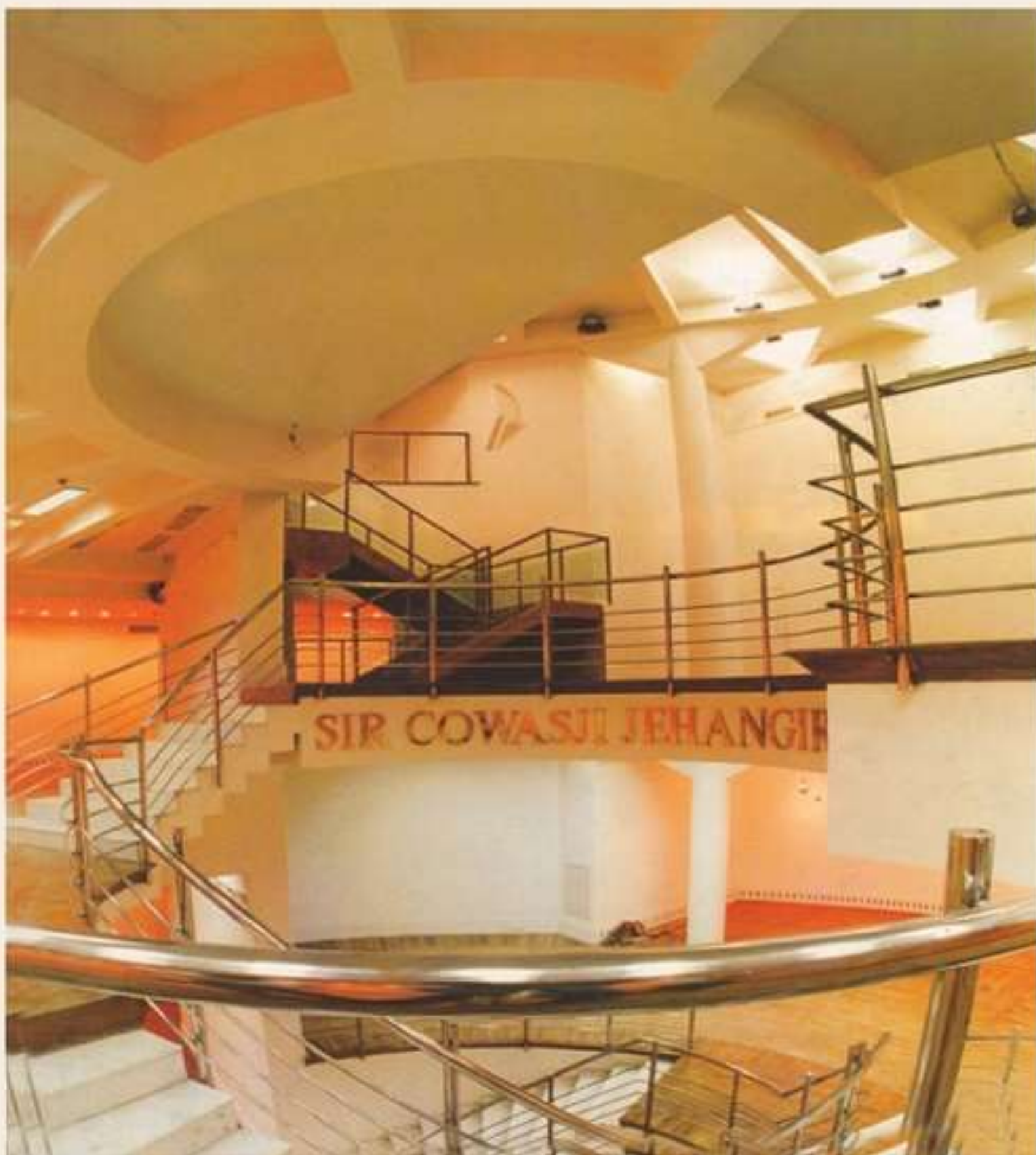


INSIDE OUTSIDE

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AN AMAZING TRANSFORMATION

IT'S BEEN A PROLONGED WAIT, A PROTRACTED RENAISSANCE. NOW, OVER ELEVEN YEARS OF WORK, IMPEDIMENT, AND BUREAUCRACY LATER, THE CAWASJI JEHANGIR HALL AT BOMBAY'S REGAL CIRCLE HOVERS ON THE BRINK OF COMPLETION.

