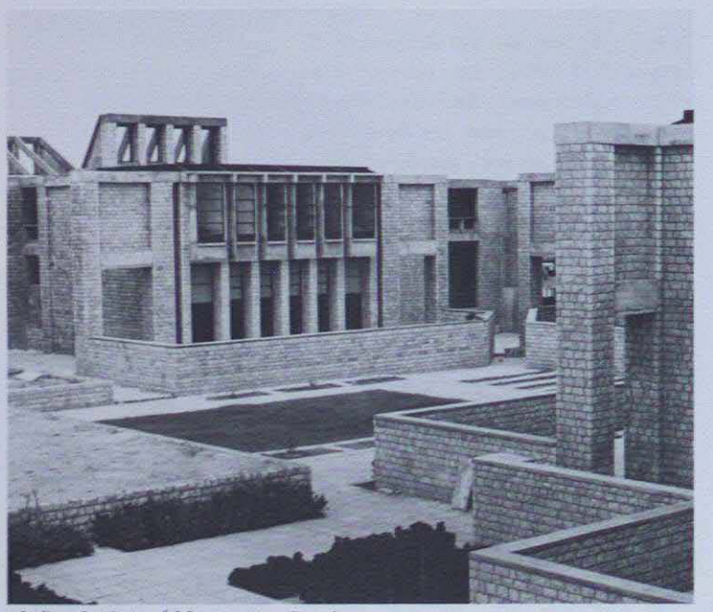
INTERVIEW WITH:

BATKRISHNA V. DOSHI

Doshi's Office, Ahmedabad

Batkrishna V. Doshi, fondateur de la jeune école d'Architecture d'Ahmedabad, a travaillé pour Le Corbusier au début des années 50. Architecte en charge de la maison Shodan, il a également contribué à la planification de Chandigarh. Il fut aussi responsable de l'engagement de Louis Kahn pour la création du ***Indian Institute of Management*** *à Ahmedabad. Récemmement de passage à l'Université de McGill, il a été interviewé par notre comité de rédaction.*



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TFC: What aspects of Le Corbusier's architecture are still relevant today? What did you learn from Le Corbusier, particularly in reference to Chandigarh?

DOSHI: Chandigarh, I think, is one part, but there is a lot to learn from his architecture. For example, I have not seen as yet somebody having such a wonderful sense of space. I think the poetry of space is unmatched. Louis Kahn when he went to see the Assembly building (at Chandigarh), came back to Ahmedabad and said, "My hat's off to this old man Le Corbusier, because he is the only man I know in my whole life, in history or otherwise, who knew how to freeze dreams."

Therefore, this was one man who was able to not only build up his own language—he had his own alphabet. He made his own language and he wrote the complete book. And in that whole thing, he talks about not only space but the juxtapositions and the inventions that he made—for example, so many interpretations. He saw India and he interpreted it very interestingly.

So it was a question of concern, he was quite sensitive to surrounding areas but extremely inventive. So the thing that I learned from him, which I remember, is that you must be able to make much out of every problem, so that every problem that comes about should be taken as a positive thing.

TFC: What is Indian about Chandigarh?

DOSHI: The silhouettes, the skylines are Indian, the transparency is Indian. I am not talking about the sunbreakers and all that, they are part of India, because you find verandahs, jali and porches there. But his architecture, if you look at the Assembly or the High Court, and you look at those walls, you find that they are really the negative of the positive space. If you did not have the umbrella - the parasol which he put on top - if you remove that and you really imagine the transparent was really the dome, you find again another sort of skyline. It is almost as if you saw the building in black and white, you know, reversed. And this, I have seen. The other Indian things are really many. For example, his house in Ahmedabad which has a ramp, I found that the ramp was also there in a palace in Jaipur, with similar openings, which he had never seen. So one other thing which I again found from Le Corbusier, is that he was sensitive enough, like a doctor who looks at your pulse and knows what has happened to you; I think that he knew how to feel the pulse of the place.

