

Research in Temple Architecture

Conversation with Adam Hardy

Salil Sayed

Tekton
Volume 3, Issue 2, September 2016
pp. 94 - 107



Adam Hardy is Professor of Asian Architecture at The Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, UK, where he runs the research centre PRASADA (www.prasada.org.uk). Adam studied Architecture at Cambridge University and worked in architectural practice in London, Paris and Bristol before visiting India for the first time in 1981. This visit ignited his passion for Indian temple architecture, steering him into the academic world and a PhD on the temples of Karnataka, and absorbing him ever since. His many publications on the subject include *Indian Temple Architecture: Form and Transformation* (1995) and *The Temple Architecture of India* (2007), and *Theory and Practice of Temple Architecture in Medieval India: Bhoja's Samarânganasutrâdhâra and the Bhojpur Line Drawings* (2015). He has been able to apply his understanding of traditional architecture in the design of temples in the UK and, recently, for a new temple in Hoysala style near Bangalore. He edited the journal *South Asian Studies* from 1999 to 2015 and is currently President of the European Association of South Asian Archaeology and Art.

✉ HardyA@cardiff.ac.uk

Typology is an essential aspect of Indian temple architecture. It is also a central approach to the study of the huge corpus of edifices built in India during the period of classical temple building activity from 5th to 13th century. The ancient and early medieval texts describe their built form in terms of a genealogical hierarchy of types. It can be robustly argued that the schools of temple builders themselves conceived in terms of types to define and evolve their respective styles. The geography of India lends itself to distinct evolution of typological styles in different regions. The early modern scholarship which did not have access to the vastushastra texts began by making such a distinction between Northern and Southern or Dravida style. The 20th century scholars however seem to have searched for meaning in the spiritual goal of the architecture, and in other instances explored the sastra texts for its native terminology. There is also a contemporary interest in iconography on the walls and the search for its basis in the philosophy of the sect of the patron. In all these research paradigms, the work of Prof. Adam Hardy stands out for its purely architectural approach that brings focus back to typology to explore the evolving practices of temple builders in time and place. His meticulous drawings and analysis of the built form has enabled him to decipher the language of the corpus. He has successfully exposed the finer grain of typological evolution to open new avenues for understanding temple architecture and showed us, in Dr. G. B. Deglurkar's words, how much is left to be done while we were almost content with our achievements.

SAYED

How did you come to choose the subject of Indian temple architecture as your lifelong project?

HARDY

This is the one that is asked to me all the time and I ought to have a very clever and easy answer to it, but I still haven't. I went on a holiday to India and got obsessed with the subject. I suppose, as I think about it, there must be something exotic. When I started, India was exotic to me and now I like to think it as familiar; and Indian architecture too. So, there was probably an attraction of some other when I started, but then, before I came to know, but I doubt when I came to know, I felt I could see things that I understood. I read books and I didn't find those things (in them), so I got more and more interested. There was also nothing more complicated than finding this architecture beautiful and finding it directly sensuous as well as intellectual and spiritual. There

was probably also the looking for the meaning of life. I still haven't found it, but there was a feeling that there is some kind of truth embodied in these buildings. And also, I was thinking about it today: I am very fond of gardening. I like plants and flowers. I know it is very naive and unsophisticated to say that, to compare human artefact with nature, but there is something about Indian temples which I think has the same appeal as natural forms. The huge variety and permutations on certain particular themes, and the sense of growth I talked about, that sort of naturalness of the Indian temple architecture is one of the things that just attracted me from the start.

SAYED

When you look at the levels of detail, you see the history developing and the forms arising.

HARDY

Yes, and of course this is where we are now getting into the academic issues. This is where you have to be critical. If it is an academic work, and not purely poetic work then you have to be critical and ask if you are seeing something that seems to be organic, natural, biological or like a flower or like a lotus or whatever. You got to have a historical understanding, critical understanding and actually look at dates and look closely at forms and then substantiate whether the kinds of processes and patterns that you can see are actually there through looking in great detail. In other words, if you think you can intuitively see a pattern of growth running through tradition you got to be rigorous about whether the more complicated evolved forms actually happened after the simpler forms? And you can do that. You just have to be systematic, but not dismiss the idea. Some people will dismiss that kind of idea without going through the working out. I try to do the working out to show whether it is so.

