Indigenous Architecture: Architecture in the Tropics
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Architecture for the developing peoples, as they are now well called—the millions of India, Africa, and the Middle East who are fast becoming part of the modern world—is a very great problem, particularly since education is acquired more quickly than wealth. An architect, if he wishes to devote part of his life to helping such people, should know the basic requirements of tropical building and the great difference in building for a hot-dry or a hot-wet climate. The subject is a complicated one, for there are differences not only in housing but town planning and the methods of siting buildings.

Grasping all the technical difficulties is only the beginning of the problem, because it is likely that poverty will rule out modern methods of construction, and that stabilized earth, rather than curtain walling, will prove the right answer.

In many areas labor costs are so low that men are cheaper than machines. In India, for example, even much of the employed labor is really disguised unemployed labor. We found in India that it was cheaper to use seven hundred people to excavate than to employ an excavating machine!

I do not mean that first-quality scientific and artistic thought is not required; but the mind that is most useful in the tropics is one which can think from first principles and can readily grasp the possibilities of local materials.

The person who first realized that Basra reeds could be stapled by a machine and turned into an efficient thermal insulating material did very useful work. This capacity for the adaptation, rather than the adoption, of local practice is one of the abilities required by any architect undertaking work in the underdeveloped territories.

It need not mean backward-looking architecture. Le Corbusier’s High Court and Secretariat were built with the aid of donkeys, men, women, and children. For our own work in West Africa, mammis, as the mothers are called, often laboriously broke the stones used as aggregate for the concrete. In India we used brickwork, which was cheap and available for almost everything—including roofs, for which we used brick in combination with pencil prestressed-concrete beams. We insulated with earth. We built houses for $473.76.

Building for the poor means building close together. This is an architectural opportunity. It means that streets can be thought of as total design in a fashion difficult to achieve in richer countries where housing is often detached. We therefore designed services and housing together, with street lights, for example, attached to the houses themselves, and with cables along eaves and on crossover connections between houses, the cost of underground cabling being out of the question.

Good modern technique can be combined with old tradition. For example, we found no difficulty in making shell concrete or prestressed concrete, or in stabilizing earth. Aesthetics are to a large extent dictated by climatic needs (I am not speaking of air-conditioned buildings). The dry tropics require small openings and thick walls and ceilings. The humid tropics require plenty of openings and ventilated roofs. Sun angles and shading devices are common to both kinds. Beyond this, there are adjustments which the harsh sunlight makes essential.

One of our more difficult problems was to find out how people wanted to live: which habits were part of their lives and which were changing, and at what speed. In India we found that the traditions regarding untouchability and sweeper access were breaking down; also, the large Indian joint-family was not regarded with much favor by the young. We found that modern kitchens were welcomed, but that chapatis (a traditional food used every day) could not be made on an electric cooker, so that we had to improve the traditional wood-fired chula. In Iran we found that, although certain traditions were changing, the carpet room was still sacrosanct, and that the way of life meant that halls were important. These factors, which vary from place to place, mean that the architect does well to study the architectural traditions, but he should always question them. The task is demanding and requires something of a missionary spirit, for the foreigner is often regarded with distrust. One should not assume that the West is, in all ways, better than the more primitive countries. To eat with a washed hand from washed leaves, beautifully arranged, is not worse but better than eating from a badly designed piece of china with some horrid cutlery. The ability to imagine how one’s customs seem to someone else is rare. One can do little to change oneself, but respect for another man’s way of life makes working with him easier.