

PROFILE CHARLES CORREA

WITH HIS MOST RECENT BUILDING CURRENTLY BEING BUILT, ARCHITECT **CHARLES CORREA** SAYS THAT'S IT, HE'S DONE. BUT HE TALKS TO *HERBERT WRIGHT* ABOUT THE BUILDINGS FROM HIS 54-YEAR CAREER THAT HE'D LIKE TO BE REMEMBERED FOR, CHOOSING FROM A PORTFOLIO THAT GOES FROM THE GANDHI MEMORIAL MUSEUM TO THE ISMAILI CENTRE, TORONTO

Asked what building in his 54 years of output he would most like to be most remembered for, Charles Correa suggests that the question should rather be 'the other way around – which would I like bombed!'

It is typical of the man, from whom flows wisdom in a warm voice, peppered with fiery pronouncements such as his reaction to the City of London's glass architecture bonanza: 'I would have thought they would be ashamed about everything they were doing – [the buildings] look like a bunch of spare parts.'

More like a mischievous elder statesman than a guru, he is tall, dignified, and, at 82, is still getting around the world albeit with a walking stick. But he insists he has designed his last buildings – the recently opened Mahindra Research Valley, Chennai (typically spatially exciting and colourful), and the Ismaili Centre in Toronto, currently under construction.

Now based in Goa, Correa quit his office in Mumbai; for the past two years has been occupied with the digitalisation of his entire archive, including some 6,000 images, which

he has recently assigned to the RIBA. 'In India, we have no [appropriate] facility', he says. 'MIT wanted them to begin with, but I thought that the RIBA would be a better place, more central and open to discussion – and more interested in India,' although he says they belong there also. 'I knew that I had to scan all the drawings so that they would be available in India'.

Correa credits a Hornby toy railway set he had as a child as sparking his interest in architecture – later finding he could read architectural plans because of the meticulous drawings for track configurations. After graduating from St Xavier's College in Bombay (called Mumbai since 1996), he went on to Michigan University and MIT, at both of which Buckminster Fuller taught.

'We became good friends, he used to come out to India. He was a big influence in the sense that I liked him because he was an inventor and wasn't trained as an architect.' Indeed, Correa recalls an interview in which Buckminster Fuller said architecture is an invention, 'which I thought was wonderful... What on Earth



This image: Mahindra Research Valley in Chennai is Correa's most recent completed work, opened in 2012. It hosts a research and development facility working on future cars for a leading Indian industrial conglomerate

Below right: Kanchanjunga Apartments in Mumbai anticipated the high-rise residential boom there. Unlike contemporary towers, it offers an indigenous climatic response with its two-storey terraces based on the bungalow veranda, which also gives it a unique iconic profile

is it but a great invention? Other MIT figures would inspire him, such as Kevin Lynch: 'His slogan was "Let's put design back into planning"'.

So did past masters such as the Sri Lankan museologist Ananda Coomaraswamy, Egypt's Hassan Fathy, who built with mud, and Frank Lloyd Wright, inspire him too? Of Wright, he says: 'He was self-taught, working from instinct, which is important because these things come naturally but become diverted through education when you begin to think, "Oh no, that's what the Greeks did"'. Nonsense! He had no idea what the Greeks did. He just invented the way America could live.'

India gained independence in 1947, and when Correa returned in the Fifties the nation carried the optimism of a nascent and ambitious democracy. Did he feel the weight of having to create a national identity? 'It wasn't a weight,' he replies, 'it was a wonderful opportunity because it's exciting!' With his great contemporary Balkrishna Doshi (see archive, p95), who worked with Le Corbusier on Chandigarh, he discussed setting up together, but refrained: 'Architects are much more like loners,' comments Correa. 'We can exist like camels, but we also do need a chance to touch base and see what other people are doing.'

Instead, he set up his own practice in Mumbai in 1958, soon starting on the seminal Gandhi Smarak Sanghalaya

(Memorial Museum) in Ahmedabad, opened in 1963 by the subcontinent's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Its small courtyards between simple, interconnected, open-sided pavilions of wood, brick and tiles followed from a crucial idea that a trail of museum rooms exhausts the visitor, so places to rest and reflect are needed, an insight gained from MIT's György Kepes.

Other early projects reveal Correa as a designer extraordinarily ahead of his time. The Hindustan Lever Pavilion (1961), built as a temporary showcase for an Indian conglomerate, was a polyhedronally faceted concrete shell informed by Buckminster Fuller domes, but with a randomness that anticipates deconstructivism by 20 years. Also naturally ventilated, the Tube House (1962), a competition-winning solution to design low-income housing for a site just 3.6m wide, may look crude with its brickwork and double cash-register form, but this was virtually the zero-energy home that we still strive for today.

