

# INDIA JOURNAL

by Orest Humennyj

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## Introduction

**A** RCHITECTURAL EDUCATION, as a process, cannot possibly attain its crescendo within the walls of an institution. In fact, there is no such thing, for 'learning architecture' is an unending pursuit. At the heart of this pursuit lies perception and the experiential aspect of observation. This multi-dimensional nature has for centuries been complemented by travel.

Just as a university education in itself cannot broach the entire spectrum of learning, so, too, buildings viewed in isolation from their historical and social contexts cannot, in all their intrinsic meanings, constitute architecture. The social experiences inherent in travel thus generate an impression, and perhaps the beginnings of an understanding of how things got to be the way they are. Radical cultural differences alter this pattern in that the eventual understanding is normally born of initial confusion. During the course of last summer, six architecture students from McGill University, under the able guidance of Professor Vikram Bhatt, had the unique opportunity of living such an experience. In one hectic month of travel throughout northwestern India, we amassed a wealth of impressions that will last a lifetime and perhaps might even exert an influence upon us as architects and people.

What follows is a blend of thoughts,

feelings, and observations of several of the participating students, as extracted from their travel journals.

## India - First Impressions

"This is the other side of the world - a dark side. The people seem hopeless, desperately poor, and cramped. We don't belong whatsoever; we are foreigners and there is no place for us, no mission for us here. As we return to our hotel amidst the hot, humid streets, I feel very, very far away from anything I know."

- WMP

"We all visit the Old Town, even more vigorously than before, seeing new, more impoverished streets; but now, I am not intimidated at all by these places. Today, I feel free to document the scenes with my camera. The four newcomers are, quite naturally, dazed by their hurdle into the deep end of the swimming pool."

- WMP

"The great culture shock hit. The streets are packed - sleeping, begging, selling, smoking, riding, driving, running; there is no end to this madhouse of masses."

- JZ

"It's busy, phenomenally so. Vendors line the sidewalk and small, tightly spaced and fiercely competitive shops are to be found everywhere. The streets are filthy and dangerous to a

dirt-sensitive foot: splattered with poot, garbage, and the infernal red goop which is spit out by betel leaf chewers who are looking for an instant high."

- OJH

## Chandigarh

"The car got a flat on the way to the airport and we had to wait on the roadside next to a strange series of women clutching tin cans, crouching in the grass with their knees touching their ears."

- OJH

"Chandigarh is a planned city, and true to form, Le Corbusier's master plan has abstracted and humanized the concept to such a degree that it ceases to be a city at all."

