

The term artist-architect is often held to be alien to the field of Indian architecture. Amongst the first to have earned this accolade was Michelangelo, originally a painter, who designed Rome—conceived the town plan, painted the Sistine chapel and sculpted its interior. Bernham, the father of modern architecture, also started his career as a painter. His student, Le Corbusier, who designed Chandigarh, was originally a sculptor.

Satish Gujral, the torchbearer of this trend in India, is, among other things, a very astute mixed-media mural-maker. And then he forayed into architecture, in the process breaking down the barrier—now commonly called artificial—between painting, sculpture and architecture. The Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre in Mauritius, the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu, the Belgium Embassy in Delhi and the research centre for the CMC in Hyderabad are some of his milestones.

A visit to his long-awaited exhibition of paintings in the Capital reveals distinct elements of design in them. Excerpts from a talk at length with him about his transition from paintings to architecture:

You have come to be known more as an architect than an artist in the last decade. What inspired you to take up architecture?

I admit that I came into the field of architecture much later than I should have. But it was more gradual evolution, not a delayed effect. Right from the beginning, I had been interested in doing murals on public buildings. In Mexico, where I studied muralism, I was taught that murals are neither painting nor sculpture nor architecture, but a mix of all three.

From painting, which is a two-dimensional medium, I graduated to sculpture, which is three-dimensional, after which I started on murals that ultimately brought me closer to architecture. I realised then that it was no use imposing a mural on a building. A building in itself should be a piece of art.

Is architecture sculpture or a living environment?

Architecture is both. Sculpture is a living environment. The difference between architecture and sculpture is that sculpture is a form in space while architecture constitutes that space inside it as much it is a form in space. An architect, unlike a sculptor, thinks of the form both from the outside as well as the inside.

Unlike forms like painting, poetry and sculpture, which live for themselves alone, architecture has a utilitarian aspect. Just because it is functional does not

'Architecture is the mother of all arts'

After a highly successful career as a master artist and sculptor, Satish Gujral made the transition into excellent architecture almost effortlessly. He speaks to Radhika Mathur during his recent, sudden return to painting.

mean it cannot be creative. It is not the medium but the intensity which a creator can infuse into his creation that makes it art.

Among so many buildings, my creations are noticed only because of the fact that creativity becomes everybody's concern. Ordinary buildings only meet the need for shelter, whereas an encounter with a piece of art leaves an impact on the mind forever. Architecture is often called the mother of all arts.

One of your earlier works which is a residential block in Niti Bagh, is often referred to as a sculpture...

I did this project about 10 years ago, simultaneous with the Belgian embassy. Perhaps you are right in reacting to it as a sculpture. Any form, whether it be a lump of mud or a heap of paper, as soon as it invokes an image, can be called a sculpture. Man, in order to survive, needs fantasy. Unfortunately, unlike old sculptured buildings, modern creations fail to create an image. Modern psychologists believe it is the inability of modern architecture to create fantasies that has children turning to crime in order

to find adventure.

How have you managed the technical aspects of both architecture and your sculptures?

Creativity has a knack of finding a way for it to be executed. I agree that today technology is very advanced but any architect—professional or amateur—depends on a structure technologist to assist him. When a sculptor wants his creation in clay to be cast in bronze, he takes the help of a foundry technician.

In your view, the living dynamics in a building is based on the lifestyle of the inhabitants...

The so called term "form follows function" has often been very loosely interpreted. I have certain reservations about it. First of all, whose function are we talking about? The

function of the building or the function of the user? Most modern architects seem to think that it is the function of the material. If they use exposed concrete, it is to express the concrete rather than the express the user. Form does not follow function, form follows culture. No two cultures meet the same function in the same way. Design is developed according to the culture of the user.

My own philosophy of design is that the design should be original and that it should create an image. The needs of the user are as important as it is to convince them to try new styles. Secondly, like education, you go to art not to confirm what you know but to learn what you don't know. Great and original architecture does not only give us something to identify with but helps us to adjust ourselves to changing times.

What is your philosophy of creation?

It is a mixture of creativity and mythology.



Satish Gujral: a sculptor who thinks from the inside; (left) the Belgian Embassy, Delhi; (right) the Modi House, Delhi: art of creating images

Mythology is a thread that links one generation to another. In a way, it gives a sense of continuity. An artist is a repository of memories with a power of recall. History needs to be assimilated and advanced; when you break away from tradition it is like a transplant that can never take root.

