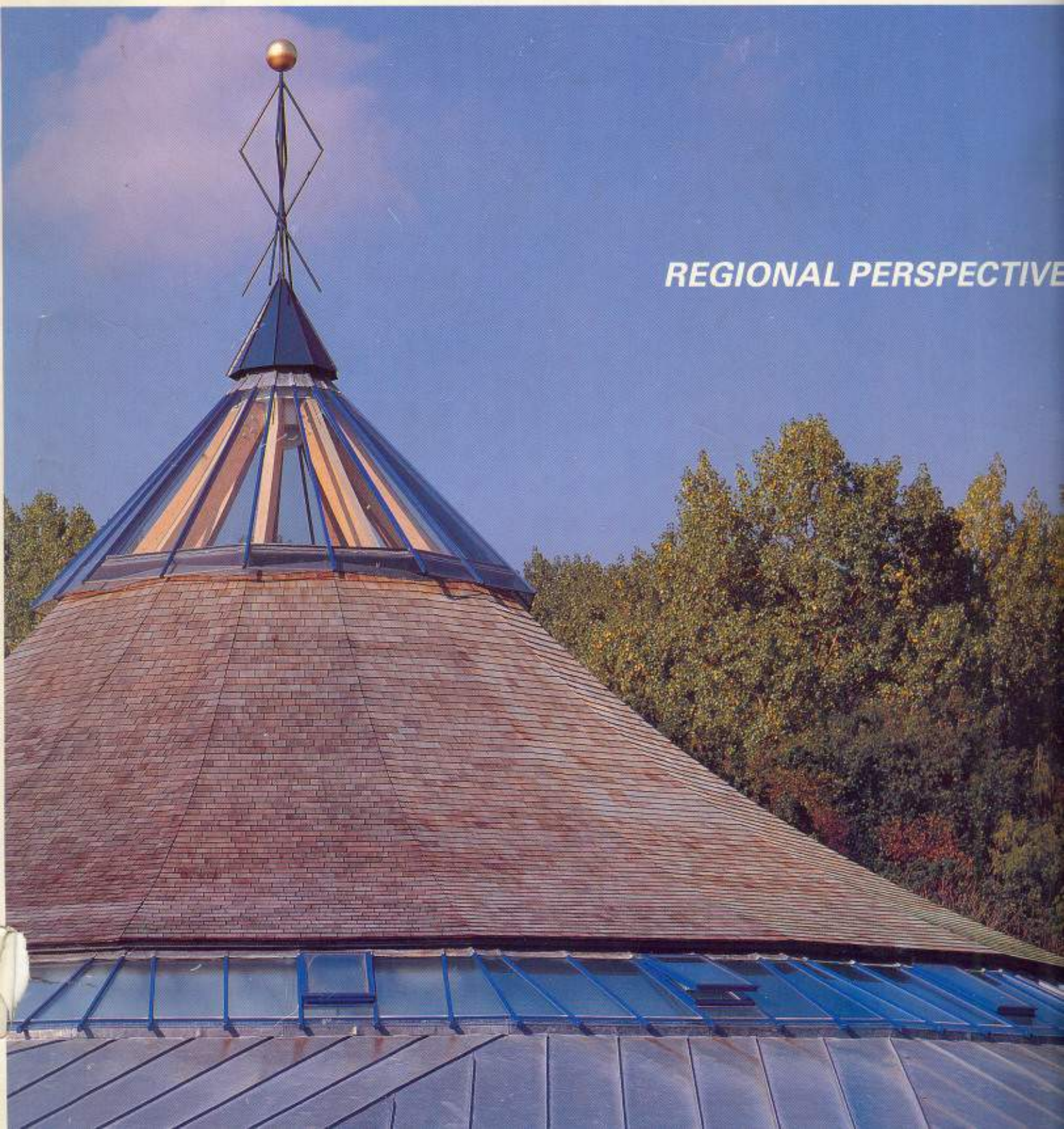


# THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW

*REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE*

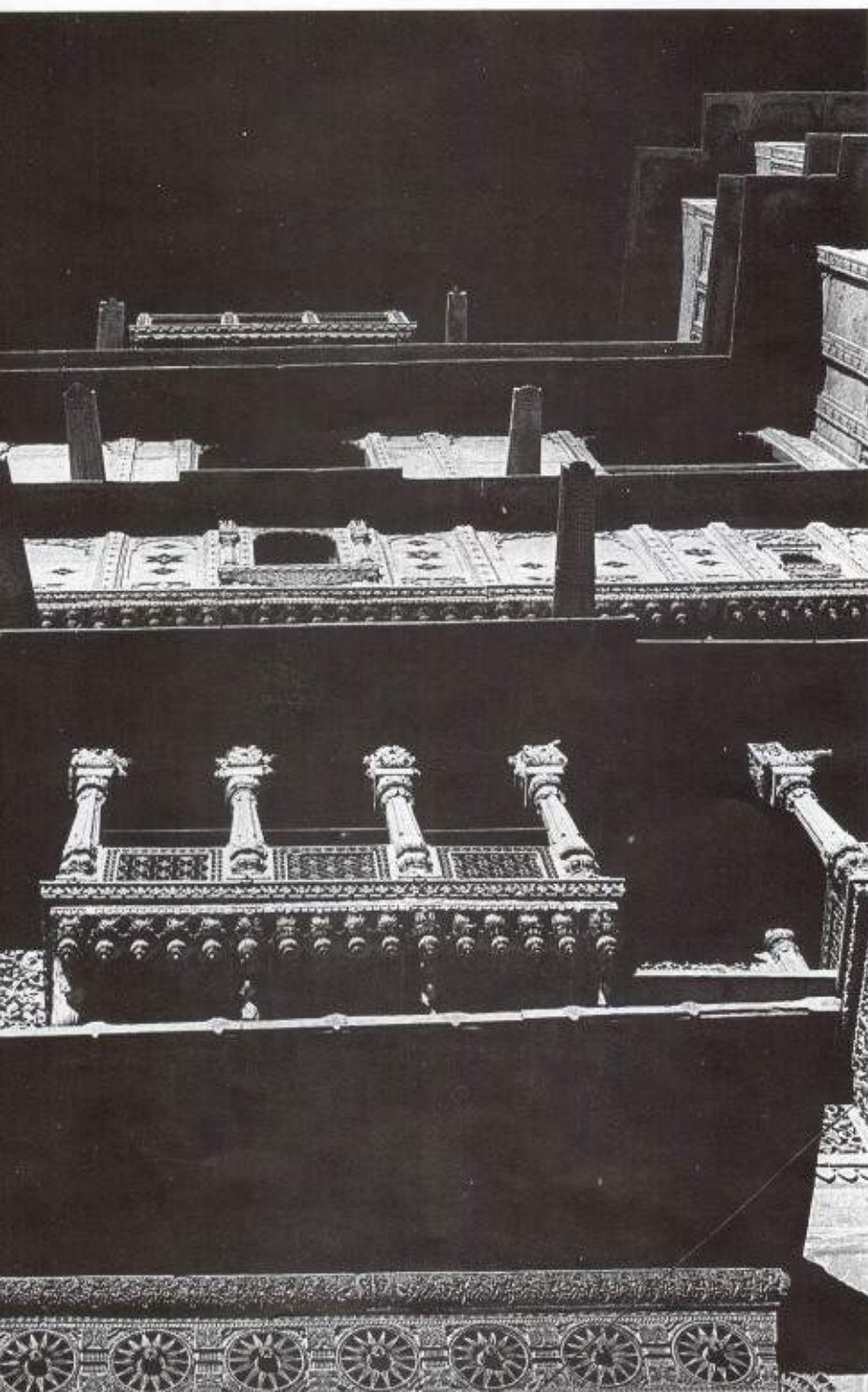


# INDIAN REFLECTIONS

1  
Kranti Singh house, Manali, designed by Romi Khosla with many of the details being finalised during construction by the local craftsmen.

2  
Screen wall of the Abu Abraham house, Trivandrum, designed by Laurie Baker.

Young Indian architects are looking at the specific traditions of the regions in which they are building to learn lessons about local custom, handling severe climatic conditions and the importance of reinvigorating almost lost craft skills. Below, a Jaisalmer *haveli*, one of the patterns for contemporary work.



The real architecture of India, as Delhi-based architect Ashish Ganju has said, is in the country's villages. Ganju's assertion was meant for places where building still conforms to the dictates of land, resources and climate. Whether village or medieval city, he meant places that to this day remain unaffected by the demands of India's growing industrial tradition.

Along the coast, on the mountain or in the plains, the traditional Indian dwelling was born out of community. The strengths of a community, its bonds and ties of family and kinship, caste and profession created the intricacies and proximities of domestic architecture. The Ahmedabad *pol* house of the Bombay *chawl* or the *havelis* of Delhi as types are enough to suggest the nature of the community that inhabited them, the lifestyles they created, the incomes they generated and the climates they were set in.

In such places, the private house was a public effort; built elements of the home were fabricated by the craftsman, the memory and skills of his continuing family trade, and then assembled by the owners in their own individual ways. Consequently, the bracketed columns and the sun screens of a Jaisalmer *haveli* were made by stone workers who knew nothing of how their handiwork would be eventually assembled and it was this, the economic necessity of creating a common language of building, that assured the perpetuation of a craft tradition.

Do the new buildings of India suggest anything of these ideas, or are the real conditions of India and Indian building absent in contemporary architectural expression? If different parts of the country—the plains, the coast, the mountain and the desert; if North and South, urban and rural have developed their own local domestic architecture, is a strain of this carried into the recent work in these places?

