

## A Project's Journey

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Tekton  
Volume 2, Issue 1, March 2015  
pp. 82 - 93



**Kamu Iyer** graduated in Architecture from Sir J.J.School of Art, Bombay, in 1957.

In practice with Architects' Combine since 1960, he has built extensively in Bombay and other parts of India. His practice covers a wide range of projects like low income housing, educational and institutional buildings and campuses and research facilities etc. His articles and works have been published in various journals and magazines. A selection of his works has been published as a monogram titled, *"Quiet Conversations: the Architecture of Kamu Iyer"*.

He has been associated with teaching at various schools of architecture. He has been on the jury panel for design and dissertation at various schools all over India. He has been on jury panels for several public competitions.

Kamu Iyer has had an abiding engagement with the city of Bombay where he grew up, studied, taught and practiced architecture. He has written extensively on its architectural and urban history. He is the editor and an author of the book, *"Buildings That Shaped Bombay: Works of G.B.Mhatre"*. He has co-authored *"Four From the Fifties- Emerging Modern Architecture in Bombay"* as well as *"Build A Safe House With Confined Masonry"*. His latest book, *"BoOmbay: From Precincts To Sprawl"* recreates the city's genealogy through its built form and spaces.

In the present essay, Kamu Iyer chooses one project among many such institutional projects from his long and ongoing career. He recounts the story of its journey and provides a glimpse into his creative processes. He adopts the approach of diagram- an approach that he has used evocatively in his books about Bombay's architecture.

**Every project travels a path that is unique to it.** No two projects are alike nor do they take the same journey. Yet, most of us encounter similar situations while working on projects because the process we usually adopt is one of 'problem solving'. A project differs from an assignment. One is a journey of discovery while the other is completion of a task in a time frame. Most architects treat projects as assignments but for those who are looking for some meaning, a client and a site are really reasons for starting a journey.

**It is actually a search for the essence of a project in its deeper sense.** In the process it becomes a journey of discovering oneself- at least parts of it.

**This is more than analysing a set of physical requirements.** The client has a set of requirements and a vision that are often vague. Understanding a programme in its entirety and its components is therefore the first step in the design process.

**Designing the programme,** which follows, is a matter of proportioning the components and arranging them in a sequence. It is a balancing act.

**Then there is the site.** It does not stand alone nor does the building that comes on it. It is among others on the same street and many more in the city. And there are people for whom they are built and who will use them all the time. A space that is created needs people to bring it to life. Otherwise it is as dead as what we see in relics. A site in the countryside exists in a landscape but design principles are the same. The site, the surround, the client, the

programme and the designer's idea - everything is related. Understanding and then experiencing connectedness through designing and building a project could help us to know ourselves and the world around us better.

**We wend our way through a maze of abstractions and possibilities.** With knowledge gathered from experience, seeing precedents and reading what others have thought about.

**To design is also to see, listen and converse.** From these, the ideas emerge, most of them visual. They have their own logic. Contained within them are structural rhythm and materials and methods of construction that are integral to the idea. But no idea can be a fixed one. It needs to be questioned deeply and debated within oneself.

**From this constant churning comes a diagram.** It contains the core from which design naturally flows. If it does not, we need to go back, for it means the questions were not stated clearly. Clarity is what matters because that is creativity.

**Architecture is the form that emerges out of an understanding of a programme, the spaces that define it and the site.**

**It is the culmination of a journey** by the people who built it, whose contribution is often more important than those who initiated it.

## THE SCHOOL AT GUDALUR

*Or for that matter any school anywhere*

*Is where the young grow*

*In body and mind, with friends and grownups.*

*Here you begin a journey in quest of knowledge*

*With sight and sound, rhythm and harmony.*

*Through guidance and discovery, through questioning.*

*Through routine and order.*

*The journey is more interesting than getting off at the destination.*

*So is the course of the project.*

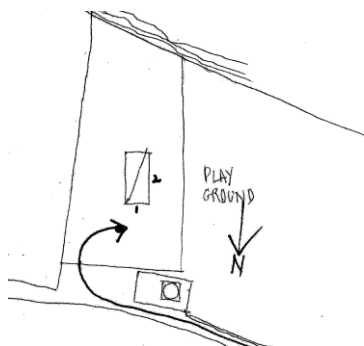
The site for the school we are talking about is in a village in the prosperous Cauvery Delta region of Tamil Nadu. It is reached through narrow but motorable roads. Villages in this part of Tamil Nadu are well connected. There are many schools nearby but people want and demand 'English medium' schools. They expect that getting educated in the 'English medium' will get them better jobs because of wider exposure and a more broad based education.

