

he shadowy Lødhi Road-the link between the Safdarjung Tomb to the west and the Humayun's Tomb to the east, forms the southern limit of Lutyens' Delhi. Beyond this edge, the city has grown boundlessly over the years. The Lodhi Estate Institutional Area, flanked by this road. is adjacent to the Lodhi Garden which is dotted with fifteenth century mausoleums of the Lodhi dynasty and has been converted into a large archeological park. This institutional area was the first precinct in the city to be brought under urban design controls. The Lodhi Plaza is a part of this area, planned around a central open space, with a group of plots having institutional land-use. Though an urban design scheme, the Lodhi Plaza, however, fails to rise beyond a

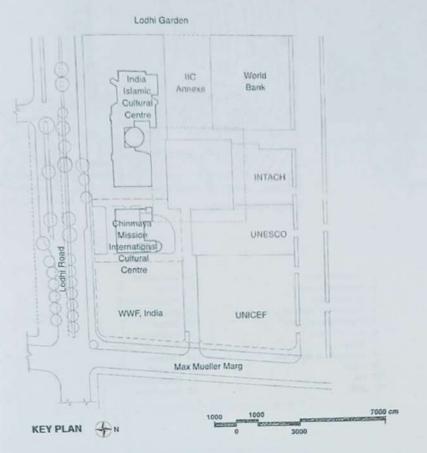
Indian Eclecticism in the 'Garden' of Confusion...

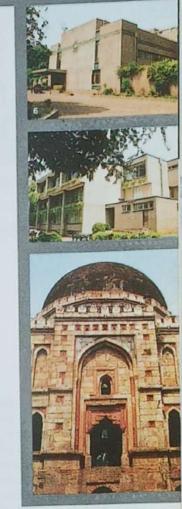
Chinmaya Centre of World Understanding, New Delhi

Text: Suptendu P. Biswas



1. Julia III. Centre - under construction; 6. WWF building; 7. UNICEF; 8. Historical monument on Lodhi Road





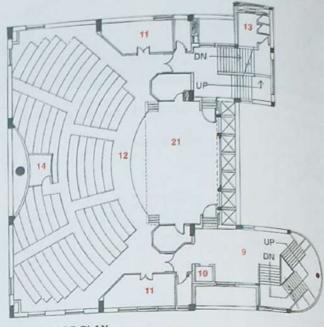
parking exercise, and is presently lying in a lack-lustre condition. This brings out a few issues and observations. regarding the urban design concept of this Plaza precinct.

Lodhi Plaza is not physically and visually connected to two of the most important contexts, that is the major movement network in the form of Lodhi Road and the adjoining large public open spaces in the Lodhi Garden. The Plaza, therefore, becomes an obscure space not experienced as a part of its surroundings. Lack of physical access to most of its adjoining buildings further weaken the linkage between the Plaza and the outdoor spaces in and around these building envelops. As a result, the Plaza is reduced to an outcome of combined backspaces to suit to the plot division. And this aspect is best exemplified by the new INTACH building-undoubtedly the most alien

Facing page Semicircular glass staircase facing the plaza - Swami Chinmaya's statue in front 'Gavaksha' form of the arch, used in the front façade







FIRST FLOOR PLAN

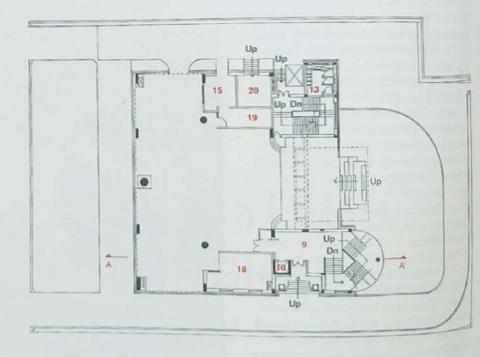
concrete lump in the locality, sitting within a high fencing and detrimental to the core concept of a plaza.