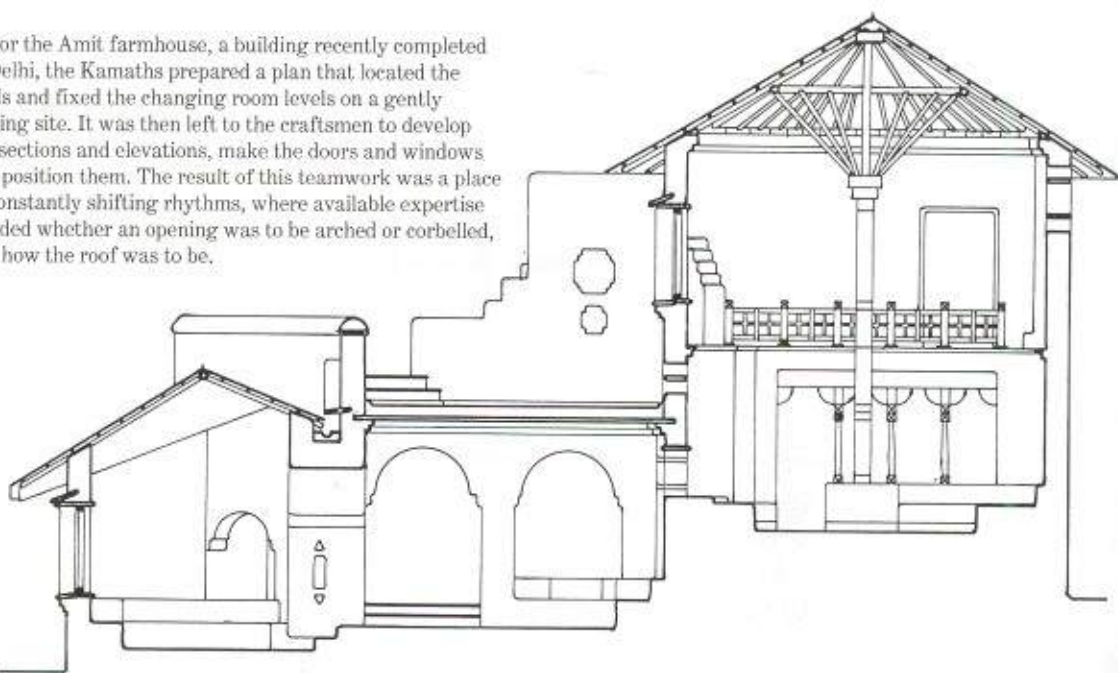
Today, a rising discontent with Modernism and the capacity of technology to solve human problems is inducing architects, and clients, into an active appreciation of the architecture of the past. Working with limited resources, but within easy access of local skills, there appears in the new work an implicit acknowledgement that the craftsman's role is critical in making and enriching buildings.

Though many architects have used indigenous architecture decoratively, the truth of indigenous expression can only be seen in buildings that actively employ craft as a participatory activity. This is the contention of Revathi and Vasant Kamath, a Delhi-based husband-and-wife team who scoff at excessive romanticising of tradition that is indulged in by some of their contemporaries: 'Local masons, carpenters and metal workers are our greatest assets, because we can offer them employment, they can teach us much more of their skills and trade'. The first signs of a recognition of craft invariably occur in houses whose affluent owners use the skills of their rural neighbours to build indigenously.

