

Deft Designer

Meticulous planning and crisp detail underline the work of a pioneer of Modern architecture in India

Miki and Madhavi Desai



Born in Bhadran, Gujarat, in 1933, Hasmukh Chandubhai Patel received his diploma in architecture from the M S University, Baroda in 1956, and a master's degree in architecture from Cornell University, USA in 1959. In addition to his having been honorary architectural consultant for various government and private organizations, Hasmukh Patel has been a member of several committees engaged in the framing of building codes and bye-laws in Gujarat state. He has taught and been involved with education over the last two decades, and since 1972 has been honorary director of the Ahmedabad School of Architecture. Patel's private practice covers a wide range of projects from institutions, theatres and commercial centres to houses and interiors.

“I DON'T THINK I have in mind a particular theory or philosophy that helps me design buildings. The human being is at the centre of my creative efforts. I only believe that my designs must create humane environments that generate vitality and the joy of being. This is the only thing I understand and the only thing I practise.”

Such a statement coming from someone with 25 years of successful practice behind him should not surprise those who know Hasmukh Chandubhai Patel—a man of few words and a lot of action. A result-oriented person, he has the habit of going into all the possible complexities of a problem, be it in designing the Reserve Bank of India building or in tearing apart and putting together an old piano. All his works, from modest residences to prestigious commercial complexes, reflect the thoroughness of the designer's approach. His finesse at detailing, his choice of materials and directness of expression in design, assure him a place among the pioneers of modern architecture in Gujarat.

Back in 1961, when he returned to India after completing his master's in architecture in the USA and started working for an ailing architect, Atmaram Gajjar, in Ahmedabad, Patel might not have

visualized such an active career for himself. He used to commute two days a week from Vadodara where he had also started his own practice. His efforts finally paid off when, after six months, he was asked to take over the Ahmedabad office. Even so, “it was no bed of roses,” Patel says, and it was a long wait before he was commissioned to design a project on his own in Ahmedabad. The first breakthrough in his career came in 1965 when he was approached by the trustees of St Xavier's to design for the priests, hostels which became popularly known as Newman Hall. This project marked the beginning of a good client-architect relationship with the St Xavier's institute, which lasts till today.

When Hasmukh Patel started his practice, the Modern style of architecture had already been chosen for the city of Ahmedabad. Except for some chaste buildings in the International style by Achyut Kanvinde, architects in Ahmedabad had shown a sustained and clear preference for the Corbusian Brutalist style since the fifties, when Le Corbusier himself had designed no less than four projects in the city. This architecture is characterized by the use of exposed and untreated materials meant to emphasize discipline in workmanship, cubist composi-

tions and proportions, as well as a degree of anonymity in space-making. Consequently, Patel became one of the noted architects who got involved in the development of the local vocabulary for Brutalist architecture. All the same, since he was not so rigidly trained in any one particular style, his choices were prone to modification and deviation. Thus, what we perceive in the initial phase of his career is his own interpretation of Brutalist architecture, and the influences of certain western architects, to whose work he had been exposed while studying in the USA, especially Mies van der Rohe and the Austrian architect Harry Seidler. Their simplicity of design, directness of expression and clarity of materials had greatly impressed him, and these elements are consistently reflected in his projects. He also owes much to his period of study at Cornell in the late fifties. Apart from participating in intensive design courses and being exposed to various western styles of architecture, the most significant thing that happened to him was that he had the opportunity to study under Prof. Kent at Cornell. Says Patel, "He has been a very important, positive force in my life. He was not only a good teacher but also motivated the shaping of my career. I owe a lot to him." After graduation, Patel travelled extensively in the USA observing the work of important architects. He was deeply impressed by Mies van der Rohe's Apartments on Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, Crown Hall, and the Architecture and Design Faculty Building of the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. He was also fascinated by the works of Frank Lloyd Wright, particularly his studio at Taliesin West, the Johnson Wax Building at Racine, Wisconsin, the Unity Church at Chicago and Price Tower in Oklahoma. Wright's dynamic use of geometrical compositions, repetition of rhythmical forms and bold detailing integrating the use of different materials left a lasting imprint on his mind.