SAYED

When you started working it out, it ultimately became your life long project, you found so much to be worked out in that.

HARDY

Yes, and there is still more. It is an ongoing work.

SAYED

You have built the research group Prāsāda at Cardiff. Can you tell us about the importance of institutionalizing a research project and the input that goes into building it?

HARDY

It is a very small thing and it certainly was not a thought out strategy. It is a small centre really, but it happened kind of through circumstances rather than through any plan. I needed a new job after working for a couple of years at the Prince of Wales institute of Architecture. And of course I had my burning interest; I wanted to do as much of that as possible. So, I proposed this centre or institute. I actually did call it an institute because I had delusions of grandeur and thought it might get bigger than it ever did. I proposed it to De Montfort University, before it went to Cardiff. The idea was that it would be good to study history of Indian architecture through the eyes of practice, and alongside do practice and teaching and theory altogether; to try to do all the three things, consultancy projects, research practice, and research and teaching, and integrate them. It seemed to me that no such institution existed. So, I dreamed up the idea and I proposed it to the school of architecture in Leicester at De Montfort University. One of the good things about the British higher education is that if you are lucky they are open to new ideas, and certainly in the new universities at that time they were into new things. So, they said, come and try it, and then I had a room which was like a little triangular cupboard. That was Prāsada. It started from there and it did grow to be about twelve people working at one time at De Monfort before it moved to Cardiff. Since then, it has been very much smaller although easier in many ways in terms of getting research projects and a lot of good PhD students. It is helpful to have an identity and a



Measuring a Temple

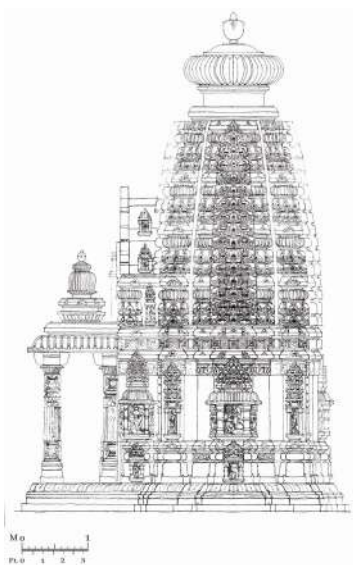
name and also to do the consultancy part which is relatively quite modest. The architectural design part to me is hugely interesting intellectually. It is not a big business but it gives you the institutional framework. I have never been interested in starting a big architectural practice. I would rather do practice as research within the framework of the university, and to earn my salary and let the money, whatever money there is, go to building up the centre.

SAYED

How many years did it take to actually materialise your idea?

HARDY

It took only about a year or so to have a name, and about two to three years before there were other people joining it. I started a Masters programme there and I had one PhD student who came with me; then within three-four years there were several PhD students. So, it didn't take very long but it is not as if it kind of grew and grew and grew like that. I hope my scholarship grew and certainly I had some very wonderful PhD students, but in terms of being a big institution, let us not exaggerate, it is quite modest.