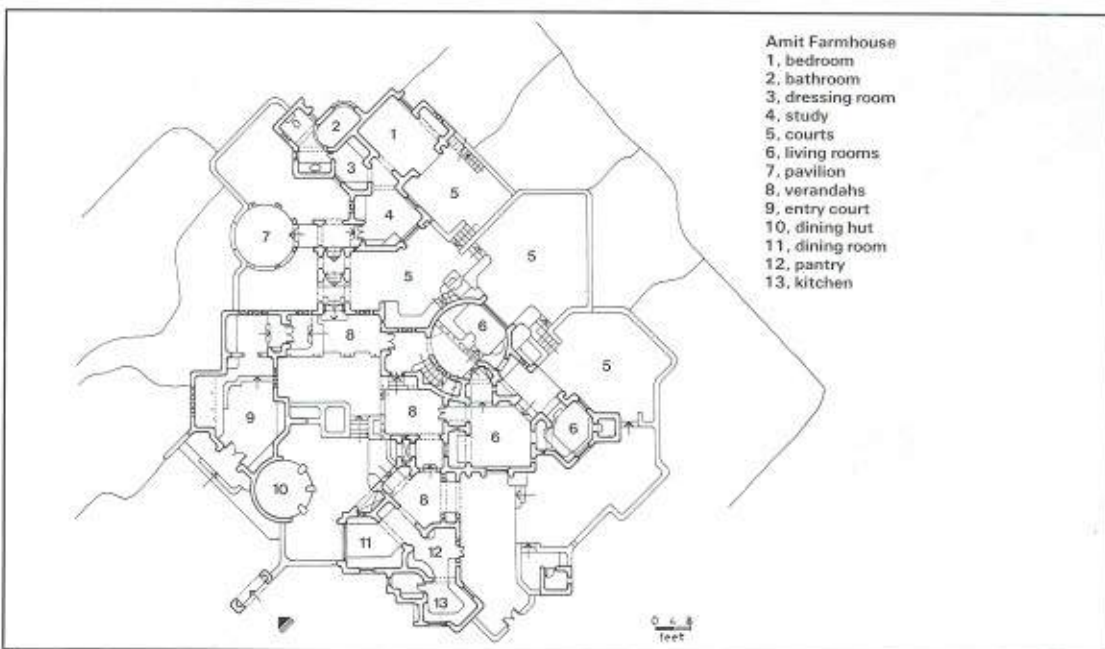


For the Amit farmhouse, a building recently completed in Delhi, the Kamaths prepared a plan that located the walls and fixed the changing room levels on a gently sloping site. It was then left to the craftsmen to develop the sections and elevations, make the doors and windows and position them. The result of this teamwork was a place of constantly shifting rhythms, where available expertise decided whether an opening was to be arched or corbelled, and how the roof was to be.

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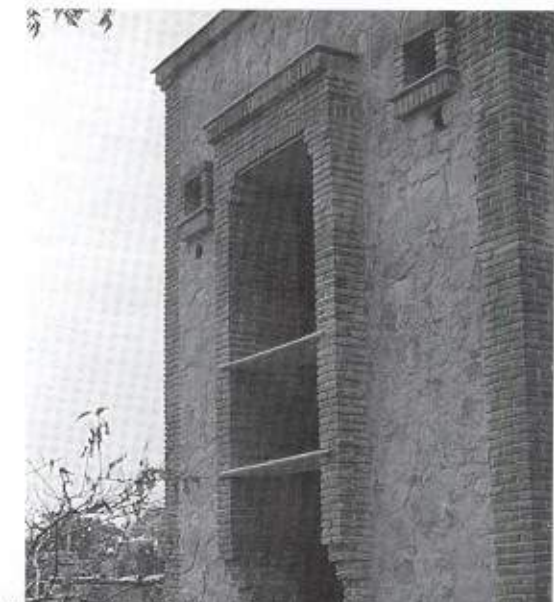
- Amit Farmhouse**  
 1, bedroom  
 2, bathroom  
 3, dressing room  
 4, study  
 5, courts  
 6, living rooms  
 7, pavilion  
 8, verandahs  
 9, entry court  
 10, dining hut  
 11, dining room  
 12, pantry  
 13, kitchen



In the Kamal Singh residence nearby, the creative potential of indigenous skill was harnessed in a more conventional manner. The understanding of local craft in this, the Kamaths' most recent work, was so comprehensive that a complete set of drawings was prepared incorporating the local elements—the dome, air vents and corbelled window shades.

The Kamaths have always felt that true revival of a building tradition can come about only if the architect allows the craftsman a free hand in expression—and primarily in the smaller scale of residential work. Larger institutional complexes tend to make overtures to culture and location in a speculative and abstract way. The actual values of a place can be effectively expressed only by those who live in it.

For the outsider, Romi Khosla, another Delhi-based architect, maintains that the task of architectural interpretation in the highly complex place-specific culture of India, is a difficult and tenuous one, Khosla's work, as varied in function as it is dispersed over India, allows him to speak and practise from the privileged vantage of an architect conscious of the myriad images and associations of each of the places in which he has built.



8

3, 4  
Elevation details of the Amit  
farmhouse, Delhi, designed by  
Vasant and Revathi Kamath.

5  
The Kamal Singh house, Delhi,  
designed by Vasant and Revathi  
Kamath.

6  
Section through living room, Amit  
farmhouse.

7  
Ground floor plan of Amit  
farmhouse.

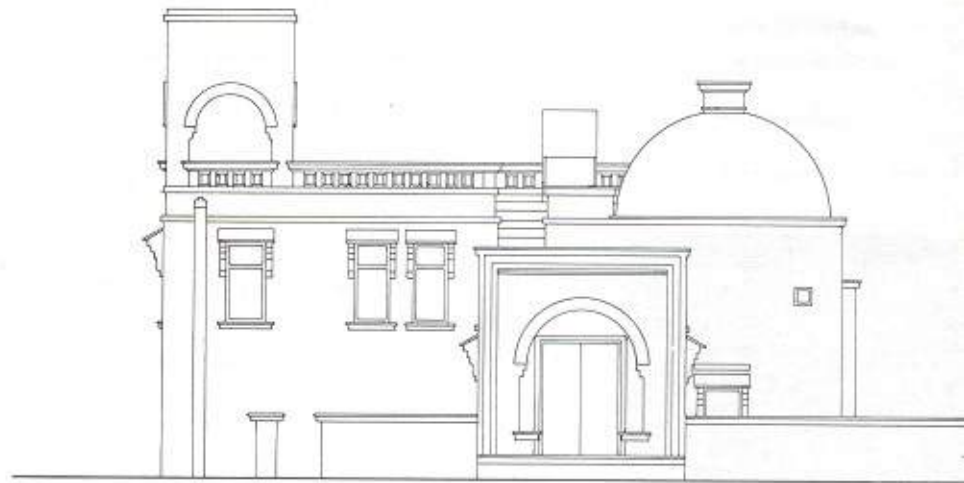
8  
Entrance to Kamal Singh house.  
9  
Dome ventilator, Kamal Singh  
house.