Lodhi Plaza is a non-interactive outdoor space around which the institutional components, which function in a completely independent way, are placed. Thus, the possibility of having a shared public domain among the users of these buildings is minimal.

Also, the absence of the central design theme (apart from the mere use of blue ceramic tile bands in some buildings) fails to present to the viewer a unified architectural composition, facing the enclosure. On the other hand, the scheme could have laid down certain urban design controls: by repeating architectonic elements as basic ingredients for a common architectural language, which the Plaza-face of the buildings could have responded to. Whereas, the street-face of these buildings could have expressed their individual responses to the context under more visible urban design guidelines than the present ones. Thus, there would have been a scope for identifiable architecture of each building, which would also respect collectively the public space of the Plaza through cohesive, architectural and

- 1 Generator room
- 2 Maintenance room
- 3 LT panel room
- Transformer room
- 5 Plumbing pump room
- 6 AC plant room
- 7 Store
- 8 Underground water tank
- 9 Lebby
- 10 Lift
- 11 AHU

- 12 Lecture hall
- 13 Toilet
- 14 Projection room
- 15 Pantry
- 16 Offices
- 17 Conference 18 Publication contine
- 19 Cafeteria
- 20 HT room
- 21 Stage (double-height)
- 22 Stage below



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

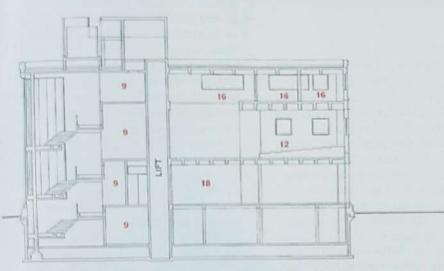




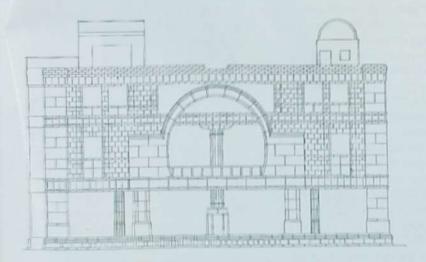
SECOND FLOOR PLAN



East façade showing the main entrance to the building



SECTION AA



BIENWINOW

urban design gestures.

The Lodhi Plaza, withdrawn from its surroundings in all possible ways, however, does not really conform to the very basic aspect of a plaza design. which is to provide an imageable setting for public buildings and on the contrary, presents itself as an empty. wind-swept, faceless, car-park-around which are scattered collections of nonrelated buildings.

The Chinmaya Centre of World Understanding is the most recent addition in the Lodhi Institutional Area, which along with the adjacent India Islamic Cultural Centre, will soon give a complete picture of the 'Plaza Complex'. The way the Chinmaya Centre presents itself to its context is worth reviewing at this juncture.

The Building

According to Prof. Ravindran, the architect for the project, the architecture of the Chinmaya Centre draws reference from the architectural character of Lodhi tombs; architectural character of the Lodhi Estate group of buildings; the philosophy of Swami Chinmayananda and the functional structure; urban design guidelines of the DUAC (Delhi Urban Arts



Left The prayer hall on ground floor with

Commission).

Entry to the building is from the eastern side like any other traditional Hindu religious structure. The ground floor is a huge column-free space, with an appealing coffered ceiling. This space extends into the outdoor-within the front and rear set-backs of the site in order to accommodate maximum number of people during important religious lectures. For the purpose of letting out the 500-seater auditorium on the first floor, its access is segregated from the regular activities of the Centre by a large staircase on the Plaza side, which is contained within a semicircular glass wall. This staircase is a gesture to establish an inside-out visual link with the whole range of landscape around Lodhi Plaza from various levels. Although in terms of its form and material, this staircase is, indeed, a puzzle with reference to the intentions of the overall architecture of this building.

