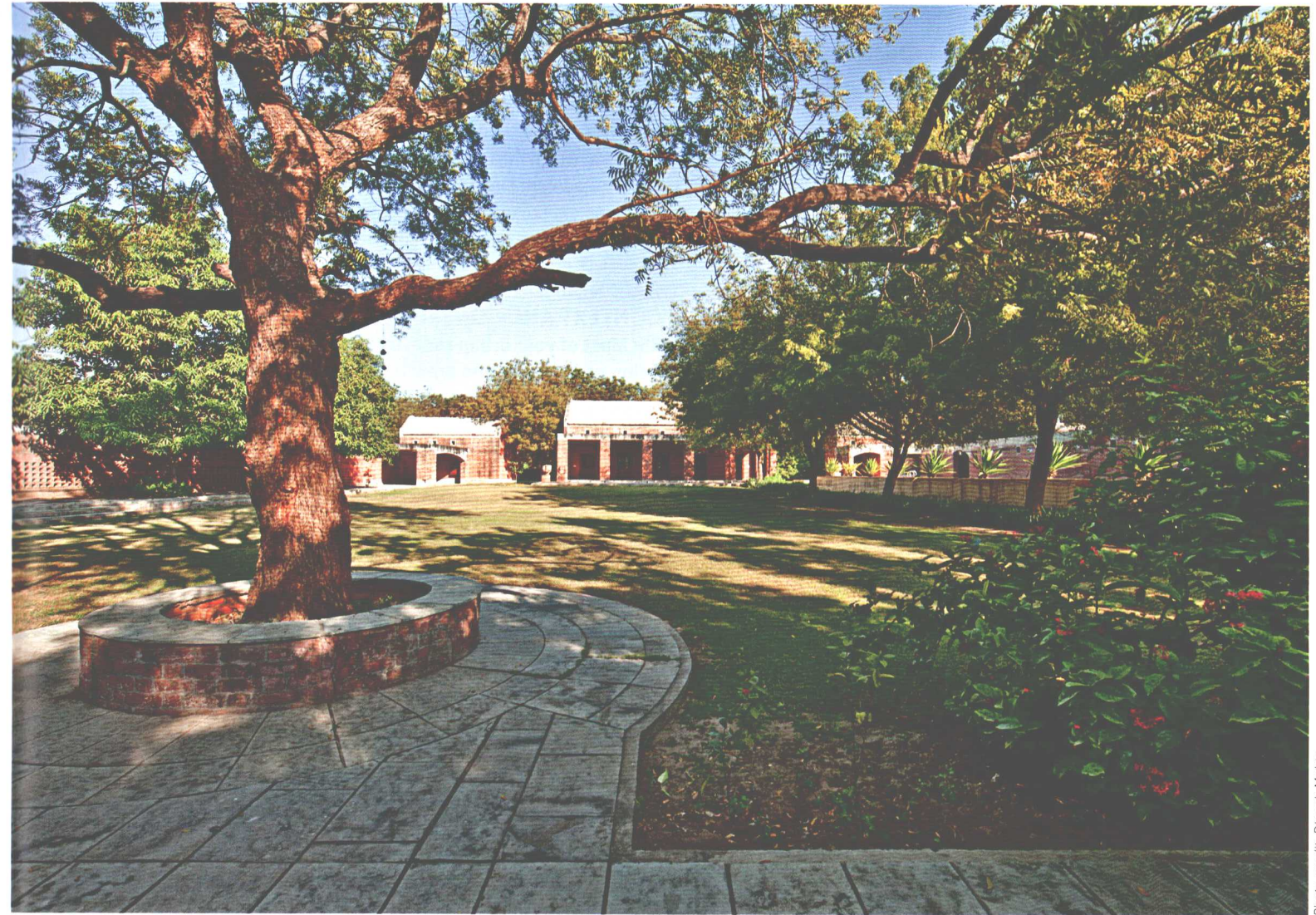
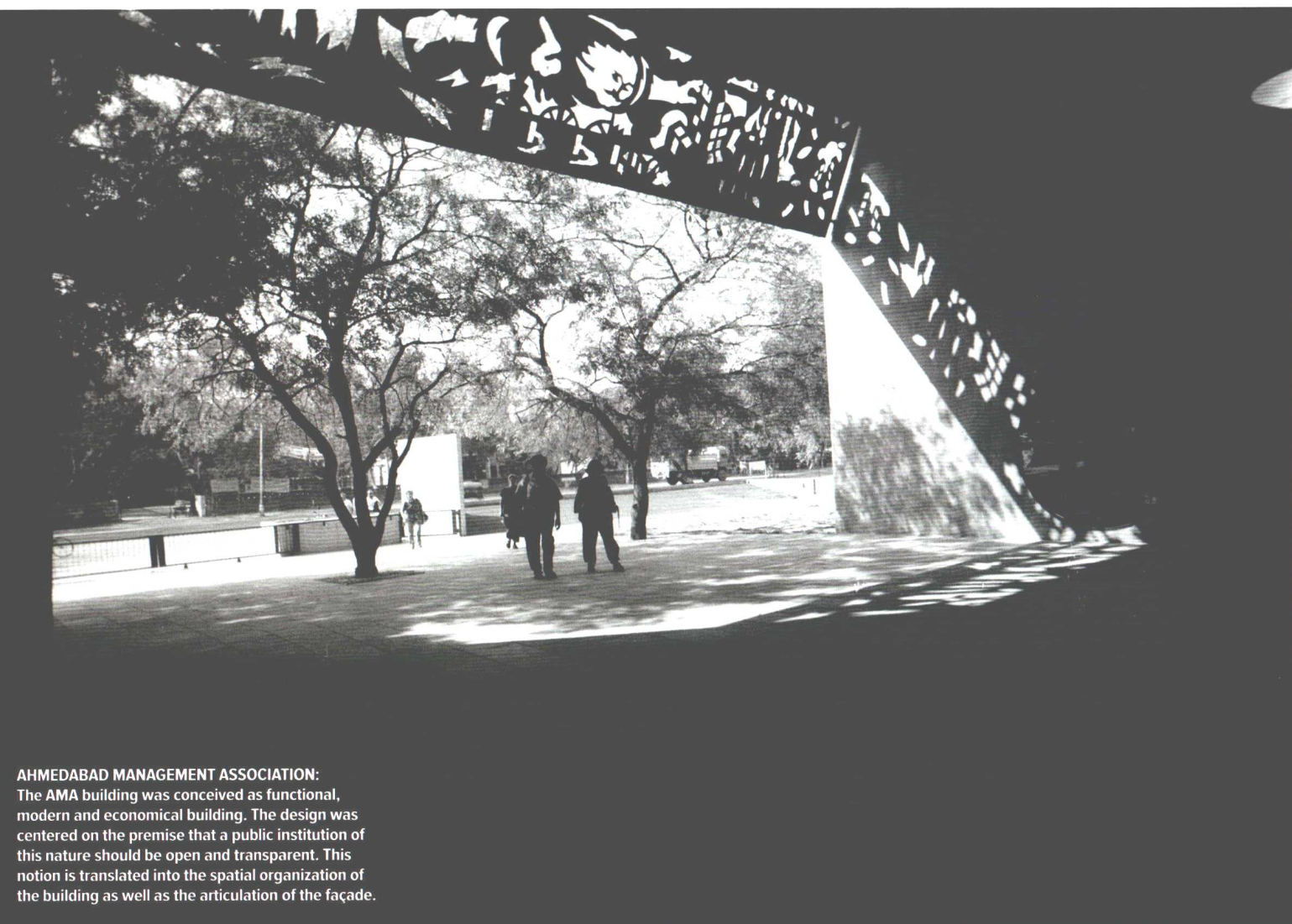
Dr. Bimal Patel (BP): One of the most formative experiences for me was when I was in my third year in architecture at CEPT; when I got the opportunity to intern at Prof Frei Otto's



