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BOOK REVIEWS

The New Landscape

BY CHARLES CORREA

The Book Society of India, Bombay, 1985. 135 pp., maps, diagrams, photographs.
Rupees 65.00 ($ 5.00).

Primarily an architect who received his training in the U.S.A., Charles Correa is one of the pioneers in developing low-cost shelter in the Third World. His claim to fame lies in his creations such as the Kovalam Beach Resort, Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, Gandhi Memorial Museum in Ahmedabad, or the much criticised **Kanchanjunga** high-rise apartments in Bombay, India. He was also instrumental in planning the city of New Bombay across the harbor. Though he has lived and worked for the greater part of his life in Bombay, he is originally from Goa which has a unique Latin American culture superimposed upon the Indian, and where people 'are never in hurry and always ready to give their time to a stranger' (Richards, 1982). His creations reflect this quality. They are arresting yet never straying from the historical architectural values of India. Correa's work, Cantacuzino (1984) comments on this traditional quality, 'wears its past as easily as a woman drapes her sari'. But he never imitates the past; Correa is, in a sense, a leader in mooting the idea of hierarchy of spaces, thereby making his creations more human.

But Correa does not weave magic only in brick and mortar. He has now taken up his pen and expressed himself in his latest, immensely readable, book 'The New Landscape'. The book aptly reveals that Correa is not cloistered in the self-created built form. To him the house is only a part of the bigger problem of housing. It is a pity that to many other architects their business is alienated from this greater reality. As Correa succinctly puts it:... as if there were a famine and in order to feed the great mass of starving millions, architects and/or housewives ran around writing cookbooks. If people are starving it is not because they don't know how to cook, it is because they do not possess the ingredients'. It is clear that Correa has little faith in specialists when he observes: the great theoreticians of guerrilla warfare were not academicians but the ones that did the actual fighting: Mao Tse Tung and Che Guevara' and his view is indeed supported by a review of the performance of the specialists. Correa firmly believes that in spite of the enormity of the urban problem facing India, 'there does not exist today a theoretical schema which can provide a basis for coherent action', and he proceeds to find just that in his book.

In the first chapters Correa outlines his problem, that is, the dimensions of various urban problems, particularly housing, that have been brought about by rapid urbanization in the Third World countries. Large metropolises are growing further because of a tidal flow of distress migrants from the countryside.

This huge, unskilled, labor force is ultimately finding its way to the sprawling, ever-increasing, squatters and slums. As the nuclear bomb was of the 20th century, the squatter is, according to Correa, the 'icon of the 21st century'. Possible measures to prevent this have been suggested by Correa: redistribution of land and social reform in rural areas, identification and development of growth centers, and a dispersal of jobs into small and medium-sized towns to remove pressure from the metropolises. His ideas hinge on the basic question of providing some sort of mechanism for generating employment. To quote him, 'any intervention we make on the urban scene, therefore, should aim to increase economic activity in these areas'.

In achieving this objective, he proposes, the physical form of the city itself can be of crucial importance. Where do all these people go? Checking the tide by putting a ban on entry into the metropolises (as was suggested by one political party in India) is simply unethical and unlawful. But it is also a fact that ultimately there would not be much urban space left for such squatters. The space-demands that are being made upon the city are so excessive that its holding capacity is giving way.

This simple law of economics is working behind the mushrooming of high-rise housing in the primate cities of the Third World. These buildings, Correa argues, restrict activity to the handful of developers who can organize the staggering amount of finance needed for such projects; to the very few engineers and architects who can design the structures; and to the even fewer construction companies that build them — not to mention the profits, much of which goes to the prosperous banks which underwrite the whole deal.

But there is indeed no relation between the way our cities have been built and the way people have to use them. This is all the more true because here the most vital resource, space, is lacking. It is precisely why the arguments in favour of low rise, high-density housing in the Third World cities are put forward. Correa shows that the idea that high-rise buildings increase accommodation capacity is largely a myth. Neighbourhood densities do not increase proportionately with building heights because the relationship depends upon a number of other factors such as the size of the housing units and the amount of community space per family. Thus high or even medium rise low-cost housing does not solve the crucial problem of density. Moreover, the materials cost for construction also goes up as the building hieght increases.

By low-rise housing Correa means the "traditional vernacular architecture in general." Leaving green areas in between houses may not be the panacea to reduce the excessive congestion. Of greater importance are the community spaces — boulevards, etc. Correa lists his cardinal principles for a proposed "Bill of rights for housing in the Third World" in seven words — incrementality, pluralism participation, income generation, equity, open-to-sky spaces, and disaggregation.

