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A+D
DESIGN

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**THE INDIAN
ARCHITECT SPEAKS**

Pluralistic Architecture

Architect **Romi Khosla** in conversation with **Vandana Baweja** on pertinent aspects of
Indian architecture

In the course of your practice of over 22 years, you have made a significant contribution to the evolution of Indian architecture. Do you feel that Indian architecture has been successful in responding to changes in the social, technical, political, intellectual and economic scenario?

I don't believe that architecture is intended to respond to technical and economic scenarios. Architecture evolves over time. The Indian sub-continent has a craft based building industry that is beginning to get industrialised at the periphery. So, buildings are still hand-made and have industrialised components attached to them — that is the architecture of today. Tomorrow it may be different.

Indian architecture since Partition has reflected the concerns of the middle class. Architectural patronage has always come from the well-to-do middle class with a disposal income with which it wants to project its image. Money multiplying factories and real estate flatted buildings seldom are at the cutting edge of architectural ideas in the metropolitan cities of Mumbai and Delhi. The demonstration of architectural bravado is more often than not confined to farmhouses, hotels and private urban houses as well as institutional buildings whose managers wish to project a progressive image of their institution. There is a wide range of work going on in India and each architect is busy doing a wide range of work within his office. For example, we are designing mud brick primary schools for the villages in Andhra Pradesh as well as international level golf resorts; there is no apparent logic. The Indian architect is heroic, he will accept any challenge and is far bolder and more courageous than his western counterpart. He is trying to practice against enormous odds. Firstly, he has no professional support. For all intents our professional bodies such as the Institute and the Council are still suffering from birth pangs that have rendered them professionally sterile. Secondly, he is unable to find adequate space to work in because, as we all know, the real estate prices of Mumbai, Delhi and New York are on par. Thirdly, he is powerless to influence the fate of his cities which have been donated to the builder who is essentially corrupt. In this architecturally hostile environment you do need to be heroic to try and build good buildings.

It can be quite frustrating for any professional in India to cut across the red tape. Architects have been hassled by the dogmatic blanket rules which are not universally applicable as control mechanisms.

The bureaucracy, from my experience, does not involve itself with architectural concepts of the projects which it controls. It is, by and large, inefficient and causes enormous delays on all projects. There is a complete absence of any professionalism in dealing with architectural projects which the bureaucracy handles. Bureaucrats are indecisive, hide behind committees, changing their stand constantly. They are more committed to uphold procedure rather

than completing the project on time and within cost. The architect's work when dealing with the bureaucracy is affected because nobody in the bureaucracy is accountable to anybody. You cannot pinpoint the cause for delay. Unfortunately, architects get bored with these delays and the nation loses enormous wealth.

Do you feel it's possible to design buildings based on vastu on sites in cities which are not based on it? Isn't there a need to interpret vastu with a scientific temper in order to make our existence meaningful?

Cognitive sciences are going through a reawakening process. Phenomena which were debunked only a decade ago as potential medical remedies, for instance, are being heralded as cures. Cosmic scientists are confronting experimental findings that defy material logic. The re-emergence of vastu is only part of a world wide awakening to a universe that is jumping from boulder to boulder. There are no predetermined theories that can be relied on to lead us into the future. Anything is possible and the most unlikely discoveries can be made tomorrow. The sociological and scientific presuppositions of this century — assumptions are frayed in many places and new thinking is beginning to emerge on man's position on this planet. We have to be extremely open and unprejudiced if we want to be creative and unique. Vastu defines a theory for better living and it describes a number of constraints that a designer must bear in mind. Architects get embroiled in vastu even if they don't believe in it because their clients often insist on following the directives of the vastu shastra which is really part of the design brief of the architect given to him by his client. Personally I am fascinated by all the so-called "alternative" remedies and basis for knowledge because they give our otherwise cognitive lives such an interesting dimension. I believe that there are no limits to what we ought to know.

Do you believe that the quintessence of traditional Indian architecture lies solely in its surface treatment and intricate decoration to the extent that the surface treatment undermines the spatial orders? What in your opinion is the source of strength of contemporary Indian architecture?