(Left)
EDI: The design for Entrepreneurship Development Institute is an attempt at creating an indigenous, Indian vocabulary. It draws on lessons learnt from vernacular, Islamic and colonial buildings, to enrich the modern aesthetic. The campus won the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1992.

(Facing page above)
IIMA CAMPUS EXTENSION: The new extension campus provides teaching & residential facilities for the Institute's postgraduate programme, an International Management Centre for Innovation & Incubation and sports facilities. The new campus' buildings have been designed in exposed concrete and brick and fenestrations in a combination of mild steel and wood.

(Below)
RAMBAUG CLUB HOUSE: The Rambaug Clubhouse is a part of HCP's design of the masterplan and common infrastructure for a cooperative housing estate on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Strategically placed at the end of a large party plot, the exposed brick and concrete clubhouse includes indoor games rooms, tennis courts and a swimming pool.



AHMEDABAD MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION:
The AMA building was conceived as functional, modern and economical building. The design was centered on the premise that a public institution of this nature should be open and transparent. This notion is translated into the spatial organization of the building as well as the articulation of the façade.

(Facing page above)
CADILLA HEADQUARTERS: This corporate campus is spread over a 5-acre linear site along the Ahmedabad – Dholka highway and provides a built-up area of 16,200 sq.m. The scheme is organized as an ensemble of three detached building clusters conceived as distinct entities, yet as inseparable components of an integrated development.

(Facing page below)
ISMET-BIMAL RESIDENCE: Bimal Patel's own house, designed in collaboration with architect – furniture designer wife, Ismet Khambatta, is sited on a rectilinear 3,022 sq.m. plot in Rambaug, off S G Highway. The house is designed as a linear building along the rear edge of the plot with a large garden in the front dotted with trees.

Institute in Germany. I was nineteen. I drove 10000km with a group of friends across Europe. That's when I really got to understand what cities can be. I was less interested in architectural monuments. What fascinated me were the well-planned cities. I was amazed by how comfortable, flourishing and productive life could be for ordinary citizens in these cities. It was there when I realised the role that public spaces play in making cities liveable. The experience steered my interest towards urban design and planning.

At Berkeley too, my focus quickly shifted from architecture to urban planning. Apart from my father, Hasmukh Patel, whom I greatly admire, my teachers at CEPT and Berkeley shaped the professional that I am today. At Berkeley, I was deeply influenced by Prof. Alan Jacobs, who was not just an academic but also an eminent urban practitioner. He believed that urban planning and urban design have to be 'practices' not 'academic disciplines'. In that sense he was a 'reflective practitioner'.

I had some great teachers including Prof. Peter Hall who was a great historian of urban planning. His lectures gave me an insight into the gradual evolution of planning practices; Prof. Manuel Castells who was a brilliant urban sociologist. Studying and working with these visionaries gave me clarity of thought and fuelled my interest in urban planning.