10  
Plan of Kamal Singh house.

11  
Entrance elevation, Kamal Singh  
house.

12  
Side elevation.

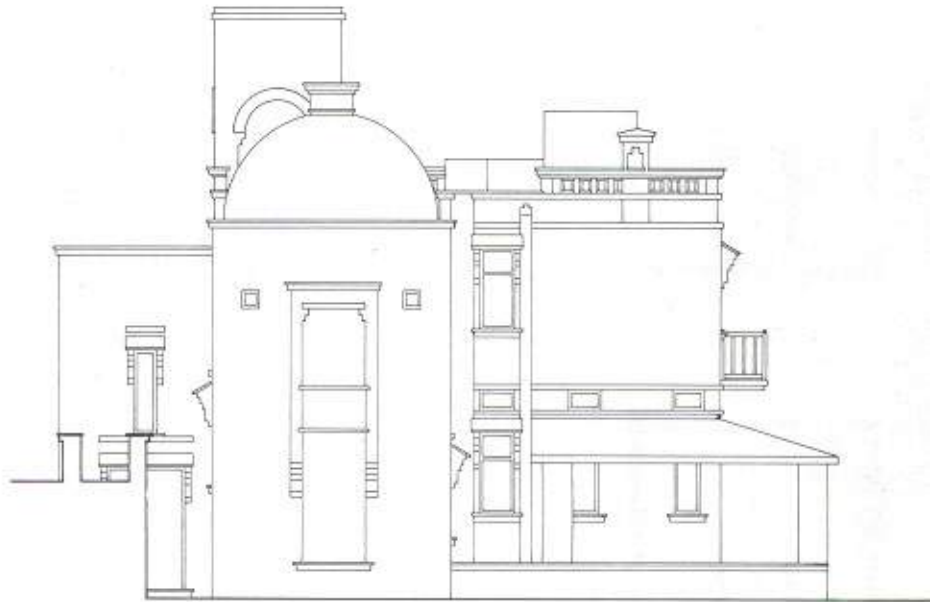
13  
Section through living room.



11

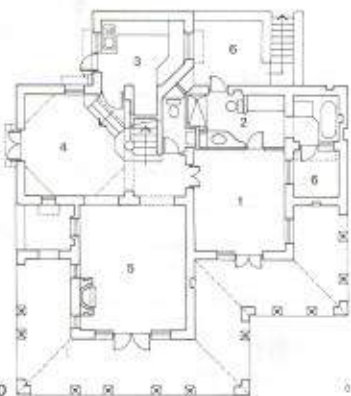


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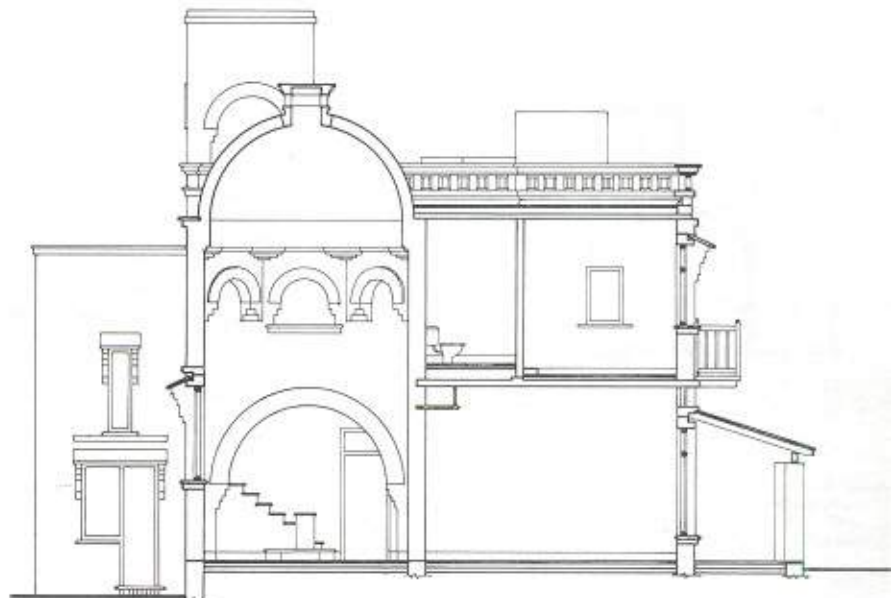


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Kamal Singh  
1, bedroom  
2, bathroom  
3, kitchen  
4, dining room  
5, living room  
6, courts



10



13

- 14 Balcony detail, Kranti Singh house, Manali, designed by Romi Khosla.
- 15 Second floor plan, Kranti Singh house.
- 16 First floor plan, Kranti Singh house.
- 17 Ground floor plan, Kranti Singh house.
- 18/19 Elevation studies of Kranti Singh house.
- 20 Perspective, Kranti Singh house.



