



Charles Correa

In and out of Goa

Arguably India's best-known architect, and celebrated especially for the mythic content of his works, Charles Correa's projects in Goa were remarkably different from those outside.

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Designed by Charles Correa nearly 40 years ago, Kala Academy is probably Goa's best contemporary building.

This breezy, low-slung, and very popular arts centre and hang-out space in Campal, Panjim, is remarkable not just for a subtle historicism—the laterite-clad and sharp-angled frontage harking to Goa's old seaforts, the inner walls enlivened by dreamy images of Goan stairways, balustrades, and windows—but also because it is that rarity in India: a genuine public space, or even 'a public space roofed by a building'. (Burte 2008)

This public quality results from the openness of both its facilities and its architecture. The complex is rarely ever closed to the public, and welcomes a wide variety of people—not just artists, connoisseurs of art, and art students, but also patrons of the canteen, and friends, courting couples, and others who just need a place to meet. But openness is



The amphitheatre at Kala Academy, an arts institution in Goa

Buildings designed by Correa showcased an ingenuity with space and form, and what would become signature concepts like open-to-sky space, the tube-house that funnels air, and the expansive oversailing roof. (Frampton 1996)



also seen in the architecture, in the wide low gates and the expansively welcoming pergola-covered foyer that leads into a large thoroughfare which is the heart of the complex, providing access to everything else, and containing plenty of informal seating and a view of the Mandovi River right through, as if the building is nothing but a shady corridor from the road to the riverside.

The performances and exhibitions held here are often free or nearly so, with Tiatr shows in the mammoth 980-seater main auditorium usually sold out. I have been told that the Academy is the only place in India to host courses in both Indian and European classical music. The facilities include auditoria, exhibition spaces, a library, schools of theatre, music and dance, the canteen, and crucially for a public institution, a generous number of toilets (which were centrally, i.e. conveniently, located in Correa's original design, but shifted to a distant corner later), and a vast variety of independent seating, from the clusters in the thoroughfare, to the amphitheatre steps, the lawn and shady groves, the benches along the riverside promenade, and the movable chairs at the canteen tables.

Kala Academy's success as a public

institution is obvious in the high usage of all its facilities, and also the high levels of lingering and loitering on its premises (Viegas 2016), despite an administration that has sometimes clamped down on the free use of its spaces, like the toilets. One of the saddest things about it, however, is the lack of emulation. Many cultural centres, most of them state-run, have come up in Goa over the four decades since the Kala Academy, but boast a different kind of ambience: forbidding, closed, air-conditioned, and free of loiterers.

But if Kala Academy is a unique building for Goa, it was a bit unique for Charles Correa as well. Arguably India's best-known architect, Correa was Goan in heritage but spent most of his life and career away from Goa. One might in fact say, given his personal life, projects, writings, and advocacy, that he was an Indian from Bombay (today's Mumbai). He was born in 1930 to parents of Goan origin in Secunderabad, in British India, and spent most of his early years in Bombay, before going to the US for an education in architecture. When he decided to leave the US in 1958, it was for Bombay again, where he opened an office and from where he took up projects in Delhi, Ahmedabad, and other parts of



India, at a time when Goa was still part of the Estado da Índia.

Correa's rise to renown was rapid, and at least partially thanks to the context of nation-building; he opened his office just eleven years after the British left, a time when Indian governments, both national and provincial, were busy in proving that the new republic was a serious, modern and historic enterprise. It couldn't have hurt either that he hailed from a wealthy and influential family; architectural practice has always benefited from – perhaps even relied on – the right connections. He began with a bang, with plum institutional projects like Delhi's Handloom Pavillion (1958), and the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya at Ahmedabad (1958-63), along with many private residences. They showcased an ingenuity with space and form, and what would become signature concepts like open-to-sky space, the tube-house that funnels air, and the expansive oversailing roof. (Frampton 1996)

Prestigious projects continued through the sixties and seventies, including government and public sector buildings, corporate headquarters and large hotels. He designed a lot of housing as well,

some of which were built –mostly private homes, upmarket apartments like Bombay's Kanchenjunga (1970-83), and also public sector housing like Bombay's LIC colony (1972) – while others, especially many proposals for low cost housing, were never realised. On his way to making an international splash in the nineties, at MIT, New York, Toronto, and Lisbon, he had become probably the closest to a public figure that any Indian architect could be, which is saying a lot in a country where the majority still respond to the word 'architect' with a blank stare.