The site is narrow and deep. It is the entrance to the Main Street in the 'agraharam', the once Brahmin enclave, of the village. Houses on the street, planned according to the traditions of the community, are also on plots with narrow frontages and great depths. Width to depth dimensions is generally between 1:2 and 1:4. Plots are gently sloped to the rear for draining rainwater to the fields on the rear.

The traditional house on the street has a 'thinai' or front verandah for all to sit on. Most houses are two storied and all have the customary 'Madras Terrace' roof. A flat topped building that is three storey high is not intrusive or out of scale with the surround. The streets are wide enough for the annual temple

procession in which the Deity is placed either on elephant back or in the temple chariot which is drawn by devotees.

The context in this case is interesting but is not of much relevance to the design of the school or its surrounding ground. A design derived from examples of architecture in the 'agraharam' or traditional forms in other areas of Tamil Nadu would be incompatible with the requirements of a modern school, with contemporary teaching methods though it is located in a village. The context, therefore, is the site itself and its immediate surround, the programme and its interpretations.



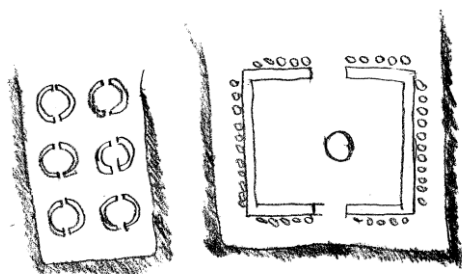
Everybody comes to school from nearby villages. By bus, cycles, mostly walking. The day starts early.

Conversing helps all to remove some of the cobwebs accumulated in the mind over the years. The debate is always about teaching methods because everyone agrees on the purpose of education.

Learning is never through a single path. That only produces robots. For a mind to be free to absorb, teaching has to be through instruction,



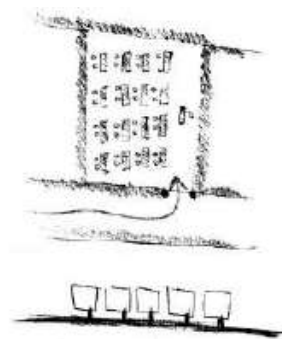
In the morning teachers and the taught seek benediction for learning together. There is a chorus of voices. That needs a space for many to gather and surfaces to enable voices to resonate. The sounds reverberate in the mind for the rest of the day. The evening is thanksgiving, a similar ritual.



For some part of the day there are many voices and even more listeners. There is learning through conversing or debating or even singing. You need to eat and it is nice to share a meal with friends. This too needs a larger space - one that is intimate, not intimidating. If the covered space brings in the outside, you get more area and light changes the space within. And if there is a tree in the open area, learning under its shade becomes a natural activity.

discussion, working with one's hands, seeing and experiencing. Devising suitable teaching methods includes the number and kind of spaces most suited for the purpose. It is another dimension of design and possibly the first.

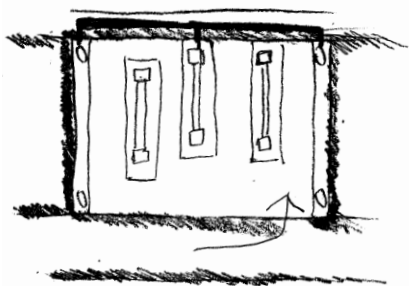
The design process starts with observation and reflection.



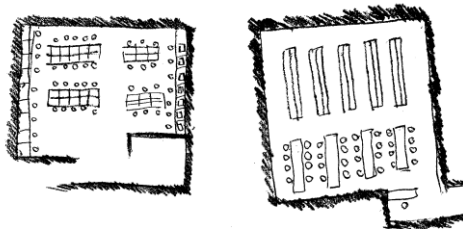
You have to read, write and recite. Most times there is one voice and many ears. This is learning through instruction. Many spaces are needed for this and they are used for most part of the day.