Architecture must provide the community with a sense of identity, tradition and culture. A building must look as if it has grown out of the soil on which it stands and must be capable of invoking in our memories, our roots and our past.

There has been a growth of ugly, undisciplined structures in our metropolitan cities, leading to chaotic, unhealthy living. How can this be changed?

This is another proof of the decadence of our total visual sensibilities. Any society that loses it becomes indifferent to its environment. But the kind of structures mushrooming today are more due to disorganisation at the planning stage than the loss of aesthetic values. Indian society is no longer provoked by visual beauty—painting, sculpture or architecture.

Secondly, although people discuss traffic and housing problems and read about poetry and cinema, they hardly discuss architecture. As part of sociology we give a lot of stress to providing more and more shelter with a negligible ingredient of aesthetics. Socialistic thinking after the two wars gave birth to the concept of mass housing, which I consider to be like the plague.

Now providing aesthetic beauty does not necessarily mean incurring more costs. Mud houses in villages are beautiful and yet inexpensive. It is wrong to think that beauty is only for the rich and elite. I am accused that my buildings are expensive. You would be surprised to know that

the Belgian embassy was built at 25 per cent less cost than envisaged.

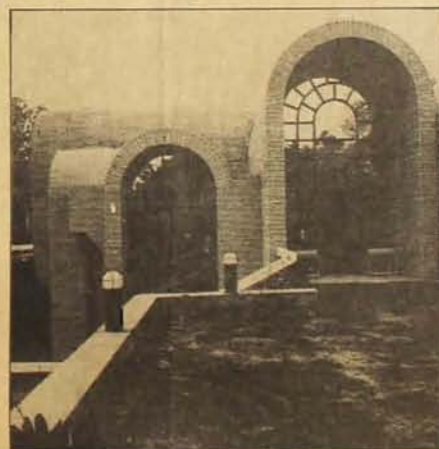
Because of a stigma that I am an expensive architect, mass housing projects do not come to me. However, I would like to stress that most of my projects have been for the government, primarily low-budget assignments.

A lot of architects have used historical monuments like the Fatehpur Sikri in terms of design ideas. Have you also done the same? If so, where?

All our past achievements have survived the test of time and provided us with the finest of models to learn from. Fatehpur Sikri, no doubt, is one of the finest land designs that we have built during the Mughal era.

In my work, historical concepts which exist in the back of the mind come forth subconsciously. For example, while building the Belgian Embassy there were a lot of ideas floating in my mind but it was only after it was completed that I realised what I had built and the identity which was finally lent to it.

Can all artists can become good architects?



No, it is not natural for every artist to think in the direction of architecture. In my case, it was muralism that brought me close to architecture. Also in the curriculum in the Arts School in Lahore we were taught all subjects like clay modelling, carpentry, forging, blacksmithy, draftsmanship, etc. Later, I also undertook other crafts like stone sculpture, ceramics, furniture designs and building designs which perhaps equipped me with the very basics.

What is your opinion of Corbusier and Lutyens' philosophy of work and design?

I am a great opponent of Corbusier's work. I think he did great damage to the future of Indian architecture. Corbusier's work was alien to the Indian concept. It destroyed at least two generations of architects who were so overwhelmed by his personality that till today they have been unable to free themselves from his influence.

I like Lutyens' work better as he tried to combine many Indian, Buddhist, Moghul and Colonial forms, although his work was basically European Classic. Unlike Corbusier, his work was not mechanical but human.

What is your opinion about the standards of education in architecture?

Colleges alone cannot make great architects. I feel creativity gets little help from academic training alone. So many artists and architects I know are self-taught and have emerged in this field on their own merit.

Must all creative people have a philosophy?

Not necessarily. Many artists are perhaps not fluent in words as they are graphically. Philosophy is intellect and intellect is the worst enemy of creativity. Creativity must be freed of all deliberations. Great art follows social and aesthetic morality not intellectual morality.

What was the reason for appointing Raj Rewal as the architect for your own house?

This house was built 25 years ago when I was not so inclined towards architecture. Rewal and I have been good friends and during the designing stage we did pool in our ideas.

Do you intend to write any books on your work and achievements?

Yes. In fact, my first book, which is a coffee table book, contains 45 years of my work in painting, sculpture and architecture. It also includes a short biographical sketch of my life. The second is to be released this year, on my life as an artist.