Correa did reel off the top buildings he'd want to be remembered for, comparing them to 'favourite children'. Even before listing the Gandhi Memorial Museum, he nominated the Kanchanjunga apartment tower, completed in 1983 in Mumbai. This 84m-high icon, indented to create verandahs for privacy and cross-ventilation and with each multilevel flat interlocking with its neighbour, it's still the most innovative



THE CENTRAL VOID IS A KEY ELEMENT OF CORREA'S ARCHITECTURE, ECHOING THE 'SHUNYA' OR NOTHINGNESS AT THE CENTRE OF HINDU TEMPLES LAID OUT ON THE DIVIDED SQUARE OF THE MANDALA

Left: The Tube House addresses the design issues of affordable urban housing and the Indian climate. The interior presents a surprising configuration of spaces on two levels. Correa went on to design other low-cost housing schemes, such as Belapur in Navi Mumbai

Right: The Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya reflects the simplicity of the Indian village which informed Mahatma Gandhi's outlook and ethos. It also offers a ritualistic pathway through its tranquil pavilions, open to courtyards and a central pool



skyscraper in a city whose high-rise boom has since produced towers three times as tall.

Very different is the Jawahar Kala Kendra (1991), a multi-arts centre in Jaipur. The city was founded by the 18th-century Maharaja Jai Singh, who Correa described as ‘the first modern Indian, [who was] trying to discover the past while inventing a new future’. Jai Singh built accurate sandstone astronomical observatories without optics, and based his city layout on the ancient Hindu model of the navaghara, where nine planets each occupy a box in a three-by-three grid. Correa’s plan is divided like a navaghara, with one corner square whimsically displaced, and the central one a void.

The central void is a key element of Correa’s architecture, echoing the ‘shunya’ or nothingness at the centre of Hindu temples laid out on the divided square of the mandala. The Jawahar Kala Kendra, with its timeless warm red stone and unglazed interiors, could not be more different from contemporary museums that Correa derides as having ‘reduced art to the level of religion. People don’t know why it is important, but they know what to venerate: the Mona Lisa followed by Van Gogh... it’s rubbish’.

Correa’s next choice draws on a contemporary rather than mythical cosmos: the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics (1992) in Pune. Here, the empty centre is a ‘black hole’ embedded in the garden, while other astronomical

references include black marble and basalt representing the darkness of space, and a courtyard mapping a Sierpinski triangle to represent the universe’s fractal nature. The Vidhan Bhavan (completed 1997), the Madhya Pradesh state assembly in Bhopal, is a massive complex enclosed in a 140m-diameter circle, again divided into nine compartments with an empty centre. This great citadel, dominated by its 25m-high dome referencing Buddhist stupa or tumuli, sits on Arera Hill.

‘How does a Parthenon really work?’ Correa asks. ‘It works because you are climbing up a hill to where the gods live. That’s such a deep internal instinct’. Admittedly, approaching the Bhopal capital by road somewhat dispels that reaction.

The curved perimeter of the Vidhan Bhavan with its punched apertures foretells an aspect of Correa’s most recent favourite, the Champalimaud Centre for the Unknown in Lisbon (see Blueprint July 2011). Correa described this biomedical research and cancer treatment centre, which includes a vast enclosed garden, as ‘three stone ships sailing in a sea of granite’.

Here, Correa distills recurrent metaphysical elements – open to sky spaces and a ritual path, here leading to a vista of the ocean between columns. Champalimaud also encapsulates the spirit of the site; Christian Norburg-Schultz called it the ‘genius loci’, referencing the great Portuguese navigators

Right: The Jawahar Kala Kendra arts centre configures nine squares sections like an ancient Hindu model of the planets. Red sandstone reflects the vernacular architecture of Rajasthan

Below left: The Permanent Mission of India to the UN in New York includes a three-storey open space providing terraces for the top-most residential level in an exciting, 3D spatial array

Below: Correa designed many metaphors of astrophysical phenomena in the Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics. In this plan of a courtyard a black hole is represented