Patel's own work, however, has never been subservient to any style. In fact, he prefers his designs to be architectural interpretations subservient to the client's needs. In his designs he opts for the 'modern' style, to be interpreted as 'technical aesthetics', rather than looking for superficial traditional or vernacular references. Even at the beginning of his career he only accepted from the Brutalist mode materials in their purest form,

especially in brick and concrete, along with the idea of cubist compositions. What he did not accept is the notion that symmetry is an impediment to the development of modern architecture. He believes that if flexibility and functional locations in a plan can be clearly delineated at the conceptual level, symmetry can be used as a creative tool to convey a modern ambience, without the stigma of, for example, the Palladian connotations of symmetry. "I often start designing with symmetrical concepts and then carefully and subtly break away from them," says he.

Even after almost 18 years, Patel's own residence comes to the fore as a project which has provided the architect with a 'seed' idea that will probably last him throughout his career. It is also a project that clearly demonstrates where and how he differs from the pristine pursuit of Brutalism. The charm of this design is that unless one studies its plan, one may not realize that it is a symmetrical composition. The architect believes that in our culture and climate, the building within is not as important as what happens around it. This belief is reflected in the design and location of his in-between spaces such as the veran-



Hasmukh Patel's residence

dah, as well as in structures, such as the garage, servant's quarters and kitchen support area, which are well integrated with the landscape. The project symbolizes Patel's preoccupation with relationships between the inside and outside, spatial experiences, and most of all his love for detailing. It demonstrates his choice of design elements and captures the essence of his style of architecture. It is only natural that his designs for many other residences and a few large buildings become variations of this theme.

Of the major traits that personify Hasmukh Patel's buildings, the following are significant: clinical clarity and an austere use of materials, meticulous detailing, rational compositions and a preference for common sense architecture as oppos-

ed to overtly contrived space making. Patel happens to be one of the very few architects who also possesses a keen interest in the mechanics of any product. "I have an engineering mind," he says. He finds joy in working with his hands, personally demonstrating to a craftsman on site, or even learning from one by watching him work for hours together.

To fully comprehend the development of such a personality we have to look into his background. Born in a middle class family in Vadodara, he was what he calls a *pol* child—*pols* being the *mohallas* in old city areas. Many of his design elements are recalled from his past experience, particularly the wide corridor (more a playground than a walkway), and courtyard spaces (variations of the traditional *chowk*). His father, still occasionally active in his profession, is a civil engineer who had qualified from Poona, and whose abilities as an engineer/contractor/designer in Vadodara were greatly respected. He took a keen interest in the development of all his children, encouraging them to be enquiring and keen observers and, above all, independent. Patel attributes his success to the encouragement and training of his father who, he claims, always wanted him to be an architect. "I had been watching my father design and construct his buildings ever since I was 12 years old, often accompanying him to construction sites." Another person who played a significant role in Patel's career was Prof. M B Dave, who had also served as city architect of Vadodara. Prof. Dave's work can be characterized as a cross between 'Streamline Moderne' and the International styles. Patel, who worked with Prof. Dave for a year in 1956-57 before going to the USA, speaks admiringly of Prof. Dave as a designer and a teacher. "He helped me overcome my shortcomings and realize my strengths," and adds, "He taught me to design with careful consideration by making me aware of the fact that each line an architect draws costs money."

It should be noted that Patel has pleasantly surprised many of his clients by exercising amazing cost controls. He is keenly aware of construction practices and their implication on project costs. "I don't believe in experimenting for the sake of it. I would not mind repeating a successful detail tried 20 years ago, if it still works." Over the years he has gradually developed a consciousness and a method of im-

plementing cost control which includes maximization of standard elements and careful selection of materials, finishes, hardware, etc. His fastidious nature, however, gets him involved beyond the selection of an appropriate contracting agency, all the way to the analysis of labour agencies and, sometimes, even in the selection of a particular artisan. "One cannot take anything for granted in a country like ours. An architect must be on his toes all the time," Patel says, to explain these additional efforts. As a result, even his buildings of modest cost reflect a clear and well-worked out system with a high level of general quality in terms of execution and finish. Patel believes in making every effort to satisfy a client and come to a mutual agreement on controversial issues. For example, when he was asked to design the St Xavier's School in Ahmedabad, he analysed ten other school plans to drive home his point about allowing 50 per cent of the total built-up area for corridors, against the average 33 per cent, because he firmly believed that these could be used as spaces for student interaction, for exhibiting students' work, or even as classrooms.