Back in India, I joined my father's practice which was focused on architecture. I love architecture. My home, EDI, AMA, all of these are fine pieces of modern architecture. But I was never satisfied with just that. I walked out on the streets, the streets were a mess, the parks were in a poor state. I could solve my problems, I could solve problems for

a select few, but if I am to be proud of my city, my country, I must work on the most pressing problems for the common man. Can't our streets be better? Can't our public spaces be better? Can't our rivers be clean? These questions bothered me. Now to do all of these, one must work with the Government. I also equipped myself a little better to tackle this by studying urban planning and design. I did five years of architecture, and practically ten years more of study in urban planning. Conceptually, I just equipped myself to think at that scale. I don't think architects are equipped to think about the public realm; they do not fully understand what urban design or planning is. Because all interventions in the public realm have to be government interventions and that requires an unusual effort. Every architect has to wade through the challenges and frustrations of dealing with different temperaments and different stakeholders, whether it's a residential or an industrial project. You have to decide which frustration you want to take on. And I chose this. I was determined to work in the public realm. The street development project, which I initiated, strategized, and executed, earned me and my firm a lot of credibility.

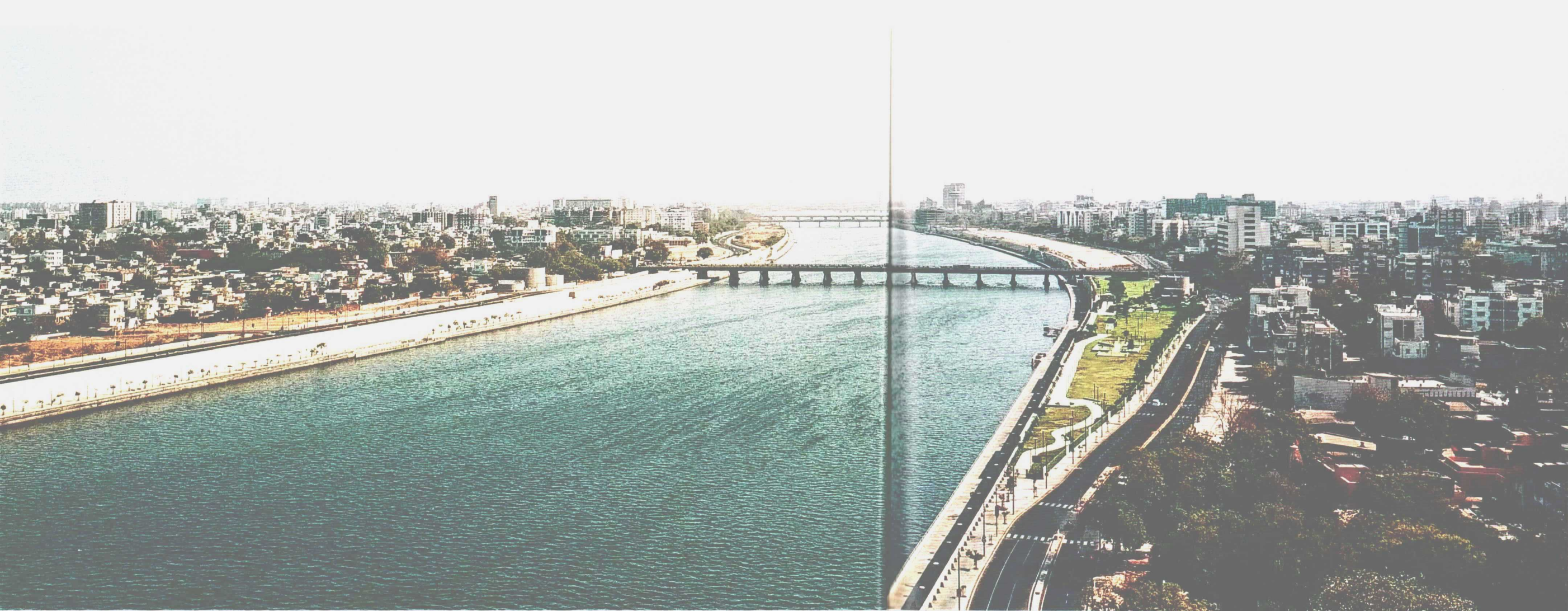
BALANCING HERITAGE, CONTEXT AND CONSERVATION

SS: Most of your urban redevelopment projects come laden with history and are sited in contexts where there is an active dialogue between the past and the present. There are issues that need to be solved, and yet there's a certain romanticism attached to such spaces. How do you then tackle such projects?

“I was deeply influenced by Prof. Alan Jacobs who was not just an academic but also an eminent urban practitioner. He believed that urban planning and urban design have to be ‘practices’ not ‘academic disciplines’. In that sense he was a ‘reflective practitioner’.”

—DR. BIMAL PATEL, Director, HCP and President, CEPT University, Ahmedabad





(Left)
SABARMATI RIVERFRONT DEVELOPMENT: Laccus The Sabarmati Riverfront Development (SRFD) Project, now under implementation, started in 1996 with a feasibility report and a concept plan. An innovative self-financing method was proposed to generate revenue and reduce the burden on the government.

(Facing page below)
MUMBAI PORT TRUST: The masterplan for the Mumbai Port Complex (MPC) has been proposed to meet dual objectives – of repurposing the port lands and of integrating it with the rest of the city, providing public spaces and facilities to the citizens.

(Below)
SWARNIM SANKUL: Gujarat Government wanted an iconic office building that would enhance the Gujarat government's image and house various corporate functional requirements. The project posed various challenges to integrate these new functions within the existing campus in a short time frame. HCP studied the existing skyline of the Sachivalaya Campus and proposed two blocks on the north and south side of the central Legislative Assembly building. The massing of these proposed buildings is in accordance with the Legislative Assembly, forming an integral part of the visual corridor from the Central Vista.