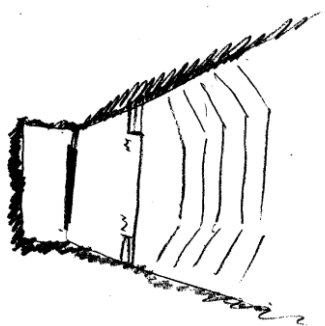
The larger space within the building extends outside.



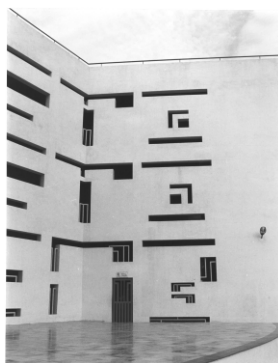
In how many ways can a space get used?  
You work together with others in one space, using your hands, like you do in a lab.  
This tells you that you are part of a group.



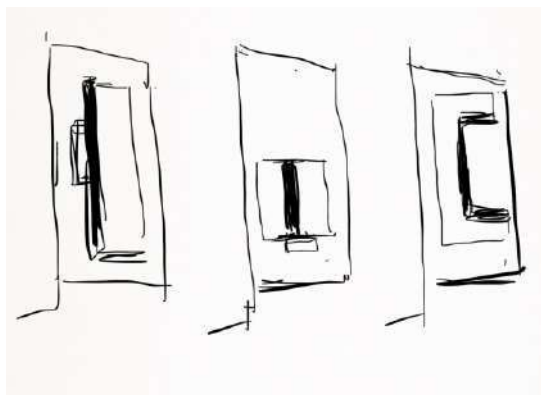
You work with others in one space but in silence like in a computer lab and a library.  
Learning in silence is an experience - quite different from taking instruction.



You sing, play act and experience emotion. Many watch that. In this school there is also a "parents' day"- when parents are on the stage performing for their children. It happens in a space that is different.



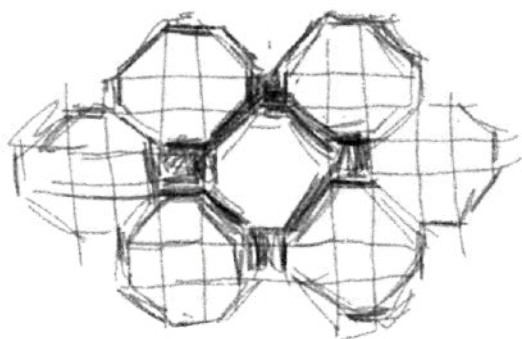
It could be enclosed or open to sky but it has to be large. Open Air theatres are best suited because it is always pleasant through the year. You don't need tiers because then you limit the use of ground space.



Do spaces merely linked together make a school? Most of them are just that, nothing more.  
The image of the average school building is firmly entrenched in people's minds. The plan of a school building has become generic but it cannot be typified as many assume.

See the usual suspects.  
They are like objects in space. The building and space around it are separate and don't speak in one voice.  
The Links between spaces are merely conduits.

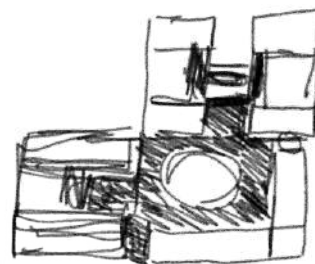
Recall precedents from your memory, even those from a distant past. Looking at them in a different time frame and through new eyes acquired from exposure and experience gives one a clearer view of the present. For instance:



The primary school in Sandur had six octagonal shaped rooms, three of them accessed from a square lobby.

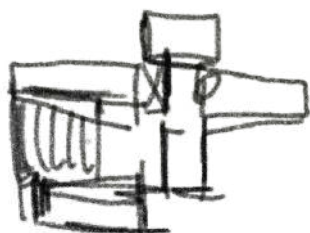
The logic was that the effective area of a room could be increased by cutting off the corners. Light coming from the splayed walls distributed light since it came from three sources.