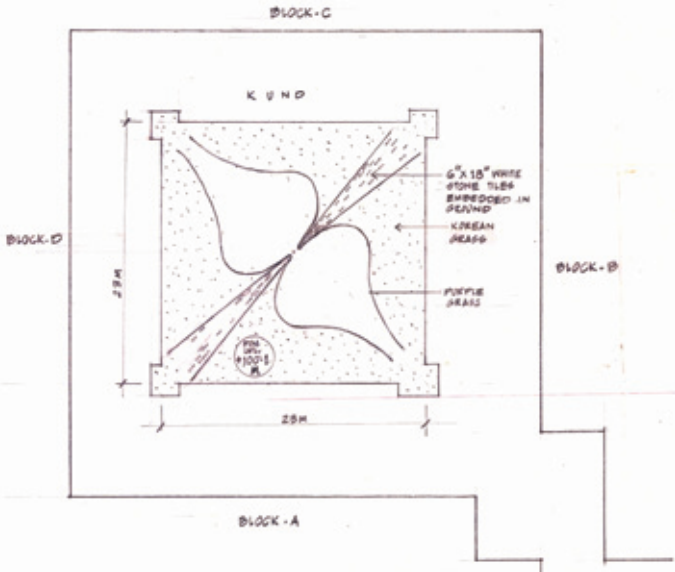
Bottom: The Vidhan Bhavan in Bhopal encloses the legislature of Madhya Pradesh within a circular plan

who sailed from there into the unknown.

How did he deal with the genius loci of the narrow strip between Manhattan’s 43rd and 44th Streets, site of his Permanent Mission of India to the UN (1992)? The red-sheathed 28 storeys are punctuated by great openings into verandahs-cum-atria, double-height in the podium and triple-height at the slim tower’s summit.

‘The client wanted something that was as Indian as possible, he says. ‘It is in Manhattan, but the building is not one that is American. Subtle, not an exotic one-liner – I didn’t want to do kitsch.’ Correa is no fan of ‘this nonsense of the Big Apple’, dismissing Central Park as ‘just for Gene Kelly to dance in’, and Manhattan as an ‘over-high slum, degenerate, unaffordable, (for) very rich whites and poor condemned blacks... That’s what’s going to happen in Bombay, and we will be stupid if we do nothing about it’.

Practical solutions for the poor are a strong thread in Correa’s work, even extending to redesigning the sidewalks of places such as downtown Mumbai in his Hawkers’ Pavements design of 1968, even accommodating ‘night-dwellers’. Cities are central to his work. ‘Bombay is ruined by just being a bloody city about money,’ he says, but in 1964 he started addressing a different problem – how the already-congested city left by the British could handle exponential population growth. ‘When you know you’re going to double,



HIS OWN CAREER ACROSS FIVE DECADES MOUNTS A FORMIDABLE NARRATIVE, RUNNING FROM GANDHI-LIKE SIMPLICITY TO STATE OF THE ART RESEARCH CENTRES. HE HAS REINSTALLED THE COSMOS INTO ARCHITECTURE YET DESIGNED FOR THOSE WHO SLEEP BENEATH THE STARS



the advantages for that quantum leap will allow you to get your act together. You can reorganise', he says.

Correa proposed exactly that with his Bombay Plan (1970): to reorientate the entire exploding metropolis by building the satellite city of New Bombay on the other side of Thane Creek. Now called Navi Mumbai, it is the world's largest planned new town, with more than a million people. Although Correa is still surprised by the progressive optimism shown by the government in accepting and building his proposal, he says they 'did it badly because they did it themselves'. Now Navi Mumbai is just a part of the Greater Mumbai metropolitan conurbation of 20 million. Nevertheless, Correa was addressing the issues of the exploding megacity decades before it was on the mainstream agenda. In 1985, prime minister Rajiv Gandhi appointed him to head the National Commission on Urbanisation,