TEXT: KAUMUDI MARATHE PHOTOGRAPHS: NOSHIR GOBHAI

The delay has been worthwhile. From the outside, the old stone structure looks cleaner and crisper, boasting new doors and old-fashioned street lamps. But on the whole, at first glance, the building is still recognisably the C J Hall. Step in and you'll discover that Delhi-based conservation architect Romi Khosla has entirely transformed the old building into a much-needed city branch of the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA). The people credited with giving the city's art and culture scene a boost, while at the same time preserving a heritage structure and putting it to good use, must be applauded.

The Hall, in the elegant east wing of the Institute of Science, was originally donated to the city by philanthropist Sir Cawasji Jehangir Readymoney. The entire curving, semicircular yellow basalt structure was designed by George

Wittet, the designer of many of Bombay's great colonial buildings, including the Prince of Wales Museum across the road.

Constructed in Renaissance style, the Hall is circular on the inside, and ringed by verandahs. Its foundation stone was laid in 1911, and the structure completed nine years later. Sir Cawasji Jehangir intended it as a public centre for cultural activities, particularly theatre. But as his grandson, painter Jehangir Sabavala, recalled, 'The Hall has been put to various uses since its construction. It was the only hall of its kind at the time. The Bombay Symphony Orchestra conducted by Zubin Mehta has played here. The distinguished black singer, Paul Robeson, sang here too.'

'Originally the emphasis was on Parsee events. By the 1950s, other halls like Sunder Bhai, Patkar, and Birla Matushree had been built, and the C J Hall was

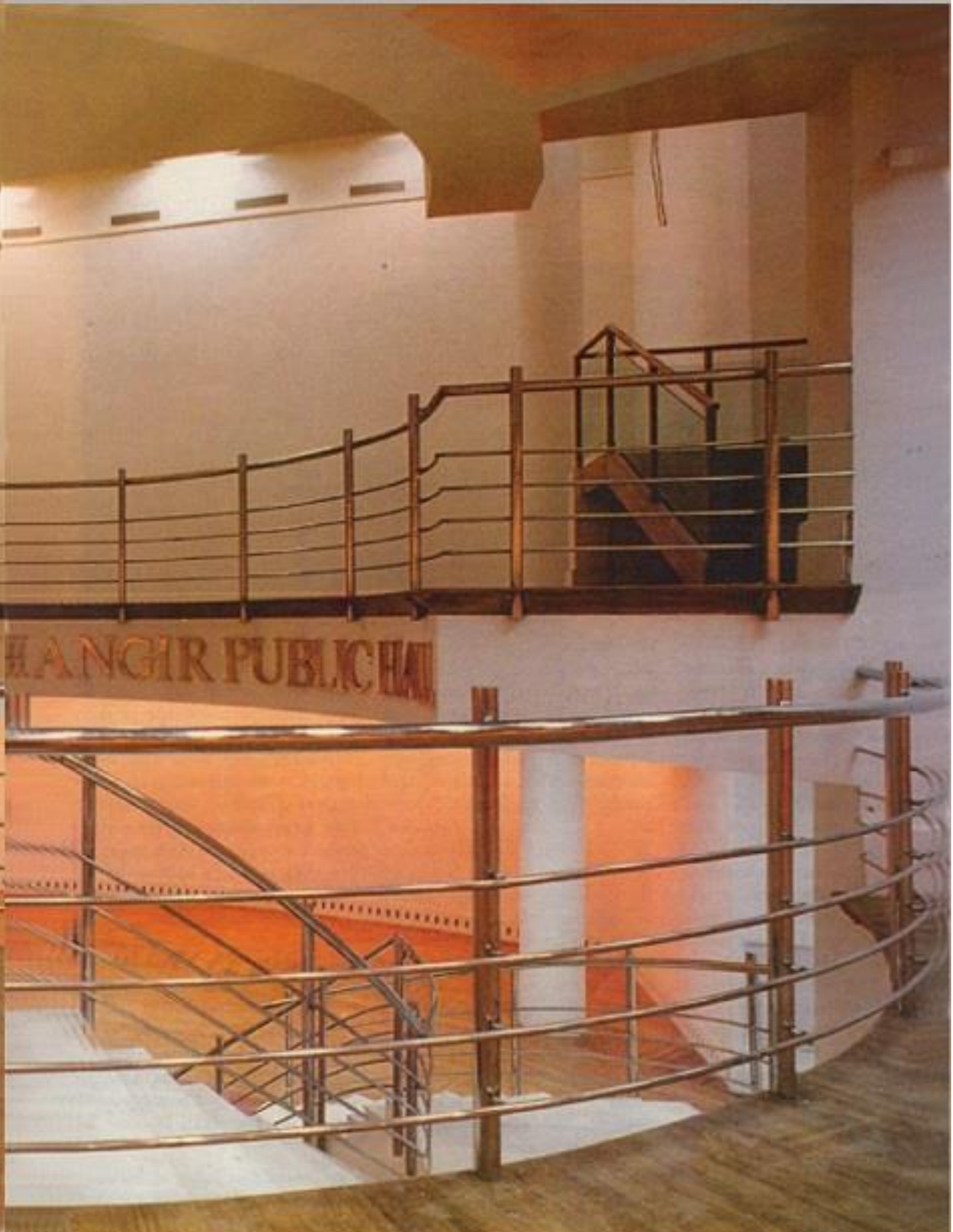
considered old-fashioned. It was then used as a boxing ring, with matches taking place on its wonderful stage. It also was used as a bazaar where sarees were sold. Over time, it became shabby and ill-maintained.'

