REMEMBERING CHARLES CORREA

- Dr. BV Doshi

When you meet somebody in the beginning of your career by chance and something clicks instantly, I think that is the miracle about life. It's the joy, enthusiasm, curiosity and feeling of wonder of a new world.

My memory of Charles Correa flashes back to the years at Flora Fountain area, where young architects used to gather. I went there and one day, I saw a tall, handsome man there. We introduced each other and he said, "I am Charles Correa, I just came from MIT now I am working with Bhuta" And I said, "I am BV Doshi. I was in Paris, I was with Le Corbusier and now working in Ahmedabad." And our meetings continued. He came to Ahmedabad, he saw something that I was doing. And then one day, I visited him in Bhuta's office. He showed me some drawings and I gave some comments, to which he said, "Why did you make these comments?" I said "Because I want to know which scale are you working on? What is your measure in life?". He said, "What do you think?" I said, "Don't you think there are great architects in the world history and how have they become so great?" That was how our friendship began, talking about the world, beyond us.

We both were born during independence movement so our concerns were very different. When you are born during freedom struggle then the most instinctive feeling that you acquire is to search for your identity. And when you start thinking about identity, you want to find ways to find what you are? Who you are? How you are? And going beyond, What is the meaning of your life? What are you for? I think this is what Charles was talking about, constantly searching, discovering and playing the game; first of personal satisfaction, personal sense of discovery, and the satisfaction that "I have challenged myself and I have achieved something". That is how legends are made. Legends are not made by compromising or by accepting things, as they are!

Every time we met whether it was in Bombay, Goa or Ahmedabad, we did all kind of things together constantly, including Monica, my wife and my family. It was really the discussions and discourses on finding out what is it we need to do.

After completion of his famous hospital project – Centre for the Unknown in Lisbon, he called me and said, "I would like you to see the slides and I will send you the slides". So he sent me the pack of slides. I was quite stunned and happy and said,"I think you have done a great building". He would talk about the buildings he'd done, feel proud but also would get equally critical about his work. So the point is 'What is it that legends are really made of?' or 'What is it that make things happen?'

We both learnt together to keep our eyes wide open. It's not only buildings. Because we are building for whom? Are we building for somebody else or for us? I think this whole idea of possession is important and to say "This is my building and this is for me, for my life". I think this is very important because, when we think it is for somebody else, we don't care a damn. I think for us, clients are supposed to be outsiders, not part of the family, because we don't have that much time to spend
with our clients and we think we are in need, but if you are possessive about yourself, then I don’t think you need manipulation.

To continuously question and take on discussions thereupon, I think is the trigger point. Whether Gandhi Ashram or Stadium in Ahmedabad or other buildings in Ahmedabad, people saw them, they didn’t know what it was. It was completely new for them. Whether it was in concrete or large-span structures? The issue is clients do not understand immediately unless they see it. Where we go wrong is when we show them, we think the client has a better understanding of what is seen and so we listen to him and in the process, gradually we get into the trap of ‘need to do something’ and there the charm is lost. I think we lose ourselves and we lose the dream. I feel, dreaming is very important. What else is there in our life? Life is continuous. Believe, feel and prove what we would like to do for ourselves. And I think, we have to become children, we do not have to be graduates/professionals. This is because dreams only come when you are a child. When you grow up, you don’t get dreams.

To be aware and talk about the surrounding environment was something two of us did very often. We used to go to the slums of Dharavi, walk on the streets of Mumbai, or School of Architecture or somewhere else. The question that we would ask is, “What are they doing? What is it for? How does it happen? What is the cause of it? What is the meaning behind it and I think, those questions become very important. The dialogue is very important. Dialogues between colleagues, professionals and the people who are there, I think this is something which we do not do anymore. Socially, we are very active and part of life we give to that. I think this is another concern that we have forgotten today in our profession. We have accepted what is given. In fact, even now as things go on, we will talk about the smart cities, we will talk about new cities. We have given away everything, our wisdom, our intelligence and we are talking about technology and production/technology rules us. So, the whole idea of creativity, of finding alternatives & solutions is very important. That is what we used to discuss, but also on the other side, as friends, we used to be joking, commenting, working together, watch movies together, because there are many things that one can talk about – how does one observe things, what we want to do, how do we correct ourselves and are we really fearless about things – do we really want to challenge, how do we