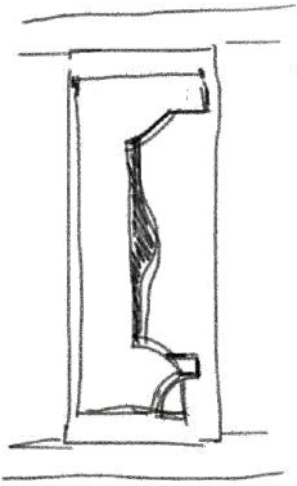
The shape was suitable for the different ways in which children of that age use a space. But the geometry was rigid and all spaces including the outside were shaped by it. The design was also unsuitable for a narrow site.



SMIORE school had a short corridor, which was more like a lobby, around which three rooms were placed. Two wings of a block were connected by a scissor stair. The school was designed to be built in two stages and the courtyard formed by the different functions was an open air theatre. Again this idea was unsuitable for the narrow site at Gudalur.

All the ideas recalled were merely memories.

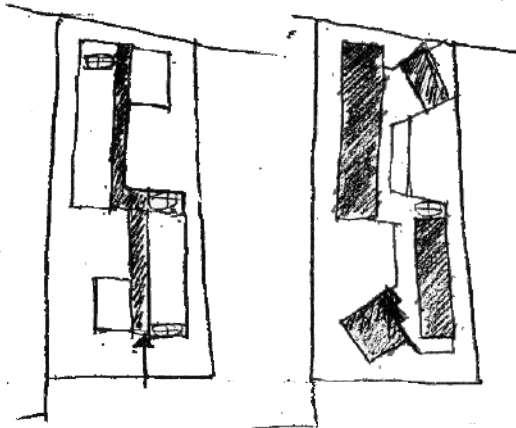




The precedent that was recent was worth a second glance because the site for it was narrow and deep. The immediate past is always more relevant than anything from a distant past.

Recalls from the distant past tend to be dim and out of focus. You can look at recent memories afresh and learn from them, after reviewing the compulsions that might have influenced the course of the project. In this case foundations for an earlier plan were completed before the clients requested a change of architects.

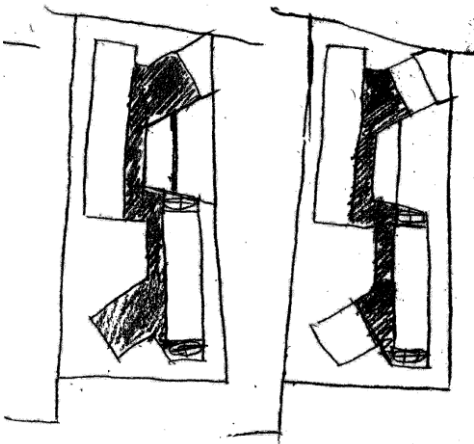
The constraints imposed by existing conditions resulted in a predictable design. A courtyard was defined on three sides by the building. A single loaded corridor turned at the ends of the building. It was only a slight variation from the generic school building that has cells strung along a corridor. But the precedent formed the springboard for the next project.



Now spaces could be rearranged to suit the changed demands which called for larger spaces at the ends. Likewise the character of the link could be changed. The link was first made discontinuous and the larger spaces at the ends relocated.

See what a slight twist of the larger spaces does to the link and the space outside.

The link merges with the larger spaces where it terminates. These merge with the outside.



**The Link:** Ground Floor

First Floor

You have to move from one space to another. A conduit would work because it lets you pass through quickly. But conduits are boring. You need some relief; otherwise you tend to rush through and lose sight of so many things. Like the train that rushes through a tunnel not letting you see the scene outside.



A link that is more than a mere conduit needs light to define it. The spaces have their own demand of light.



Spaces for instruction need light that remains constant and unvarying.

Light in the link and the spaces it culminates in can be modulated to enhance their quality.



The conventional corridor has a parapet wall that does nothing to make the link something more than a mere conduit. Here, light on the path modulated through openings in the outer wall makes all the difference.

