Charles Correa

Museums: An Alternate Typology

In his MIT seminars in the 1950s, Professor Gyorgy Kepes would discuss the notion of "museum fatigue": those feelings, ranging from ennui to fallen arches, that many museum-goers experience as they trudge through the Louvre or the Prado. He would then emphasize the need for contrapuntal areas, where the eye—and the mind—could rest.

This insight came vividly to mind when, as a young architect back in India, I was asked to design the Smarak Sangrahalaya for Mahatma Gandhi at the Sabarmnati Ashram in Ahmedabad. This memorial museum, to be located next to Gandhi's own house, would contain his letters, photographs, and other documentary material about his life and the freedom movement he headed. Since more such historic documents were sure to be identified and collected through the years, I realized that the museum itself would have to grow—in the process allowing each generation to pay its own respects to the Mahatma (an idea somewhat influenced by the Ise shrine in Japan).

A building in memory of Mahatma Gandhi cannot be the same as one to commemorate Charles de Gaulle—or Jawaharlal Nehru, for that matter. They were all very different individuals. And so this museum itself, through its intrinsic form, would have to express the message of the man: human-scaled, unpretentious, modest. With this as a starting point, the building very soon designed itself—as a series of pavilions, some open and some enclosed, interspersed with courtyards and a water pool. The mood is one of calmness and contemplation, qualities that

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the Mahatma exemplified and that are essential to any scholar attempting to understand his ethos. Of decisive importance to the creation of this mood are, of course, the "rest" spaces—those open areas that interlock with the enclosed ones.

This question of the context we provide for the object (and the validation, or the distortion, it can cause) is central to any discussion of museum design. It has, of course, already been brilliantly articulated by the great scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy. Writing almost a century ago, he warned against the falsification inherent in the very act of putting any object "on display"—i.e., skewing it onto an antiseptic museum wall, far removed from its own natural context. Thus, the mud pot, used in an Egyptian village to draw water from the well, has completely different connotations when caught in a beam of halogen light at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Regardless of our intentions, we have irrevocably changed its meaning.

The symbiotic relationship between container and contained was the key issue in the design of the National Crafts Museum in Delhi, built to house the finest examples of folk art and handicraft in India (figure 1). This includes, for instance, the magnificent mud horses that come from various villages in South India. Villagers make these horses neither for sale nor display, but as part of sacred rituals, which they perform on special festival days. How can one "show" them without falsifying their meaning? Here the client, Pupul Jayakar, came up with a simple, but brilliant, suggestion. Instead of arranging the thousands of items in the museum's collection chronologically, or by geographical location within India, or even by the materials and techniques used (all of which would serve to distance the viewer from the object), she came up with a marvelously simple structure. There would be just three categories: village crafts, sacred crafts, and court crafts. All three are vitally important to any understanding of India—in fact, they constitute a paradigm that can be used to comprehend many other crucial aspects of this country as well. From this *parti*, the design developed very easily. We created an open-to-sky pathway, a sort of meandering street that goes right down through the heart of the museum—from village to temple to palace. Off this street are the various galleries, which are also connected

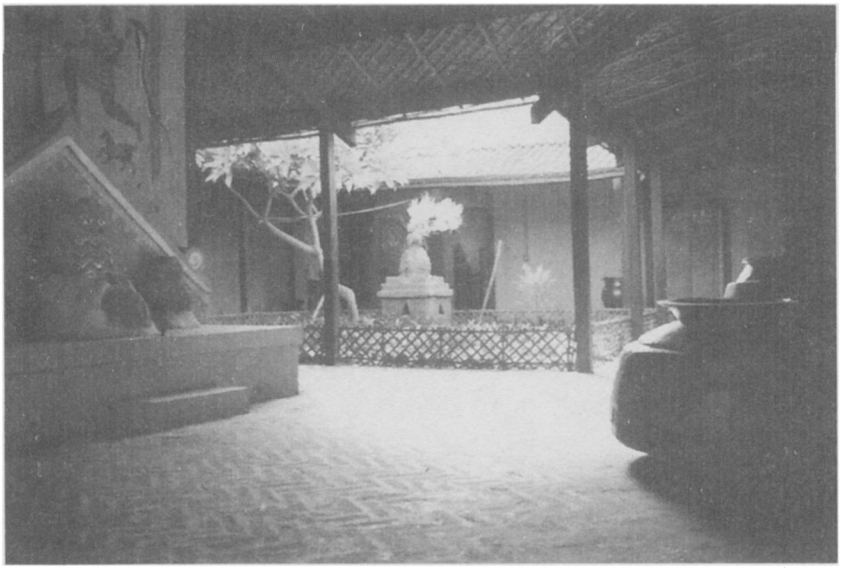

Figure 1: National Crafts Museum, Delhi. Courtesy of Jyotindra Jain.

internally. Thus, you can either cover the whole museum at once, or visit only those galleries you wish to see, and in the order you prefer—so that the narrative is not proscribed and linear, but created anew each time. As in the Gandhi museum, the crucial element is the open-to-sky space—each time one emerges out into the street, the eye clears. Very soon the street, and one's progress down it from village to temple to palace, seems to become a metaphor for India herself.