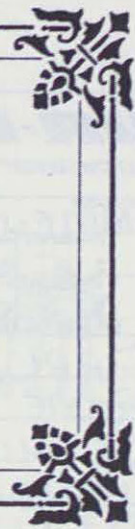
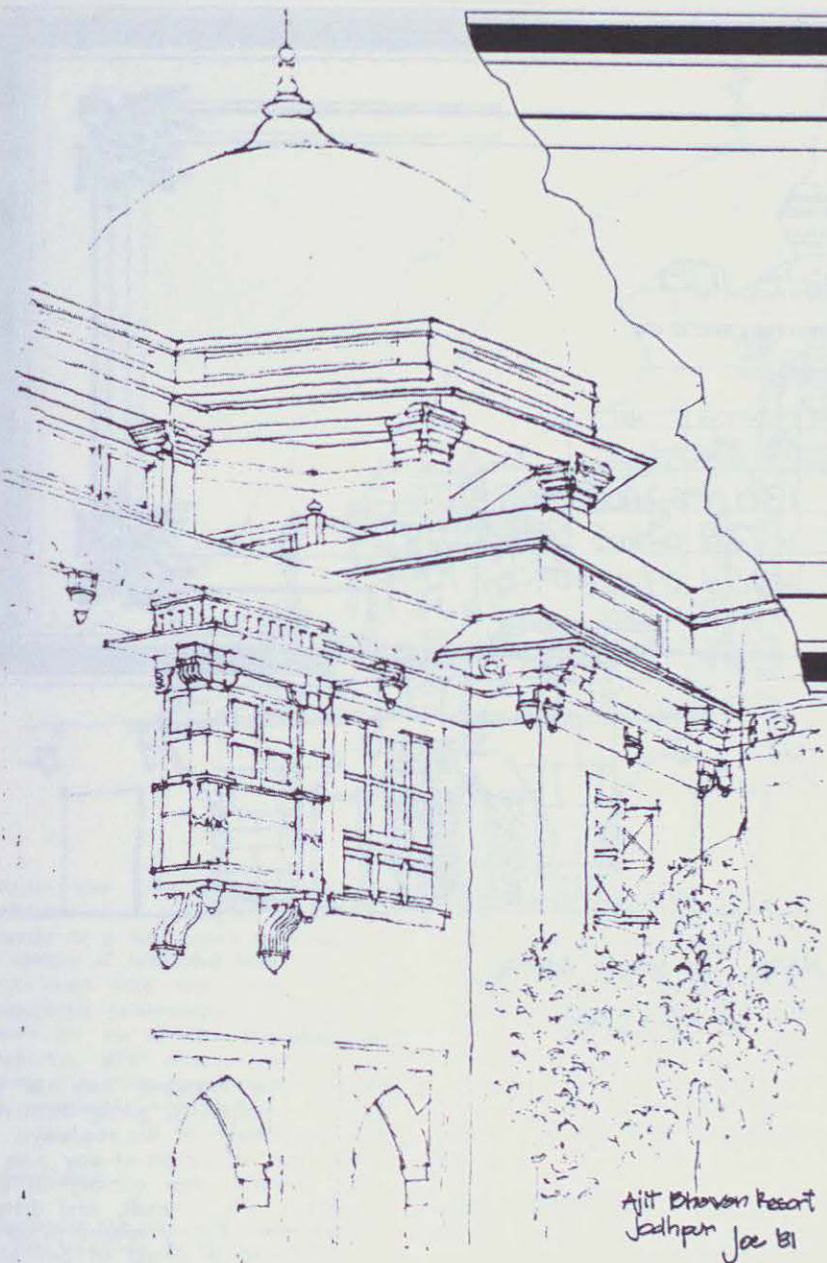
- WMP

"It is a city laid out with the automobile in mind, in a country where most people can't even dream of owning one."

- OJH

"The Assembly, the Secretariat, the High Courts - leave Corb with individual buildings to do and he is brilliant. Gone is his publicity and foo-fa and make-believe and left is his art and architecture. The Assembly Building allows Le Corbusier to demonstrate his panache - he does things no one else would dare to, and yet by doing so, he remains the only true Modernist. He is loyal to the





grid and disloyal to it when he needs to be: a Functionalist. Rooms are not rooms as such, but free-standing objects in space - they bend to the grid, alter the 'space' and are 'formed' according to their function. Services, stairs, and ramps are all brashly tacked on where needed. All become 'abstracted' by Corb's functional treatment of them."

- WMP

#### On Breakfasts

"Breakfasts in India take an extraordinarily long time, caused by a variety of reasons: waiters, for example, always seem very busy, but they are simply running around and

fussing; moving the knives and forks an inch or two to the right and so on. They rarely, indeed, see you at this time of day. But when they do see you, they take your order. Then, they either throw it away or exchange it with someone else's. For the meal is only occasionally similar to what you have ordered and if it is what you ordered, it occasionally looks like you never thought it could."

- WMP

#### On The Road To Simla

"The colours of the Himalayan foothills were magnificent, real National Geographic stuff. The scraggly terraced hills appeared to be

covered with a lush green velvet carpet and the clouds drifted among them. The winding road was extremely high up and at times we drove through those clouds; on that road it can only be described as being on the edge of the world."

- OJH

#### Agra

"Up at an ungodly hour, we boarded a train - the Taj Express to Agra. Aside from bellowing coal dust, the train was relatively clean and efficient and did not have people hanging on to its axles. In Agra, our first destination was the Taj Mahal - a building unrivalled for its sheer beauty. The quantity, quality, and detailing of the white marble was incredulous. In fact, it was so spectacular that, at its base, I had to wear sunglasses as the brilliance hurt my eyes."