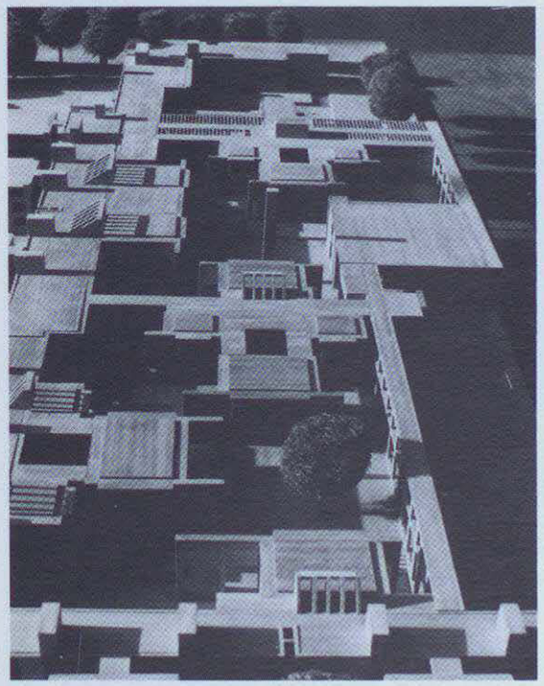
TFC: Is the Indian architecture of today in danger from American and other outside influences? Is tradition threatened, do people fear this?

DOSHI: After independence, we had a lot of Indian architects who were trained abroad, at Harvard, M.I.T., and other places—then came Le Corbusier. So at that time there were British architects who were practising, not many other foreigners, some Italians who did some International style buildings. The British people were doing building but there were also some British architects who intended to revive buildings. I remember there was one architect, Claude Batley.

Claude Batley, from Bombay, who did a lot of studies of Hindu temples and Hindu architecture and who was probably to me the first Indian architect after Lutyens and Walter George and others. At the same time he was also using the Indian overhangs and mouldings in his buildings.

But then these foreign trained architects came and did buildings in the Bauhaus style, the Gropius style, in the sense of Harvard and what not. Independent volumes which are put together into a space so that you really have each volume speak for itself and you juxtapose them together as a composition. So it was the International style which came up and quite a few buildings were built and Le Corbusier came and he influenced a lot. And there were buildings which were almost done like disciples of Le Corbusier, by people who had never worked with Le Corbusier but who knew about his work.

I learned from Le Corbuser one simple thing. Never imitate a master, because it does not pay you in the long run. I mean, he told me that—that there was no question, he says what you do, you do. So the first thing I did was I said that I will never use sunbreakers, and if he is going to use rough materials, I will use smooth materials. I said let me reverse the order and see what I can do.



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So there were people who started thinking about it. Then there was a question of finding other people who work in planning areas. Gradually, things began to change, and now in the last decade because of lots of new schools, and I suppose also because of the change in the attitude of architecture in the West, we don't want to talk about the International style, you know, this Modern architecture, from Modern to Post-Modern. I think that this has shaken the Indian people quite a bit because really you don't know what to follow, so the best is to follow your own place. So now there is a concern about this in India, a lot of young people and practising people my age are going back and asking questions which are from India. So a good deal of studies are being done now on traditional Indian house forms, Indian temples, streets, cities and literature. So I would say that it is not a revival, but it is now searching for the identity of the place.

The other thing which luckily has happened is that, when you have affluence, you can do anything. Supposing that you have very little work, you have more architects and little work, then you start thinking about what to do, and you intellectualize. If you have a lot of money and a lot of materials which you can buy and get, then you can start doing many things also. If you don't have this tool, that means you don't have the resources. If you have opportunities, then it doesn't give you much time to think, but your resources are there, and your problems are very basic—like say housing, shelter or something else. You say, I have brick, I have concrete, so what do I do with it? I have to build a house or a building in not very expensive cost, so I must build it very simply. So we ask a question, saying, well if this is to be simple it must be made very easy. And so maybe one can talk about space and form but then it becomes very simple, so therefore, one is going into low technology but high visuals. You get into really a visual expression out of this technology which is minimum. And that today is what is happening to many people. You find that one is talking about climate more, peoples' habits more and using these as a tool to manipulate the kind of projects each one is doing.

