3. ALTERNATIVES FOR A DEVELOPING INDIA

". . . In the context of the Third World, the architect must have the courage to face very disturbing issues. For what is your moral right to decide for a thousand, for a hundred thousand, for two millon people? But then what is the moral advantage in not acting, in merely watching passively the slow degradation of life around you . . . ?" Charles Correa[1]

Anyone who builds in India today must confront the physical and economic realities of under-development. Much of the most interesting contemporary Indian architecture embodies the frugality, and even the primitiveness of the circumstances in which it is built as the basis for an expression of identity. This is, however, a passive response to the issues. Such buildings reflect reality — both the problems and the potential of a developing society — but rarely do they contribute to the process of change.

The socialist undertones of the Modernist ethic have compelled many architects to consider how design and planning might be more active agents of change. However, only a few in India manage to put such ideas into practice for the issues are so large, that potential activists are defeated by the apparent futility of even trying to make an impact. The architect's challenge is as much to find a relevant avenue by which to apply his skills as it is to innovate effective solutions. It is not surprising, therefore, that the handful of architects who regard themselves as committed activists see their work as a conscientious alternative to the conventional design processes and standard solutions of a profession oriented intrinsically to serve the advantaged classes of Indian society. But this attempt to engage in the process of development does not compromise the possibility of designing and building a full-blooded architecture. It simply recognizes a different set of parameters that can nevertheless pose a stimulating challenge to the practising architect. An innovative professionalism characterizes the design work behind some of India's more ambitious development initiatives in crucial areas such as urban housing.

In most of the developing nations, including India, to design for the poor appears to imply a search for appropriate Third World solutions to the desperate need for housing and basic amenities in fast-growing human settlements. The prevalence of such thinking is emphasized by the importance many professionals and political leaders engaged in development issues place on the use of the term 'Third World' in lieu of concepts such as 'underdeveloped' or 'developing'. This was a label originally coined by Jawaharlal Nehru and the other founders of the Non-Aligned Movement, to describe a third option — the open-ended alternative not to conform — that the emerging post-colonial nations wished to protect in defiance of the development options presented by the two Super Powers.[2] Although the politically shrewd idea of the Third World option continues to embody a certain optimism and flexibility in contemporary affairs, the term has become hackneyed. Many of the problems faced by developing societies are not necessarily unique, but it can be convenient to assign these a special status and avoid the hard-nosed criteria of the real world.

A Third World standard for design is, at best, an innovative response to the challenges posed by limited funds and resources; a creative rethinking of tools, methods and materials towards novel and effective solutions to demoralizing· problems. But to resort to an alternative standard, defined not so much by alternate, more relevant criteria, but by the conspicuous rejection of accepted norms can be a form of escapism that risks encouraging amateurism and mediocrity as acceptable qualities for an architecture oriented to the disadvantaged masses.

In a limited way Third World sensibilities can provide useful insights to the interpretation of crises that the development activist must address. The nature of

possible solutions can be revealed in a problem that is sympathetically defined. But there is the possibility of going too far with such an alternative interpretation, of idealizing the forms and principles observed in lieu of simply assessing them with an unprejudiced eye. If the product of that analysis — a Third World architecture — becomes merely an attempt to simulate by design the spontaneous 'architecture without architects' of the evolving Third World city, then the value of the architect's contribution to the development process remains questionable.

The cities of the developing world are undergoing change with speed and violence. However, the conventional notion of progress, which implies imbibing the Western-style standard of living, does not necessarily describe this cataclysmic transformation. The important questions are: What is the Third World city evolving towards, and what direction should its architects and planners be providing? Is this Third World consciousness permanent or merely a transitional alternative to the ideals of modernization promoted by the Socialist and Western blocks? Is there something fundamentally different about human society in the poorer countries of the present day that should continue to distinguish them as Third World in a more evenly developed, more equitable global community of the future? Is it the architect's prerogative to decide, for example, that poor rural migrants to the Indian cities are culturally incapable of enjoying a modern house?

