

# Charles Correa's poetry in concrete

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## **Introduction:**

Among the present cry and clamour for a "universalization" of our thoughts and actions that is seen as a necessary function of the 'advancement of mankind', emerges the architecture of Charles Correa. Not in endorsement of this line of thought but as a counterpoint that tries to make us see beyond these mere progressions. Where the interpretation of life itself depends on another dimension of advancement, viz; that of 'the ethical and mythical nucleus of mankind'. Implied in the above positions articulated by Paul Ricoeur in his 'Universal Civilization and National Cultures' (1961) are a host of disturbing questions being raised today by India, in concern to the way global modernization has been undermining most agrarian-based autochthonous (indigenous) cultures. And a sparkle in this area of darkness is Correa's insistence (through his works) that we remember our 'vistas' and the contextual points of our civilization's evolution and uphold our heads in pride for being able to confront ourselves with (and not for hiding away from) our own contradictions.

## **Correa placed within a perspective of collective developments:**

The urge to place Charles Correa within the perspective of collective developments, rather than as an individual architect with his own singular emphasis on forms and syntaxes is rather overwhelming. Especially because Correa's professional career roughly coincides with our own years of freedom from alien rule

and that, his works represent for us certain elemental signposts in this brief political, economic and cultural evolution of our post-Independence times.

#### Correa's oeuvre:

Charles Correa's oeuvre spans across hundreds of projects, covering his independent professional years between 1958 (when he received his first commissioned project - the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalay, Ahmedabad), to the present. His oeuvre also encompasses a range of architecture-needs that include in their content and scope of work, projects as varied as the museum (National Crafts Museum, Delhi) and the memorial (Kasturba Samadhi, Pune), to the urban church (Salvacao Church, Bombay) and the seaside resort (Kovalam Beach Resort, Trivandrum); swank metropolitan apartment housing (Kanchanjunga, Bombay) to low-cost suburban (Belapur Housing, New Bombay) or middle-income urban (Bimanagar, Bangalore) housing; projects that house administration (Vidhan Bhavan, Bhopal), consular - related activities (British Council Head quarters, Delhi) and insurance activities (LIC centre, Delhi); projects that help to uphold scientific enquiry (ICAA/Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics) to those that are dedicated to erudition and culture (Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal; Kala Akademy, Panaji).

#### Correa's auteur:

But typically embedded in his projects is an '*auteur*' that is driven by two sets of paradigm arising out of an essentially intelligent response to climate. In Correa's own words ... " at the deep-structure level, climate conditions culture and its expressions, its

rites and ritual. In itself, climate is the source of myth: thus the metaphysical quantities attributed to open-to-sky space in the cultures of India and Mexico are concomitants of the warm climate in which they exist; just as the films of Bergman would be inconceivable without the dark brooding Swedish winters". As an extension of this is the first paradigm that organises itself around a theme that cries for an "open-to-sky" space; the second paradigm on the other hand uses the construct of the 'tube house' in reverence to the need to conserve energy "in a society that cannot afford air conditioning". Over the first two decades of his independent practice, Correa's works of public and private housing have determinedly revolved around these two paradigms. Thrown on to a broader canvas of the "habitat", these two generic type-forms have been manipulated by Correa to intersect one another in plan and in section, depending upon the particular intention of the project. A good way towards understanding the crucial concepts of the "open-to-sky-space" or the "tube house" would be to first grasp what these are not. For Correa these have been the mechanisms for dealing with the elements of nature, especially in a climate that depending on the latitude, "is relatively benevolent for most of the year". So for Correa, "to cross a desert and enter a house around a courtyard would be a pleasure beyond mere photogenic image-making; it is the quality of light and the ambience of moving air, that would form the essence of our experience". When an architecture cuts out the elements of nature, for example the way it does in cold climates through its closed boxes, the overall effect could be detrimental to architecture itself. And yet, one finds a happy exception to this in the Gothic Cathedral that allows light to fall from great heights and which makes one feel as though one were moving through a