This stare is not surprising, for the field of architecture has generally been, notwithstanding honourable exceptions, socially and politically conservative, and focussed on the needs of the elite. Correa was, however, one of the few Indian architects to speak out about the public environment, especially to criticise the disaster that is Indian urbanism, calling out 'our criminal indifference' to the 'subhuman conditions' of Indian cities. He offered solutions too, which were almost always ignored. He proposed a redesign of Mumbai's streets to provide for hawkers and pedestrians (1968); it was not taken up. He made proposals for expanding Mumbai's green spaces; they were

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Jawahar Kala Kendra, a multi arts centre located in Jaipur



Façade of British Council of India building in Delhi

never taken up. He offered solutions for affordable housing; they were taken up only as a few stand-alone projects, like at Belapur (1986). He called for decongesting Mumbai and bringing down housing prices through the development of New Bombay; this was taken up but along with the simultaneous reclamation of Nariman Point, sending real estate prices rocketing upwards instead. He maintained a presence on government and public sector commissions on urbanisation and housing, which made no difference to the mess in both areas. He didn't give up though, arguing furiously and futilely for the need to use Mumbai's old mill lands for mass housing and green spaces, and in Goa, in the last decade of his life, for the need for people-centric and environment-conscious regional plans, and pedestrianised towns with mass public transport.

Was it all this futile advocacy that won him some of India's highest state awards? Or was it for the increasing 'Indianness' of his designs? The latter tendency won critical acclaim for 'demonstrating an authentic modernity that superceded the condescending orientalism and stale imports of colonialism' (Rykwert 2015), and 'finding inspirational depth in the mythic and cosmological beliefs of the past' (Frampton 1996). Most later works, like Bhopal's Bharat Bhavan (1981), Jawahar Kala Kendra (1992), the National Crafts Museum (1991), and the Intra-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (1993), prominently incorporate Vedantic concepts like the mandala and bindu, and Brahmanical temple spaces like the ritual pathway and kund. These were concepts that he considered the essence of India, or even Asia. As he put it: '... to us in Asia, the symbol of

education has never been the Little Red Schoolhouse of North America, but the guru sitting under the tree' (Correa, 1996).

But, unlike the little red schoolhouse, the guru was never for all. Most of the old and traditional Indian concepts that Correa adopted were exclusionary ones that segregated people by birth. For example, his inspiration for the layout of New Bagalkot town (1985) was that of the temple-town of Srirangam, a pattern of concentric rectangles generated by traditional social hierarchies.

It was this uncritical celebration of India's exclusionary traditions in art and spatial design that perhaps made him unable to call out the cultural roots of the urban horror that he railed against. For it has to be something inherently cultural that



Gandhi memorial museum at Sabarmati Ashram reflects a contemporary expression for the spirit of swadeshi.



Beautifully erected Kullu Hut at the Crafts Museum in Delhi

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can produce and accept the obscene differences in space, infrastructure, and access that make India’s ‘Great City’ such a ‘Terrible Place’, as Correa described Mumbai in 2002. How can you have decent housing for the poor in a society which sees them as inferior and thus undeserving?

But he somehow managed to leave this conflicting baggage behind when in Goa. He did only one more public project here, the Margao Railway Station, a low-key but pleasantly functional building. His other three Goan projects – the very upmarket Cidade de Goa hotel, Dona Sylvia resort, and Verem Villas – are part of the privatised hospitality and residential sectors so dominant in today’s Goa. The five projects show commonalities in spatial design and detailing, but it is Kala Academy that sticks out, not just for its architectural ambience but also for the powerful message this contains, one that surely stems from its location – Goa. It is a message about the common heritage of Goa and Goans, the natural landscape and resources, and the Portuguese-inflected culture. Even the well-

dressed Europeanised folks depicted watching the performance in the big auditorium, who might be taken to represent Goan Christian elites, actually reflect the Christianised culture of all Goans. In fact, according to Kaustubh Naik, PhD scholar and theatre director, “Kala Academy is an aspirational venue for Goan theatre artists, especially from remote villages, because it is at once an elite space that fits perfectly into the old residential district of Campal, rubbing shoulders with the feudal homes of Panjim’s elites, and yet is not just accessible but owned by all who perform there”.

It is this confidence in a heterogeneous, cosmopolitan and Christianised culture, a culture that seems like a hope, or a dream to have overcome the barriers of caste, that resonates in Correa’s Kala Academy. But Goa is rapidly becoming India, and that is why the toilets had to be hidden away. That is why the relaxed confidence of the built form, surface imagery and public welcome of Kala Academy is one of a kind, a mirage of what might be if the best of our heritage could meet a socially inclusive present. 

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