

Rewal's craft

Raj Rewal's oeuvre embodies ideas of sustainability and the cultural significance of buildings. **A. SRIVATHSAN** talks to the well-known architect whose exceptional works are on show at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, till June 15.

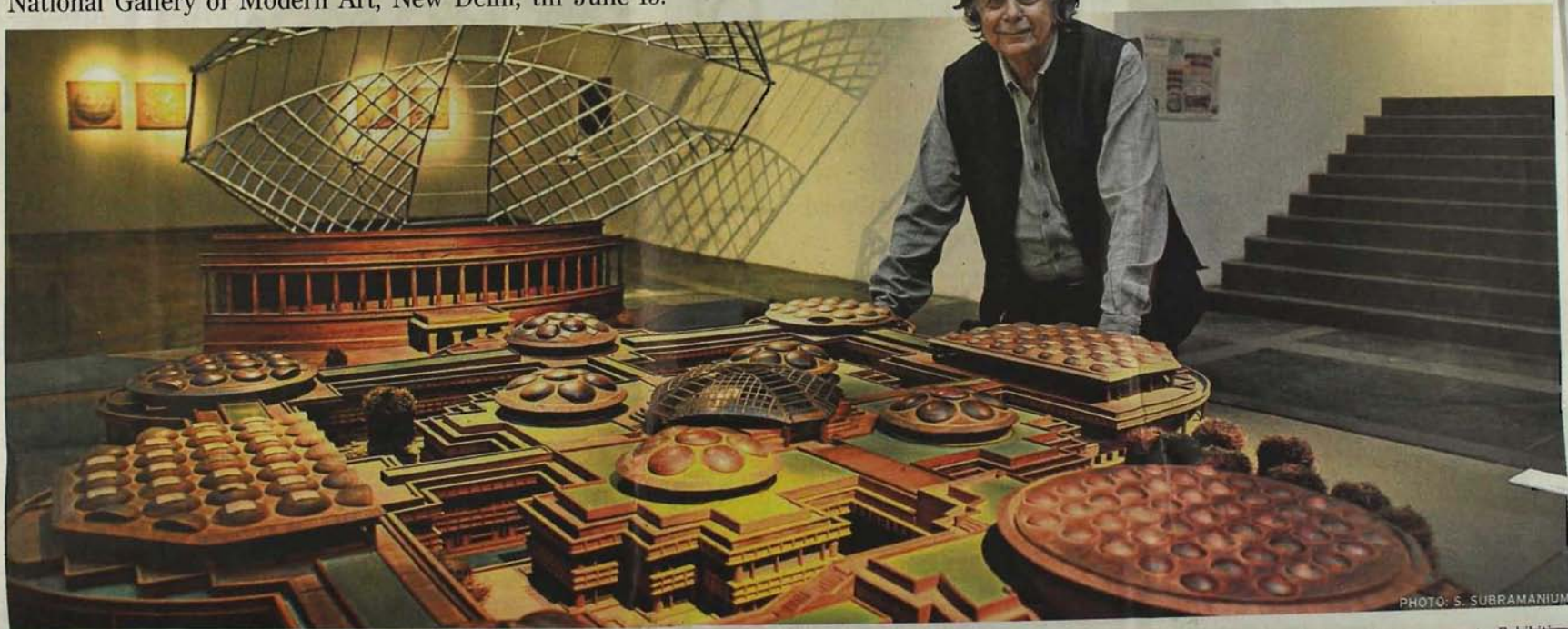


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An art gallery exhibiting evocative architectural works should not surprise one. But when the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA), Delhi, decided to showcase the works of India's well known and prolific architect Raj Rewal, it was a surprise because the NGMA had seriously considered architecture for the first time. Given the historical, aesthetic, and philosophical affinities between the two — art and architecture — this neglect is disconcerting.

The indifference is not difficult to explain, said A.G. Krishna Menon, one of the two curators of the exhibition. Look around, he urged. "The damages caused by non-reflective architecture are evidenced in the degraded habitat. Design, understandably, is missing in the public imagination. The purpose of this retrospective is to initiate a public discussion on architects and architecture in India by displaying the exceptional works of Raj Rewal," he said.

Raj Rewal, 80, was educated in Delhi and London. He worked in Paris for a few years, before returning to India to set up practice in Delhi in 1962. Since then, he has been busy: the Asian Games Village (1982), the National Institute of Immunology (1990) and the Library for the Indian Parliament (2003) are among his notable buildings. Overseas, he has built the Lisbon Ismaili Centre, Portugal (2000) and the Indian Embassy in Beijing (2011). Though his design for the Olympic village in Paris was chosen, it was not built because Paris did not succeed in its bid to stage the Olympics in 2008.

In his writing, Suha Ozkan, former president of the International Union of Architects Congress, described Rewal as one of the most distinguished pioneers of sublime and distilled architecture rooted in regional contexts. He meant that Rewal does not blindly adopt universal and standardised design ideas, but responds sensitively to climate, context and materials.

