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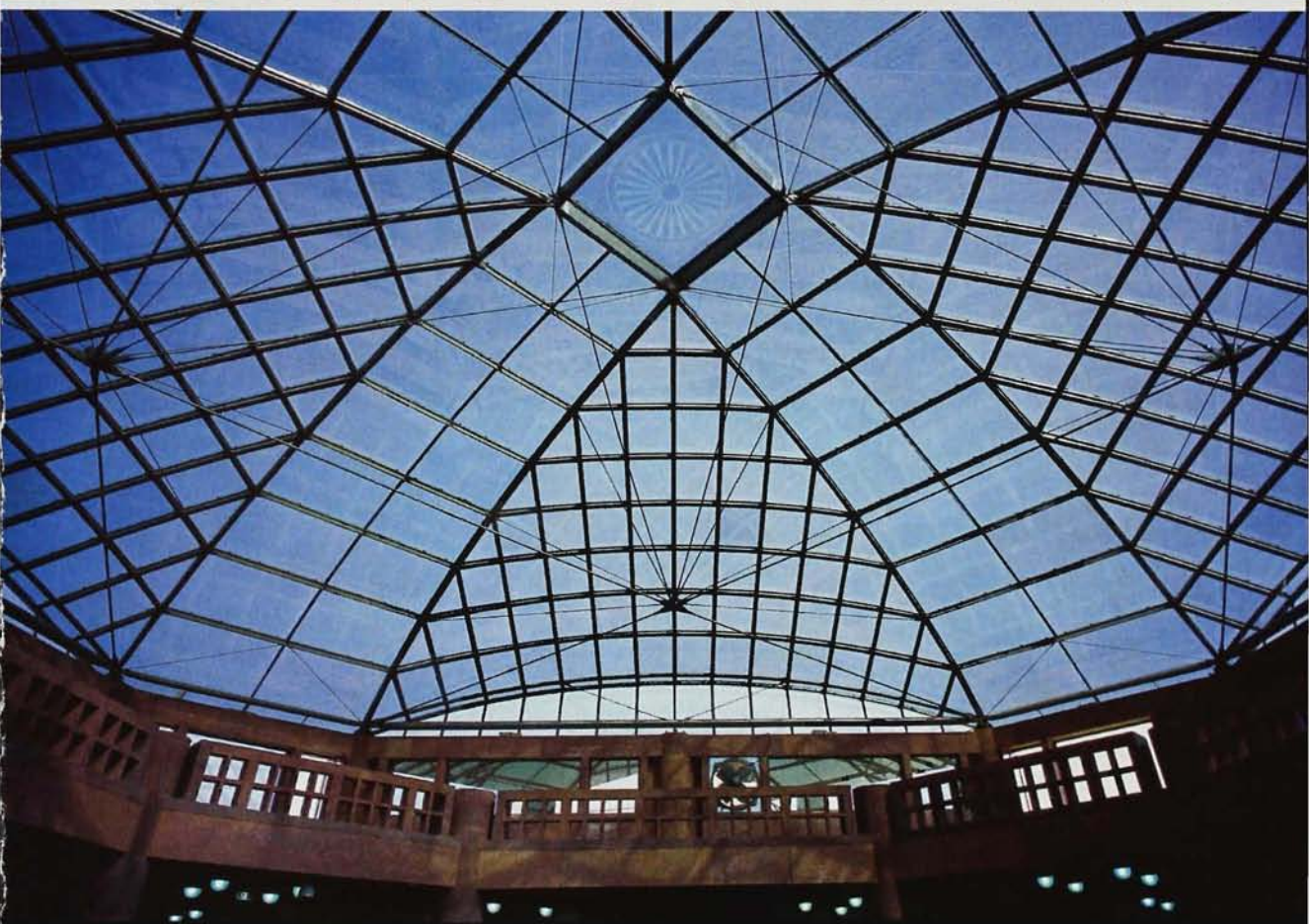
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