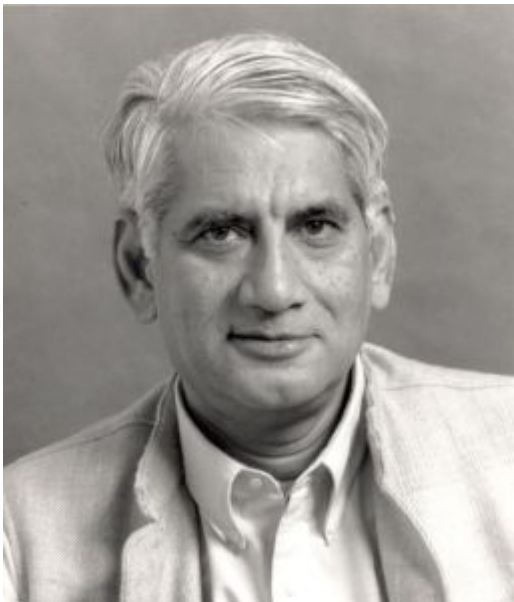




Writing in *The Guardian* (19 June, 2015), architectural historian Joseph Rykwert hails Charles Correa as the “premier architect of India whose authentic modernity superseded stale colonial imports.” Of the many tributes that have followed Correa’s passing away, Rykwert’s seems most problematic. Nonetheless, it allows us to reflect on the nature of Correa’s work.

But before I proceed to an analysis of Correa’s work and philosophy, we need to acknowledge the role of Nehru in appropriating modern architecture to represent post-independent identity of India. He achieved this in one swooping move by commissioning of the Modernist international architect, Le Corbusier, for the design of the new city of Chandigarh. The exposed-reinforced-concrete buildings of Chandigarh, built between 1951 and 1965, stood in complete contrast to the colonial architecture of pre-independent India. This was a dramatic change from the styles prior to independence. Consequently this modern style inspired many Indian architects that followed, and Correa was no exception.



Correa’s post-colonial modernity is amply demonstrated in the design of New Delhi’s Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) building, completed in 1986. The building is situated on the outer road of the historic Connaught Circle. Most of the buildings here belong to the neo-classical style adopted during the late colonial period. However, the architectural aesthetics of the LIC building make no effort to blend with the existing context. Correa’s twelve storey creation is supposedly modern as it is fully adorned with a glass façade on its north face. But was Correa’s choice of the modern architectural style for the LIC

building simply a personal preference, or was there a deliberate ideological rejection of the “stale colonial” history that Rykwert derisively mentions?

Correa (1996), although, in the initial years of his career, Correa was influenced by Le Corbusier, he moved away from the French architect's ideas of international modernism as he found "inspirational depth in the mythic and cosmological beliefs of the [Indian] past."

This shift is unmistakably demonstrated in the project Jawahar Kala Kendra (JKK), which was completed in 1992. Affirming the same in the above book Correa states that "the Jawahar Kala Kendra in Jaipur, is a... contemporary construct based on an ancient perception of the non-Manifest World, as expressed in the *vastu-purusha-mandalas* - those sacred Vedic diagrams that have been of seminal importance to Hindu, Buddhist and Jain architecture over many centuries ... [T]he program for the art centre is disaggregated into nine separate groupings, each corresponding to the myths of a particular planet: for instance the planet Guru (which symbolises learning) houses the library... The central square, as represented by ancient Vedic shastras, is a void." Although, like many of Correa's works, the aesthetics of JKK is also aesthetically modern, subtle Brahmanical ideas can be gathered from his architectural philosophy, especially in the plan-form, as in his use of the concept of the mandala. In his book *The City Shaped* (1991), historian Spiro Kostof deciphers the use of the mandala for urban design as "a mystical symbol of the universe in the graphic form ... with as many *padas* as there were to be residential quarters, and only within each *pada*, inhabited by members of a particular professional groups..." And it is here that the mandala as inspiration reveals its problems. When employed as a design element, the mandala is a means to divide the area on the lines of caste as understood by the reference to 'particular professional groups'. If the mandala represents the discriminative *varna*-based ideology of caste-Hinduism why then did Correa choose it to feed his designs? Was it merely rhetorical or was it a measure of his philosophy?

Part of the answer lies in the way in which post-colonial India embraced architectural modernity to project itself to the world. Dedicating the Jawahar Kala to India's first Prime Minister, Correa writes that in "[g]uiding the new nation in its first decades after Independence, Nehru also wanted to look backwards and forwards in one decisive gesture: rediscovering India's past whilst simultaneously inventing a new future." Although Nehru had unleashed the modernist Le Corbusier on India as a catalyst to move away from colonial identity through the design of Chandigarh, I suspect that Correa's interpretation of collating 'ancient' Vedic concepts with modern aesthetics would have pleased Nehru more. It was this ability to juxtapose 'ancient Indian' concepts with modernism that emblematises Correa as an ideal Nehruvian architect.



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