

FOUR: LEARNING THROUGH EMPIRICISM

I have presented our work in Sri Lanka, Israel, Switzerland, Italy, Hong Kong, China and the USA. In discussions afterwards, students often ask, how do you make money? Or perhaps, how do you become famous? My reply is, please do the work and the money will follow. The biggest reward is not the fee but the satisfaction of standing in front of a building when it is finished and the client says, I like it; and you also tell yourself, yes it works – even though, inevitably, it falls short of what you had envisaged. That is the biggest reward.

Each work follows from the previous projects in an empirical chain of gathering knowledge, information, experience. There is often a desire to take an idea further in the next project, even though the site and program might be different. The essence of an idea is impartial and immortal: it never dies or becomes stale. It can develop, mature, transform. History shows that the different architectural styles – whether Renaissance, Gothic, Chalukyan, Kakatian or Moghul – distil an idea that produces buildings for decades and sometimes centuries.

We learn as we go along, from the first brickwork house to the latest house in stone, using the material without any surface treatment, simply as stone.

We learn by doing, either working at the site or on the drawing board.

The courtyard at the centre of the single-family house is a crucial space. Somehow, we still have not been able to master the size, shape and proportioning of this element as gracefully as the pol houses of Ahmedabad. One hundred and fifty years ago, many were built, though we do not have information about who designed them and the circumstances in which they were built. What were the precise criteria governing the street patterns and the size and configuration of the courtyards open to the sky? With modern life, it is necessary to cover over this space to prevent rain from entering. We have designed covered courtyards but never to our complete satisfaction: a square plan in the centre of the house; one longer on the south side; one carved out aligning west-east (governed by site constraints) – yet none captures the essence of the pol house courtyard. This is an element we are still learning to master empirically.

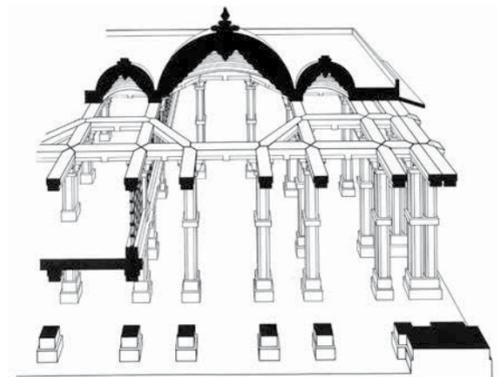
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Achyut Kuki's Mosque, dome ceiling, 1469



Darya Khan's Tomb, squinch, Ahmedabad, 1453



Typical mosque interior, provincial style, Gujarat, 14th-16th century



ABOVE: As a designer, I seek to create spaces that are well lit and structurally meaningful. A consistent design strategy is carving into a volume, working with the material and exploiting its tectonic potential.



Designing a large building opposite the IIM-A by Louis Kahn comes with its own challenges. It was important not to impinge on the force of this imposing architectural neighbour, yet also not be daunted by its presence.

While I was studying architecture, in 1973 IIM-A was being completed, and several professors worked on it with Kahn. We students were set several projects to study Kahn's architecture. One involved the double spiral staircase of the IIM-A library building – for me similar to a staircase

designed by Andrea Palladio in the monastery of the Carita, Venice. We had to make a model of the library, showing brick courses with Flemish bond and other technical features. The image and lessons of that stair lingered; and years later when the opportunity came to design a building facing Kahn's great campus, we paid homage with a reinterpreted idea of the stair in today's language. The double stair has concave and convex curved soffits; difficult to construct on site.

Other elements derive from the Kahn masterpiece: the curved arch on the south-west ground floor; the accentuated tangent of the cylinder; long corridors open at both ends.

Classrooms – the main requirement of the college – are placed along the north

and east sides, making an L-shaped plan, with the juncture housing a staircase.

A limited budget constrained use of stone and required larger areas of exposed concrete. The banding of these materials adds to the aesthetic impact: grey concrete and grey polished Kota stone.

The client required a phased construction program. The single-storey building eventually acquired a second storey involving minimal upheaval; and the building would seem complete in both single- and two-storey phases.