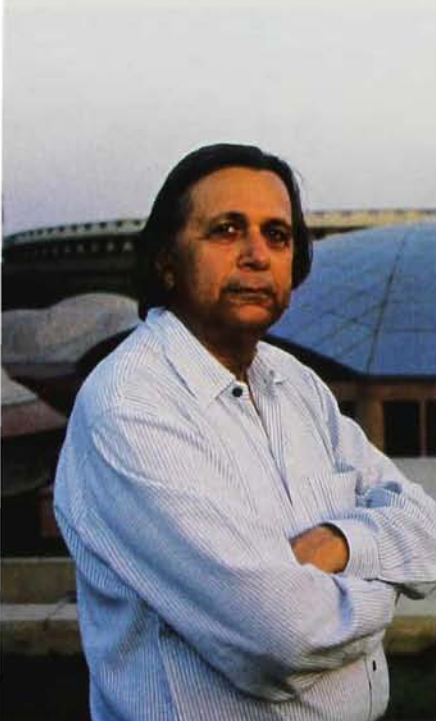
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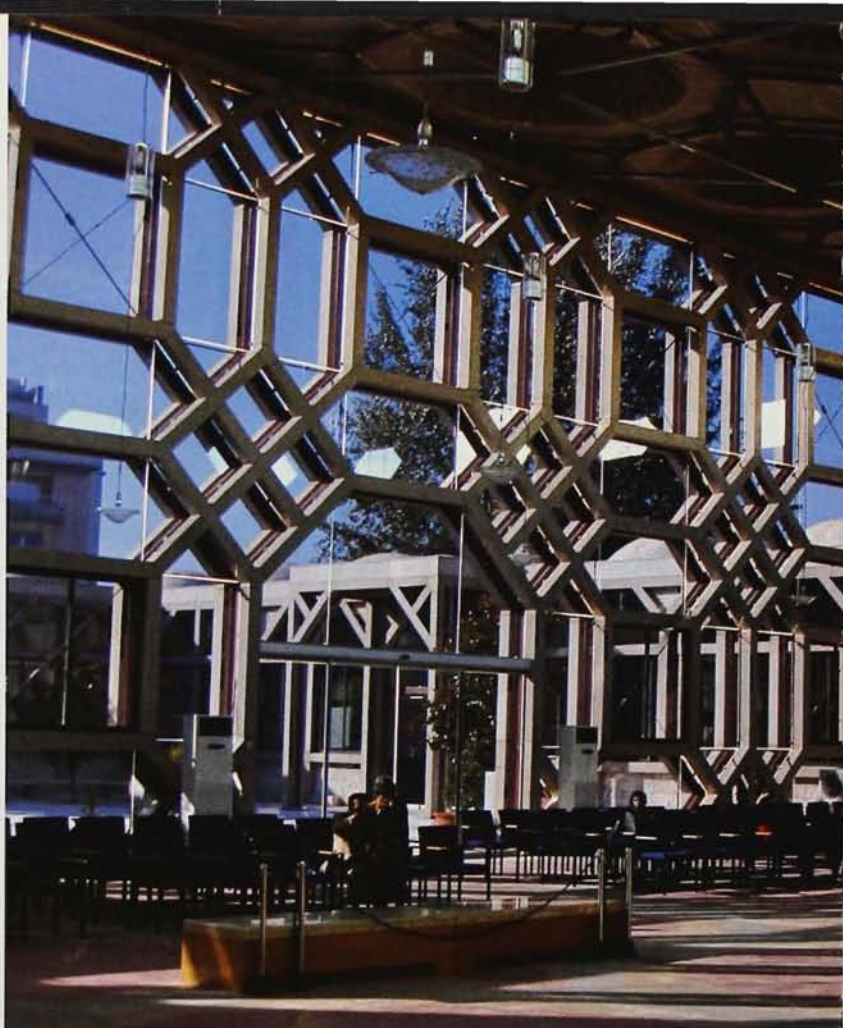