On a cultural level there is no doubt that a great diversity does and should continue to exist in the ways that the different peoples and subcultures of India — let alone the world — perceive and interpret daily life. But there is a stage at which a global culture ultimately takes root, one that universally shares much of what is already taken for granted in the way of communications, transport, industrial technology and international trade amongst other things, in the societies of the Third World. Where then does the threshold between the unique and the universal lie, and to which aspect of this reality should the architect apply his skills in the cause of development?

These questions cannot be categorically answered. There is a fundamental ambiguity in much of the work examined here. On the one hand political and philosophical idealism tends to distance and obscure the complexity of the issues. On the other hand stand the cynics who are convinced that all efforts are futile in view of the colossal problems at hand. An almost Machiavellian will to combat such fatalism with creative new possibilities complements the pragmatism evident in some of the more inspiring examples of 'alternative' architectural design in India.

ACTIVISTS AND CONSULTANTS

Indian architects are working at various levels of the national development effort. The range of problems they address is dramatic and often they entail responsibilities other than the physical planning of the built environment. Economics and the political and sociological dimensions of the issues involved give the impetus for much that is most interesting in this work but, not surprisingly, they are also the key to some important failings.

At one extreme, a desire for political solidarity and immediacy to the issues encourages some activists to step out of their middle-class mould into the life of the poor themselves. Hands-on architects of this missionary ilk are usually limited in the scope of their efforts to the immediate communities with which they work. In some instances, however, efforts to transfer appropriate new skills and technology to a small client group can have a wider impact through example to other communities.

At the other end of the spectrum, independent architectural consultants have been successful collaborators with government in promoting effective alternatives to the stale or outmoded formulas for housing and urban development commonly applied by government planning departments. Although this is a limited and external form of design intervention, its potential influence can be enormous. The planning of New Bombay is a good illustration of this point.

The current strategy for the growth and development of the greater metropolitan region of Bombay was originally conceived and advocated by an independent lobby of concerned architects. It has since been adopted by government and gradually implemented. It will be instructive to describe the scheme briefly as it demonstrates some of the more effective principles by which planners and architects have structured their assault on development issues in India.

The idea for New Bombay was first proposed in 1904 by the architect Charles Correa in collaboration with Pravina Mehta and Shirish Patel. Their suggestions were forward-looking but realistic: to co-ordinate and enhance government initiatives involving new highways, bridges and industrial zoning; to expand and transform a critically congested linear city into a ring-like, polycentred city on the water. This was to be accomplished by providing an infrastructure and incentives that would encourage new nodes of growth on the undeveloped shores opposite the long narrow peninsula on which the original port city of Bombay was built (Fig. 3.1).[3]

The plan for New Bombay did not entail a revolutionary transformation of the existing urban organism of Bombay. It was a proposal for a planned redirection of future growth using the economic, demographic and political forces already in play. A more evenly distributed urban network would offer healthy new options for economic competition and new space to house the urban poor in reasonable proximity to the jobs that would be created. The strategy for implementation was pragmatic. Although a solution to the housing crises of the less privileged inhabitants of Bombay was a primary objective, the designers were shrewd enough to acknowledge that jobs were the first priority of the urban poor; economics was the concern of government. These facts were exploited to indirectly support the social and environmental benefits of the scheme.

This micro-economic approach to urban and regional planning is being adapted, on a smaller scale, to the design and implementation of specific housing schemes.

HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMMES

Housing, within the broader issue of human settlements, is the aspect of India's formal development effort with which the architectural profession is most significantly involved. However, it is not as a conventional designer of houses that the architect has much to contribute. The issue is too large and resources too limited for relevant and cost-effective efforts to be made at that intimate level. The architect's ability to preconceive the complex set of relationships between people, their physical environment, and the influential parameters of economics, culture and tradition, is of greater consequence. Architects' efforts to structure the dwelling environment at the community level in some current Indian housing initiatives are interesting exercises in refining the mechanistic housing strategies of most formal development agencies. Again, the more successful examples of architectural intervention in this field reflect the designer's willingness to acknowledge and work with the inevitable constraints of the problem. These include the patterns and tendencies that spontaneously emerge in any growing settlement. This willingness to 'play the game' with skill and innovation, extends to an acceptance of the frugal logic that the Indian government and most international development agencies have adopted in their housing programmes of recent years. Development policies today tend to recognize the spontaneous growth process in human settlements as a force far superior, and in many regards more efficient and more accurate than the pre-designed and built form of housing that the formal sector has tried to provide in the past.