Rewal often draws from historical building precedents to 'invest his designs with meaning'. "My extensive travel and study of traditional Indian cities and teaching history for many years have deeply impacted me," he said.

Such experiences and approach are not unique to him. A few other designers have also taken to reinventing historical motifs and forms. This tricky method, as Finnish architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa, cautioned should slip into 'sentimental scenography'. Rewal cleverly avoids that and focuses on sound design principles that have generated interesting spatial layouts in Indian cities such as Fatehpur Sikri, and Jaisalmer.

Rewal conceptualises his institutions and housing projects as miniature cities. He arranges buildings in the form of interlocking blocks, organises them around multiple courtyards, and links them with shaded paths highlighted by gateways. At times, the buildings look monumental and monolithic like citadels. Some are like structures in terraced gardens. In either case, they are well crafted. The creative use of stone, particularly sandstone, is impressive and produces a visual similarity among his buildings.

Architects are a divided lot and their buildings are as diverse as their opinions. Some think buildings are only about experiences while others look at it as expressions of abstract intellectual ideas. For some others, the



1. ASIAN GAMES VILLAGE (NEW DELHI, 1982): This housing complex contains 700 dwelling units and is considered one of the best examples of a low-rise high-density housing layout. The clusters are arranged around courtyards and linked by pedestrian paths.

2. VISUAL ARTS INSTITUTIONAL CAMPUS (ROHTAK, HARYANA, 2008-IN PROGRESS): This complex has four institutes and is spread over a 25-acre site. The design responds to the climatic conditions; the central building, which contains an auditorium, is crowned by a disc of photovoltaic cells to harvest solar power.

3. LISBON ISMAILI CENTRE (PORTUGAL, 2000): This centre is a gathering space for the Ismaili Muslim Community in Portugal. Rewal's design was chosen from a limited competition organised by Aga Khan Trust. In this building, Rewal creatively used traditional Islamic motifs and built them with granite and steel.

4. LIBRARY FOR THE INDIAN PARLIAMENT (NEW DELHI, 2003): Spread over 50,000 sq.m., the building is located adjacent to the Parliament. The new structure was designed to defer to the style and scale of the surrounding heritage buildings. A central glass dome amply lights the interiors. PHOTOS: SPECIAL ARRANGMENT

emphasis has to be on change, inventing new design processes and creating novel forms. On the contrary, Rewal and those like him look at what they think are continuities in the built environment. To borrow Pallasmaa's words, they emphasise cultural significance of buildings using material, memory, and metaphor.

Some may argue that Rewal's design values, which emerged largely under the patronage of government clientele, are

inapplicable to the commercially-driven building world. On the contrary, it appears that his reflective practices have acquired greater importance in the current context where architecture has been reduced to a mere tool in a real estate venture.

Rahoul Singh, the other curator of this exhibition, drew attention to another equally important aspect of Rewal's work: structural expression. "Rewal is predisposed towards finding an articulate struc-

tural solution for his buildings. His works are not only about poetics but also about making. Ably assisted by engineers and craftsmen, he has ingeniously used structural elements such as viereendeel girders and the weight ferro-cement domes," said Singh. Rewal also emphasises that structures are an important part of his own

vocabulary. The Permanent Exhibition Complex (1971) and State Trading Corporation towers (1989) are good examples. However, the same cannot be said about Metro Bhawan in Delhi (2009). A strong structural logic also drives this building but the use of steel and aluminium takes away the expressive elegance. Though Rewal feels that one has quickly to find new materials for tall structures, he is undoubtedly at his best when he uses stone.

Rewal's buildings embody ideas of sustainability. But, in the recent years, he has focused on energy conservation and used photovoltaic cells to harvest solar power. The Visual Arts Institutional Campus in Rohtak, Haryana; the Energy Technology Centre in Noida; and Coal India Headquarters in Kolkata represent this shift. Large photovoltaic panels, which adorn these buildings, are overpowering and appear uncomfortably dramatic. Probably, these are early stages in his experiments and could soon evolve into a more sophisticated solution. Part of the problem is in his theorisation.

Rewal has often emphasised that every building has a *rasa* or essence and it has to express it. Following this principle, he simplifies the multidimensional concept of sustainable architecture to the single issue of energy and expresses it through one prominent element — photovoltaic cells. Menon, though, admits that the idea of sustainability is complex and defends such experiments as indicative of Rewal's propensity to take risks. These debates, however, do not take away from what Rewal has accomplished. He is, undoubtedly, a worthy candidate for the first retrospective at the NGMA. The exhibition with large-scale models, original drawings and mock-up constructions is impressive. It could have gone beyond the structure of a monograph, explored the times of Rewal's practice, and located his works alongside that of his compatriots. Probably that is reserved for another show. This commendable effort, the curators' hope, will help highlight the significance of good design.