- OJH

#### Jaipur

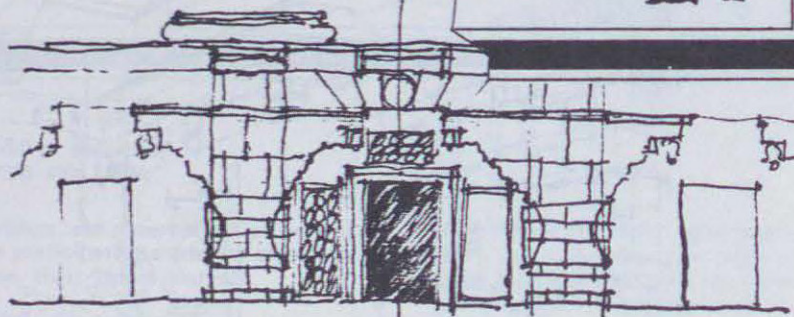
"As a result of studied planning, this city is very orderly and impossible to get lost in. The main grid defining streets, as well as some secondary ones, are lined with shops at ground level, terraces and housing above (similar trades tend to cluster together). Although the streets are very busy, they are not oppressive."

- OJH

"One quite bothersome feature common to many older places in India



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is the 'reverse Affleck' stair where the rise is much greater than the run."

- JZ

"So, we go off to Jaipur City, and rather than work hard, get luckily dragged off into a jeweller's shop somewhere deep inside one chowk. With the doors closed, the single central hanging lamp on, cigarettes, fan, and chai - a fabulous display of precious and semi-precious stones; we come to realize that anything we ever saw in the movies was absolutely true."

- WMP

#### Jodhpur

"We are staying at the Maharaja Prince's 'smaller house', and it is very much like being thrown back fifty years. Lord and Lady Mountbatten's autographed portrait photograph is in the vestibule. That colonialist feeling returns."

- WMP

"Our host treated my body to a lesson in Indian climatic torture, as he demolished me with ease in the open air squash court. After five slaughters (3, 1, 0, 1, 3), which I still can't believe I lasted through; I was drenched and dripping profusely. A Limca and half a cola only started to replace that which my partner extruded from me so simply, yet

- WMP

*Wikipedia: The ponds (doorway)  
at New Delhi*

relentlessly."

- JZ

"Vikram and I walk through many parts of the city - from piazza to the intimacies of the smallest house to house relationships. As one of the very few whites ever to go into the area during the last thirty years, I became an object of great interest to everyone, and according to Vikram, an object of desire to the girls, who spoke much of me, particularly my very long legs."

- WMP

#### Jaisalmer

"It is a beautiful city, very intricately detailed. Its innocence, despite the insurgence of hundreds of French tourists, still is abundantly evident. It is somehow magical and golden, and when walking through the city, although there are adults and children everywhere, it still seems uninhabited and frozen in time."

- WMP

#### On Taxis

"Taxis are Number Two on the Vehicular Hierarchy, giving them rule over most beasts of the roadways. In India, the only right-of-way rule is what position you occupy in this hierarchy. As a result, taxi drivers are maniacal, fully prepared to hurtle headlong into a throng of any sort, regardless of the probable loss of life that may ensue. On this day, we scarcely avoided scores of dogs, countless individuals (who walk quite calmly across the street daring Death himself), an avalanche with real, rolling, bouncing rocks, goats, several water buffaloes, very large trucks, and in the evening, an astonishingly close call with a sacred cow, who decided to walk into our path."

