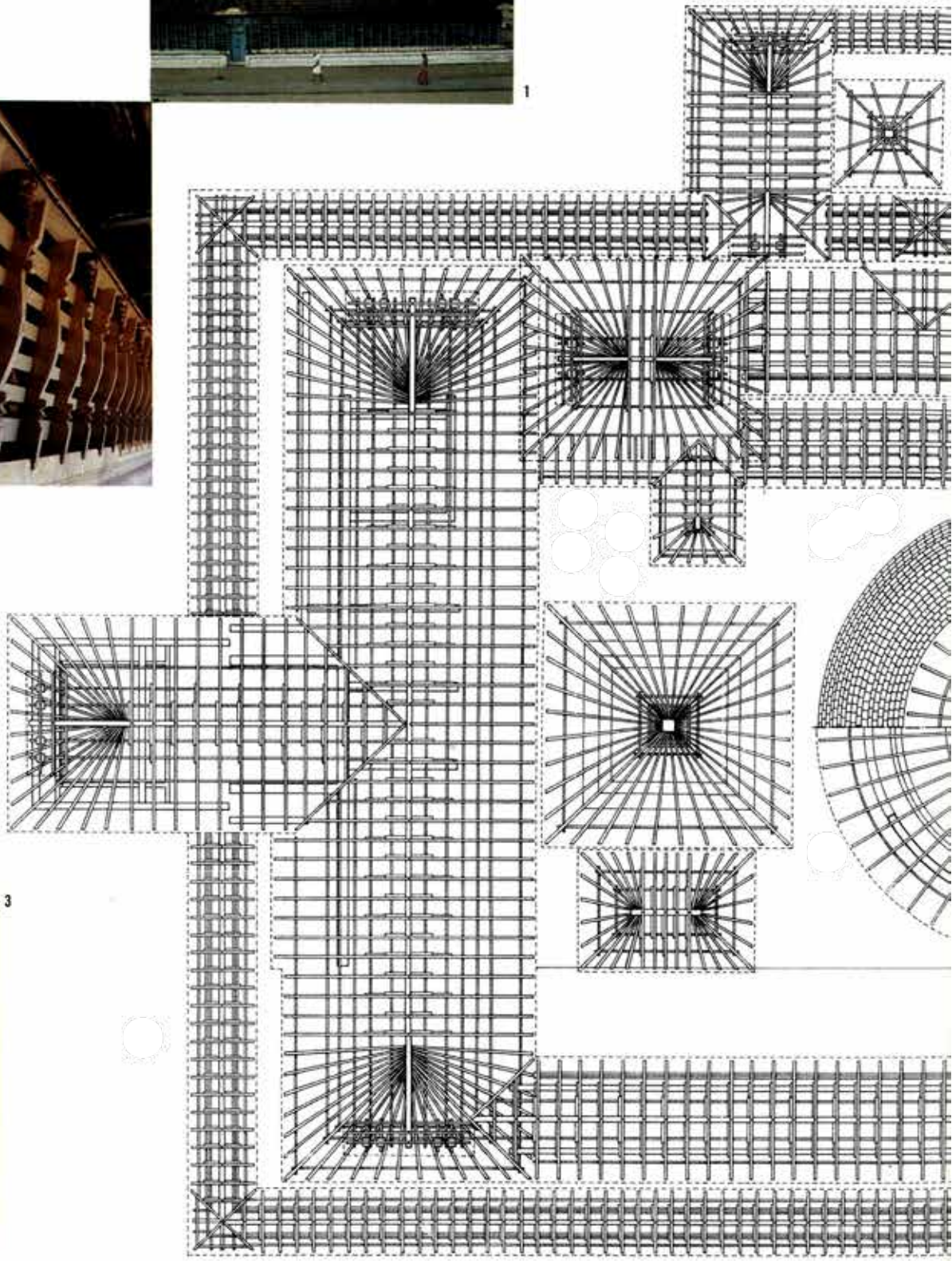




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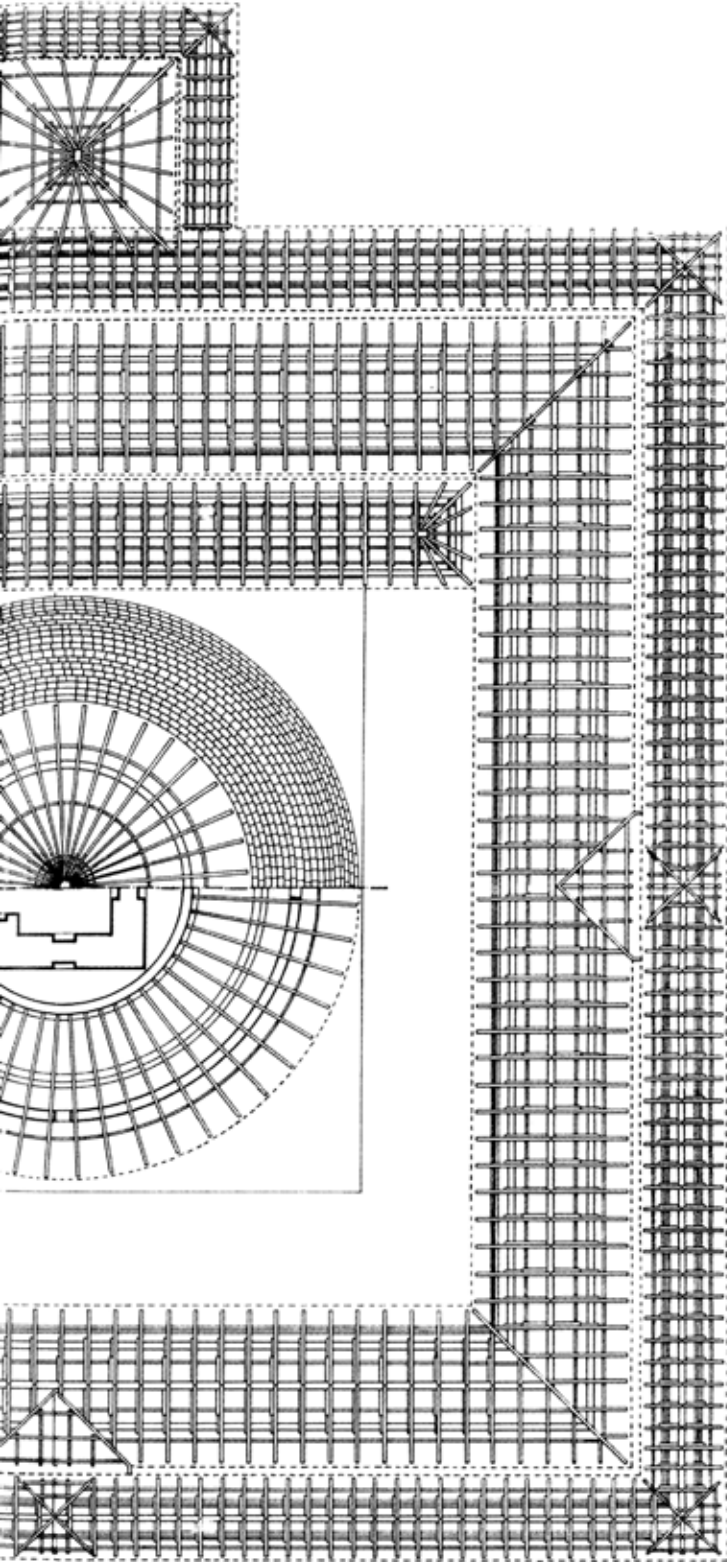
WOODEN ARCHITECTURE OF KERALA

*A distinct tradition in the
Indian subcontinent*

Miki Desai

PART 1: TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE

India is a vast and complex country, a pluralistic society with tremendous religious, geographic, ethnic, climatic and linguistic diversity. Indian architecture, therefore, has many manifestations that cover a rich heritage of building traditions. These traditions are spread across the country in the form of a variety of settlement patterns, institutions and dwelling types symbolizing the cultural ethos of distinct regions. Among these the state of Kerala in the southwestern tip of the Indian subcontinent holds a distinct position due to the richness of the wooden craftwork and the development of its building science.



