

KEY WORDS:

B.V. Doshi, Indian Modern, Tribute

Doshi's Architecture: Breathing Life into the Static

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Tekton Volume 10, Issue 2, December 2023, pp. 66-71

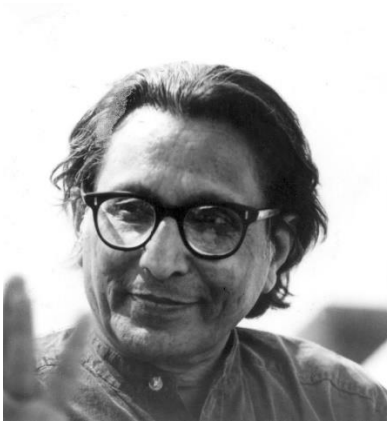
ABSTRACT

The passing of Balkrishna Doshi marks the end of an era of great modern Indian architects led by Habib Rahman, Achyut Kanvinde and Charles Correa. His prolific designs set the stage for an architecture of independent India. Doshi considered Le Corbusier as guru and Kahn a mentor, imbibing from them lessons on concrete and brick, learning to use both contextually and critically. His designs synthesized environment and context with the building's specific relationship with the site. Doshi had a constant desire to animate interior space, and the spaces around his buildings. When he was conferred with the Pritzker in 2018, architecture's greatest honour, the jury celebrated his work as one that embodied a deep sense of responsibility and a desire to contribute to his country and its people through high-quality, authentic architecture. Over a career spanning seven decades, Doshi was a modernist, a designer of settlements, an Aga Khan Award winning architect, a creator of low-cost housing and a teacher with generations of students whose lives he transformed.



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Doshi, a Pioneer of Indian Modern Architecture

With the passing of Balkrishna Doshi, 2018 Pritzker Laureate, the last of the great modern Indian architects has become one with the ages. Doshi formed part of a vanguard led by Habib Rahman, Achyut Kanvinde and Charles Correa, whose prolific designs set the stage for an architecture of independent India, unfettered by the baggage of the past. Their buildings reflected an optimism fuelled and mentored by India's first Prime Minister and squarely located the Nation State at the forefront of modern architectural expression. These young architects basked in the opportunities offered and created the new institutions of a free India with contemporary materials, aesthetics and space making. In this, they followed the heroes of international Modernism that preceded them, Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn.

Doshi spent close to a decade working with both Le Corbusier and Kahn, in Paris, Chandigarh and Ahmedabad, overseeing projects like the High Court in Chandigarh, the Shodhan House, the Millowners Association and the IIM in Ahmedabad. He considered the Swiss-French architect his guru and Kahn a mentor, imbibing from him lessons on the dexterity of concrete and from the other the austerity of brick, learning to use both contextually and critically.

Doshi recalls the first time Le Corbusier sat down at his table in the Paris atelier, where he demonstrated his architectural philosophy to the young acolyte using drawings and words: "Animating walls starts a dialogue and thus they become active elements of architecture.



Institute Of Indology, Ahmedabad, 1959
Source: <https://www.sangath.org/projects/>



Premabhai Hall, Ahmedabad, 1976

Always bring life to all static elements and connect buildings to the cosmos." This advice was taken to heart, never forgotten and formed the basis for his own practice. When awarded the Pritzker Prize, Doshi acknowledged his guru: "I owe this prestigious prize to my guru, Le Corbusier. His teachings led me to question identity and compelled me to discover new regionally adopted contemporary expression for a sustainable holistic habitat."

Early Works

Doshi began his own architectural practice with projects like the Institute for Indology (1957-62) and the Premabhai Hall (1956), both in Ahmedabad, using the architectural vocabulary developed by Le Corbusier. His buildings boldly celebrated RCC in its raw, unadorned form called *béton brut*, a form of architecture called Brutalism. The sculptural composition of the Institute of Indology belied its actual purpose as an archive of rare Jain manuscripts. And yet even while practicing an international modernism, Doshi sought a way to make a building that was both authentic and rooted. Its high plinth and full length, overhanging verandah emerged from studying Jain upashrays, while the modulated light within kept temperatures down to preserve the fragile artifacts. This was done by embedding the building partially into the ground, creating a basement like space where air circulated through cross ventilation.