Two other projects that make use of this typology (i.e., the disaggregation of the museum's intrinsic form and the movement through the open-to-sky spaces that lie between) are the Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal and the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur (figure 2). Both are art centers. The former is situated on a hillside that slopes gently down to the lake, setting up a series of descending courtyards and terraces, off of which are located various galleries and other facilities. The latter is an ambitious exercise, a metaphor for Nehru and for the city of Jaipur itself—an extraordinary creation by Maharaj Jai Singh based on the oldest myths of the *Navgraha* (the mandala of the nine

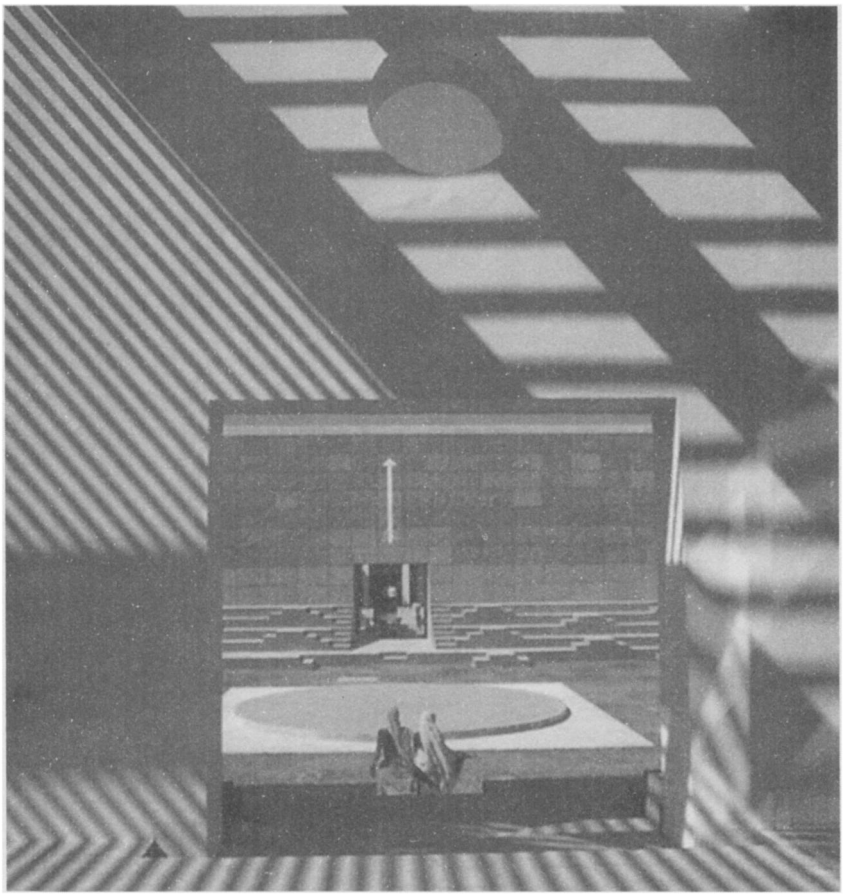

Figure 2: Jawahar Kala Kendra, Jaipur. Courtesy of Mahindra Sinh.

planets), as well as on the newest ones: Science and Rationality. In the Jawahar Kala Kendra, the client's brief was disaggregated into nine squares, each 100 feet by 100 feet, to correspond to the mythic qualities of these planets. Like Nehru himself, the building is double-coded, seeking simultaneously to rediscover India and to invent a new future for a new nation.

In all these examples, the contrapuntal open-to-sky areas are of primary importance—an approach that is perhaps somewhat more difficult to incorporate in a cold climate. It also complicates security systems for the institution, since the disaggrega-

tion of the intrinsic form necessitates that each subgroup has its own independent protection. But the rewards to the visitor can be considerable, and I was delighted to find these same principles at work in three different examples existing in quite diverse areas of the world. The first, about a decade ago, was a Howard Hodgkin exhibition at the Anthony D'Offray Gallery in London. The show was housed in three separate townhouses, each about a hundred yards apart, along a London street. They had to be visited in succession—and each time one returned to the street, one was back in the soft English rain. And then one stepped into the next townhouse and the magic started again. It was a wonderful way to view Hodgkin.

The second example is James Freed's unforgettable Holocaust Museum in Washington, where the excruciating experiences of the main galleries are interspersed with transitional areas that mark a clear change of rhythm. If these transitional spaces had not existed and the galleries flowed one into the next, the whole experience would have been fundamentally different. Here Freed is not using open-to-sky spaces, but he lets the harsh light falling on the grim vocabulary and construction materials of these transitional spaces transform them into the necessary punctuation points—a sort of architectural equivalent of Moussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition.*

The third example is Ramirez Vazquez's wonderful National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. Here one enters into a large rectangular courtyard surrounded by various galleries, each showing a different period of Mexican culture. The galleries are magnificent, but what dominates is the huge courtyard, with its *axis mundi* at the center: a single column holding up a cantilevered slab, from which a sheet of water cascades down. Standing in the middle of this vast space, one feels that it takes on a primordial symbolism—especially so because of the open-to-sky context in which it exists. If Vazquez had built the same column within a covered air-conditioned space, it would resemble just another upscale hotel lobby. In fact, that is probably what is happening to many museum typologies—and for much the same reasons that it happened to hotels: It is easier to monitor and safeguard a cocoon. Thus, while the old Raffles Hotel in Singapore, like the ones in Bombay and Hawaii, had

generous verandahs, the new hotels are fully air-conditioned sealed boxes.

Yet need this be so? Even today, a visit to the Topaki in Istanbul or the Red Fort in Agra—or, for that matter, the castle hovering above Edinburgh—involves a certain amount of moving through open-to-sky space. And in all sorts of weather. In fact, this movement, far from being a handicap, is essential to one's enjoyment of those experiences. Perhaps it is time we evolved alternate museum typologies—ones that take this fundamental truth into account.