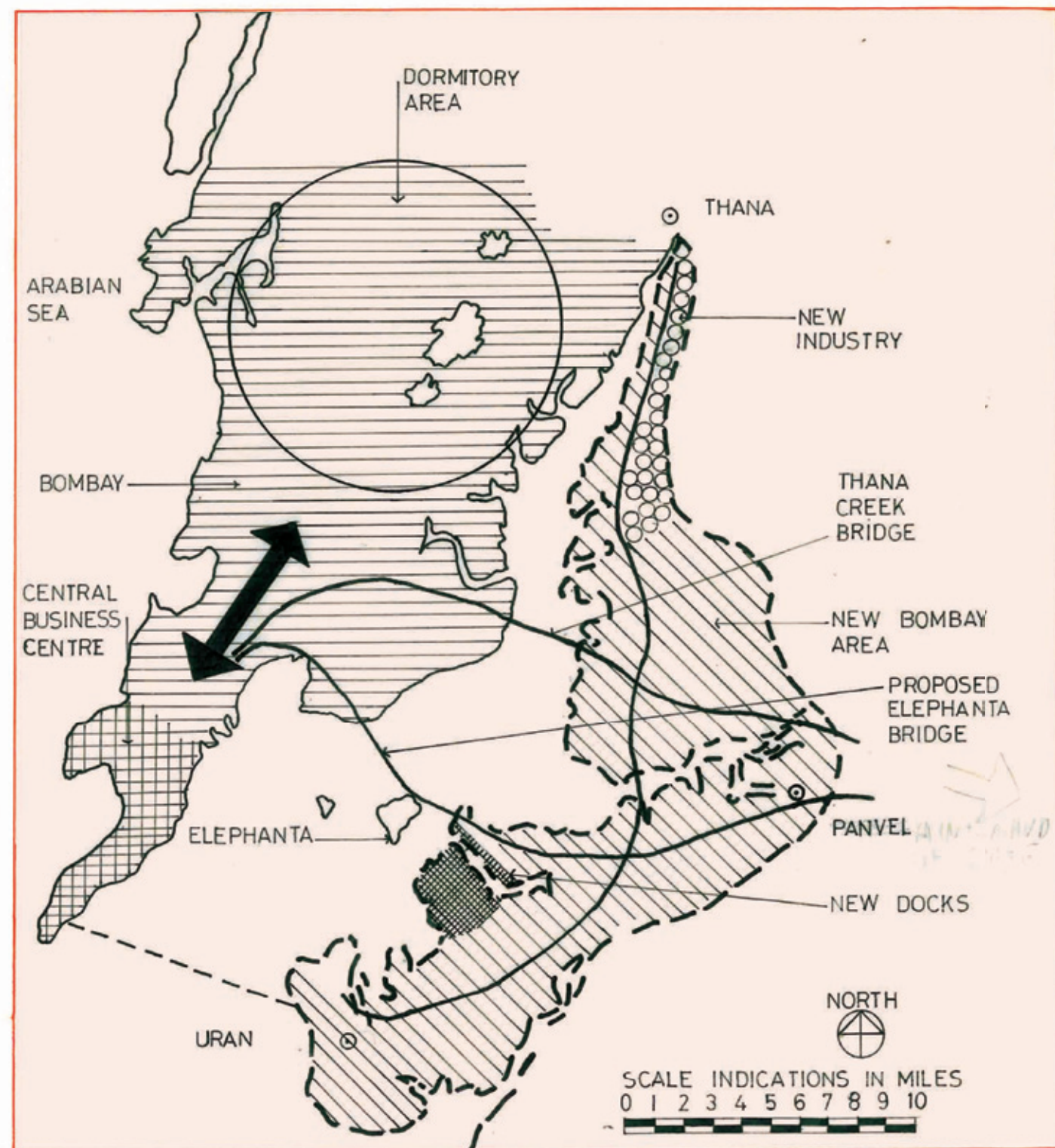
and in a period of two years he visited every state in India, identifying 329 towns growing faster than average, and incidentally seeing Bangalore, now India's IT capital, as a special case because of its cool climate and cantonment structure.

Despite the mixed success of Navi Mumbai, Correa is optimistic about cities, often relating the story of the washerman and money-lender sitting next to each other on a Mumbai bus, a social integration which might have been difficult to imagine under the traditional caste system. While he notes that 'working in India, the issues encountered are really heroic', sadly it's the Indian states that run the cities rather than elected, accountable mayors (with the exception of New Delhi, the political capital), and Correa finds it difficult to maintain hope '...when I think of the way the political parties are exploiting our cities for money'.

There is both a profound humanity and

sense of the metaphysical in Correa's work. He laments that 'architecture has become fashion' and the 'tragedy of architects is we know how to do everything and nothing'. Correa's architecture certainly transcends fashion, and spans the universal... and the void. His own career across five decades mounts a formidable narrative, running from Gandhi-like simplicity to state-of-the-art research centres. He has reinstalled the cosmos into architecture yet designed for those who sleep beneath the stars, and has tackled issues of sustainability and developing-world urbanisation before the terms were even coined.

His best projects make even works by Pritzker winners look trivial, parochial or dated in comparison. With his gift to the RIBA – and by digital extension, to the rest of the world – Correa leaves one of the world's great and hitherto unsung architectural legacies. ■



Left: In 1964, Bombay's population had tripled to 4.5 million in just 30 years. Anticipating yet more explosive growth from then, Correa, with Pravin Mehta and Shirish Patel, drew up a plan to reorientate the choked north-south conurbation by building New Bombay (now known as Navi Mumbai) across the creek and exploiting the water for transport