

Five lessons

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As part of the RIBA Part Three examination in London in 1985, I was required to write an essay on why I wanted to become an architect. I recall vividly what I wrote, after some soul-searching to express an honest answer. That essay informed my later distillation of the basis for practice to five lessons.

These lessons are crucial and integral to our practice.

The essay began with a confession: I had not heard of the RIBA before completing Part One as a student in Ahmedabad.

I passed the Part Three exam to become a registered architect.

TWO: LEARNING FROM HISTORY

There are not textbooks for architecture like there are for medicine and accountancy. Two plus two always makes four; but architecture entails inspiration and synergy, meaning that a resolution can be either minus or plus but never exactly four. Why so?

While studying at CEPT and the AA, I wondered about the temples, mosques and other buildings from the past I visited, initially unaware of their impact on me. Even now, I am struck with awe by how amazing, wonderful and meaningful many historical structures are. The more I visit them, even though many are in a ruined state, the more I discover. They are like trees standing tall through the extremes of time and weather, giving shelter to all and lessons to anyone who enquires. I wonder too what it does to me when I occupy and move through the ruined spaces: I become charged, or I forget everything else. My wife jokes that I forget to eat, drink and sleep when I travel to visit these structures, which I do several times a year, just to marvel even if I do not always understand them.

Visiting buildings of history has allowed me to see many things. One is an image of the ruin, which fascinated architects during the neoclassical period. However, for me the fragmented image is of something that looks complete yet is incomplete. It is a quality we try to invest our projects with: to make buildings like ruins. Unconsciously perhaps, our projects are imbued with making a building complete while maintaining a fragmented aesthetic.

The ruins of Palmyra and the temples of Kiradu – both in the middle of desert – look complete and yet they are in ruins. At the Kund vav of Dedadra, a stepwell with temples surrounding it, and in the courtyards of the Alhambra – both where architecture is composed around the central element of water – you wonder whether it is the water or the buildings that are primary.

Which historical building has taught me the most? They cannot be ranged in chronological or typological order. Their influence come and go, making one initial impression, then often fading and returning with redoubled intensity.

FACING: Lessons of repetition, rhythm and balance inform this perspective, finding completion in the reflections of the floor.



Rudabai stepwell, Ahmedabad, 1499 AD



Amiens Cathedral, France, 1270 AD



THREE: CLIMATE

Perhaps the most crucial lesson offered by history is response to climate. People now talk about green buildings and sustainable architecture and critical regionalism. Architecture, past and present, is validated by an appropriate response to climate and location, which amounts to all these things.

No one in past centuries while designing a building thought to themselves: I will only make a building that is climatically responsive. Yet historical and vernacular buildings have always adhered to practical and aesthetic architectural principles developed to answer the great implacable forces of climate, place and nature.

Climate remains a constant primary design consideration. In designing buildings, architects need to develop imaginative responses to both the ordinary and extraordinary impacts of climate – and changing climate. Often they need to go no further than to look to the proven, refined architectural lessons of the past.

The multi-storeyed historical pol houses of Ahmedabad are a constant personal inspiration, built around a central courtyard atrium, giving light and ventilation to the interiors as well as comfortable sheltered external living places, and ensuring security and privacy. The colonial verandah also provides comfortable living spaces between indoors and outdoors, differently oriented yet climatically appropriate. These elements have their modern counterparts in our designs.

A lesson in the importance of the sun is delivered by the differing orientations of two stepwells, both built in the 16th century at more or less at the same time and close to each other in Ahmedabad, one commissioned by a Hindu queen and other by a Muslim courtly lady. The Bai Harir stepwell is oriented north-south, while the Rudabai stepwell is oriented east-west. At Bai Harir, the north-facing deep well is almost never in shadow, direct sunlight penetrating the space and enhancing the exquisite well shaft with cheerful light. The Rudabai stepwell is mostly experienced in shadow and thus the space is less vivid. So we learn that it is preferable to orient a long building north-south. An example is the TCS Garima Park building, where the quality of light of the main atrium and ancillary spaces is vivid and life-enhancing.

But if for some reason it is not possible to take advantage of the sun in this way, with a site that is oriented east-west, then we carve out spaces to make areas that face north and south, and use borrowed light.

Light takes many forms: direct, indirect, borrowed. It streams through sky lights, and clerestories, or is filtered by louvres, *brise-soleil*, screens and baffles. It is the foremost design concern.



Colonial verandah, Pondicherry, 18th century



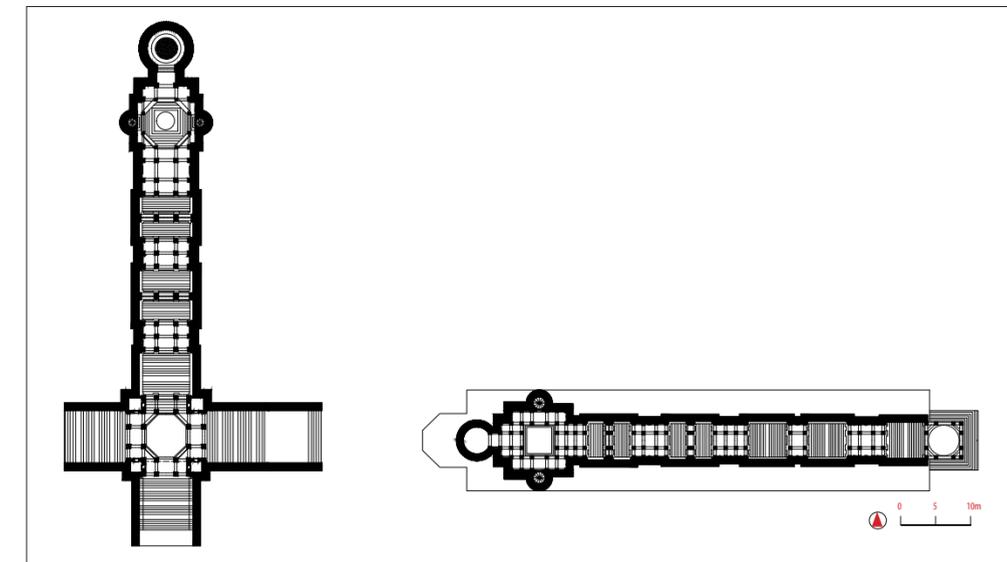
House at Sam, Rajasthan



Padmanabh Puram Palace, Kerala, 1601



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Rudabai stepwell, Adalaj, 1499

Bai Harir stepwell, Ahmedabad, 1499

ABOVE: The bold, abstracted tracery punched into a sinuous masonry wall ensures the interior is kept free of glare yet enjoys breezes and light. In hot, arid western India, stone is an appropriate material for the harsh climate. Its durability speaks of architectural authority.