

Charles Mark Correa (1930–2015)

Charles Mark Correa, an architect of international repute, passed away in Mumbai on 16 June 2015. Born on 1 September 1930 in Secunderabad, he had his early education at St Xavier's College in Mumbai and then went on to study at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (1949–53) and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge, Massachusetts (1953–55). Returning to India he established his own professional practice in Bombay in 1958.

Easily one of the best known names in the field of architecture across India and the world, Correa, the thinker and philosopher is remembered not purely for the landmark creations he left behind but also for his approach, thought processes and philosophy as he applied them to life and his area of expertise.

Known as India's greatest architect, Correa was responsible for some of the finest structures post-independence India has seen. He was influenced in his thought by Le Corbusier, Louis Kahn and Buckminster Fuller. He is known for striking concrete forms, responsiveness to site, Indian landscapes, organic and topographic scales, Indian climate, conservation of energy, economic housing and urban planning.

His approach was simple but profound in its relevance. In a talk he once delivered in Mumbai, Correa discussed the design implications of an Indian bath built in ancient times and the presence of mind and common sense with which something as basic as steps were created to go right to the lower depths allowing for bathers to access the bath even when water levels were low. That thought of functionality following design has been omnipresent in everything undertaken by Correa, something that he firmly believed in.

Educated in USA, Correa returned to India and brought his clarity of thought and design, coupled it with a deep understanding of Indian culture and ethos and applied it to his designs. His work, always inspired by the evolution of Indian architecture and spaces through history, is never repetitive but is a tribute to the sensitivity of the ancient planners, while using modern technology. Whether it was the cave temples, ancient forts and temples, palaces and courtyards, the importance of design and its relevance to

the environment, both physiological and cultural, is evident in his every creation.

What is striking about Correa's work is its stark simplicity. He was uninterested in the so-called classical approach prevalent in the subcontinent since its colonial invasion. Decorative pillars, gables and their like were of little relevance to him. His emphasis was on the necessity of honest space, and the reduction of unnecessary consumption of natural and other resources. He placed



importance on features such as verandahs and terraces, courtyards and as many open-to-sky spaces as possible, enabling a natural interaction of indoors and outdoors, with an emphasis on light and air. He was not a proponent of high-rise buildings, which he admired for their technical achievements but dismissed them as architecturally not viable spaces.

Correa was the pioneer of urban housing architecture in India. As the chief architect of Navi Mumbai, he was responsible for the design of one of the largest urban spaces in the world. Correa's unique design concepts were path-breaking in the area of affordable housing, which, had they been adopted, would have changed much of the landscape of developing countries.

As Correa once said, there is a big difference between 'construction and architecture', and he concurred with Corbusier, who described this difference saying that a construction holds things together, whereas the purpose of architecture is to move us; to take the inner material and infuse it with passion. Having said that, however, Correa was clear that whatever the abstraction that architecture is or should be, a building must work. And with architecture the building

goes beyond the purpose and takes on a metaphysical value.

One of the binding principles of his work was his belief in the 'axis of the universe', or what he understood as a direct and natural connection between the earth and the sky. This principle he expressed in his work by creating spaces that were open to the sky, something he believed was primordial and necessary. The Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal is testimony to this approach, with its vast open areas and the natural flow of spaces, amongst other popular designs.

What stands out most about Correa's work is its stark honesty and devotion to the elements, the climate, the materials, the function and the importance of keeping these in harmony in the simplest way possible. There are no random twists and turns, frivolous touches or anything beyond what is necessary and aesthetic. Every design draws inspiration from something that is relevant and has gone before. Whether it is the 'navagraha' that inspired the Jawahar Kala Kendra Arts Centre, or Gandhi's childhood home that was the basis of the Gandhi Ashram in Sabarmati, every line has a distinct *raison d'être*. Whimsy has not much of a role in Correa's designs, even though sometimes it may appear that way.

A layman may look at the Kanchenjunga building in the heart of Mumbai and consider it a flight of fancy on the part of the architect; so stark is the structure in contrast to its surroundings. The truth could not be further from this, as it is the primary consideration of the climate and the heavy monsoon rains in Mumbai that requisitioned the unique cantilevered balconies that replicate verandas of yore in the landmark building. While designing and constructing the Champalimaud Centre in Lisbon, Correa created a space where he saw the sea and sky as therapy for those who went there. And the movement of the building speaks for this idea.

One can go on and on about the strength of Correa's conviction, his sensitivity to the environment and his philosophy of design. His legacy in terms of a design-enriched India, his contribution towards low-cost buildings, and his reach across the world are something our nation should be proud of. Recipient of several awards and recognitions, subject

of several publications and journal materials, philosopher and thinker extraordinaire, Correa has left some large shoes to fill. Influenced as Indians are by the West, it is important that we realize the true effect of good Indian architecture. Although educated abroad, Correa's designs always drew from deep within Indian history and culture, and in this manner he has given back to India in an authentic and tangible way. To the millions of architects and students of the subject, Correa has been and should continue to be a source of true inspiration and relevance.

In his words, architecture 'is a risk... and no building is better than the client who commissions it'. It was important to him, as it should be to those who pursue this path, that an architect requires a cli-

ent who wants to be on the cutting edge and has 'the courage to go into the unknown'. Above all, a trusting relationship is important between the client and the architect, as the artist in the latter knows that architecture is sculpture, but with gestures of human occupation.

Some of Correa's prominent works include the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial at Sabarmati in Ahmedabad (1958-63), Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal (1975-81), the Kanchenjunga Apartments in Mumbai (1970-83), Surya Kund in Delhi (1986), the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur (1986-92) and the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics in Pune (1988-92). He received the *Padma Shri* (1972) and *Padma Vibhushan* (2006) awards from the Government of India. Royal Gold Medal for

Architecture from the Royal Institute of British Architects (1984), the Praemium Imperiale Prize for Architecture by the Japan Art Association (1994) and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1998.

Correa's words are a source of inspiration to those who follow the incredibly challenging path of an architect's profession. It can only be hoped that inspiration leads to creativity and finally to built expressions of thoughtful design.

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