LUMINARY Raj Rewal's architecture of light 50

ARCHITECTURE



HEMANT CHAWLA/INDIA TODAY IMAGES



Halls of Light
Raj Rewal denies he is a cultural nationalist, though his fixation with temples is apparent. His buildings stand out for their cool passages of pure light **DIVYA GUHA**

RAJ REWAL'S HANDS are witch-like—gnarled like tree trunks in a gothic forest, tapering and with pointed fingertips—and he uses them a lot when making a point about his buildings, as he moves from accounting for their physical strength, to describing their utility, to outlining how he achieves the trickiest aspect of design: *venustas*, or beauty.

Looking at Rewal's work, one is amazed at the beauty of stone, a material Rewal is clearly obsessed with. His structures are often huge, dominantly clad in stone mined from across the country. He often chooses sandstone, a sedimentary rock made of compacted sand found most abundantly in Rajasthan, but all over the rest of the country, too. Divergent in colour, tone and appearance of finish, sandstone, when prepared for setting, can be glossy like well-polished marble, or muted and grainy, in a dull, greyish

pink or a rare, deep green.

For his iconic Parliament Library Building, Rewal used a type of sandstone that had the appearance, but not (obviously) the sensation, of wood. An unlucky CPWD mason who was tasked with its selection for the building's elephantine pillars recalls this detail with a wry smile during a 40-minute documentary made by Rewal's son for the show *Raj Rewal: Memory, Metaphor and Meaning* in his *Constructed Landscape*, now open to the public at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi.

Rewal may be accused of ostentation in his use of marble—a stone with poor acoustic qualities—in Delhi's parliamentary auditorium, for example. Contractors had to go the extra mile while building its roof and cutting the marble into slats, placing sound-absorbing material underneath. Come to think of it, one hardly sees an auditorium with marble interiors—this is why.



LET THERE BE LIGHT (Left) The Lisbon Ismaili Center in Portugal, designed by architect Raj Rewal (facing page)

At the time the auditorium was built, it could accommodate 1,100 spectators, making it one of the largest such venues for this country's administration, meant to accommodate the two Houses of Parliament and then some. Rewal's structures are usually expansive in size and scope, as if land were no object, many commissioned by governments when they were socialist minded, many by the Congress, when a lot of land was publicly owned.

Most of us know that unless invited to tea by someone important, visits to these high security places are not, as it were, walks in the park—one requires several permissions just to enter. Many of Rewal's buildings are as difficult to enter as the War Memorial at India Gate, which is more often than not cordoned off. Accessing government buildings such as the Parliamentary Library is fiendishly hard.

Rewal is quick to defend himself and

say that Rewal Associates, his Delhi-based architectural firm, offered a design for one-bedroom housing units in Navi Mumbai that would cost no more than Rs 1 lakh to construct and include plenty of democratic-feeling common spaces. But human habitats, like animal habitats, are becoming smaller, and no matter how cheaply they might be made—they are still built on expensive urban land, dulling the purported affordability angle.

BORN IN 1932, Rewal studied architecture in Delhi (and later in Paris) in the 60s and 70s. When Rewal the architect was emerging, he was an observer of Lutyens' and Baker's colonial monuments in central Delhi, such as the Presidential Palace and Parliament House.

But Rewal insists he is not like his colonial forebears. When commissioned

to build the new Delhi library adjacent to the iconic colonnaded drum of Parliament House built by 'imperialists', he knew it could not be incongruous, though it needed a distinct spirit. Also, the new library could not be higher than Parliament House.

His ruse was to build six floors into the ground. If the Parliament was the centre for consensus and decision-making, its roundness symbolic of democratic values, the library was a place for study, repose and meditation.

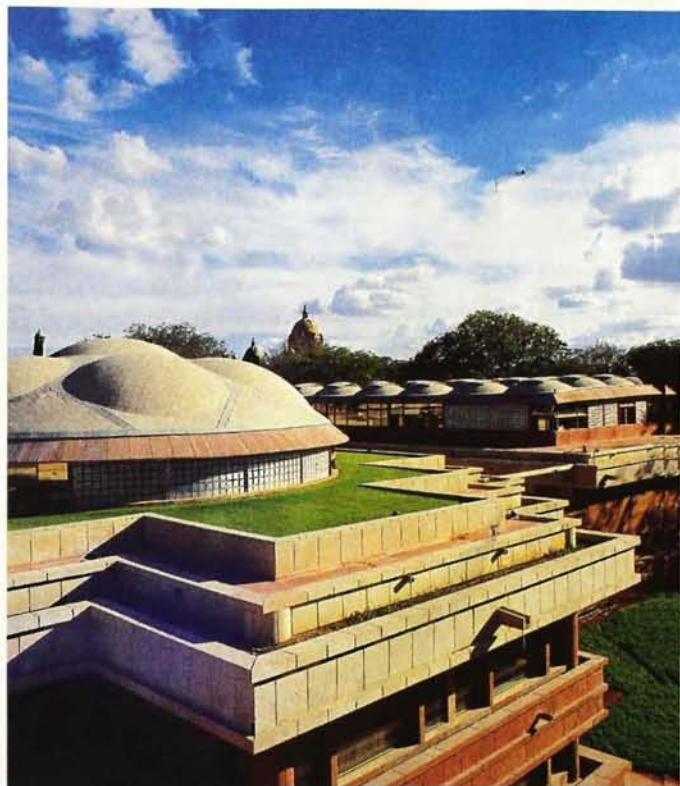
He included a great glass dome made of many chunks of glass that were scaffolded and fitted into steel, and placed on pillars—a way for the large central hall to be bathed in natural light. While a lot of architecture feels most romantic lit up, making so much Western architecture in cities such as Prague and Paris a nocturnal art, Rewal's masterpieces revel in wholesome and abundant light that is never fierce. This element of the library's design makes it a place of enlightenment, he says.