TFC: The metaphysical or spiritual aspect of architecture that you described in your lecture, do you think this is a concern of most architects?

DOSHI: I think it is coming. There are few architects who are talking about this now, really there must be something there which we have not found. Once we start going into the background and history, you begin to ask, why is a house the way it is? For example, we did a study for the Aga Khan program at M.I.T., a document on the Bohna houses, a community which is Ismaili, and this Ismaili community is 150 years old. They came from the West, but they really converted a lot of Hindus, so the Hindu conversion into Ismail, but they were using a Hindu house with a courtyard and then they got into business with the British. So they went out and therefore their house has really three facets. Their many rituals are Hindu and Ismaili; in many rituals you'll find Hindu and in many Muslim, their costumes are mixed. The houses are Hindu, but the facade is colonial. So we are talking really about the Post Modern and what not. I think there are examples where you see the layering of a house so the facade is shown as what I belong to the outside world. Inside, when I have come in it, I am still somebody else. So this layering is very interesting and I think one is going to have phenomena, and I am more interested in that kind of phenomena today. How does one accept things and then get that as part of your culture, absorb it. Those houses don't look Indian on that street. What is amazing is that beautiful street, those staircases and columns, you feel that you are somewhere in England, but the moment you go in, then you find now that it is not England at all, it is somewhere else. The moment you go in the rooms it is quite different. So my

interest in this study was to find what was the past, what is the present and what will be the future and I am sure there are many other people who are thinking like this. So when we talk about past we want to find out those rules which were there before and what is it you can do today.

TFC: What makes your architecture Indian?

DOSHI: In my architecture, I think, I am trying to get into this question of duality and a little bit of open-endedness or ambiguity. But you have an architecture which is slightly shifted from definition. So there is amalgamation of many things put together in a different way. So it is not a very clear fundamental definition. For example, let's take my office. If you look at the plan of the office it has three structures put together. There is one structure which is a pure one, another one with columns and walls and the third one is only columns. So the three storey building has a column structure, the two storey building has some columns and walls and the single storey one is only brick. But then the main space and the subspace really change and they really meander—the form is not finite. So you don't make a regular, definite form, but you make a definite form and destroy that form. And this you find in the Indian miniature, this you find in the Indian scriptures, this you find in the Indian sculpture. You will find you see the elephants going in a line and one elephant will turn. The idea is not because the elephant has turned, it is an idea of a reality that all will not follow the rule. The rule is necesssary, you have to make an exception to prove the rule. This is a very important thing to understand, if you want to make an exception to the rule, then you must change it. Similarly, you find that the kind of movement that is there, you never move into the direct axis. You shift the axis as you go along, so that your vistas are not the same. Because you can never go to the destination only by one direction, you can go by many directions. So this is another philosophical aspect, that the destination is not one way, you can go and turn and come back, and you can go, pause and also go. So the question is not necessarily time oriented, there is neither time nor space because it shifts, because you are also constantly evolving. And, therefore, this experience is very interesting when you shift—the moment you shift, then your building isn't the same either. Because the moment you shift, your facades don't have to be similar because now you are in a different world altogether. Which means you are into the stage. Man is really a performer on the stage. So as he evolves he is also looking at many vistas.

In fact Le Corbusier talked about this very interestingly. One day, he drew me a drawing on a wall, a river, and he said these are the two banks and somebody asked him where is the truth. So he says the truth goes like this, it goes very close to the bank but it never touches either of the banks, it is always between the banks. It comes close but it never stabilizes there because you cannot say that truth is only in one place. So truth is constantly modified and so your experience must modify that. So you can never say that you are sure about it. In architecture you bring this little uncertainty about things, a little doubt—what I call ambiguity.