Side elevation of temple 17 at Ashapuri

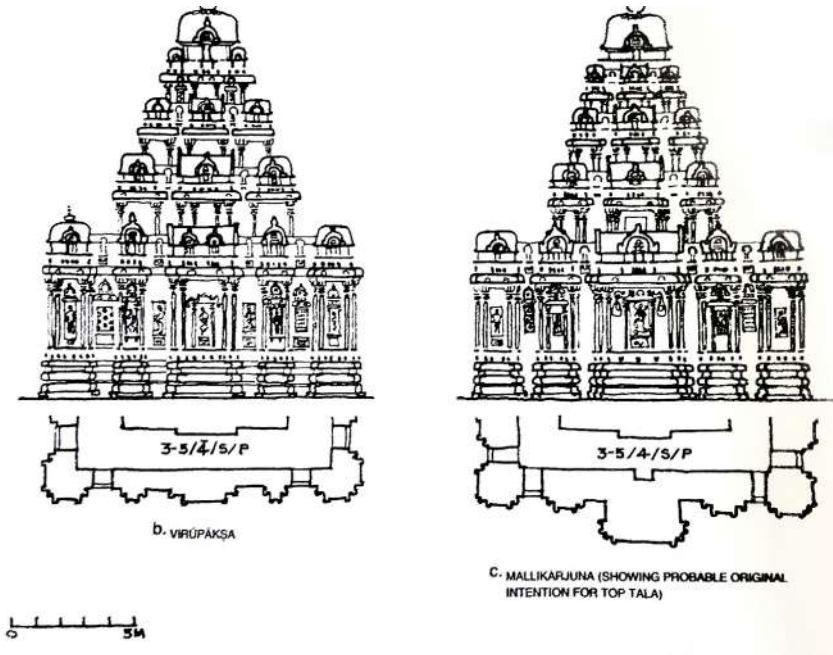
SAYED

Would you like to share any significant challenges that you faced while working in India, be they at the logistic level, in your collaborations, or in dissemination of your work in India and outside?

HARDY

Bureaucracy is everywhere. As you get more established, a little bit known, it gets little bit easier in terms of getting permission from the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and so on. I am not complaining, because gradually I have been able to climb up temples, a long time after I knew all these temples in my heart. I knew every inch of them. When I could get permission to actually climb up and measure I was in my fifties. Yet, I have enjoyed that really very much because you have a new relationship with them apart from being able to measure and do digital scanning. Somebody who comes fresh to the field would find the bureaucracy very hard I think.

As for dissemination in India and outside, I suppose, the only challenges there, are the challenges of the subject itself. To me it is very central work, a mainstream subject, but over here (in UK) it tends to be seen as obscure and marginal. So, in terms of publishing, it can be easier to publish the 5000th book on Le Corbusier's



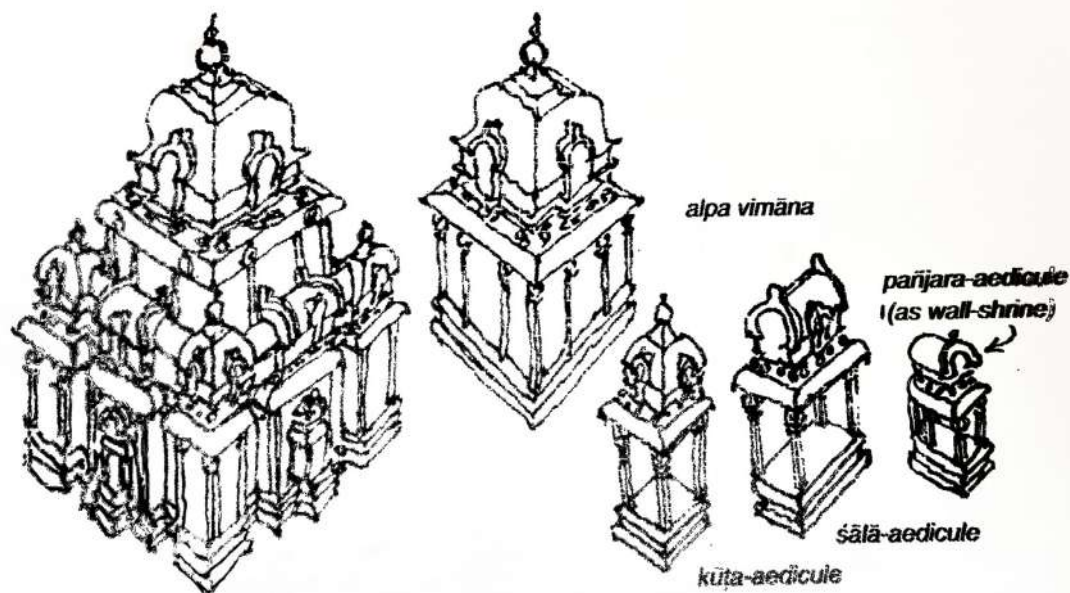
Studies of vimana compositions of Early Chalukyan temples (late phase)

love of dominoes in 1923 than it is to publish one on the main cultural architectural product of a civilization for two thousand years. That is seen as marginal.

We must not exaggerate that either. Another challenge in terms of dissemination is that people find it a complicated subject. I do try to put things across as clearly and simply as I can. I don't want to use jargon and sound impressive. My aim is to communicate whatever there is to be communicated. When I think something is clear, people can still find it difficult or they can't be bothered. Understandably, because it is quite a complicated subject. You need to put in some effort to understand it, which probably is true of most subjects.