The most peculiar quality of Rewal's designs is the way that, when you are on their premises, you wonder 'where is the building?' as one is surrounded by a glow of nothing but natural light, different parts of a building connected with long passageways. Rewal maximises the use of natural light, while protecting occupants from the harsh glare of the Indian sun.

This, the architect says, is from where the building derives its "modesty and inner strength". "It is pure light that surrounds you." The gnarled hands come up again, and he smiles a smile of pleasure.

MODERNISM IN architecture hit India rather late, at a time when many early examples, such as Le Corbusier's 'tower blocks'—tall multi-storeyed housing—in France and the US awaited demolition. These had been built in the spirit of Corbusier's belief

DIVERSE SENSIBILITIES (Below) A section of the Visual Arts Institutional Campus at Rohtak, designed by Raj Rewal Associates; (right) the Parliament Library building in Delhi



that houses are machines for living in, and designed in great detail, down to the furnishing of the flats. This philosophy was misjudged, however, because quite the opposite happened—the people expected to live in these buildings hated them so much they urinated in the lifts and vandalised the common or public spaces provided with quixotic flair.

Modernist architects of Rewal's vintage believed that modern technology relieved them of the constraints imposed by tradition and convention. But this was not the case for Rewal who steadfastly drew inspiration from traditional Indian architecture, which he calls his 'cultural memory'.

In the course of his work as curator of an exhibition of traditional Indian architecture in Paris, he went measuring important classical structures such as the Fatehpur Sikri fort, the stepwells of Gujarat, and Jantar Mantar—all built as secular public spaces, which he would return to for inspiration throughout his career.

Rewal says his lines and symmetry are taken from the Jain *mandalas*. He names Ranakpur Temple in Rajasthan,

dedicated to the first Tirthankara, Adinath, as his main inspiration for the structure of the Parliament Library.

He denies that he is a cultural nationalist, though his fixation with temples does not seem very secular. He points out that the courtyards around the main edifice of the Parliament Library are influenced by those in Fatehpur Sikri, where Mughal Emperor Akbar built a special chamber for theological debates.

There is a spark of curatorial honesty in choosing to show a film, as part of the NGMA exhibition, that be-

gins with doddering politicians—how many of Rewal's building in the 70s and 80s would have been possible without them? The film has footage of the Parliament library's inauguration, with President Narayanan, Vice-President Krishan Kant, then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Leader of the Opposition Sonia Gandhi lighting a ceremonial lamp. There is also black-and-white footage of the young Rajiv Gandhi laying a foundation stone at another time.

Rewal says that the two main parties fighting 2014's election are both planning to build '100 cities', and that India, thus, has a bright architectural future. The truth on the ground is that a lot of India is beginning to feel like a vast construction site.

But the grandee may be forgiven for making blatantly political statements through his work; those clean, cool passageways of pure light absolve him of his arrogance. ■

The most peculiar quality of Rewal's design is his use of light. Different parts of a building are connected with long passageways; you are surrounded by a glow of natural light

The exhibition Raj Rewal: Memory, Metaphor and Meaning in his Constructed Landscape is on at the NGMA in Delhi until 16 June