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become versatile? These were the topics of discussion amongst two of us. Another interesting aspect of Charles was his last minute rush, a peculiar characteristic so to say. I was with my wife and we were going to Nashik for a wedding. We had to catch a train at 4 o’clock. Charles said 4 o’clock is no problem. He suggested we watch a movie instead. He was accustomed to catching flights/ trains at the last minute. But it surely made me nervous. That was the difference between us. A marriage procession blocked our way to the station and we literally had to run and catch the train. This was our relationship. But this nature/ streak was not just restricted to movies, parties etc. It was the same vis-a-vis his work, too.

People used to say Charles is always impatient. Actually he was doing his last minute conversation and things of the sort, observing and watching things around him. I think what is important is not the story but the approach – the casualness, formality and informality, looking at and taking things seriously and also taking it in another manner. I think it is very important for creative work. Because if we don’t, it doesn’t happen / the magic doesn’t unfold. To remain child like is an important aspect, so to say.

The next question is how does one re-interpret things that one sees? Do we really say that things can be reversed or looked at it the other way round? If I was drawing and Corbusier was around sitting or standing across, he would see the drawing upside down, and I think that becomes very important. That unusual way of perceiving things. In how many ways can you reinterpret the same situation. And that’s where the whole idea of reading books of various genre comes in. Mystery books and so on and so forth. You grab new ideas, you are not always on the same track. What it means is legends like him do not move necessarily on the road which has been laid. They wander!!!

Once he took me to Khetwadi to have Goan food. We looked around and there were only two plates left for eating. The whole idea is you walk through the ‘galli’s’, it wasn’t about food alone – it was also the moment of going through that lane, looking at the street, looking at the scale and dimensions, talking about the character of the place. Food was just incidental. He was an architect, but essentially a creative person, a person who was constantly challenging himself and wanting to discover, to find something, to remain a child.

The house that he purchased, he asked me to have a look at it. I went inside and I partly saw the upper floor and said, “Oh my god, this is very much like the Roman houses. He said “I’m glad you liked it, I am going to make this into a Foundation”. And then, we had the challenging job of doing the structure. What made him do these challenging things? At times, it was so severe, the positions were almost at the point of collapsing. That is the time you select, that’s where the virtue lies of somebody’s confidence, belief and a sense that in that area which is getting lost, I can do something, I can work out something.

Similarly, when I shared with him about the School of Architecture, he would visit Ahmedabad often and every time he came, he made a valuable contribution. He would always add something more or new to the prevailing discussions. And I think that was important as ‘Jugalbandi’. It was like reciprocating/ responding to one another and was almost like playing a game. How does this happen? Visually and through your thought process, you make it into a fairy tale. So every occasion, if we see as a fairytale – what would happen to that situation? If we imagine our client, not merely as a client, but as an actor or somebody from outer space, then start thinking and come back to reality, I think it would become very beautiful.
City plan was another story that he would look at – drain pipes and children inside and he would photograph and say this is how people live. What can we do? So what was it that he was doing? What was his profession? When we say ‘The Legend goes on’… I’m glad that you mentioned about this, because we can always talk about Charles as a person. But we should talk about Charles as somebody that we can not only appreciate, revere, but how do we pick up the threads from there and carry it forward ourselves? Can we not have part of that within us? Can we not really get something for us? It is a moment of true homage to continue the legacy and to do that, the question that arises is “Do we have any commitments to society at large?” For example, why did he take the Urban Art Commission’s challenging job in Delhi, in the last phase. He took it because there were lot of problems of urbanisation, of housing, of land, of all kinds of things which people were doing legally or not legally, or due to ignorance, so if such things are happening then one has to take up such tasks, challenge and even oppose the Ministers and firmly hold one’s ground. I think it was possible for him because, he also held a key position, of course.