Photo credit: Dinesh Mehta





KASHI VISHWANATH DHAM

(Facing page above)
PROPOSED VIEW POST CONSTRUCTION:
 As a part of the dramatic transformation of the ancient city, the first in nearly 200 years, the land will be used to construct a 20-metre wide pathway for the about 320-metre distance from the river to the temple.

(Facing page below)
CONSTRUCTION IN PROGRESS:
 It's a dense and unusually stressed city, with layers and layers of construction built upon years.

“We must respect our heritage and conserve it; we must take into consideration environmental concerns; but we can't let these aspects paralyse, or hold us hostage. Any change, especially if it is of a certain magnitude will spark debates and discussions if not a controversy. It is inevitable. But what needs to be done, needs to be done.”

—DR. BIMAL PATEL, Director, HCP and President, CEPT University, Ahmedabad



BP: As a professional you find solutions. Yes, we must respect our heritage and conserve it; we must take into consideration environmental concerns; but we can't let these aspects paralyse us or hold us hostage. Any change, especially if it is of a certain magnitude will spark debates and discussions if not a controversy. It is inevitable. But what needs to be done, needs to be done.

Everything acquires character over the years. That doesn't mean you can't change it. And you have to find the right solutions for each unique challenge. For instance, the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Project (SRFDP) required over 11000 families to be rehabilitated, the project needed funds. While we presented the plan to the stakeholders, we also offered them solutions. Solutions for funding the project, solutions for rehabilitating the families.

The SRFDP created over 204 hectares of public realm, along 11km of riverfront land. This consists of a network of parks, promenades, public amenities, cultural facilities, and an integrated street network which improves accessibility to the river.

SS: The Kashi Vishwanath Dham project — an amazing complex network of different social, economical and physical systems. It's an intriguing juxtaposition of tradition, culture, and spirituality. Tells us a little more about this project.

BP: Yes. It is complex. It is the city of myths and legends, it's a city that is being continuously built upon. You'll find many instances where, over the years, multiple layers of construction have been built upon the original

structures — often for various different purposes — social, administrative, commercial, etc! Contrary to many rumours, we are not demolishing any temples. In fact, we unearthed some temples which were hidden under encroachments. It's a dense and severely stressed city, with thousands of pilgrims frequenting it. The proposed master plan is constantly evolving, it goes through many iterations, as we consult more people, discover new facts and see previously unforeseen opportunities or problems. The redevelopment plan seeks to first clear the space, and then redevelop it to provide a setting befitting the temple, provide amenities necessary for comfort, safety and for the security of pilgrims and visitors. It provides a pilgrimage path leading up from the Ganga to the Mandir, providing settings for social, cultural and civic exhibitions, and restores the ghats to their former beauty.

THE CENTRAL VISTA: PURPOSE, DESIGN AND LOGIC

SS: The Lutyens Delhi is ingrained in India's iconography. It is viewed as the symbol, the identity of Democratic India. You are entrusted the task of changing this narrative. Does it really need the change?

BP: You have to realise that the Parliament, or the Central Vista were built by the Raj, to represent the Raj. These structures were meant to be instruments of intimidation; they stood there as symbols of imperialism. After independence, the newly-formed Government of India appropriated these colonial structures and repurposed them. Over the years the British-era barracks or hutments started being used as office spaces.

After independence, the North Block and the South Block became the bastions of the Government's power. What we are proposing now is an inversion of that equation, by repurposing these magnificent buildings as Museums displaying Indian history and heritage. We are putting people first; we are giving prominence to our culture. The Central Vista Project, in that sense, is an attempt to re-establish a connection with our glorious civilisation, and to create a unique identity for the Republic of India. India is in the middle of an epochal revolution and change is inevitable.

What the Central Vista project is focused on is meeting the needs and aspirations of Indian citizens by modernising itself. That, it respects tradition but is not held hostage to it. That, it is concerned about the environment but not paralysed by it. That, it can be modern without losing out on its essence.

It will now be people taking over the hill and the government will move below. It's like turning a fortress, a symbol of government power, over to the people. It's a remarkable turning around of symbolism—the Republic is finally being established on the Central Vista, with people at the top.

SS: True, change is inevitable. But to what extent are you changing the existing plan? And what are the objectives?

BP: We developed the masterplan based on six broad objectives. The masterplan is constantly evolving. The Central Vista is a spectacular space. And hence, I understand and work with the fact that we must be restrained in our approach and do everything possible to retain and reinforce the majesty of this place. Today, the Central Vista houses only 22 out of the 51 Ministries of the Government of India, due to lack of adequate office spaces. The public space and landscape of the Vista were not designed for heavy public use and are quite stressed. A comprehensive upgrade of facilities and infrastructure is needed to improve public space and to assist the administrative and legislative functions of the Government of India.

The proposed master plan will strengthen the Central Vista as an icon for governance, a grand public space and a treasured part of India's heritage. The plan will provide modern, sustainable and upgradeable facilities for administration, cultural institutions and public space. It will also restore the Vista's architectural character, protect its

PROPOSED OVERALL VIEW OF KASHI VISHWANATH DHAM: The Kashi Vishwanath Dham is a complex project which seeks to restore the heritage structures, develop the infrastructure, and provide a befitting milieu to the religious centre of India.