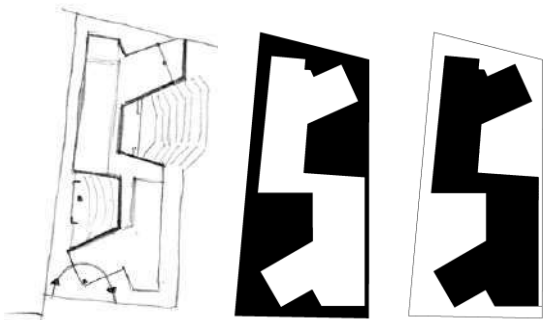


The light of the morning differs from the afternoon. To design openings in a wall to let in light that creates an atmosphere is not easy because the size and type of openings and the light coming through them is speculative in nature. Every time it comes as a surprise because light is ever changing. But openings in a wall do more than only letting in light. They also bring in the outside.

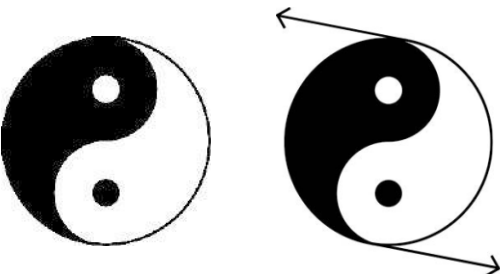




There is visual logic. Walls on the east and west sides need uniform light because movement is mostly in the north south directions. The outside is also worth looking at. On the north and south sides openings frame portions of the outside and permit less light. The combination of differing intensities of light adds to the ambience of the space.



The outside is part of the inside. In fact they are one. The building ceases to be a stand-alone object.



This reminds one of the Chinese yin- yang diagram. There are so many variations to the diagram but the principle remains the same.

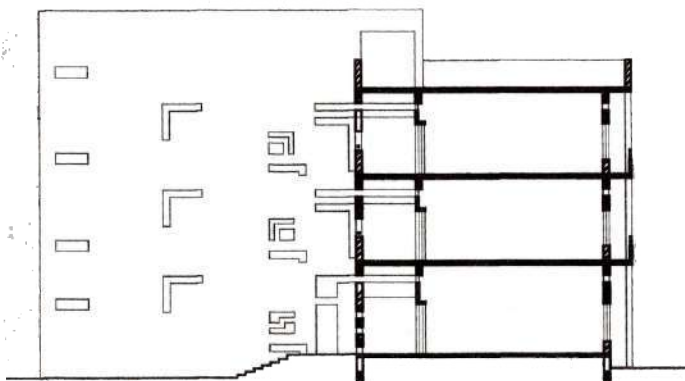
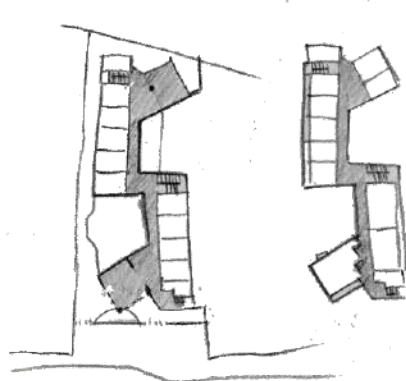
Yin- yang is not static. It has movement within it. Both parts are in movement like everything else in Nature.



A year later we find we have neglected the effects of nature and we are paying the price for it. The sun, when high, streams in bringing heat with it. And rain comes in restricting free movement.



You need light but not direct sunlight and heat.  
You need to keep the rain out but it is nice to see it falling.



This was when we got off at the destination.

Subsequent users usually change their space which is as it should be because a space that is static is usually either disused or deserted. In this case, more rooms were needed for indoor sports, Art and Craft studios and for staff meetings. Options were either to add another floor or design a more intense time sharing arrangement or shift these activities to another site. Everyone agreed to relocate because spaces suitable for these functions could be created without the constraints of existing conditions. The form of the building stayed unchanged. And a new project began.

This happened seven years later.

A project's journey culminates in a building. Built mostly with common sense, it appears simple enough for anyone to be able to build. And indeed anyone can just do that but it needs a sensitive and searching mind to bring soul to a building.

Hence the need to take the journey. ■