Since the early seventies Indian authorities have endorsed a human settlements planning concept that promotes user initiative in building housing for the poor. In such 'sites-and-services' projects the layout and preparation of building plots with essential services — roads, water supply, storm and waste water drainage, and sometimes, a small structure containing a toilet — is the only responsibility undertaken by the formal sector, while the design and construction of actual dwellings is left to the owners of each plot (Fig. 3.2). Economy is the primary objective of this strategy; minimum resources are allocated to each individual such that a maximum number of people — of a set economic target group — can be reached with at least the rudiments of housing within the fixed funding for a given development. From a design standpoint, a distinct advantage of this approach is its inherent flexibility that allows individuals to meet their own specific needs to a degree of variation and detail that has been impossible to provide in conventionally planned public housing developments.

The sites-and-services strategy is essentially cost-effective, not a no-cost answer to the need for better housing and communal amenities, and most efforts in this area have not reached the poorest segments of society. In practice, projects are targeted at narrowly defined lower-income groups who have some
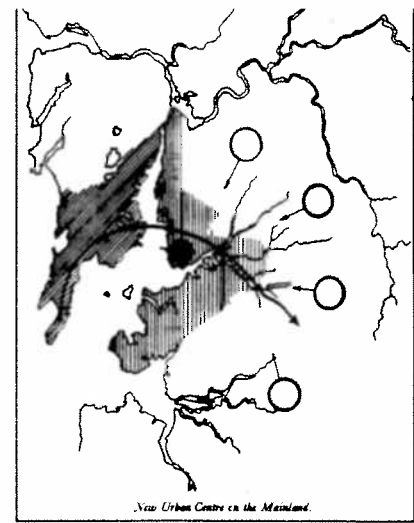

Fig. 3.1
Plan of New Bombay.
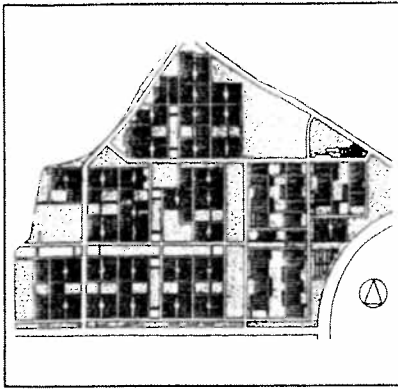

Fig. 3.2
View of a Sites-and-Services Project.

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Fig. 3.3
Plan of a Sites-and-Services Project.

resources to invest in their housing. However, many of the homeless cannot afford to spend their marginal incomes on shelter. Economic opportunity and proximity to the place of work are greater priorities than the desire for a permanent dwelling.

A problem stemming from the economic priorities of both the planners and users of many sites-and-services projects is the tendency to compromise or simply ignore the socio-cultural dimensions of domestic and communal life. For the sake of economy in planning and managing a development, different income groups are often ghettoized, plot designs and street layouts are relentlessly standardized, and only marginal attention is devoted to the planning of public spaces (Fig. 3.3). The argument that more attractive design must necessarily be sacrificed as an expensive luxury is accepted, unfortunately, by most architects who see no place for their skills in such low-cost planning efforts. With this regrettable impasse between architects and government engineers, even the questionable cost-effectiveness of some of the more mechanistic planning practices applied in such schemes has gone unchallenged. Gradually, experience is showing that insufficiently and insensitively designed sites-and-services projects can degenerate into a quality of environment only superior to most squatter settlements by virtue of their functional services.