According to Sabavala, in the 1980s, a group of local artists and art lovers decided that the city needed a museum of contemporary art and made the suggestion to the Maharashtra government. Though it approved of the idea, it lacked the funds to carry through such a project itself, so the proposal was sent to the Centre. 'Indira Gandhi thought it was a marvellous suggestion and was typically brisk in giving her consent,' explained the painter.

As the group of artists had very definite views about what should be done with the building and a gallery of such proportions, it was decided to establish a monitoring committee, headed by the

OPPOSITE: *The Cawasji Jehangir Hall.*

While the spaces along the rim are left free for exhibits, the central channel of stairs and banisters which, apart from variety, provides interesting breaks in the white expanse, and a juxtaposition of lines in steel, marble, brass, iron and wood. The central stair allows people going from one exhibit to another a clear view of everything before and below them.





Ministry of Culture, 'The group consisted of Krishna Hebbar, Charles Correa, myself, several ministers who changed over the years, and Central Public Works Department (CPWD) officials,' said Sabavala.

Before Khosla, who also conducts assessment of world heritage sites for UNESCO and believes in selective conservation, preserving the craft process, and revitalising historic urban areas, could begin work on the structure, it had to be assessed by the CPWD. The architect explained. 'The Hall was transferred on 27 July 1984 by the Government of India to the Department of Culture for 30 years for a branch of the NGMA to be opened.'

While the CPWD examined the

structural soundness of the building, it also ascertained the feasibility of proposing additional construction. 'The Hall was described as being 80 feet in diameter, of exposed Malad stone facing over coursed rubble masonry,' said Khosla. 'It is enclosed by a covered, eight-foot wide verandah. The walls are two feet, nine inches thick. There are two viewers' galleries, each with a capacity of 264 seats under a domed roof.'

Though the department found the structure in a satisfactory condition, it warned, 'Any new addition will have to be self-supporting and independent of the existing structure.' Khosla's response was to retain the building's circularity while changing its use entirely. 'Conservation can be