Contemporary architecture is saddled with the same problems that beset contemporary life. India has a vast architectural heritage and the phrase "Indian architecture" is as meaningful or meaningless as the term "Indian mind". In trying to define what is Indian, there could be a tendency to identify it as Hindu Indian. We will then certainly have to accept that the Taj Mahal is an imported structure, that potatoes and tomatoes are not Indian because the missionaries from Portugal brought them here and also that the sword is imported from Afghanistan. As we start throwing out the imported cultural artefacts from India, we will be left only with our own mud because that was not brought here by anybody. The truth is that India is like a funnel into which everything keeps getting poured. How lucky we

are! That is the strength of our architecture.

We have witnessed a steady retrogression of workmanship and craftsmanship, which was the hallmark of our traditional architecture. What can be done to rectify the situation?

Craft skills are our greatest assets; they can enable us to produce buildings that are quite unique. It is significant that many architects have been overwhelmed by the Indian temple at Neasden in England, which was handcrafted by craftsmen who went from here. People in an industrialised country find it difficult to conceive hand-made buildings today. Hand craft skills should always be incorporated into our buildings — a building incorporating hand craft can be very contemporary. It is a mistake, I believe, to associate hand craft with antiquity and aluminium with modernity. A skilled craftsman can create unique steel columns if he is given an opportunity. Currently, I am working on a project where such skills are being used to enrich steel components in buildings. A craftsman today does not have to be confined to stone and wood. If you give him an opportunity to work in steel and concrete, miraculous results can emerge. The hand craft resource of our civilization is to be viewed as a moving stream of skill and sensitivity and craftsmen should not be viewed as potential workers on restoration projects only. To me, the uppermost idea is related to discovering how to allow the stream of craft skills to flow into contemporary buildings. It is not possible to do this in all buildings, but it is certainly possible in some of them.

How do you resolve the conflict, to provide an architectural solution which is cosmopolitan and contemporary on one hand, yet endowed with regional virtuosity on the other? Do you feel we seriously need to evolve an 'ism' called 'modern regionalism' or do you believe it is an oxymoron?

When an architect designs a building, he certainly projects his patron, but equally important is the fact that he also projects his point of view. I am aware of the definitions that draw a distinction between modern and regional and those distinctions are not important for me.

The West developed the credo of modernism at an enormous cost to themselves. I hope that our civilization never goes through that wasteful process. Within this century, the West developed enormous weapons of destruction which were used on its own people. In the two world wars and one revolution, over 50 million people were slaughtered and entire cities reduced to rubble. It was this destruction which concluded with the atomic explosion on Japan that enabled the West to ride the modern charger through their own land and later in more distant lands. So, modernism automatically implied a radical change from the past. Modernism, I believe, is part of a continuing saga in India. Seeing it as a dramatic break from the past is something I cannot do — we would need to kill 50 million and to rebuild our cities to be convinced that the modern is radically different from all that has happened in the past.

How do you explain your pluralistic architecture and the lack of any coherent style or 'ism' in your work?

Sometimes an architectural student meets me and asks me about my style. One of them even said "so and so suggested that I talk to you about my thesis on post-modernism." The truth is that I have



been designing buildings without any stylistic uniformity. You could call it plurality or you could also call it chaotic and confused. Personally I might call it stylistically "empty". Emptiness as a concept is important to me and it originates in Buddhist literature and explores the idea of multiple truths. Our buildings are located in the Himalayas and in the Indian Ocean, some are located in Assam and others in Rajasthan. To each place one proceeds with an emptiness within one, without the baggage of a predetermined style to determine what sort of building will improve the well being of its inhabitants. Architectural critical theory is full of categories and stylistic divisions whose names end with 'ism'. Such categories are convenient ways to

label and digest the bewilderment of the urban styles of our cities. I have a feeling, however, that heroic architecture is generally picked out and written about, while 99 per cent of the urban environment is depressing and ignored. I think what is really important is to create beautiful buildings that will be on par with any preserved monument of the past. How difficult it is for us to believe in our work to such an intensity that we design and detail it in a way that it can compete for a presence on this earth, with the beautiful heritage of the past. If my work is stylistically pluralistic, it is because I am continuously searching for the way to make even one of my buildings feel remotely eternal.