These practical failings of the sites-and-services concept do not, however, undermine the fundamental pragmatism and potential it retains as a basis for effective design intervention in the development process. As long as poverty is the primary reality, the need for economic solutions will be overriding. But to counteract the shortcomings of a merely mechanical equation between the financial resources of an individual and the maximum material amenities he can be provided with, there is a call for a much more dynamic manipulation of the problem at a micro-economic level. What is essential is to abandon the idea of a single target group, and to consider, alternatively, a complete economic cross-section of society as a developing community. In this sense the designing of housing ceases to be viewed as a finite project. As with large-scale urban designs, housing is better conceived as a co-ordinated development scenario that encourages the enrichment and diversification of the end product by setting up a creative interaction between a wide cross-section of users and beneficiaries. This strategy has been successfully employed in recent urban projects in Madras and Kanpur, implemented by their respective municipal authorities with financial and technical assistance from the World Bank.

In a recent proposal for a large public housing scheme in the central Indian city of Indore, a team of architects and engineers from the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation in Ahmedabad have developed this broad-based alternative application of the sites-and-services strategy to a considerable degree of refinement. The active basis for the proposal is socio-economic; a controlled manipulation of the marked and sometimes contentious communalism inherent in Indian urban culture. Rather than idealizing a non-existent social homogeneity, the scheme acknowledges that each income group with its various religious and ethnic subdivisions, has its own requirements and capacities, but often another group will provide a service or a market to meet those demands. Combined in a co-ordinated community development scenario, the sites-and-services incentives conventionally reserved for low-income target groups are also tailored to the housing and commercial requirements of affluent middle-class merchants and professionals. Such diversification creates a healthy tax base as well as autonomous commercial activity within the settlement, both of which can serve to cross-subsidize the cost of land and services for the homeless poor who would otherwise be unable to hold on to even the most rudimentary government furnished plot.

To make this principle of cross-subsidization really work the architects have maintained an explicit hierarchy between the different economic categories of plot recipients in the scheme. For instance, the fundamentally separate space and access requirements of automobile-driving externally oriented upper-income residents are clearly differentiated from the pedestrian-based lifestyle and spatial order of the lower-income neighbourhoods that form the heart of the scheme. Despite these demarcations the whole scheme is sensitively integrated. A distinctive network of public spaces within the 7,000-plot development reflects the designers' attempt to improve on the inefficient redundancy of the standard cartesian layout of plots and services used in conventional sites-and-services developments. In the same exercise, short streets, chowks (small public open spaces) and mohallas (narrow pedestrian alleys) are implied in the layout; there

at the level of each plot. As both rich and poor residents are responsible for all construction, the architects' task has been to anticipate the outcome of a spontaneous process by designing the unbuilt spaces and relationships that will stimulate the desired growth.

The social and economic virtues of diversity in the planning of human settlements have been recognized in various Indian housing efforts of recent years. However, the subtle but important differences between developments such as the Indore township and the Artistes' Village, a housing scheme within the larger planning framework of New Bombay, show some significant divergences in the social ideals propounded.

The Artistes' Village is an experimental housing sector completed in 1986; a realized increment of the broad scenario for New Bombay that the architect, Charles Correa, formulated some twenty years earlier. Though it has only 700 plots as compared to the 7,000-plot Indore scheme, the intentions of the two developments are similar — to house a variety of income groups in a single integrated neighbourhood. Village-like in imagery and in its apparently loose and random order, the overall development is rendered in a curious neo-vernacular that might have been conceived by a village *mistri* (traditional builder) were it not so religiously and rigidly cloned from one standard unit type to the next. No dwelling units actually touch one another, even though plots are small and tightly clustered to create an integrated network of semi-private and public spaces.