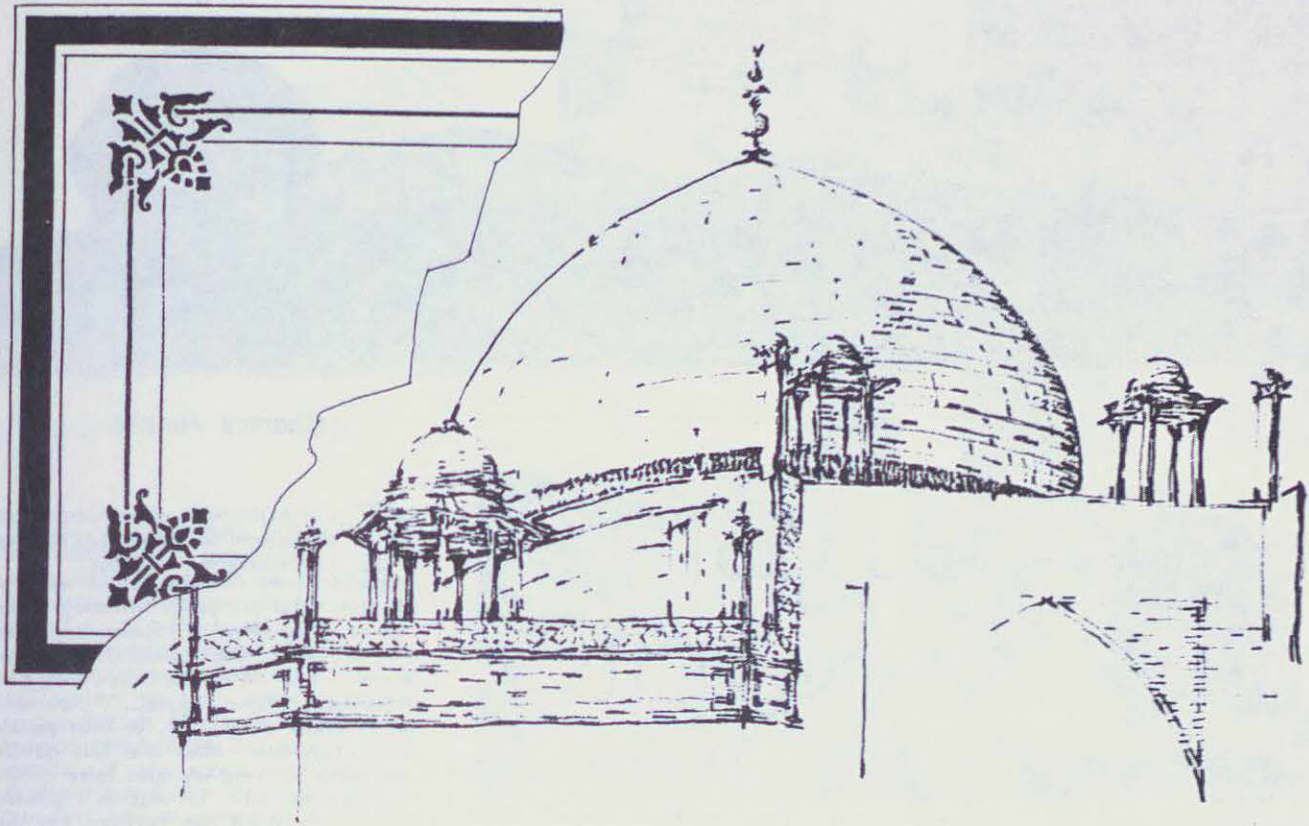
- WMP

#### Udaipur

"Joe, Mark, and myself made the mistake of having ice cream at supper the night before and eventually paid for it. I immortalized the misery by drawing the someday-to-be-infamous 'dispoopsy' self-portrait."

- OJH





"From the Lake Palace Hotel - a brilliant white jewel set in the blue waters of a lake itself surrounded by a series of beautiful blue hills - we ventured into the city. It was exquisitely picturesque, a whitewashed town of an almost Mediterranean quality, with steep, narrow, and winding streets engulfed by buildings of remarkable massing."

- OJH

#### Ahmedabad

"We spent the entire day exploring the Indian Institute of Management, Louis Kahn land. To experience the work of this great master as opposed to just reading a book or seeing a photo was an architectural delicacy."

- JZ

"The geometry is overriding and prevalent as the main ordering factor. The mere scale of the project elevates itself to the monumental; however, it loses something as a result of its unending magnitude."

- OJH

"Vikram set us up for a visit to another temple, where we walked across five metres of ice, crawled through bamboo tunnels, and saw some music-box gadgetry for the light show at nights. Theme - some god in the Himalayas."

- JZ

(Note: Shortly after our visit this electric gadgetry set off a fire in which over a hundred people perished.)

"There are some beautifully clustered small neighbourhoods, with charming homes spanning six centuries of rebuilding. If not for the overcrowding, the smell, and the animals in the streets, this would truly be an enviable place to live."

- OJH

#### On Telephones

"Phones in India just do not work, often within one's own hotel. The aggravation mounts as one must continually shout, lose patches of conversation as a result of technical difficulties, and inevitably just have the damned thing go dead. Worst of all, is that once you finally get hold of somebody at the other end of the line, it's virtually guaranteed that they will be totally clued-out about everything and thus be of no help whatsoever."

- OJH

#### Bombay

"My most prominent impression of Bombay will unfortunately remain our final taxi ride to the airport - corruption at the hotel, the tension and uncertainty over a driver who just stops suddenly and trades cabs with

someone else, the squalor of shanty housing lining the route to the airport, and, worst of all, the stench, a turgid smell compounded by the humidity."

- OJH

#### Note:

OJH : Orest J. Humennyj  
WMP : William Mark Pimlott  
JZ : Jozef Zorko