There has been a phenomenal increase in the number of schools of architecture, yet one finds that there is a dearth of a vibrant and rich curriculum. Fresh graduates have to learn, unlearn and relearn quite a few things. It is imperative for schools to be ahead of their times and encourage students to cultivate an attitude, an acumen or a vision. Where do you think education has failed?

I believe that it is too easy to be critical of our schools of architecture. We ought to view them as a part of our entire educational framework. Our educational framework is placed on the edge of the changing times in which traditional feudal attitudes still prevail amongst the teachers who wish to control and influence the student's output. The student, in order to get through, finds it easier to please the teacher and to produce "acceptable" answers. Also, the legacy of ancient and colonial times continues to linger like thick smoke in a room and students are expected to be trained to do well 'in service'. Our education system has not failed anymore than our democratic system has failed. Both are alive and prospering. Luckily, we are an incredibly intelligent people with an over-developed sense of the pragmatic. The bright ones go abroad, some come back, but the fact remains that many of our buildings are recognized globally. Some of our architects are also well-known abroad.

The West is witnessing an obsessive stress on theory. How do you react to architecture emerging out of philosophies? Do you feel we have an avant-garde in architecture?

Theories and practice are the essence of architecture. No matter how outlandish an idea or building, it can be relevant to architecture. Architects are like eagles flying in the sky, turning their heads from side to side, to try and see more clearly what is happening on the theoretical and practical ground below. The farther we fly, the better our inspiration.

What does architecture mean to you — in its simplest abstract sense

and at the other level in its diverse, complex manifestation?

Architecture means a lot to any architect. It is his route to get to know the world around him. An architect views the world through architecture. Even when he is watching a film, his eyes will react first to the set in the background, then to the hero and the heroine pounding the floor with their anatomy.

Which of your project do you consider as a 'complete one' where you have been able to transmute all your beliefs and ideas into built form with an expressive architectural vocabulary?

I cannot say that I have been satisfied, pleased or delighted with

any of my own projects. One or two I can regard as worthy of visiting again. But the search is still on for a building which I will regard as beautiful even after five years of its completion. I don't believe that I have acquired the depth of knowledge yet, that will enable me to design a building that will transform itself beyond the material and the physical space with which it has been constructed.

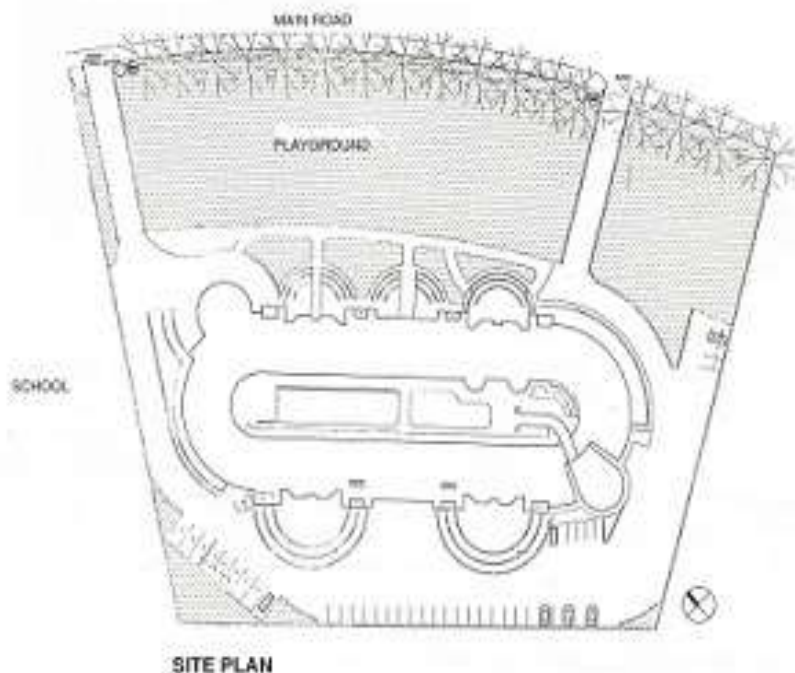
Romi Khosla (b 1941) graduated in economics from Cambridge University and architecture from the Architectural Association, London. He has been in practice as head of GRUPINDIA for over 20 years and been a consultant to the UNDP for urban renewal projects in Tibet, Central Asia and Egypt.