Scandinavian pine forest or through the narrow canyons of the American West. Correa echoes: "there is something about looking up and seeing light - I think the tilt of your head awakens some primordial instinct. Perhaps it was the fear of Jove hurling down thunderballs". The way to deal with the elements is not by denying their existence but by recognising them; and to try and conserve energy by either disaggregating space (under warm conditions) and allowing this cellular space spontaneously to generate its counterform of built-in structures so that these open spaces and structures go to form a yin-and-yang/figure-and-ground configuration; (where the open spaces begin to act as areas of visual rest between enclosed volumes of concentration). Or, in an antithesis to this open-to-sky space, by using an extruded form that firstly closes the house down to protect it from the fierce rays of the sun and then ingeniously uses air vents at the intersections of sloped roofs to allow cross-ventilation as well as the carriage of hot air outwards through the broken ridge between two overlapping pitched roofs. The Ramkrishna House (1962) and the Parekh House (1966) in Ahmedabad remain some of the finest examples of tube housing designed so far by Correa.

#### **Correa's early influences:**

Through the maze of his architectural creations, one detects in Correa's mode of thought, a distinct analytical and experimental training that has been combined with a certain vision for the future. One assumes that this broad holistic and rationalistic appeal surrounding the man's outlook stems in no small measure from his Western university education. At both the University of Michigan and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology where he studied for

his undergraduate and graduate degrees respectively, Correa was exposed to the teachings of the master innovator and social engineer Buckminster Fuller, who he affectionately addressed as Bucky and with whom he remained in touch until Fuller died. Not coincidentally is Fuller's work laced, among other things, by a belief in a coherent mystical faith and which surfaces recurrently as a feature of Correa's intuitive belief in the "non-manifest" world communicated via religion, philosophy and the arts. But what really assimilated itself into Correa's intellectual and mental make-up through this didactic process was this American New Deal avant-garde architect's 'objective constructivist' attitude that is so well engraved in his free-standing Dymaxion House designed way back in 1927. The sense of lateral thinking, enquiry and experimentation that Fuller injected into Correa through student projects such as a spinning dome for the North Pole or the tetrahedron truss of reinforced cardboard, helped to sustain the architect's continuing thrust at adventurous designs into the more forward years of his career, such as one finds in the Crafts Museum, Delhi. This almost 'invisible' building is in tribute to the 'humble objects' collected from village houses around the country, and through the use of the metaphor of the 'ritualistic pathway' seeks to create constant surprises at bends and corners without ever upstaging the beauty of the artefacts that it houses. Correa also claims to have imbibed the facility for comprehending ideas at the level of their dialectics through seminars run by Gyorgy Kepes. The subjects ranged in their eclecticism from Bauhaus functionalism to Zen metaphysics, to discussions on Renaissance painting, perhaps causing the cross-fertilizations that are so evident in his latter architectural pieces such as in the British Council Headquarters, Delhi. In whose designing Correa seemed eminently placed

as a person to be able to respect and assimilate Western sensibilities without hurting Indian ones. Not without surprise does one find, therefore, that English painter Howard Hodgkin's mural of a gigantic black tree which animates the facade of the building wounds around it so organically that building and tree become one. As New York art critic John Russell remarks "without Correa, Hodgkin would have had to topple over into sculpture to get the use of the third dimension". Further, there is this architect's capacity for across-the-discipline understanding which finds reflections in his treatment of the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (Pune) where he uses literal icons such as the statues of Newton, Aryabhata, Galileo and so on; or a landscaping that evokes scientific paradigms mirrored in the use of fractals such as Serpenski's gasket. Correa further acknowledges his gift of perception to his MIT teachers Lawrence Anderson, Steen Eiler Rasmussen and Kevin Lynch. Just as he seems to recoil from the 'monumentalization of technique' of another architect-teacher, the ex-Bauhaus principal Mies Van der Rohe; where Correa felt Van der Rohe's buildings that never used the sky and often looked like warehouses in their indelible symmetry also completely lacked "emotional wallop", quite unlike the effect that Moghul domes have in their interfacing against the sky. These, on the contrary, make " beautiful yin-yang interlocks with the sky and Corbusier understood this", as Correa would remark.