So the moment you bring this ambiguity you find that this ambiguity has a quality which is not specific. Then you are no more specific, you are a little more generous. So the function doesn't become very defined, it modifies. Your function has become another function also, because there are many greys between black and white, so you get into that kind of a shift. So if one was trying that, then one can do it in architecture, really. How do you arrive, how do you really go in. For example, I enter my buildings diagonal to the wall or at right angles to the wall but never parallel to the wall, because that is an effort that normally I will not do. One would enter into the wall straight, it is nice to enter at a right angle or a diagonal and then see the wall and then shift it. So I think that the kind of experience is different. Then the other thing is that structure changes but it doesn't matter at all. I mean, after all, pure and impure is a question of emotion. It is an emotional thing, if you really make things that work then they are correct. For example, experience is more important than the kind of material that one uses. We have a saying which is interesting, somebody asking somebody, "You tell me what it is that makes sense." What we call in the Indian language, *rusa*, the theory of *rusa*, is making sense. So he says if you go to a friend's house for a dinner and in the evening I say, "How was the dinner?" what will you say, you will say, "The dinner was good", or, "It was not good". But would you say, "No, I think the dessert was good," or, "The main dish was good," or, "The soup was good." No, I think that it is the totality of the experience, that is very important. So maybe it was made of many parts but the total experience becomes very important in the end. What is the ultimate experience which you remember? That memory is very important. So what one is talking about, what I think at least is that one is trying to find out memory through this building. Supposing one was drawing the building after seeing it. You may not be able to draw at all the building, I think that that is the richness of the place because you cannot draw but you can remember. You have felt something but have not drawn. This is an effort which I am trying to do. So through that then you come and talk about how do you

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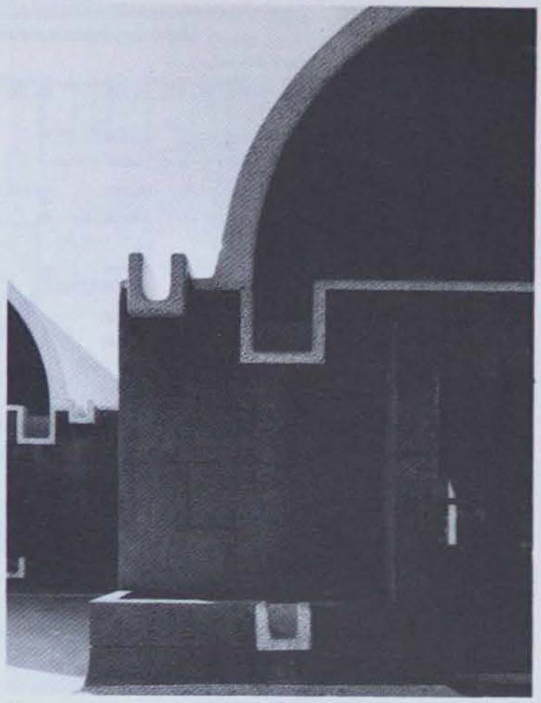
use the space at night and how do you use the space during the day and how many days can you be really active in the place, so that it is not dead. These are all issues of function, but attitude-wise, this is important, how does one really get into this sense of time and space, there is a disorientation in time and space.

TFC: Some of the values you are talking about are International and some Indian. Where, if you do, does one draw a line between the two?

DOSHI: I don't think one can draw the line at all. Because, really you will find similar things happening in Italian buildings also. European buildings have also the same experience. I mean all this Baroque, there are so many experiences, the perspective, the change of perspective, the change of materials. I was in Mantua and I saw this Palazzo del Te by Romano and it is an amazing building because outside it is all stone, but actually it is not stone at all, it is all plaster like stone. Since you don't know, you begin to think it's stone and you don't know and you go inside and the facade is bricks to show you whatever I show you is not true, this is true. Then he shows you the arches which are made false and the keystone is taken out and shown half of it down, saying that if the keystone is not made then the arch is false. So these are the questions I am really now thinking and intellectually saying, what is it that you are really looking at a building for, you are looking because you want to have a dialogue with that building. It depends upon what kind of dialogue you are looking at. So if between us we have to have a dialogue, so we say let's have a dialogue around this particular project—then I say, well my dialogue is going to be that I would like to show that my building, the office building, as you arrive it's a small building, but actually, it is a big building. But again, it is really small, so this kind of contradiction that there is a small and big, I must express. The second one is that if you want to express small and big and then you say well you want to enter the building and then you say should I enter from the top or the side. You begin to ask questions of yourself and maybe this is interesting and you get into constantly this question of whether this is right or that is right. The other thing is that one looks at the building and says well I am sitting here and because of the window I can feel the night or the day. That is a question of not only climate but also relating yourself to the place. So if you make the walls around and if you find a nice skylight and the light changes inside, you begin to wonder what is it that gives this and so you begin to get another kind of feeling. Now the relation of light is very important, the volume of light, the kind of quality of light becomes very essential and this is what I learned from Le Corbusier. How does one really create the light into volume and not in a sharp edge? When you get a light into a volume it glorifies, when the light is sharp it makes you very hard. So I think this is one of the fundamentals I learned from Le Corbusier, volume and space articulated through light, which is his major theme all his life. The other one is that you must play counterpoint; thick and thin, solid and void, rough and soft. So you play the game all the time with two themes so that because of the two, each one exists. Like positive will not exist without negative, this is the other thing that one learns from Le Corbusier. So if these two things are understood then you can see that he will use a big square column and a round column, he has no hesitation. Or he will have a sunbreaker which has no relation to the column, because it's a skin. So the skin has nothing to do with the structure, though it is attached it is independent and the structure which is doing something else, the structure and the surface are not necessarily the same.