Building is a matter of evoking the right associations, he says. So the particular configuration of a summer house he designed in the mountains emerges out of local prototypes which conserve ground space and expand upwards for the view and access to the sun.

From the outset, the owners had made it clear to Khosla that local craftsmen would be the eventual designers of the building, making the dressed stone base and crafting the woodwork for doors and balconies. Indeed the roof proposed by the architect was not acceptable to them and in its present form represents the more traditional perceptions of the craftsmen.

Internally, the plan approaches the traditional type of avoiding the definition of specific rooms, but almost in a kind of apology to the builders of the area, the rooms of urban convention—kitchen, dining, lavatories—are inconspicuously incorporated within. The easy retrofitting of contemporary functions within a traditional framework necessitated the unusual situation in which the architect simply handed over his building to the local craftsmen.

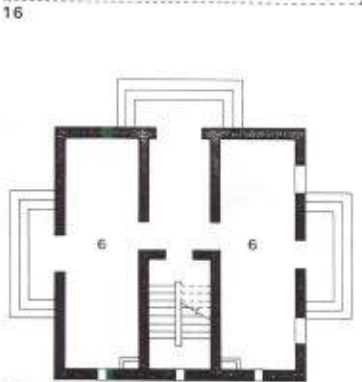
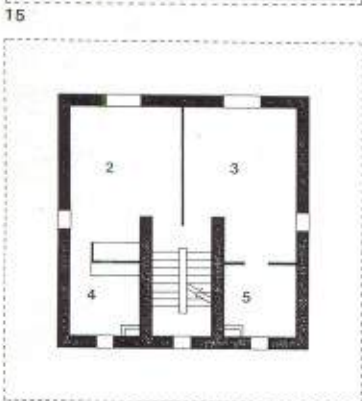
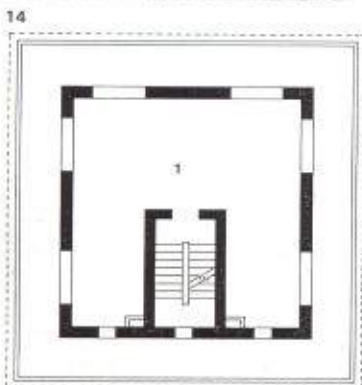
Khosla cautions that although we may draw upon history for inspiration, the architect must be conscious of the associations that the building evokes. 'The demonstration of a building's stylistic consistency is as important as its internal reality.'

Khosla's beliefs find an echo in the architectural philosophy of Jaimini Mehta who practises in Baroda, in the western state of Gujarat. Mehta stresses the need for stylistic consistency and plan clarity and the residence he designed for Mr & Mrs Vyas strikes a deliberately formal note in its association with history.

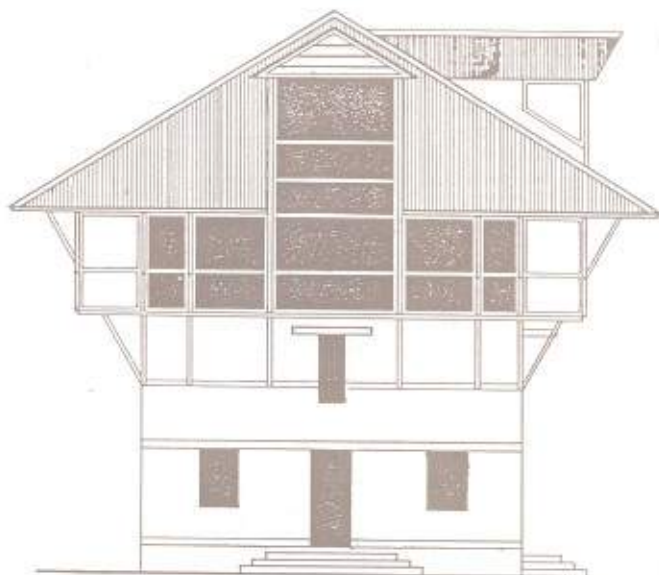
A typical suburban sub-division in the city with little advantage of orientation or view, the house is camouflaged by a series of external screens; the traditional screen of the family court, now offered as a high verandah beside an urban garden plot, concealing within its high volumes places for ducting and storage. And yet, the high volumes which wrap around the body of the house function like the internal courts of a traditional house, venting the hot air and orienting the external exposure of the rooms into a pocket of shadow.

If the particular details of the screen walls are articulated in personal or stylised renditions they are, as Mehta says, carried over from some of our earlier projects, 'masks in front of the house, with its architecture of a more public character'.