Since the beginning of his career, Patel has been involved in the field of architectural education. He is a keen and dedicated teacher, given to few words, but nevertheless very actively involved in all aspects of the training of an architect. He has a questioning mind, taking nothing for granted. Having been an average student himself till high school—he used to skip classes to sneak off to the Relief Cinema (1950), then under construction in Ahmedabad, to watch artisans and craftsmen working on its exquisite Art Deco interior—he is bemused at having held the positions of Director, School of Architecture, and Dean, Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology, Ahmedabad. The Centre particularly has benefited from his resource management capabilities, crucial to the survival and growth of most academic institutions. He has strong views on existing educational methods which he finds rather slow and old fashioned. "Education should change according to society's changing needs. We have a lot to learn and not enough time." He prefers to separate the creative learning process which he feels requires vigorous inputs such as visual aids and on-site experiences, from theoretical knowledge. Needless to say he is not always successful in achieving desired

results in policy changes, but the positive force in his personality keeps him striving relentlessly for improvement.

Patel has also been actively involved in professional and public bodies at the city, state and national levels. He has been a member of various committees set up to frame the National Building Code by-laws, a member of the Sabarmati River Front Development project in Ahmedabad, the Gujarat Lalit Kala Academy and other organizations. He has been called upon by the State and Union Governments in the past for his expertise on various issues related to his field of work. Committees usually have a laboriously slow pace of functioning and being a man of action he finds himself limited by work procedures. Often, he says, he is not reinvited owing to his habit of calling 'a spade, a spade'. He feels that the days of the individual client are almost over. The architectural profession should gear itself to face the requirements of the anonymous client, be it in the field of mass housing or commercial complexes. He accepts the reality of the developer's domination in the profession. He believes in working with the developer and educating him on the requirements of



Reserve Bank of India

an urban environment, which the developer must take into consideration. At the moment, Patel's practice ranges from the designing of private residences to mass housing schemes, and from educational buildings to large commercial complexes. To a great extent, his success is based on excellent team work and high management skills. His office is extremely well organized and everything from the preparation of drawings and working details, bills of quantities and specifications is meticulously worked out. Says a senior associate, "We have a family-type atmosphere in the office. Personnel relationships are good and employees tend to stay here for a longer duration than they normally do elsewhere."

Ever since the sixties, many cities such

as Ahmedabad have grown out of their rural-urban nature towards a more urbane character. The city and its people have no choice but to develop a civic awareness that is different from their traditional past. Owing to factors such as ever increasing land pressures, commercial and office complexes have had to evolve, giving rise to the need for a corporate architecture. Meeting the requirements of this new demand with a fitting response as an architect, marks the style of the bulk of Hasmukh Patel's present practice. The Reserve Bank of India at Ahmedabad (1971), Dena Bank at Ahmedabad (1974) and Chinubhai Centre at Ahmedabad (1978), are among his recent major projects. Predominantly exposed concrete structures, activity floors served by a carefully located vertical circulation and service core, plaza-like areas at various levels, and prominent stair elements, form the major part of this architect's vocabulary. It is here that he has explored the urban notion of creating public spaces on and off the street, as well as in the buildings. "One must design something that can set an example to be followed by society." This has been his emphasis in developing frontal promenades at the Chinubhai Towers, Chinubhai Centre and Dena Bank. Patel is also very conscious of the need for total community planning. In his multi-storied apartment complex at Centre Point, Ahmedabad (under construction), he has carefully and meticulously designed various types of open spaces, a health club, swimming pool, car and scooter parking, and limited shopping to facilitate community living in an urban setting. Hasmukh Patel's buildings project him as an architect giving the society architectural images necessitated by its emulation of western urban models. His latest designs are strong as well as popular images that are assured of a firm rooting in our urban culture.

Miki and Madhavi Desai both graduated from the School of Architecture, Ahmedabad, and completed their master's in Austin, USA, in 1978. After working for two years at Berkeley San Francisco, they travelled extensively in the USA and Europe before returning to India where the husband and wife team established a joint architectural practice in Ahmedabad in 1981. Miki, a keen photographer, has also been a visiting faculty member at the Ahmedabad school since 1981.