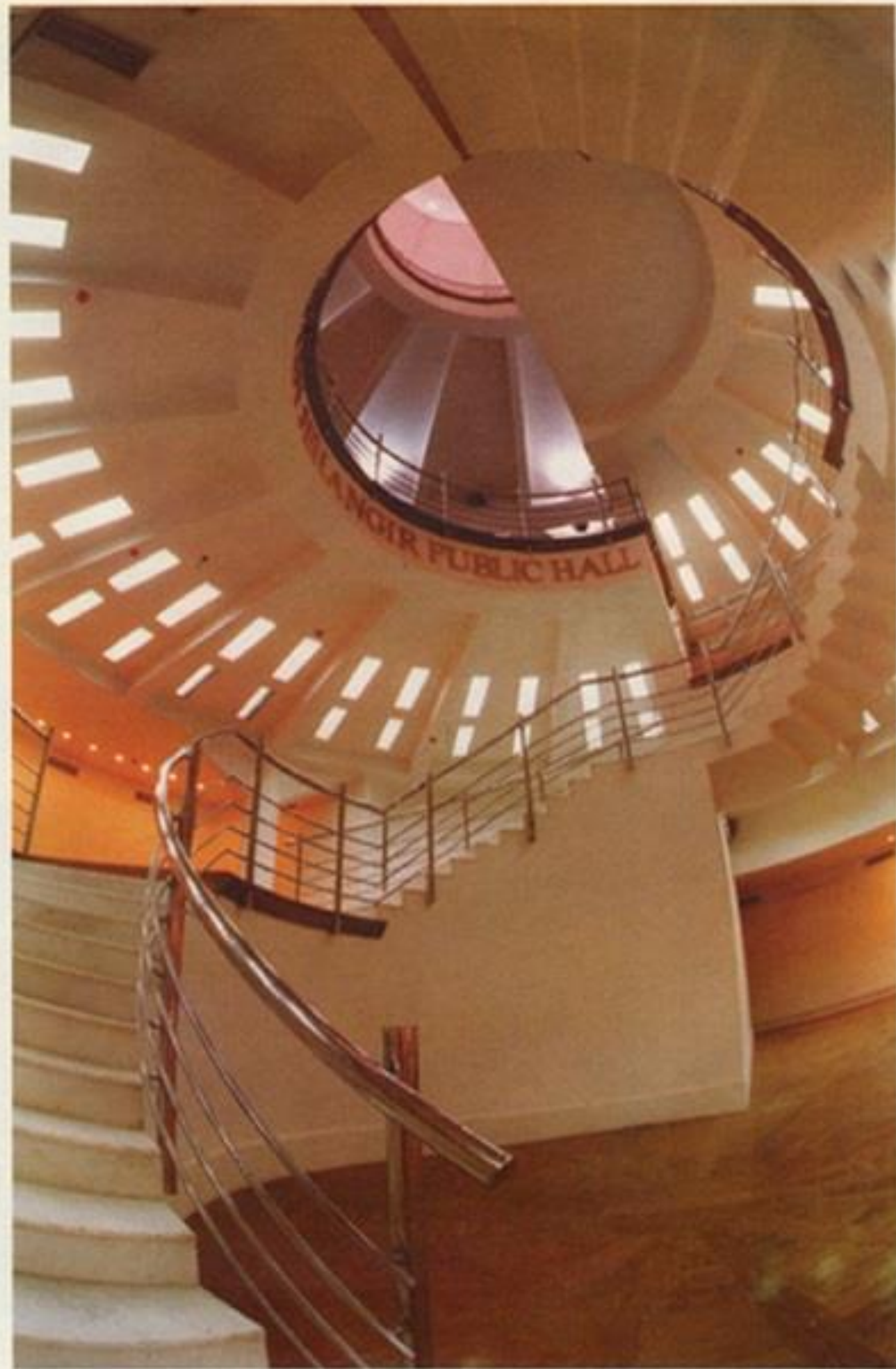
done in several ways,' he said. 'The conservation of a national monument like the Taj at Agra is very different from that of the Cawasjee Jehangir Hall.'

'For the latter there were two choices — the first was its restoration as a theatre, which would have meant resurrecting the entire theatre movement. And chances are that as one's approach to drama and theatre has changed, the facilities necessary for it have altered, so it may not have been suitable today. The second choice was to change the use of the building.'

He explained that the decision to convert it into an art gallery was taken by the owners. 'My challenge was to see how it could be done. The Hall is one of

ABOVE: Looking down from the 2nd level. Different materials used in the stairs create texture. The smaller of the split-level galleries are visible.

OPPOSITE: A view from the ground floor gallery all the way up to the skylight, showing the spiralling seasbell effect of the split-level galleries.





Bombay's 600 heritage buildings, which the heritage committee clearly indicated could not be demolished or structurally changed in any way by a new design.'

So Khosla built within the existing structure. 'I did this for two reasons. First of all, the weight that the old structure might withstand was not known. Second, in principle it is always better to leave the building as is, and make interventions inside. Our independent structure makes changes reversible.'

His design also had to reflect the requirements of the monitoring committee, which included:

- the provision of the maximum amount of space on floors and walls for paintings, drawings, graphics, and sculpture
- an auditorium to seat approximately 120 people, its use to be related to the visual arts
- central air-conditioning
- storerooms, and sophisticated and complete fireproofing.

While the old gallery had 5,000 square feet of space, the new, centrally air-conditioned, fireproof interior possesses 30,000 square feet and a high level of lighting to allow for the flexibility of moving exhibits. The internal walls are at a two-foot distance from the original ones, and are made of gypsum board fixed on metal frames.

The configuration includes six, free-form exhibition spaces for paintings and sculpture; a small, wood-paneled auditorium, complete with lighting for stage performances and a projector booth for film screenings; offices; storerooms and elevator. Future plans include a cafeteria, restrooms, and a library. There is also a proposal to seal the covered verandahs

Standing at the edge of the central stairway, one gets an uninterrupted view of the gallery below.