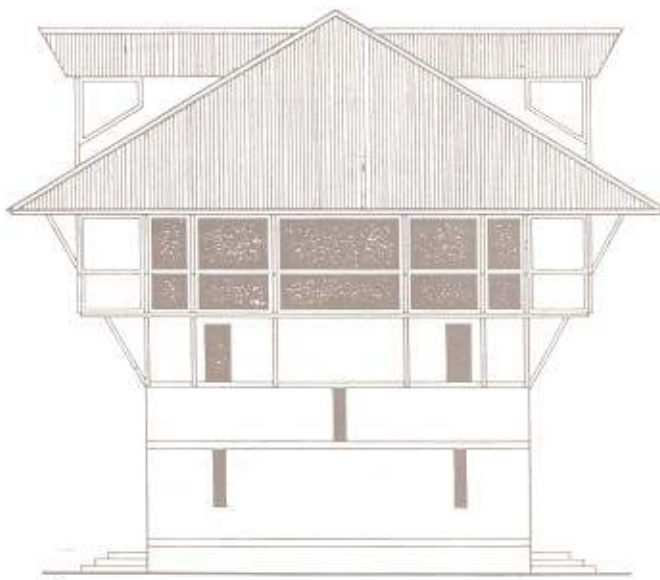
This also holds true for Englishman Laurie Baker's work in Kerala in South India. Though Baker never masks the building in elements of stylistic expediency, he does use traditional elements in a spatial manner to define



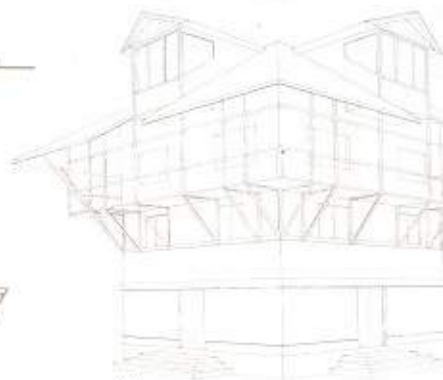
- 17 Ground floor plan, Kranti Singh house.
- Kranti Singh  
 1, family room  
 2, family room  
 3, bedroom  
 4, kitchen  
 5, lavatory  
 6, stores



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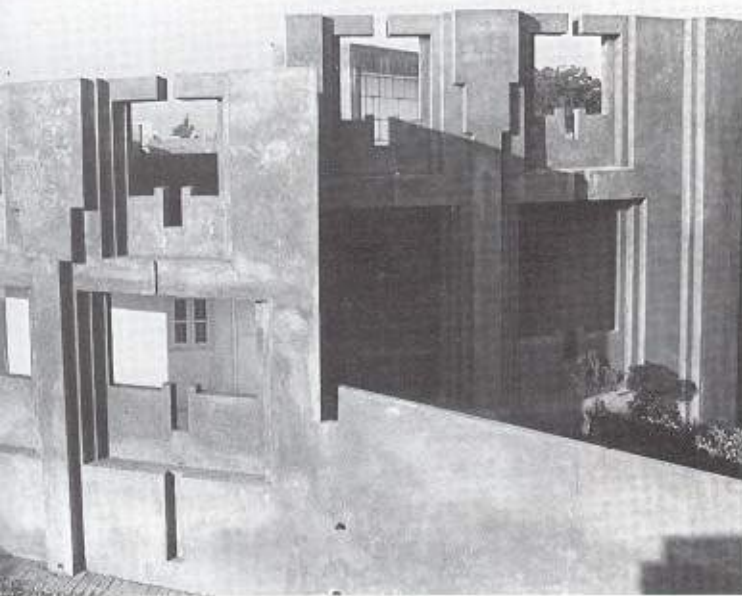


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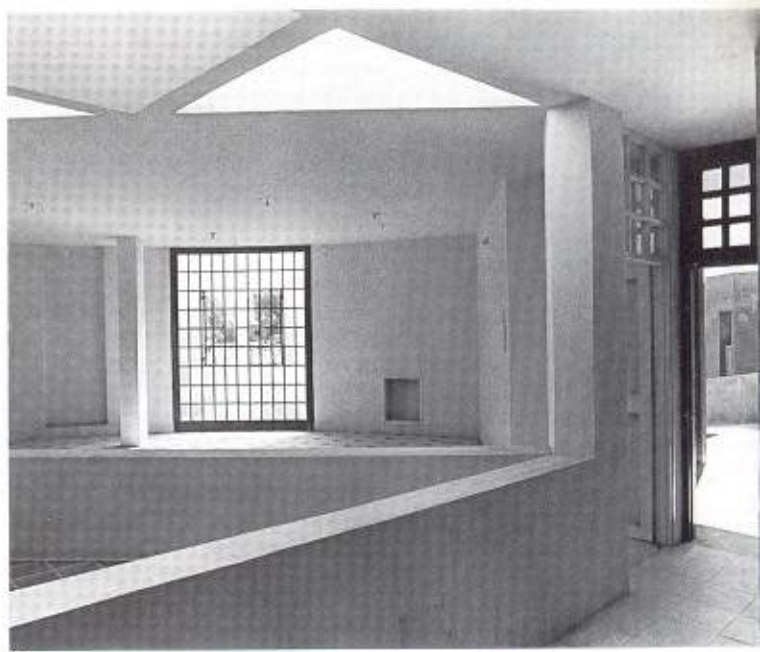