An obvious difference between this development and most recent government sponsored housing efforts is that the dwelling units are pre-built — at least in rudimentary form — and, as such, the architectural character of the settlement has been narrowly prescribed. The implications of the imagery employed are interesting in their own right and we shall return to that point in a moment. Of greater importance, however, is the scheme's underlying principle of *equity* that this folksy and homogeneous expression serves to advertise. Despite the social disparities between the various income groups incorporated in the development, the architecture and the egalitarian principles by which plots are clustered and distributed do their best to disguise these differences. The basic units do vary in size and type but only according to a prescribed series of incremental additions and combinations that respects the common code of elements, proportions and scale. Each household is able to expand within this controlled pattern of growth to the extent of its financial means and space requirements. The collective standard of the housing furnishes an image of domestic bliss that exceeds the average lot of the poorer residents. But the converse is also true, which raises doubts about the viability of such a concept as a spontaneous development scenario. In the mixed-income scheme proposed for Indore, on the other hand, it is by catering opportunistically to the wealthier home-builder and his natural desire to invest more money in more exclusive real estate that an effective trade-off in resources and capital is realized. Such entrepreneurial pragmatism is likely to give a more dependable impetus to the growth of a community, than the altruistic ideal that those more fortunate will voluntarily opt for a more collective, equitable lifestyle.

Correa has portrayed his housing experiment in New Bombay as a fragment of the 'new landscape' he foresees for the Third World city of the future.[4] The rustic, scenographic character of his architecture is thus a surprising indication of the manner of urban experience that it might entail. One cannot help seeing in these petite cottages with their colourful shutters and exaggerated gables, the chimera of a movie-village, like the idyllic pastiches that dot the back-lots of Bombay's film studios. The fantasy promised by that generic caricature of tropical vernacular is in many regards a parallel to the garden city ideal promoted in the nineteenth century as an antidote to the coal-blackened squalor of industrial England. Effectively, the Artistes' Village is a classic suburban alternative to the intensity of city life; a tract of tiny single-family bungalows linked by a (projected) mass transit system to the heart of India's most important metropolis. A collective, pre-industrial order remains the untenable ideal of the development.

ARCHITECTURE WITHOUT ARCHITECTS

The longing for a simple village way of life — with its implications of greater self-sufficiency, environmental harmony, and social co-operation — has characterized most of the utopian thinking that has emerged in the wake of the industrial

conquest of the world over the last two centuries. William Morris, Ebenezer Howard, John Ruskin and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were some of the more obvious Western predecessors in this philosophical tradition. It is no surprise that the admiring student of European liberal thought, Mohandas Gandhi, and the rustic ideal he cherished as the desired path for India's development have served as the fulcrum for most alternative ideology and social activism in modern India.

Through the last two decades, a new crop of nostalgic iconoclasts have captured a following among architects and social planners. In his book *Small is Beautiful: a study of economics as if people mattered*, E. F. Schumacher provided a blueprint for a co-operative, proto-industrial approach to life and work that guided many counter-cultural experiments through the 1960s and 1970s. Bernard Rudofsky's sweeping celebration of vernacular craftsmanship in *Architecture Without Architects* and subsequent books, has been another influential polemic in an era that has become increasingly sceptical of the idea of progress. Such sympathetic external influences have reinforced the stamp of Gandhi on the work and attitude of various Indian activists.

Respectfully deified as the spiritual father of the modern Indian nation but generally ignored by economic planners, Gandhi was the underdog in the unbridled push toward industrialization and urbanism following India's independence. Through time and the problematic experiences of modernization, Gandhi's ideals have held their ground, with no shortage of defenders, as an almost sacred alternative to formal development policies. However, this veneration has often tended to blur good judgement in the translation of those convictions into social action. A basic premise of Gandhianism is that Indian culture is still rooted in the village, and that society should continue to develop within the self-nurturing security of that rural order. But one may argue that the reality is different. A large portion of society, although still in the minority, has long ago graduated to an urban frame of mind, and thrived. The forced and unconvincing gesture of solidarity with the village exhibited in proposals for an alternative lifestyle, such as the Artistes' Village, provokes one to question whether this desire to retreat from the city is truly the will of the collective or merely the sentimental nostalgia of the urbanized elite.