My suggestion is that if we are here to honour Charles, is it possible for us to say that we would do something which our society, our city, our place, our profession needs? And I think this is where he was concerned. A constant concern of what can we do for young people? For example, he often had active dialogues with students, he started writing very often – articles, books, gave lectures etc. He spent last few years at MIT, not only teaching but also doing some work there. The reason was very simple. Questioning is important. The student body, the young mind constantly questions and if you remain with the young mind, then you remain young, then you become better. I think those are the things that are required for us as an organisation, as an organisation. How do we get involved in education actively? How do we get involved in creating awareness in the society? How do we really get involved with the issues concerning our environment? Also our standard and the quality of aesthetics that we are getting, the quality of life that we are getting, I think those issues are very important but we don’t do much about it.

And I think, Charles comes into the picture because these were the issues Charles was involved with. Pravina Mehta, Shirish Patel – these were the people who were involved actively. How did they spend their time? They had their own practice. Then what was the purpose of doing such work, to think about other wild, weird ideas of creating another city across the harbour and then say this is important for us. Is it something that is required for us to do? Instead we can go home and sleep quietly. But I think this is where the issue comes up. It comes up when you visualise of tomorrow? What is going to be tomorrow? What tomorrow is for us?

I came to South Mumbai and what do we get? 2 hours – 2 ½ hours traffic jams but what are we doing about it? I think these are the concerns that are important. Are we really talking about social concerns? Some of his buildings are talking about it. Every building that he has done, there is some concern. For example, when he did Gandhi Ashram, he studied Gandhi and then came to this whole idea of simplicity and gradually made it accordingly. I would say if somebody like Charles has created a big canvas for using his life for us, it is that canvas, that we must have as our image, as our role model and we must carry this with us and continue…

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Based on the talk delivered at the programme - ‘The Legend Lives On’ organised at IIID Mumbai Chapter in association of GM Modular at NCPA, Mumbai.
REMEMBERING CHARLES CORREA

Architects ‘Do Not Die’, they remain Living Legends for time immemorial, their work, their structures keep them alive – similar to Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright and many more, Ar. Charles Correa too shall remain a Living Legend.

Ar. Correa was 84+ and am happy he lived his life to the fullest, however I wish he could have lived for another 10 years and continued to share his experience & knowledge with the younger generation!

Charles Correa virtually represented India on a global map of architecture and he went on to win a lot of recognition, awards and accolades and his architecture further matured towards Master Planning, Urban Designs, Social Developments and he was involved by various state.

I personally shall cherish good memories of time spent with him, he always expressed his liking towards me whenever he met me – we had the opportunity to collaborate during my days as IIID President, wherein he would ensure his presence in the events as an encouraging icon; I salute and celebrate his victory, he achieved in his mortal being.

Charles learnt from the past, but he did not copy it or even imitate it. Yet, in his own charismatic way, created it. The first time when I met him by chance in early 1980s at a conference on EKISTICS, I had no idea who he was, but that glimpse of his character and the intensity with which he was making a point, even today tingles my cells.

Charles was impatient of anything that had no depth or content with context. One could sense it and he made no bones about it. He expressed them as he expressed his buildings, bare and without shrouds, for all to see and admire. Every sketch that flew from within him had life and delivered a dialogue of the human being and the spaces they tread, occupied and lived to share and enjoy. He was clear about this edict and his spaces leave no doubts about this.

All the spaces that Charles created has an intensity that is evident of intense research and in-depth control of the senses in tune with the elements in time and space. The world he stalked, awakes and wonders, it is and shall always be part of our cultural history.

Charles practiced what he preached. He was and is, an EPIC.

Charles Correa’s life has many things to look up to and many things to applaud. But on a personal level, what inspires me the most is the fact that he took Indian Architecture, Indian Design, global. His architecture whilst being regionalist in some way caught the imagination of the world, that too in the days where today’s digital medium was not all pervasive. The reach of his work and its influence was a lot greater than a lot of architects before and after him. In that sense, his global impact and global leadership is something that one can only aspire to. Also, his engagement with society through his profession, directly or indirectly has had deep impact and continues beyond him through various organisations that he incepted.
As a student at the SPA, when I look back, I feel that two Indian architects influenced me most: Charles Correa and Bruno D’Souza. Strangely whilst Bruno was my thesis guide and mentor in person, Charles I experienced through his works, publications and talks. It was also a coincidence that both architects studied in Michigan.