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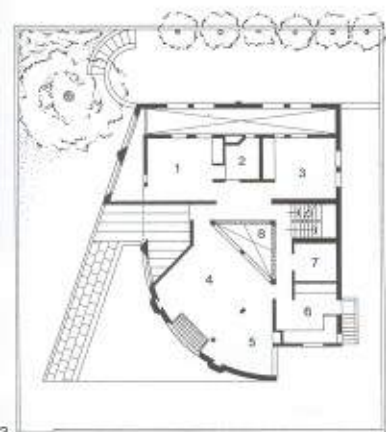
- 21 South facade, Vyas house, Beroda, designed by Jaimini Mehta.
- 22 Entry hall, Vyas house.
- 24 Section through Vyas house.
- 23 Upper level plan, Vyas house.
- 25 Lower level plan, Vyas house.
- 26 Abu Abraham house, Trivandrum, designed by Laurie Baker.
- 27 Courtyard, Abu Abraham house.
- 28 Ground floor plan, Abu Abraham house, Trivandrum.



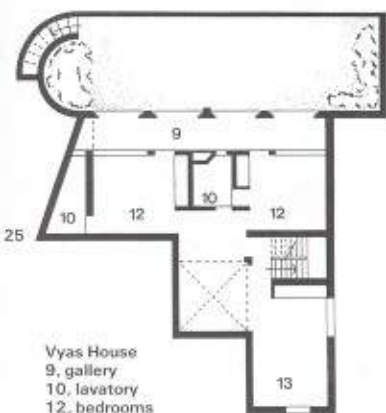
21



22



- Vyas house  
 1, bedroom  
 2, lavatory  
 3, bedroom  
 4, living room  
 5, dining room  
 6, kitchen  
 7, store  
 8, light well



- Vyas House  
 9, gallery  
 10, lavatory  
 12, bedrooms  
 13, family room

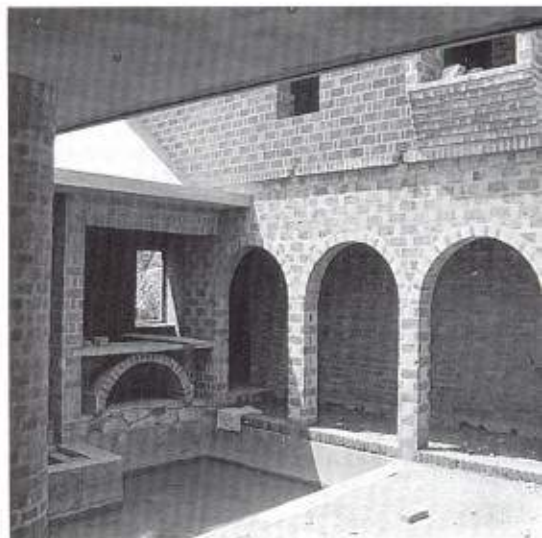


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sequences of space. But the kind of contemporary crafts tradition that Baker's architecture promotes has to be viewed from the perspective of Kerala and the constraints of an individual culture and local resources.

In the old neighbourhood of Trivandrum, the capital of the state, Baker's recent house for cartoonist/columnist Abu Abraham, stands among a group of earlier houses—some modern, with some not so successful imitations of the vernacular lending a kind of dubious lineage to the area. The rectilinear plan of the Abraham house projects an entrance portico to the outside but orients the main volume towards the internal focus of a courtyard. Behind the portico, the formal and informal living areas meet through a series of arched openings; the brickwork patterns and rat-trap bonding walls are left exposed. Random rubble stone foundations are allowed to rise and form an outer shell for the ground floor of the house.

The house, built in close co-ordination with the mason and the client, is eminently suited to the needs and lifestyle of its particular occupant. When Baker builds a house, it is created under the closest personal supervision. His constant presence at the site makes it possible for improvisations to be made as a matter of routine. In-built beds are designed on the spot, a wall is cut away for a view. Variations that would not be possible in the drawing office become a part of the process. Baker's daily presence at the site, like that of the Kamaths, allows the symbiosis between house and landscape, the established floor and existing terrain to occur in the most natural way.



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- Abu Abraham  
 1, studio  
 2, bedroom  
 3, bathroom  
 4, court  
 5, servant's room  
 6, lavatory  
 7, verandah  
 8, living room  
 9, entrance  
 10, dining room  
 11, kitchen



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