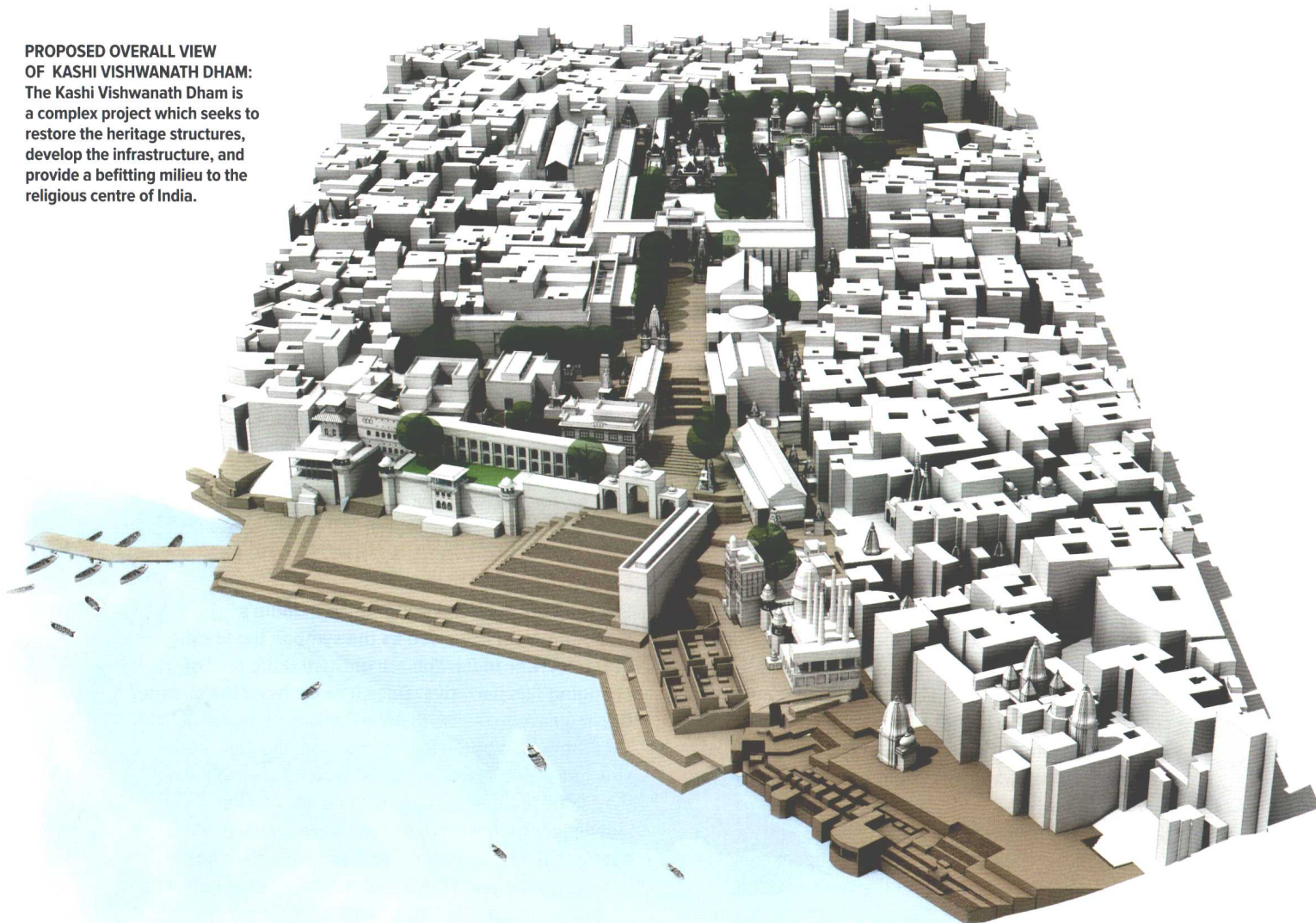
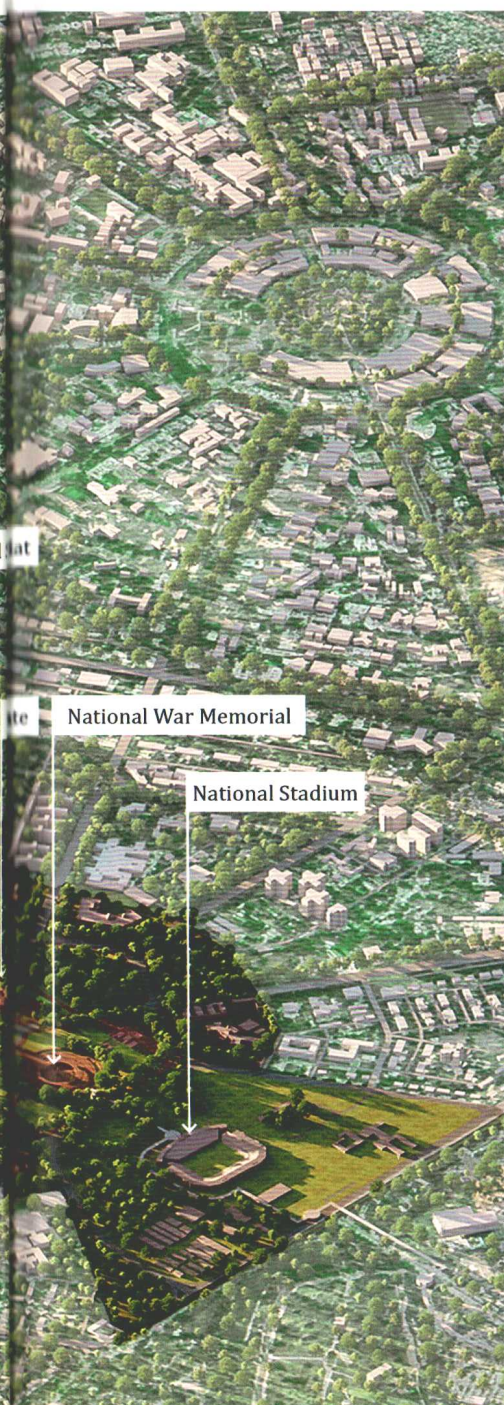
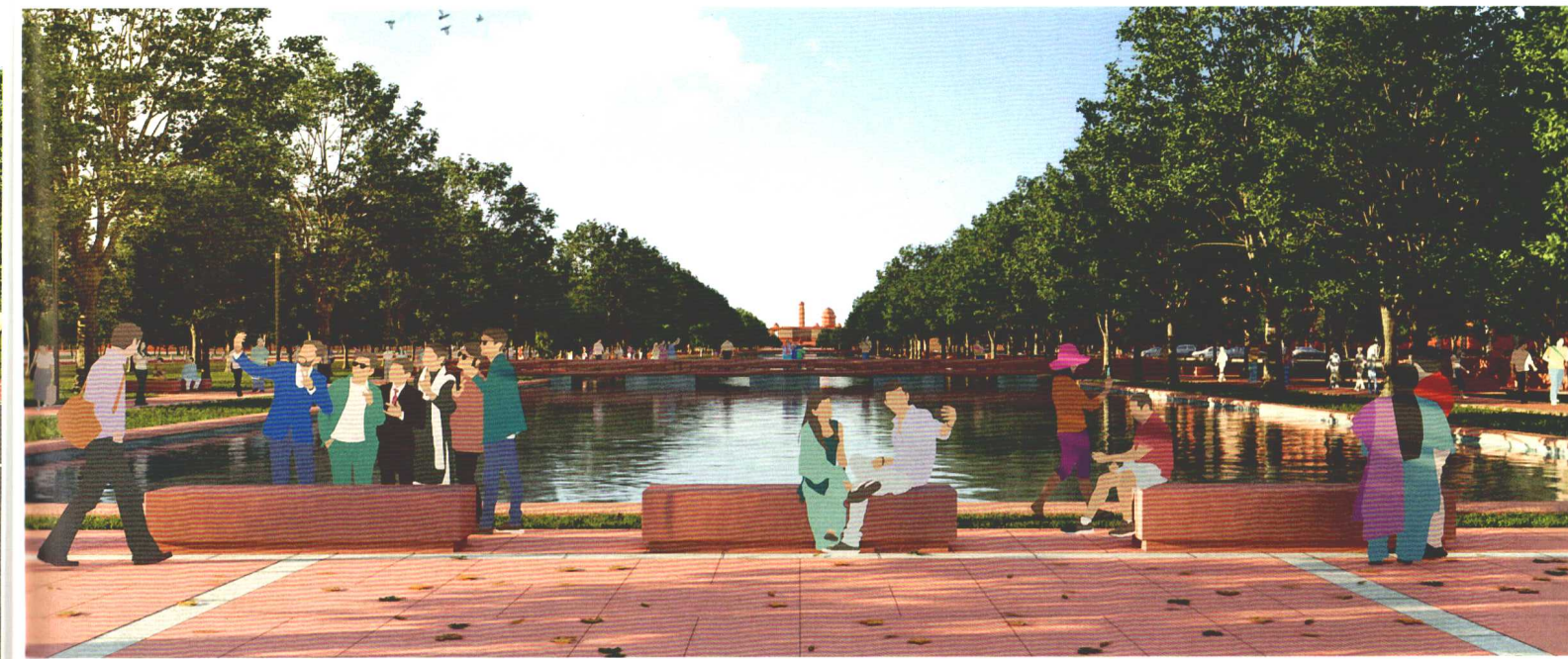