A necessary counterpart to Gandhi's philosophy of development is a commitment to live by it; the activist should provide leadership through personal example. This demand appeals to a variety of architects who have opted to sacrifice conventional architectural practice and engage themselves fully in what might be called 'grassroots initiatives'. Among them are proponents of Schumacher's intermediate technocracy whose hands-on experiments with an ecological approach to design frequently amount to a committed personal pursuit of an alternative lifestyle. Others, such as the British-Indian architect Laurie Baker and his admirers, remain more focused in their professional calling but place much emphasis on both the practical and altruistic aspects of participating in the physical process of building. Yet another category — those involved in social action at the community level — respond most directly to the Gandhian compulsion to help the poor on a personal and interactive basis.

Grassroots community work is best illustrated in the projects and programmes of small non-governmental development organizations. Groups such as Unnayan in Calcutta, Development Alternatives in Delhi, and the Ahmedabad Study Action Group have established themselves in most of the larger Indian cities. As multi-disciplinary action lobbies comprising a variety of professionals — architects, planners, economists and community workers — such organizations work to develop an interface between people in need and the institutions and infrastructure that can help them. The role the architect plays in this manner of team work is much broader than that of the conventional professional. It may entail diverse organizational and decision-making responsibilities but little physical design. Housing is a component of this work but usually a subset of comprehensive social programmes involving education, health, nutrition, vocational development, and so on.

Several of the important community action groups in India have developed out of the independent initiatives of their architectural members to apply their professional skills to the needs of the poor. Therefore, the low profile of architectural design in their work is intriguing. The shortage of resources and capital in many of the working situations they deal with can only partially explain this, as such constraints are common to all low-cost design efforts. The conflicts

explicit explanation for this apparently self-imposed constraint on creative architectural thinking.

The economic viability of community action lobbies is precarious. To work directly for poor client groups, activists must first identify problems and create their own commissions, obtaining sanctions and funding from government and formal development agencies. This presents an ethical dilemma for the architect, as his professional relationships with these various clients become confused. The necessity of fabricating design commissions, if not the problems themselves, also calls into doubt the appropriateness of his services at this intimate level of commitment. Social and economic initiatives are inevitably easier to justify in the hierarchy of development concerns.

These professional scruples are compounded by the politics of community action. The ideal of democratic, people-oriented development runs contrary to the concept of the architect as an elite form-giver. The reaction is to transfer responsibility for architectural design to the users themselves. The architect assumes a background role as a skilled organizer who can translate their ideas into action. User-initiative has been increasingly exploited in the planned development of human settlements in India, but an important difference between the sites-and-services experiments discussed earlier and such independent grass- roots programmes lies in the direct involvement of the lay public in the formal design process. The architect's own creative prerogative is curtailed, a voluntary censorship that appears to imply a loss of faith in the profession's capacity to address the real issues. Curiously, action becomes relevant for these architects when they discard the skills they are most qualified to apply.

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES

The introspective tendency of the socially conscious professional is mirrored in the efforts of some architects to promote the concept of an appropriate technology as the answer to India's development needs. Ostensibly this is a pragmatic plea to extend limited resources in view of the extreme demands placed on the environment by the forces of population and industrial progress. But the implications of the solutions offered are far greater than simply being a question of alternative technique. The compulsion of its practitioners is to personally demonstrate not only the building methods, but the whole alternative lifestyle that would give meaning to the voluntary suspension of technological progress they propose. This compulsion is a measure of the almost religious nature of that ideal.

The movement for an appropriate technology gathered most of its impetus in the rich industrialized nations of the West when, in 1973 the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries created an artificial shortage of oil in the world market. This so-called energy crisis brought into sharp focus the disturbing reality of those nations that were acutely dependent on limited resources subject to political manipulation. The perennial ideal of a simpler, self-supporting mode of life was subsequently accorded serious attention. In countries such as the United States, official research programmes to develop alternative autonomous sources of energy were complemented by a massive campaign to make the public conscious of the need to conserve. A reassessment of the patterns of energy consumption and the careless waste of affluent societies was advocated as a key to averting a real crisis. This initiative reinforced an already well-entrenched concern for the fragility of the natural environment in a machine dominated world. A consequence of the reduced consumption of petroleum-based energy would be a reduction of waste and pollutants. The two concerns came together, creatively, in the surge of innovative proposals for the passive, low-impact production, use and re-use of energy that came to be labelled as 'appropriate technology'.