Correa has formulated a logical framework for the growth of a city around viable and economic transport systems. According to him, "the age old patterns of a work/dwelling mix which one finds all over the Third World, are not only more humane and economical than the exclusive zonal systems introduced by modern town planning, but also reduce the pressure on transport systems". He argues that the public transport system should be linear to make it more effective, and "into the existing land-use pattern

we must inlay high density housing developments in a manner which generates corridors of demand down which the mass transport will run". Then at each transit stop along these corridors, there will exist a hinterland, within walking distance (8 minutes), of reasonable size (50 hectares), and density (500 persons/hectare) to economically support a MRT system.

Correa talks about the mythical urban quality acquired over time. Cities are not merely jungles of brick and mortar with some open spaces sprinkled in-between the closely packed structures. Cities are more about "people getting together communicating, reinforcing each other, Challenging (and changing)." They are the powerhouses of ideas and reforms. Thus, even if a city like Calcutta decays as a "physical plant", one must realize it is improving as a city for it continues to be "a vibrant centre of exchange and production. However, unless something is done soon the piles of debris and strinking garbage (will) take their toll, and the elan, the enthusiasm of the citizens (will) slowly disintegrate", for he warns "cities grow and die... much faster than we think". Such cities cannot be saved merely by the Urban Land Ceiling Bills. In the Third World countries, the government itself must initiate counter magnets to relieve the pressure from physically decaying cities. This is only possible if the state reorganizes some of its activities away from the expansive CBD to the virgin areas attracting its own employees to self-help housing. But if the State continues to grant its own privileges, for example the sprawling bungalows for the political and administrative elite, then there is little hope of saving our cities from sure doom. However, the ever optimistic Correa points out, "Perhaps what is needed is not just more towns and cities but a new kind of community which is quasi-urban, quasi-rural; one which produces densities high enough to support an educational system and a bus service, yet low enough for each family to keep a family or goat." The resulting scene is very much Gandhian in its essence, a recreation of the typically Indian self-contained mohallas in a rurban background.

A somewhat strong reaction, after reading the book, might be that all this has been said before. But the point here is no one has expressed so many ideas in so few words and that too on a subject which borders on various disciplines. As we are not architects, we look at the whole book in its totality and find that the various chapters have raised different issues which are in fact integrated. Correa's style is lucid, elegant, pithy and poetic. The sense of optimism that pervades the book surfaces when he says that the saving grace of the Third World cities lies in the capacity of oppressed people to survive precisely because of their humanity. Surely this book is going to be a landmark in the literature on urban planning in India as well as the whole of the Third World.

It must be pointed out that at times Correa's ideas, at least some of them, seem rather unrealistic. Take for example, the concept of equity plots. He claims that plot sizes ranging from 50-100 square metres would be viable for more than 95% of the urban populace. Different people will build different types of houses to suit their own lifestyle. But the fact remains that Indian society is stratified and pluralistic, and it is quite impractical to try and recreate the idyllic rurban communities in the true Gandhian fashion. In India class tension prevails in the urban areas; in addition there are the private (and even some

government) agencies engaged in land speculation. These glaring facts render the concept Utopian, impossible to implement in reality. However, that does not really redue the value of the concept because as we all know, Utopia is not merely a useless idea. Provided with the right incentives, it might become a material source in directing the future cities.

But the summation of all the issues raised, what one could call the ultimate observation, has come from Correa himself Recently in an interview in Calcutta he said, "In the final analysis cities cannot be planned". One wonders whether anything could be truer than this.

Kuntala Lahiri Dutt

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TROPICAL GEOMORPHOLOGL

BY DR. H. S. SHARMA

New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, 1987, pages 385,figures and tables.

To those geomorphologists who are interested in the geomorphology of Rajasthan and of India in general the name of Dr. H. S. Sharma is synonymous with the geomorphology of Aravalli Ranges that straddle, like the vertebral column, the terrain of Rajasthan. For the last two decades Dr. Sharma has been consistently investigating the different facets of the geomorphology of these extremely old geological formations of India of the world. These investigations, as would be expected of an accomplished scientist, focus on both the geomorphological features and the genetic processes.

The title of the book and the chapter titles are extremely modest, they deal with a much larger canvas of related themes than are indicated by their phrases. Essentially it is an investigation of the morphogenesis of Rajasthan: the term morphogenetic here really refers to and is ensconced by the widely discussed principles formulated by Tricart, Birot, Budel, Peltier, and Seuffert and a host of their colleagues and research associates. Their basic premises even though the concepts, methods, and arguments are involved in seemingly intractable controversies and contradictions, are surprisingly similar: the principal determinant of geomorphological processes and the features and attributes generated by them is to be found in the intricate details of climates and the climatic processes. Dr. Sharma does a commendable analysis of the present and past climates and a very detailed morpho-chemical analysis of typical soils which themselves can be considered as constituting important climatic indicators. This is further supported by a long, interesting, and balanced discussion on **kankar** formation, a subject that has been investigated by a host of scientists since the last century. By de-