Photo credit: HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd.





(Above)
PROPOSED VIEW OF THE
CANAL AND WALKWAY AT
CENTRAL VISTA

(Facing page above)
PROPOSED VIEW OF
CENTRAL VISTA AVENUE

(Facing page below)
CENTRAL VISTA MASTER
PLAN: The project aims
to revamp a 3 km (1.9 mi)
long Rajpath between
Rashtrapati Bhavan
and India Gate, convert
North and South Blocks
to publicly accessible
museums by creating
a new common Central
Secretariat to house
all ministries, a new
Parliament building
near the present one
with increased seating
capacity for future
expansion, new residence
and office for the
Vice-President and the
Prime Minister near the
North Block and South
Block and convert some
of the older structures
into museums.

heritage buildings, expand and improve public space, and extend the Central Vista axis. The proposal will revive the formal order, grandeur and symmetry of the place, while creating space to consolidate all the essential functions of the Government of India. It's a complex project. There are layers and layers of interventions required.

Coming back to the six objectives: Modernising parliament's facilities; Improving productivity and efficiency of administration; Strengthening cultural and recreational facilities; Providing modern and secure infrastructure for executive offices; Providing adequate facilities for the Vice President and the Prime Minister; Ensuring environmental sustainability, protecting heritage, expanding public space and extending the Central Vista axis.