Externally, the building is cladded with light gray granite with torched finish to match with the textural quality of grey-grit finish of the adjoining buildings of Lodhi Estate. The Chinmaya Centre building claims to draw its reference from the Lodhi tomb structure, in which a combination of gray quartzite and blue coloured glazed ceramic tiles for horizontal lines were

used along with red sandstone cladding for defining the openings. To emulate this technique of combined materials. in the Chinmaya Centre building, buffcoloured sandstone is used in combination with granite to articulate openings. Here, external elements are composed by the larger components, mostly in the form of arches and pillars, iconic to the 'religious identity' (formal) of this building. These iconic (formal) elements are added as a layer on the facade. In the case of the Lodhi tombs, the arch is used to accentuate the openings, which have a sense of verticality, enhanced by the presence of the mass of the dome above. "In the place of the arch of the Lodhi tomb buildings, a Gavaksha form is used in the Chinmaya Centre building, both as a symbol of ancient wisdom that the institution stands for and to provide the building with iconic quality", say the architects, thus extending the immediate context to the reference of 'historic symbolism'.

This altered version of the Gavaksha form in this building has taken its clues from the 'sun-window'-used in the places of learning mostly in the Hindu temples, Buddhist viharas and also in post independence architecture in India. In the Chinmaya Mission building, this rhetoric is used on all four sides in various sizes. In the front

façade, facing Lodhi Road, the largest arch of this type epitomizes the personality of the building and will certainly dictate the public face along with the existing W.W.F. building and the proposed Islamic Centre. In the eastern side of the building, the entrance is also adorned and welldefined with this typical arch mounted on two pillars. In the western as well as in the morthern façade facing the Lodhi Plaza, the use of arches is more of an attempt to establish a commonality with the other two faces of the building, Especially on the Plaza side, the timid presence of the arch is suppressed by the semicircular glass wall.

Any prevalent apprehension (based on the usual visual association with the arch-form, where the arch is seen as a structural element to transfer the load to the ground) about the composition of the front elevation of the Chinmaya Centre (in which a huge arch floats on a structural beam with a decorative, yet structural pillar piercing through the arch) seems paradoxical because, it is important to note that in this building. the Gavaksha form of the arch is used for 'formal resemblance' (iconic) and not for 'causal (constructional) relationship' (indexical).1

The reference of 'historic symbolism' here is mainly monumentalization of the symbol with more of a historicist tone, where the 'eclectic adaptation' uses the power of historical forms as styles to create an 'emblem'. The use of historical forms' is, therefore, out of a concern for the institutions and traditions of the past', which has 'and attitude' to use 'an artistic practice"2 The Chinmaya Mission International Cultural Centre is an accomplished manipulation of the fragile urbam design guidelines of the Lodhi Plaza area. 💠

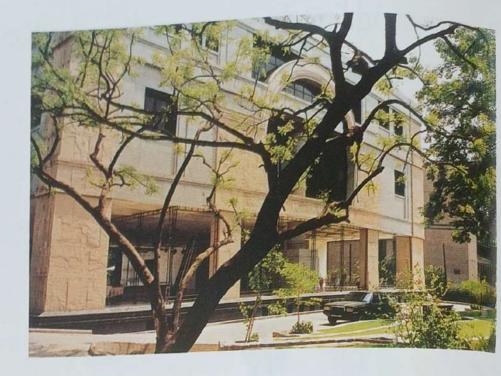
Photographs courtesy Suptendu P. Biswas and drawings courtesy K.T. Ravindran

Suptendu P. Biswas, a practising architect and urban designer in Delhi. also teaches at the Sushant School of Art and Architecture, Gurgaon. (e-mail: v_spb@mailcitu.com)

References

1. G. Broadbent, R. Bunt & C. Jencks (eds.) Signs, Symbols and Architecture, Wiley, Chichester, 1980, p 315, which reinstates the Persian explorations of three kinds of sign. 2. Alan Colquhoun, "Three kinds of Historicism", in Modernity and Classical Tradition: Architectural Essays 1980-1987. The MIT Press, Cambridge, 1991, p6 (pp. 3-20).

According to Colquhoun, Eclecticism depends on the power of historical styles to become the emblems of ideas associated with the culture that produced them.



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