TFC: At what point does the ambiguity get resolved?



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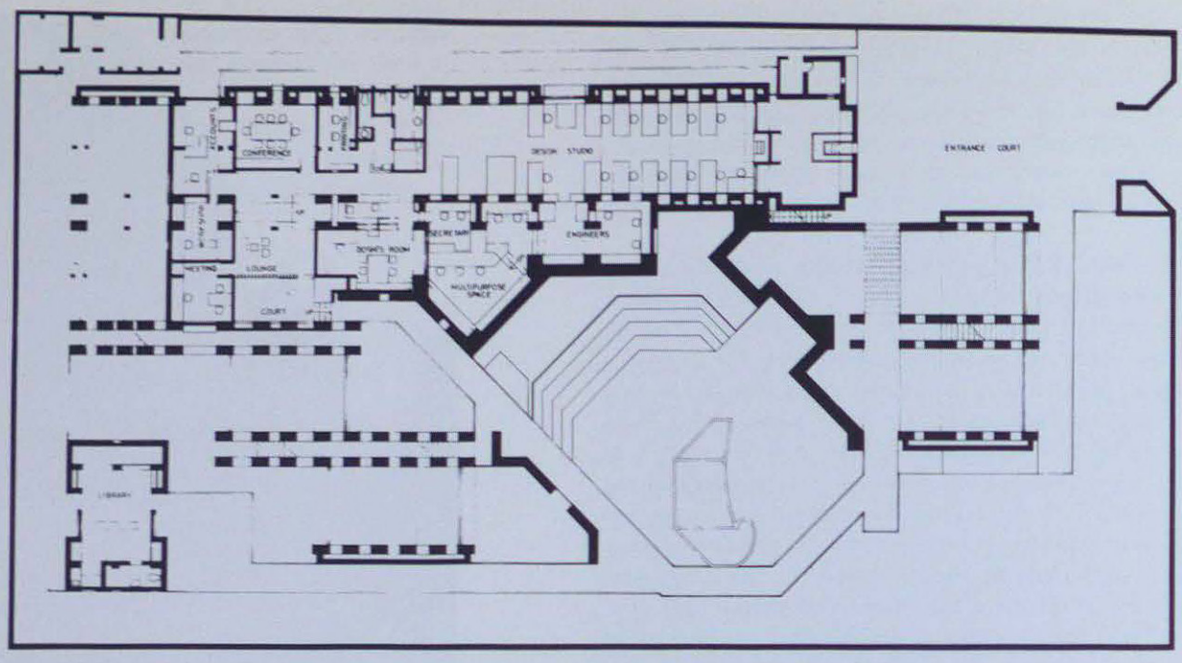
DOSHI: I think the ambiguity and the resolution come when you have intentions. I think it is a question of intentions. At what point do you find it resolved? In very good work, in Le Corbusier's work, the workmanship seems to be resolved very well because he knows when to stop. And I have not found that yet. I don't know how to resolve it, really. It is very difficult, because one is playing a game which doesn't have any rules. The most difficult thing to do is to know that you are playing the game without knowing and you must know when to stop.