Founding of CEPT Ahmedabad and Later Works

Environment and context synthesized to become the hallmark for Doshi's architecture. In his projects the building's specific relationship with the site always led to the development of spaces. His buildings related themselves to their site not just by sitting on it but by emerging from it. Site and buildings become one, and can still be perceived as such both by the user as well as by the aficionado of his buildings. In his School of Architecture (1966-68), the building is wedged into the natural slope of the site to create basement-like spaces, insulated from the harsh Ahmedabad sun. His own office building Sangath (1979-



School of Architecture, CEPT, Ahmedabad, 1966
 Source: <https://www.sangath.org/projects/>

81), perhaps the most iconic architectural studio design in India, has barrel vaults rising from the ground. The visitor approaches the building, past cascading water in pools and channels, by climbing to the springing line of the vaults and then enters the subterranean workplace. Light comes in through the ends of the vaults like an ancient basilica. Doshi own studio is like a monk's cell, illuminated by reflected light. Architect and cartoonist Ajit Rao, who worked for Doshi for several years finds this his favourite part of the office: "A simple overhead periscope-like device alters the harsh south east rays into a soft celestial glow, breathing pure drama into the space. And when a cloud moves past the sun, it feels as if the Gods themselves have turned on the dimmer in the room."

Doshi's other iconic design is his most experimental, the *Amdavad Ni Gufa* (1992-95), or a Cave in Ahmedabad, that he designed in collaboration with the artist Maqbool Fida Husain. The cave is underground, only the freeform undulating roofscape of ferrocement, finished with China-mosaic rises like an ancient leviathan emerging from the permafrost. Both artist and architect put their creative minds together to come up with an interior space never conceived before, making an Altamira for Husain to stay and paint in. Once again, site and building work as one. Doshi appears as himself in a surprising cameo in Mani Ratnam's *O Kadhal Kanmani* (2015), guiding a group of aspiring architects through his Gufa. The Gufa has no conventional building elements. Light only enters through punctures in the roof. He describes its space succinctly: "When sunlight comes in, it moves, so the building and space starts moving." Doshi's has always had a fondness for animation, movement and kinesis. This he achieves with light, modulating it, then setting it free to provide ever changing perspectives.

Doshi's Poetics of Space

I search for the right word to describe his spaces. Elastic or flexible doesn't do it. No, to describe a kinetic quality to the rigid materiality of built form. I think, perhaps I will fall back on the Hindustani 'lacheelapan'. Yes, this describes Doshi's predilection best, the constant desire to animate interior space, and the spaces around his buildings. The School of Architecture has a *plan libre* (free plan), where inside and outside spaces are



Indian Institute Of Management, Bangalore, 1992
Source: <https://www.sangath.org/projects/>



Hussain Doshi Gufa, Ahmedabad, 1994

purposefully ambiguous, and studios flow into other studios, without walls or academic silos, encouraging students of architecture from various years to do the same. My fondest memory of this building is visiting it late one night in the early eighties to find students happily snoring away below their very drawing boards. An architecture school with *lacheelapan*, with doors always open, students always welcome, day or night. One of his most loved spaces is the long corridor, in the IIM Bangalore (1977-85), punctuated by courtyards. The cross section of this promenade is a composition of stone masonry, tall, slender columns of concrete holding up a pergola, permeated with creepers and sunlight, throwing a variety of shadows illuminating and diffusing the walkway with banded light throughout the day. His spaces evoke a visual delight, ever changing with the hours and the seasons.

These pursuits work across scales for Doshi, even in the homes he designs. About in his own home (1959-61, named Kamala, after his wife), where he lived for six decades, he asks Dayanita Singh, a photographer and artist, who is there to document it: "How do you give people a chance to become themselves, lose themselves? Where does formality become informality to the point of almost intimacy?" In her deeply affecting, intimate images, we see spaces tumble into each other across levels, steps become seats, its inhabitants brought together in proximity and love.

When Doshi was conferred with the Pritzker in 2018, architecture's greatest honour, the jury celebrated his work as one that embodied a deep sense of responsibility and a desire to contribute to his country and its people through high-quality, authentic architecture. "Projects must go beyond the functional" the jury said, "to connect with the human spirit through poetic and philosophical underpinnings."

With a career spanning seven decades, and his vast influence as a modernist, a designer of settlements, an Aga Khan Award winning creator of low-cost housing (Aranya, Indore, 1983-86), a teacher with generations of students whose lives he transformed, Doshi cannot be pinned down into shorthand homilies. He worked within contexts, then went beyond them. He acknowledged his influences gratefully, learned from mentors and clients alike, then created designs that satisfied both. He was always well loved by his students the age of his grandchildren. My tribute limits itself to his conceptions of space. But here too, Doshi

asks: "What was important? Was it the form of the building, the content, the space? I thought the most important things are the experiences, the *rasa* which is the subtle experience of the space that makes the space memorable. It extends the associations and enriches imagination." There is a shamanic quality to Doshi's architecture that shall always be present. Even as we revisit his buildings, we will be aware of a silent murmur in the background, an incantation, a breathing of life to all static elements, that have connected his buildings to the cosmos. ■

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