SS: But there's a new Parliament building, adjacent to the existing one? And it is triangular in shape. Is it purely meant to be in contrast with the present circular Parliament or is it what the site demanded? Could you elaborate on the design language? What happens to the present Parliament building?

BP: The new Parliament building will work as an ensemble with the present building once the latter is retrofitted and refurbished. The design will take reference from the present Parliament building, and the other buildings of the Central Vista. We had to take into consideration three key spaces: the Lok Sabha; The Rajya Sabha and the Common Foyer. The trinity of the functions and the site itself suggested a triangular arrangement. The new Parliament building will be the first purpose-designed Parliament building for India. It will house larger Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha halls, with capacities of 750 seats and 375 seats respectively. The Lok Sabha Hall will also have additional capacity of about 1100 seats, to host joint sessions. Along with essential facilities like committee rooms, major offices of the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs, Lok Sabha Secretariat and Rajya Sabha Secretariat, the building will also include publicly accessible museum-grade galleries and exhibits. The central Constitution Hall and Gallery will showcase the Indian Constitution and other artefacts of

NEW PARLIAMENT BUILDING

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The New Parliament Building, triangular in shape, in response to the site and its functions, will be designed to seat almost 700 delegates.

(Below)

LOK SABHA: The Lok Sabha hall will also have additional capacity, up to 1100 seats, to host joint sessions.

(Bottom)

RAJYA SABHA: The Rajya Sabha is designed with a seating capacity of 375 delegates.

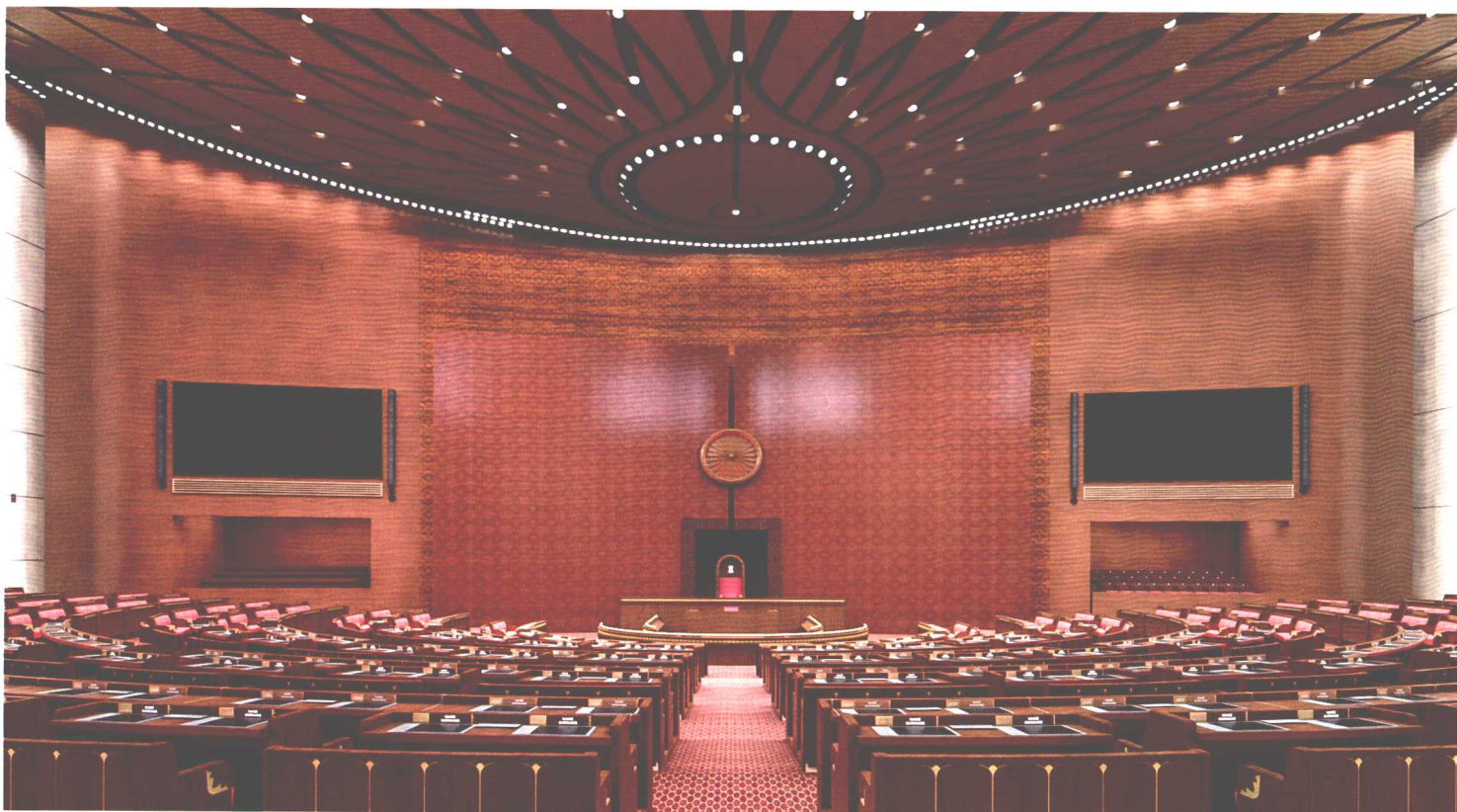
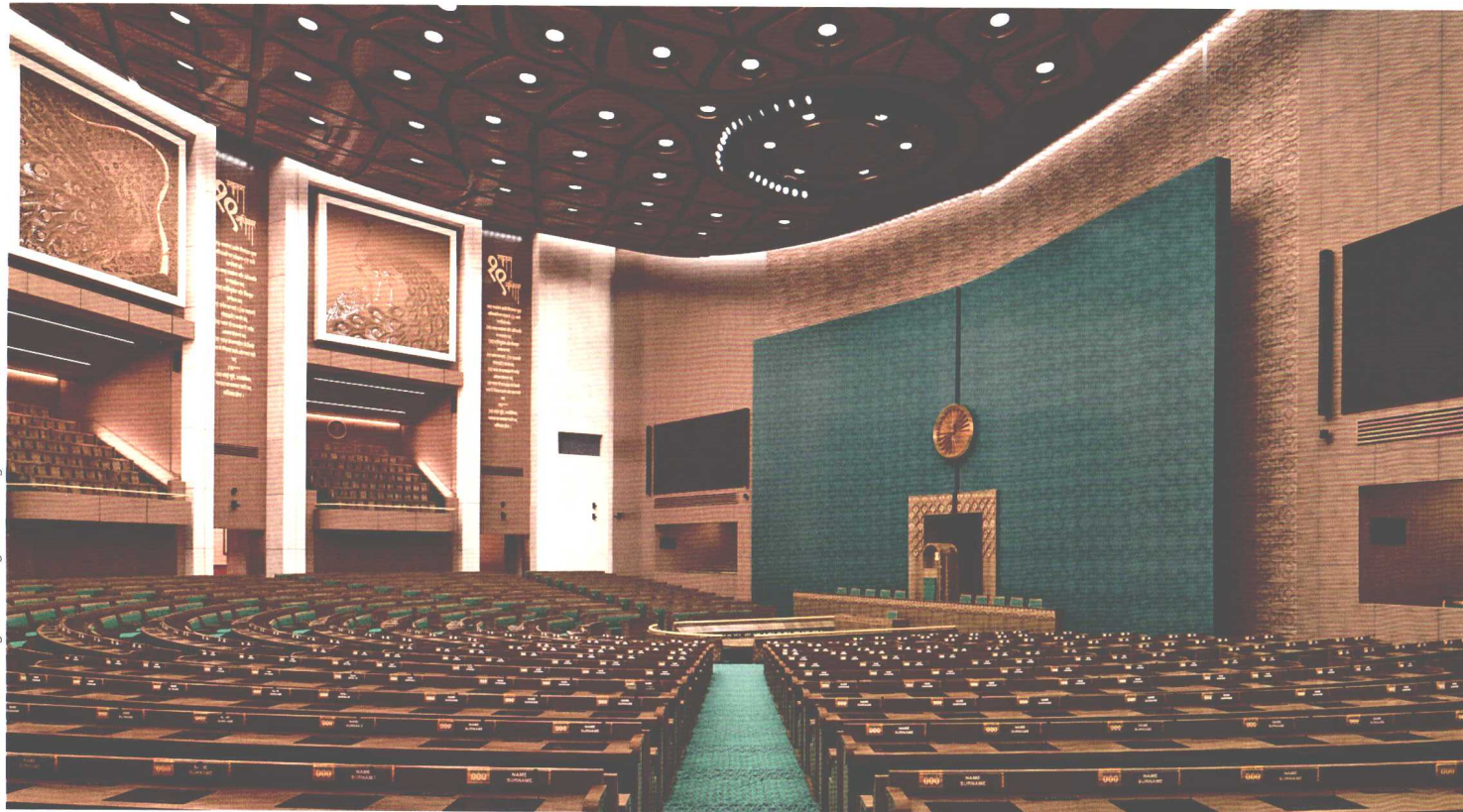