TFC: There seems to be an influence of Kahn—you were a close friend of his.

DOSHI: Well, I tell you, I was quite involved with his work and my school building I did when he was there. I think I was influenced quite a lot by him because it was really saying how do you make, when do you draw the line which really holds by itself. So how do you really make it a minimum which you can't really change. I think it is still valid, certain things you can do but then you ask for the resolution. I think this is where Kahn counts. You must know after having done six alternatives, which alternative is the closest, and then you say, "Like a puzzle, it fits and nothing else is possible". Then I think the resolution is there. This I found from talking to Kahn.

It is very funny, I can give you an example, I was doing the tower in my township. The tower, the water had to be one hundred feet high. I made a tower saying I don't want to make a normal tower, I want to make a tower which is tall, but it goes down increasing in diameter to columns below and a little theatre below. Because to me the water was a symbol and so people will come underneath and this is a symbol of the



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Doshi's Office, Ahmedabad

place and so they will come there and they will sing there, they will dance and there was a staircase which will go up and you come before the water body. Lou was in the office and I said, "What do you think of this building?". He says, "I don't know but if I would do this building, I would not ask this building to do too many things. Why should the tower do more than what it should support?". So I listened to him, but finally I built the way I wanted to build. Then I took the photographs to him to Philadelphia, after two years. I said, "Louis, see this what I have done". He says, "My God, this is wonderful!" I said, "You know what you have mentioned to me?" He says, "What?". Then I told him this. "Ah!" he says, "but I don't know anything".

It depends, what is interesting about disciplined people is that they are not conventional people. They are subject to change, modify their views. I think this is another thing one learns from people, is that those people who make a religion, the first dictum of theirs is never follow the guru.

You must really follow what you believe in, what they are telling you is, "Go to the source". This is what they always do, go back to the source.

TFC: How do you try to integrate some of these ideas into teaching? Do you try to impress students to be multi-dimensional in their thinking?

DOSHI: Yes. I think I would talk about all this that I have talked about here. Just tell them stories about things, never talk about projects.

It seems now that things exist by themselves, this is a very important thing to understand, things do not exist just because you say so. I think there is a good deal of cause and effect which really works into this. One of the things which I have discovered is that things which last long, don't last because somebody else has said it, but because there is a lot more merit. Therefore, the role of designers is to find out how many ways it can satisfy many situations. So it is not the singularity but it is the plurality. So I am interested in this phenomenon of plurality. A rationalist or a purist will think of only one at a time. I think in a pluralist society you are talking about many ways to reach the ocean. One doesn't really know the source of the river, because the source of the river is very small but there are so many other rivers which join that river—it is not one river. How many tributaries must have joined? And finally when it goes to the ocean and we don't know which one is the real Amazon.

The culture is like this, the flow goes this way, we have to get into that kind of attitude first to design. The other thing is to solve what is relevant, what you think is relevant, not because somebody else says. Try it out, there is no harm in trying. So what I am doing is only trying.

TFC: You worked for a long time with Le Corbusier, does your office work in the same spirit as his?

DOSHI: It tries to do it in the spirit. First of all, I don't have time scale in the office like the other offices have. So, it is similar in terms of behaviour. The second one is that in either Kahn or Le Corbusier's office, it was easy to have ideas, to talk with the people who work with you. I suppose it would be in other offices also, but it is more so in the offices of these two. The third one is if you don't like a project, throw it away and start again. So if it takes time, it will lose money—it doesn't matter. This is another thing which I have learned from these two offices. Le Corbusier once said, "Remember that you will never get another chance, you could be dead tomorrow". So this is very different from the other offices, who say, "Well, look, we have done this drawing, let's finish it, when we get the next project we will modify it". It is totally different from that. What you do today is the best you can offer. And this is the thing I learned from these great architects.

TFC: How do you survive economically?

DOSHI: Well, if you believe that this is what you want to do, you survive anyway.

Note: The presentation of this article would not have been possible without the help of Professor Vikram Bhatt, McGill University.