In the sphere of architecture the ramifications of this conservation consciousness were a broad range of experiments with alternative building materials, structures, and passive systems for the climatic control of the built environment. The effort to diminish dependence on industrial production encouraged the investigation of organic materials and manual methods of construction. A renewed interest in vernacular building technology and its aesthetics was a natural corollary of this research.

Fig. 3.4
A Typical Bio-Gas Plant Installation.

The most significant flaw in the appropriate technologists' argument has been the backward leap in standards of living that their anti-industrial, anti-urban alternatives entail. The advanced countries have become conscious of ecological issues in recent years, and efforts to avert the threat posed to the environment by progress have been all the more forward-looking. Industry has led the way with new technology of a much higher sophistication and efficiency, neutralizing many ecological concerns while advancing the standards of comfort and leisure. The alternative movement has remained an idealistic counter-culture to the affluent society and its values. Meanwhile, alternative technologists have shifted their focus to the more accommodating context of the developing countries. From the pre-industrial perspective of the Third World village, the philosophy of optimizing the use of local resources and labour promises tangible results, such as improved agricultural output, cottage industry and innovative low-cost housing, all of which constitute a plausible, intermediate alternative to the uncertain rewards of full-fledged industrialization.

In India, the enthusiasm for appropriate technology is exhibited in the programmes of many Gandhian organizations. Government has also attempted to promote the use of technologies, such as methane gas plants to reduce village-level dependence on conventional energy resources (Fig. 3.4). The efforts of architects in this direction have been more isolated, often in the form of model ecological homesteads and communities. In form and philosophy, this architecture is still directly linked to Western counter culture; it has not seen widespread application to building problems and human settlement issues in the country as a whole.

A forum for some of the most interesting experimentation with appropriate technology in India is the international settlement of Auroville. About five hundred people, many of them Europeans, comprise the permanent population of this cosmopolitan community on the south-east coast of India. As in most utopian experiments, the impetus for this exercise in communal and environmental harmony is spiritual. The settlement is being conceived as a vision of a united global society, its pioneering settlers committed to the teachings of the late mystic, Sri Aurobindo.

Auroville is a loose array of homesteads scattered over a development area of over twenty square kilometers. Small-scale, labour-intensive construction is a continuous activity along with cultivation, reforestation and various small-scale specialized industries. The handful of architects and engineers who have chosen to live in this community have built many innovative structures with minimum resources. A wide range of construction systems and materials have been experimented with in their buildings. For the most part they have explored the traditional uses of materials, such as bamboo, casuarina thatch, mud and stone and upgraded them where appropriate. Ordinary mud brick construction, for example, is susceptible to the torrential monsoons of south-east India. A more durable, monolithic form of mud construction known as 'rammed-earth', has been exploited in many Auroville structures in lieu of conventional masonry. Industrial materials are sparingly used, usually as lightweight, material-conserving technologies, such as ferro-cement, that can be manipulated by hand.

The buildings of Auroville serve the mundane functional requirements of the community, but their purpose, like the settlement itself, is to a much greater extent symbolic. The conscious act of building a low-cost, ecologically appropriate architecture is a form of devotion to the ideal of a better world that underlies such holistic social experiments. Despite the creative intent of those architects who have built here, their innovations only amount to tinkering within the preconceived economic and technological order they advocate as the appropriate model for the development of the Third World. The sense of a world apart cultivated in Auroville and other idyllic homesteading experiments by Indian architects suggests an escape from the difficult challenge of analysing and resolving socio-economic issues within the mandate of conventional architectural practice. The ritual of self-improvement serves as a placebo for the original ideas and creative conceptual thinking that so few architects seem to be able to bring to the problems of the poor.