SAYED

You have largely focused on the form of the temple and not the iconography; does it have something to do with dissemination?



Study of embedded aedicular components in a Dravida vimana

HARDY

Yes. Some people will find that off-putting, I suppose. There are probably more people interested in iconography. I am interested in it as well, but as an architect there is so much to be said about the architecture itself. You should not and can't separate it from iconography, from the religious intentions, from the society, from the politics etc.; but I am an architect and I start from the architecture. Architects don't have to be ashamed of what they can do; and if you try to be a historian and a sociologist, I admire you for becoming all those, don't get me wrong, I am not saying everyone has to do it like this, but in my perspective you should talk about what you know, you really know and from that very firm basis, you shouldn't be narrow, but from that firm basis you can make connections with other things, more meaningful connections than if you try to jump straight to other things and become an expert in everything.

SAYED

So you have to focus on one aspect where all your skills integrate.

HARDY

Yes, I think so. You have to integrate the other things through that.

SAYED

Interdisciplinary research demands accessibility to the languages of many disciplines. You have collaborated with philologists in the understanding of Sanskrit texts, with archaeologists in reconstruction of ruined sites, and with experts in photogrammetry. We borrow the tools from these disciplines that come loaded with their speak. While collaboration is an obvious solution, to what degree do a budding researcher has to train herself just to access the possibilities of this field of research? Can you tell us about your journey in acquiring various skills and the doors they opened up for you?

HARDY

I don't think I have a definitive answer to what skills people should learn because new ideas and new discoveries are inherently unpredictable anyway. So, I wouldn't presume to prescribe, and to have a whole variety of skills is really important, but at the same time it is important to remember to value the skills that architects or some architects do have and not to underestimate the potential of looking and drawing. I would say that is my main research method: looking and drawing. I don't have to go on about complicated methodologies. By just looking and drawing you assimilate, you kind of become part of, you internalise the material, and it is the only way it becomes part of you. Even measuring comes after drawing. Drawing does not necessarily mean measured drawing, but measuring is also an important skill. Through drawing we find things out. It is easy to be lazy, even architects, specially with computers these days can be lazy about drawing. I am not against drawing with computers but there is something about drawing per se. Perhaps, it does not have to be hand drawn but it gives you a means to really to try to understand

something; otherwise, you can cheat yourself if you don't draw it. You can delude yourself to think you understand it. If you can actually make yourself draw it then you really understand how something works. I mean not only in terms of physical working, but also what are the concepts, how is something composed, how is it thought about as well as how it was constructed, and also the geometry. All those things you can find out by drawing.

SAYED

How and when did you decide that you have to start learning Sanskrit, examine the text and understand it more?

HARDY

It was almost an accident, a lucky one. At least it wasn't planned. I didn't think of it as the next thing I must do. I had a large project with some collaborators between Cardiff University, British Museum and SOAS. We had Mattia Salvini as the Sanskritist involved in the project. He was a research assistant at SOAS, where he had done his PhD. We roped him in the project because he would translate *Samarāṅganasastradhāra*. I knew that I would be interested in the architecture part of what he is doing. I didn't realise how interested, and then when he started doing these translation and I started looking at it, I realised I could get into the mindset and kind of crack the code and work it out. It wasn't just the matter of doing the translation and then you read the translation and you understand it. It is the two-way process, and with the architectural understanding you go back to the translation and you see it can mean different things. I would say, it can't mean that, it has to be this, and usually he'd agree that it made sense. It kind of grew from there. Then I realised that I was wrong to dismiss the texts. I also realised how much nonsense people talk about *vāstuśāstrās*. I mean, how many times do you read in books that the texts say this, the *śāstrās* say that, that such-and-such is according to the *śāstrās*. Or that the *śāstrās* are very strict, or they are very abstract – all kinds of generalisations about them. People usually don't say which text, where did they read it, how did they know. I hope I have avoided that kind of thing. That project was a huge opportunity because there is so little that is published and interpreted. Having found it, I could

see that you could tease out architecture from those texts. It developed from there and turned into a big study and now I am doing a lot more along the same line.