#### **Correa's onward influences:**

So while the young Charles Correa was fired by the zeal of the MIT gurus, what became an abiding force of inspiration for him was Le Corbusier's works beginning with the master's reinterpretation of Mediterranean vernacular in the Maison Jaoul (Jaoul House) still

under construction in Paris in 1955; and further, by Corbusier's overriding philosophy: "architecture or revolution". Corbusier believed that man's primordial instinct for shelter itself had been threatened by post-Industrial Revolution's dehumanisation. Artisan and intellectual alike now shared the spectre of a likely social unrest arising out of a sense of deprivation for a shelter that was no longer tailored to his basic needs. It is a matter of some pride that the impending catastrophe should have struck such deep chords of empathy within the young Correa, who might easily have opted for a more elitist worldview towards the sub-continent's architecture-needs. This empathy for people rather than for artefacts reflects in his following statement made at the 1983 Thomas Cubitt Lecture 'A Place in the Sun': "To find how, where and when he can be useful is the only way the architect can stretch the boundaries of his vision beyond the succession of middle and upper income commissions that encapsulate the profession in Asia". Which viewpoint also calls to attention the fact that Correa has not restricted his professional commitment to architecting the individual building alone but has extended it to another genre of work that embraces architecting entire towns and indeed, entire blueprints of plan-policies that address the vexed issue of our hurtling urbanisation and its related problems and prospects.

**Correa's intent for influencing change:**

Undoubtedly, it was his MIT teacher Kevin Lynch who had triggered Correa's interest in urban issues while these were being developed into themes for his 'Image of the City' during Correa's post-graduate days. But at a deeper level of assimilation it is unlikely that the architect could have remained unaffected by various manifestos drawn up under

the Congress Internationaux d'Architecture (CIAM) between 1928 and 1956 in Europe and Britain; and which roughly clamored for three sets of socio-economic ideals as the launchpads for future urbanization. These ideals ranged from the radical political socialist persuasions that espoused material objectives, to a more universal and less doctrinaire attitude that saw urbanisation in greater aesthetic breadths of vision but by the same measure carried a lot of 'abstract sterility' along with it; to the final triumph of "liberal idealism over the materialism of the early period", with a recognition of people's aspiration for "monumentality, joy, pride and excitement".

Closer home in 1964, Correa along with his architect-colleagues Praveena Mehta and Shirish Patel proposed an alternate growth centre to Bombay across its natural water inlet. By 'colonizing' this untapped land and harnessing it with new economic growth, much of it as a transference from the mother city of Bombay into this satellite town New Bombay; one could expect to contain the vicious cycle of constant in-migration, spiralling land prices and squatter population that seemed to make Bombay "feed off its own tail" much as a serpent would. The community and spatial precepts applied by Correa in the New Bombay scheme were closely linked to two socio-economic ideals of his : (i) a preclusion of the existing trend that "diverted resources from the limitless pool of the bazar's craftsmanship to inefficient centralized production", and which would automatically now discourage the use of prefabricated system building; and (ii) the need to make housing incremental in order to allow families "to build according to their perceived needs when capital becomes available". The Belapur Housing stands in partial testimony to this requirement. Regardless of the government's initial reservations towards the concept and its subsequent inertia in

implementation, New Bombay remains a shining example of a project that deserves applaud of emulation by the First and the Third worlds. The imperative for Correa was to act and not just brood. As he would ask along the way "what is the moral advantage in not acting, in merely watching passively the slow degradation of life around you?"