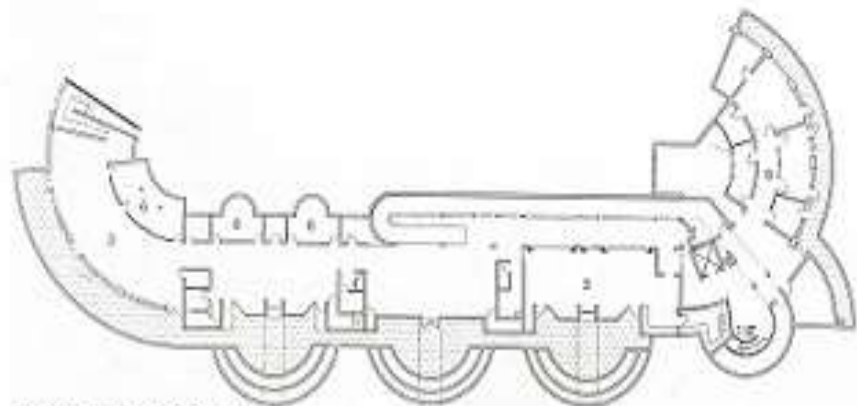
School for Spastic Children, New Delhi

Architect **Romi Khosla**

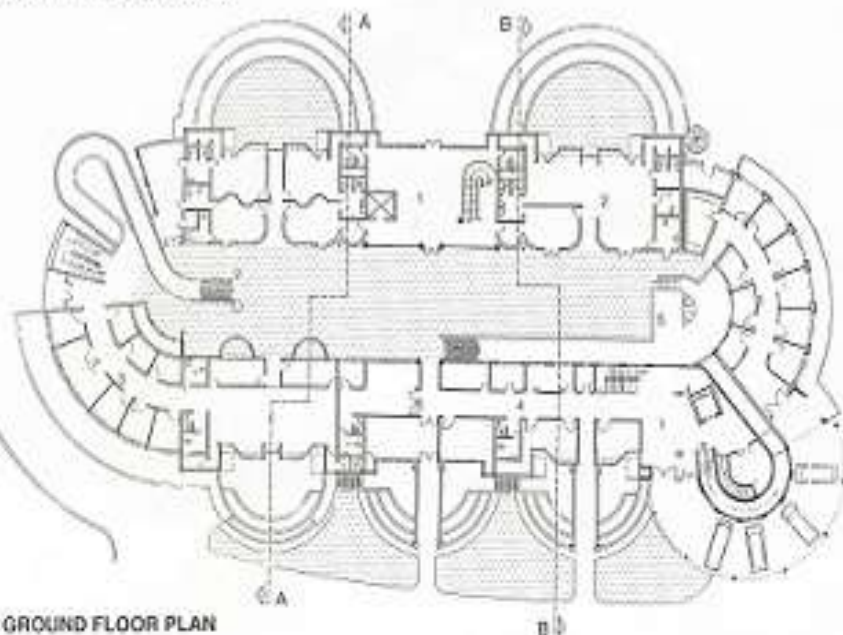
The design proposals for the school were guided by an extremely dedicated group of teachers who work there. The realisation of schools for spastic children located in Calcutta, Delhi and Mumbai, as well as some rural areas around Delhi, are the result of the untiring efforts of a few individuals. Armed only with a unique determination and a vision which subsequently inspired hundreds of people, the clients went about founding the first of the many schools in a church building in Mumbai. Subsequently this zeal spread and a new building was built in Delhi, India did not have any prototypes for this type of an institution and the ones abroad were all adapted from buildings built for some other purpose.