SAYED

Then there is this question of different speaks of different disciplines which I experienced when I went from architecture to anthropology and then to design.

HARDY

Architects have their speak. Everybody gets infected by this. Like a few years ago, there was critical theory, cultural theory kind of speak. There are speaks that are discipline specific jargons. There are also widespread academic jargons that spread across ways of writing. The social sciences as a whole have their way of doing things that are very different than physical sciences. There are these different cultures. I haven't done like what you have actually done, you know, done degrees in these different things, but when you just try to read works from different disciplines you come across the challenge of the different cultures.

I would just try to transcend, try to cut through those things and be able to speak, to write in a clear, interesting and lightly way, not a boring way, try not be pretentious and try to get across the ideas clearly, and try to write as if you are not writing for a specialist audience. You are writing for any intelligent person. Then often that is more work for the writer than just simply mastering the jargon.

One should try to be plain and clear. Even if it is a complicated idea try to make it as clear as possible. Don't try to impress. The aim to impress always leads the wrong way. Sometimes if you are clear and plain, then some people won't take you seriously. Sometimes, it is much more work to make something clear than it is to throw in the jargon words, the buzzwords so that it will tick the boxes and that certain people will think you are a good thing, oh he is one of us, because he has quoted this. They just look for these buzzwords, this name dropping and then you

are OK. If you go to the effort of trying to put something across so that many people could understand it, then certain people will say that is not serious, just because it is not using the jargon.

SAYED

What according to you are the future directions of research in temple architecture? What topics should be taken up by MA and PhD students interested in this field?

HARDY

There are certain trends going on now which are quite interesting that I am not really part of, yet I think are valuable. People are looking beyond buildings to landscapes and sacred landscapes, and some good work is going on from that perspective. A lot of people are conscious of the place of temples in the state formation and the political purpose of temple architecture. But, I think there is still a lot to do in terms of understanding geometry and form and even in basic documentation of buildings, especially later temples; you shouldn't undervalue that simple thing of documenting. Then there is a huge amount to do in interpreting architectural texts. So, I am waiting for students who want to take that on. I suppose it is not easy. You need to get very familiar with the architecture and it is something like reconstructing from pieces of a broken down temple. It is only by having the pictures of the temples in your head that you can tease out from the text what was the intention. No one else is doing that at the moment. I hope, I am not the only one.

So, I would love to have some PhD students who would continue in that direction. But, I am always open to documenting some places that haven't been looked at. There is also the idea of making a database of all the archaeological fragments, any traces of temples, just to get together all the bits of work that people have done, so that you can build up a picture of the landscape. It will be a huge task needing many people, but it is a good idea to make a beginning.

There are lots of different approaches and different areas. When PhD students come I always like them to have an idea first. It is not very promising for a student to ask, what would you like me to do. I think that happens in science, where there are these big funded projects and

the professors are looking for students to do particular things. In our kind of field it is not like that. So, if somebody comes with no idea at all, that is not a good promising start.

SAYED

With the benefit of hindsight what would you have done differently in your career?

HARDY

I don't have any kind of burning regret. I could have started earlier. I started my PhD when I was about thirty and I did it part time. I could have gone straight from studying architecture into PhD and gone straight into an academic career. I don't particularly regret it, but I might have done more if I had started that way rather than fiddling around for a few years. Of course, I would love to have learned Sanskrit properly and various other things. You could always do more. Couldn't you?



Salil Sayed is a design researcher at Aalto University, Helsinki working on the challenges of designing for other cultures. As an architect he has practiced in Navi Mumbai for eight years before studying for his MA in Anthropology at University of Kent at Canterbury. Presently, he is also working on his M.Phil. in archaeology at Deccan College, Pune. He has engaged in anthropological fieldwork in Greece, China and Finland, and archaeological surveys in India. He has taught in architecture schools in Navi Mumbai and user-centred design in Helsinki and Wúxi.

His seemingly varied educational background is unified in the goal of developing methods of designerly knowing of other geo-specific cultures in order to successfully intervene in their material culture. While his interest in archaeology is fundamental, it nevertheless extends the idea of knowing other cultures beyond the contemporary.

✉ salilsay@yahoo.com