#### **Correa as the man emerging from the architect:**

For the present generation, Correa could represent a tidy metaphor of a man who had the ability to envision a successful career possibility within his own country, at the end of a full cycle of undergraduate and graduate studies abroad. What conspired against India in the fifties are the same socio-economic limitations albeit in a changed form and in differing degrees, that happen to go against the sub-continent even today. And yet, Correa was able to cut across any potentially "negative attitude towards these restrictions" to arrive at an inner conviction that these were not restrictions but were, in fact, veritable opportunities. The detractor will wish to point out that the India of the fifties is removed from the India of the nineties not just by the element of time but by the pitch and tenor of its ideology or by the lack of it. Then there were more dreams than despair. There was the Nehru-Nasser-Tito triad holding up for a third line-up of options for the Third World. Which is why Correa professes the use of the term Third World over 'developing' and 'underdeveloped'. Today we are caught up in a whirlpool of opposing currents that threaten to destroy one another by their paradoxes: the instinct to preserve one's cultural resources against the instinct to borrow across-the-border 'elementary cultures' without discrimination. The point, however, is in being able to

envision the promises of the future through all these turmoils. Undoubtedly one likes to ascribe to Correa a certain mode of thought that is so reflexive as to almost question one's own identity; with the result that there is a heightened sense of pride for whatever that is one's own. In Correa's instance, this pride for his country echoes in his attitude that perhaps "Le Corbusier was as favoured in being able to work in India, as India was privileged in having its state monuments designed by him". This is the man who has now risen to the heights of the universal architect quite in the likes of Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier by not only "absorbing a people's culture and tradition to an extraordinary degree," but above all by giving back what had been absorbed "in the form of magnificent and appropriate architecture". This is also the same man who has so forcefully cut through the dense Eurocentric fog of a bias that clouds their judgement of non-western (non-Japanese) architecture. In the words of a Columbia University faculty of architecture Kenneth Frampton, Correa today represents "a notable exception to this eclipse" of our works caused mostly by "the Eurocentric prejudice of the media". And yet, by the same breadth, this is also the man who is sometimes assailed for not having used his frontier position to clear this haze of obscurity that continues to surround the achievements of his peer group in India and whose work is not only reflected in our "contemporary architecture of exceptional calibre" but which could be compared "with the finest work being produced anywhere today". Perhaps Correa respects his contemporaries too much to want to extend any kind of patronage towards them. But the one patronage that he might have extended in is the creation of THE monument of architectural pride - a close symbiotic association with an institution of learning in India, so that his ideals and

worldview could transpire pedagogically into fresher and many more eager minds.

#### Conclusion - architecture as a pathway into history:

At the end, as one finds Correa rooted in the pantheon of the universal architect awaiting just that sweeping description that could lend the correct inflections to his *auteurism*, such as one finds in 'the sacred spring' of architects Wagner, Olbrich and Hoffman, or in Henry van de Velde's 'the abstraction of empathy' or in Le Corbusier's 'the *Espirit Nouveau*', or in Mies Van der Rohe's 'the significance of the fact', or in Frank Lloyd Wright's 'the Disappearing City' or in Philip Johnson and Louis Kahn's 'the Eclipse of the New Deal'. One begins to hear architect Adolf Loos' lingering voice "May I lead you to the shores of a mountain lake

The sky is blue, the water green and everything is profoundly peaceful".

We imagine this is five thousand years from now. Seated amidst the ruins of a past monument one realizes that architecture has the innate ability to produce life after death. That it is one of those rare categories of artefacts whose ruins do not just mark-off the end of something, but which in another era, could open up entire vistas in the form of a veritable language; to encode and to decode the dynamics and the mechanics of a lost past, during whose time these ruins were a glorious architecture. One wishes to learn from Correa whether he foresees the vocabulary of such a language emerging from the ruins of his own architecture? And where in this architecture will be encrypted the ciphers that could eventually help the future generations to relive in their minds, the pains and joys of another bygone civilization. In that sense, a truly meaningful piece

of architecture would not just be the edification of an architect, it is the edification of an entire civilization.