Rafter Plan, Inner Precinct
Sri Durga Devi Temple, Kumaranallur, Kerala



- 1 The Sri Durga Devi Temple as seen from the western gate. Outer precinct area, circumbulation path, western side lamp wall of the inner precinct, the upper roof of the main temple, the kitchen roof, the roof of the front wing, and the southern gate of the outer precinct are seen.
- 2 The slatted window-wall seen from outside the Dance Drama Theater at Sri Vadakunathan temple, Trichur, Kerala. See photo 6.
- 3 The slatted window-wall seen from inside.
- 4 The main precinct with western wing, markers on the ground of the inner circumbulation path, the plinth, wall and the lower roof of the main temple are seen in the foreground. In the background is the sacred tree under which the Bhadrakali Temple is located.
- 5 The ceiling of the entrance gate structure with heavy beams, brackets, and false ceiling.
- 6 The Dance Drama Theatre as seen from the outside at Sri Vadakunathan temple, Trichur, Kerala
- 7 The 1:20 scale model of the inner precinct of the Sri Durga Devi Temple constructed by Miki Desai for the European exhibition "Krank, Warum?" by Ethno-Expo, edited by Mr. Frank B Keller.

Endowed with ancient institutions of religion and culture, Kerala's traditional architecture comprises temples, palaces and dwellings built in a unique system of wooden construction. The examples found today are 200 to 400 years old but their styles date back 800 years.

The cultural richness of Kerala stems from the interrelationship of religion, language, dance, music, visual arts and architecture. The region has remained comparatively less influenced by 'other' cultures. In contrast, the physical environments of the northern regions, such as Gujarat and Rajasthan, show an intermingling of native and incoming cultures. It is the homogeneity and continuity in its traditional architecture makes Kerala a fascinating study.

RELIGIOUS ARCHITECTURE

The typical Hindu temple of Kerala stands out among the Indian temple typology in form, structural clarity, stylistic tradition, symbolism and most of all, in material and craftsmanship in wood. Belonging to the southern Dravidian classification, the Kerala temples are traditionally neighborhood institutions of worship in the form of precincts.

The main temple within this precinct is square, rectangular, apsidal or circular in plan and may have up to a three-story roof. A typical temple has an axial relationship to its surroundings as well as within its complex. It has a number of functional components, main shrine and sub-shrines and is clearly demarcated by walls. A courtyard within a courtyard defines its center with the main deity located in the innermost courtyard.

The precinct in Kerala possesses an elemental religious geography relating the worshiper to water, vegetation, directions and sacred spirits. It manages to blend with the settlement surrounding due to its sensitive scaling devices. This article describes one representational case study – Sri Durga Devi Temple of Kumaranallura – and heavily draws upon the process of a detailed analytical documentation.

SPATIAL CONCEPTS AND THE MEANING OF THE TEMPLE ORGANIZATION

The spatiality of Kerala temple follows the general Indian philosophical concepts of the center, axis and the human relatedness to the cosmic reality. Its implementation in the built form, however, follows the Vedic religious practices. The temple's spatial organization is dictated by the symbolism of the vertical axis joining the nether world with the heavens and the horizontal axis following the cardinal directions.

The visitor or devotee passes by the main and the subsidiary deities and the ritualistic circumbulation or pathway in an ordered sequence. Prior to entering the inner precinct, the devotees pay respect to the main gate, the banner pole, the deities and the directional gods in the circumbulation path. During this process they are held into a ring-like open space. This space is enclosed by a thick wall and four

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entrance gates, which, while demarcating the precinct, show the rooftops of the neighborhood, the existential world of the devotee. On its inside, this space is defined by the mass of the temple structures and a continuous lamp-wall holding together a rectangular basin with four symmetrically placed entrances.

In a sense, the rituals in the first courtyard or the outer precinct are preparatory in nature and build up the crescendo, experience of the devotee. Depending on the day, occasion and most importantly the time of the day, the outer and inner precincts are charged by the live temple music, scents, color and the ritual processions followed at given times of the day.

Entry into the second courtyard or the inner precinct reveals the main deity along with the closer members of his/her family [sub-deities]. This area has a sequence starting from the banner pole and the Belikal [the sacrificial stone icon, now unused]. Through the entrance porch with the decorative ceiling a devotee enters the front wing and goes through a dark alley space that enhances his expectancy while helping him to leave behind worldly associations.

Now one enters the inner courtyard where a whole new spatial and ritual sequence of spirituality opens up, that of having entered the realm of personal/private spiritual space. Compared with the experience of an open and airy space of the outer precinct, here the space becomes denser and more focused. The feeling of being enveloped and secluded is remarkable here.

STRUCTURE AND AESTHETICS

The structural and the construction system of the main temple, the dance drama theater, the elephant shelter, the salutation pavilion and the entrance gate structure demonstrate a distinct variation to the