Many days were spent in discussions and observing the children, sitting in classes, and attending functions before finalising the proposals. The design was intended to reflect the special world of the spastic child. The central courtyard, the ramps and the internal decks as indeed the form of the whole building could be regarded as a ship on a special voyage, except that the decks are on the inside of the ship. The building is more inward looking than outwardly designed. The wheel chair

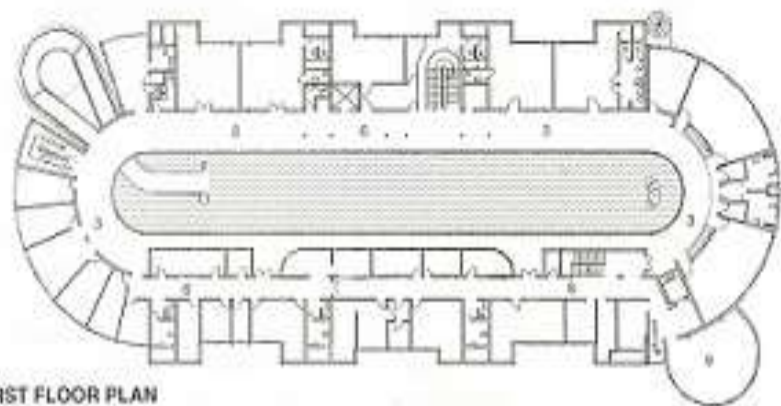




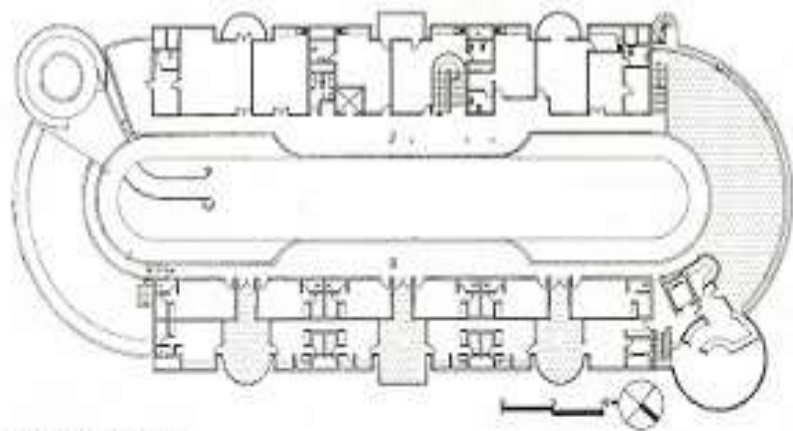
BASEMENT FLOOR PLAN



GROUND FLOOR PLAN



FIRST FLOOR PLAN

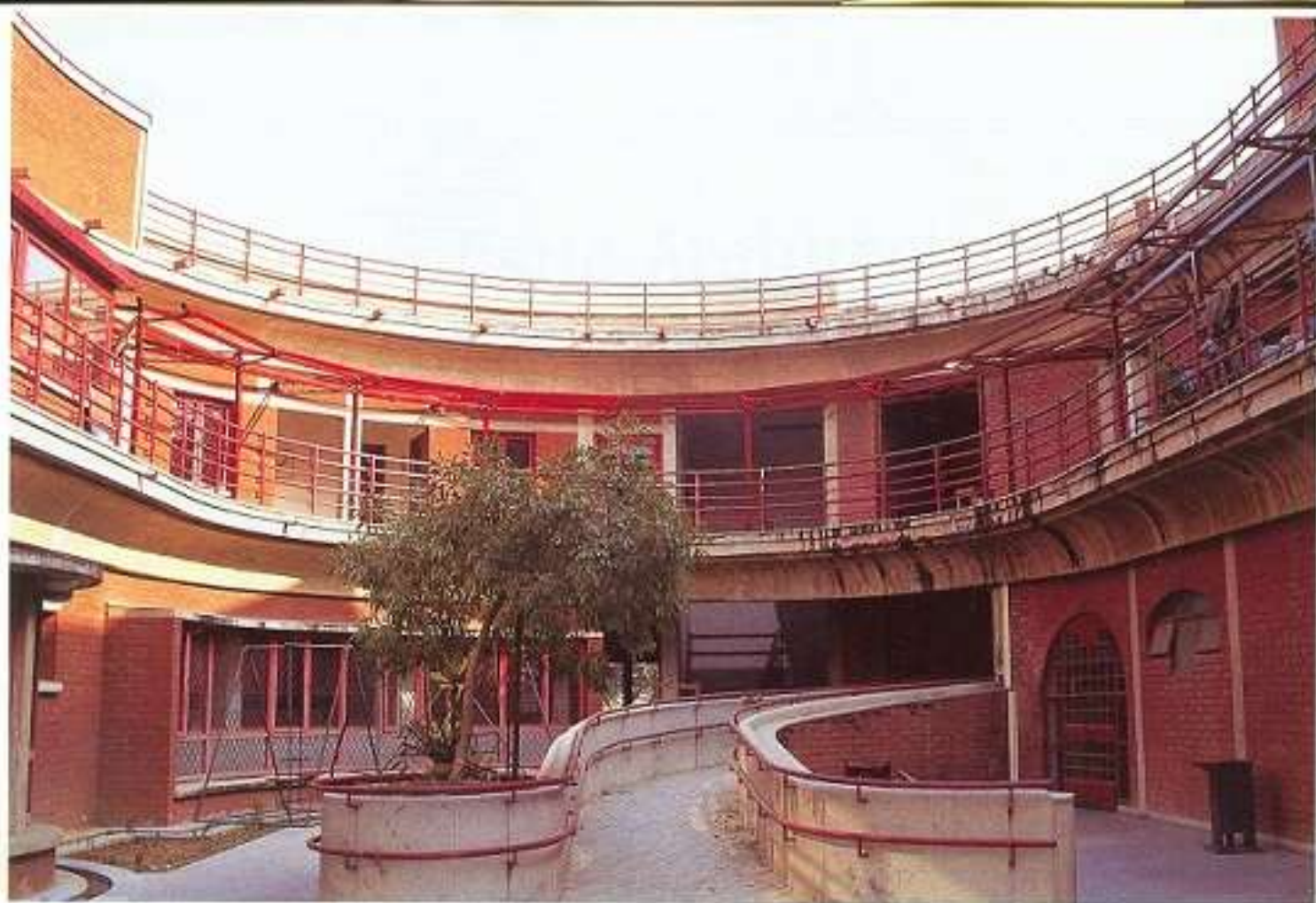


SECOND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 RECEPTION
- 2 THERAPY ROOMS
- 3 TEACHING SPACES
- 4 COUNSELLING ROOMS
- 5 OPEN-AIR STAGE
- 6 OFFICES
- 7 STAFF FLATS
- 8 ROOMS
- 9 LIBRARY



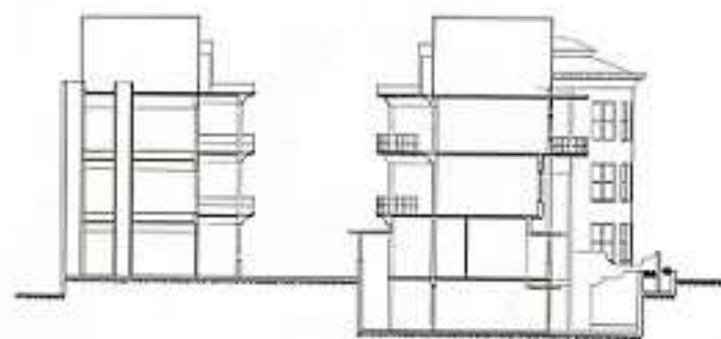
Top Courtyard view
Above Part detail of facade treatment



Courtyard view



FRONT ELEVATION



SECTION B-B

accesses all parts of the building and banks of toilets are provided between teaching spaces. Lifting a child to the toilet can be exhausting for a teacher and a centralised bank

of toilets was deemed most inappropriate. The staff, too, needed to be considered as very special people.

The top floor has been slotted for the residential accommodation of the staff with terraces looking outwards, away from the central court. When they sit on the terraces after an exhausting day, they can reflect on an entirely different landscape which surrounds the exterior of the building.

The school is an extremely complex series of inter-related spaces which are continuously undergoing change in functions. It was necessary to

provide the maximum flexibility for an institution that is constantly undergoing change as it develops its philosophy and techniques for imparting knowledge to spastic children and their parents. ✦

*Drawings courtesy the architect
Photographs by Vandana Banerji*

Client The Spastic Society of Northern India

Design Team Romit Khosla, Chandu V Arshikere

Consultants SEMAC, Ramesh Pangasa (structure), M K Gupta (sanitary), T S Sethi (electrical), Arvind Bhatnagar (municipal)

Cost Rs 4,00,00,000 approximately
Year of Completion 1995-97