Laurie Baker is an expatriate architect who has made his career in India, committed, in the Gandhian spirit, to the service of society. Like most grassroots activists he has felt compelled to alter the conventional practise of his profession in order to realize his altruistic objectives. Discernible in his work, however, is a

Baker's buildings gain character from the visually distinctive techniques he has devised for reducing construction costs. In his design method he takes pains to involve the eventual users of his buildings in making important decisions. But neither technical criteria nor sociological intent appear to outweigh the architect's confidence in his professional expertise and the ultimate authority of his own spontaneous creativity.

"... Low cost is a relative term, there is a false notion that low cost is only for the poor ...." What Baker practises is 'cost reduction', a principle and a variety of techniques that he applies to the needs of poor clients as well as the rich.[5] Middle-class professionals are his largest client group, a respected element of society whose collaboration with Baker in reducing the cost of building serves as an example to other factions who tend to be more fixed in their status-minded ideals about *pucca* (durable) construction.

Baker's architecture is an imaginative exploitation of exposed brick masonry. The cost-saving elimination of plaster unveils the graphic potential of brick and mortar. Rich textures are generated in varied bonding patterns and pointing, and in the ubiquitous use of the *jali*, a lattice of brick that diffuses light and admits the breeze. This sensitivity for the building craft suggests a bias towards the 'Arts and Crafts' ethic that prevailed in his British training of the 1930s. A benign anomaly in modern day India, his architecture has a strong affinity with the hybrid style of some of the more interesting British Indian buildings of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras (Fig. 3.5). In form, the buildings are evocative of a child's fantasy of gingerbread houses, with their corbelled arches, niches, built-in window seats and slit openings — the whole covered, in most instances, by a large wooden roof with many peaks and valleys. This expression is largely derived from the traditional architecture of India's southern-most state of Kerala where Baker lives and works (Fig. 3.6). A rationale common to wooden buildings throughout the coastal regions of South and South East Asia is exhibited in the overbearing size and drama of the roof with its large overhangs that keep heavy monsoon rains away from the interior spaces. Walls, on the other hand, are reduced to mere structure and screens to allow breezes to pass through the building.

The message in Baker's work that appears to have earned the admiration of many Indian architects is that social commitment and creativity as an architect do not necessarily negate each other. But neither Baker, nor others, have managed to address the full scope of the issues. The grassroots tactic is overly empirical; activists manage to reach only a limited number of people from their alternative camp. Their work confirms that the architect who takes too righteous a position is prone to produce a naive and shallow architecture as the built manifestation of that belief. The more effective architects are those who acknowledge this ideological impasse through their pragmatic and conciliatory approach to the problem. In their work there is a consciousness that change must be introduced incrementally through the system itself. This attitude prevails over the more idealistic view that society, a community, or even an individual client will easily and willingly transform its lifestyle and — more importantly — its aspirations to accept the alternatives the architect may offer.

The Gandhian belief in the permanence of rural values continues to dominate the social concerns of Indian architects. In the jungles of Kerala and Maharashtra, or in the Aurovillians' attempt to create a world apart, these values may continue to hold for some time. In the urban context the probity of a timeless vernacular should be subjected to more scrutiny. A paternalistic sentimentality for the rustic ideal in the planning of new settlements could have the effect of trapping the urban poor in their underdeveloped past more surely than providing a familiar footing from which to move forward. The emerging reality of India's urban poor is only beginning to be examined for what it is. The question remains whether the lessons of the village are to be idealized or transitionally utilized towards a different future.

Fig. 3.5
Trivandrum Museum.

Fig. 3.6
Padmanabhapuram Palace.

NOTES:

1. Charles Correa, *The New Landscape*, The Book Society of India, Bombay, 1985. p. 132.
2. Ibid., p. 6.
3. New Bombay: Draft Development Plan, City and Industrial Development Corporation of Maharashtra Limited, Bombay, 1973. pp. 7-11.
4. Correa. op.cit., pp. 54-64.
5. P.G. Varughese, 'A Questing Conscience', *Architecture + Design*, July-Aug. 1985. pp. 12-27.

Contemporary Indian Architecture
AFTER THE MASTERS

Vikram Bhatt and Peter Scriver