Photo credit: HCP Design, Planning and Management Pvt. Ltd.

“The new Parliament building will work as an ensemble with the present building once the latter is retrofitted and refurbished. The design will take reference from the present Parliament building, and the other buildings of the Central Vista.”

—DR. BIMAL PATEL, Director, HCP and President, CEPT University, Ahmedabad

India’s heritage, symbolically and physically putting people at the heart of Indian democracy. The design will also reflect the classical, folk and tribal arts and crafts of India. And the National Emblem will crown the new building.

SS: There’s an apprehension that the new design will reduce the public area or the access to public areas. Central Vista is currently an accessible public space. Also, there’s conversation around heritage structures being demolished as part of this redevelopment project.

BP: Quite the contrary. The design will, in fact, enable the public space to expand. The National Museum will be relocated to the magnificent North and South Blocks and will be reconceptualised to present the rich heritage and achievements of the nation in a modern and engaging manner, this will add around 20 acres of public spaces. And to reiterate, none of the heritage structures are being demolished.

SS: There’s a lot of criticism, a lot of resistance to change. Not just for this project. This is true for most of the projects

you’ve helmed. But you remain unfazed. You remain calm. How do you manage this state of zen?

BP: When I remain unfazed, when I remain calm, I’m listening. I’m listening to constructive criticism, to try and understand people’s apprehensions, address their concerns and incorporate their suggestions, if they can make the project better. But more than anything else, I have the answers to their questions and propose solutions.

SS: You said in one of the interviews, that at the end of it, any project should be a triumph of common sense? What do you mean by that?

BP: At the end of it, once the project is completed, any project really, it should make sense – to the end user, to everyone.

SS: I would have asked what your dream project is. But in your case, you are doing what most architects would dream of. What’s next for you?

BP: I will go back to teaching. I will write a book on all my urban development projects, and another on architectural projects. +