Charles and I came together to conceptualise a master plan for the Bombay Gymkhana and it is in that brief interlude that I experienced his inimitable qualities: clarity of thought, deep contextualisation, non-compromising, gentle but firm.

It is incredible that over five decades an architect could constantly re-assert his belief, his thoughts and his ideas from a small house to nothing less than a universe, so eloquently, consistently and with conviction.

A lot has been written and discussed about huge body of his works, but what signifies the most is the relevance of a design ideology behind these projects even after several decades of its execution. A recent exhibition of his unbuilt works also echoes continuity of similar ethos.

Charles Correa was a great communicator whenever we heard him articulating on variety of issues – whether planning or governance or humanities – backed up by clarity of thought and strong vision. He also documented very well, whatever he did and made it visible for the benefit of everyone. We feel proud and privileged that our generation of architects have actually grown with this great man. His inspiration was so deep that many times we wonder how he would look and react at our designs!

He was one of those rare architects whose building, lecture or an article in a magazine have constantly connected and touched thousands of architects across the globe. Charles Correa took lot of pride in discussing any of his projects whether executed recently like Ismaili Centre in Toronto or Gandhi Ashram constructed half a century ago. This is because his works truly reflect timelessness.

A life lived fully like Charles Correa’s is blessed and always inspiring and enlightening.

Remembering Correa is nothing less than bowing down to his sincere contribution to build modern India. It is a salute to his simple vocabulary through which he guided architecture to be embedded in Indian culture and climatic conditions. ‘Gandhi Ashram’ and ‘Kanchanjunga’ are the two simple examples which established a path for India to adopt contemporary language of architecture while staying rooted in the spirit of Indian context.

My tribute of love and respect to the master, for his humble yet masterly designs.
I had the opportunity to meet Charles Correa in person and interact with him when he came to Munnar as a Keynote Speaker during the ‘Mountain Conclave’ International Conference on Holiday Architecture in 2000. The program was organised by IIA Cochin Centre and I was the organising Sec. for the event. Ar. Charles Corea who came to Munnar with his wife, was attracted by the beautiful landscape of Munnar. He was suggesting that it will be wonderful to come and settle down in Munnar after retirement. It was a memorable experience interacting with Charles Correa during his visit.

I am fascinated by quite a few works that Ar. Charles Correa did. The Kanchanjanga Apartments, Mumbai, The Salvacao Church, Dadar, Mumbai, Hotel Cidade de Goa, The British Council Building at New Delhi, The Salt Lake City Centre, Kolkata, to name a few. The project of him I had visited 2 years back, the Champalimaud Centre for the Unknown, Lisbon, Portugal, was the one I admire most. This Research & Diagnostic Centre is a state of art facility. Ar. Charles Correa has created the architecture of the building as a beautiful sculpture and that beauty in turn is used for the therapy. To me this is the best of his creations.

Ar. Charles Correa was a Legend and will keep on inspiring us with his Legendary works.

He came across as the Master Artist whose first stroke on a blank canvas was as bold and complete art in itself. An architect who dared. Dared to think and stick his neck out to chart the path or even counter the flow. One of the first to look at Indian urban scenario and propose ‘multiple use of space’ on new streets to accommodate the hawkers and the have not’s. Realising the idea of ‘the un-built as structuring component of the neighbourhoods’ with hierarchy of open spaces in an incrementally growing neighbourhood of artist’s village in Belapur. Daring ‘humility’ to bury the building, not to lose memory of lake and continue civic activities on roof top despite construction at Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal. One of the few architects who rather than creating objects within the compounds took up the challenges of urbanity head on. One of the first to demonstrate ‘high-rise as bungalows in the sky’ with integration of outdoors at Kanchenjunga. One of the earliest demonstrations of the ‘traditional ethos in contemporary’ at Jawaharkala Kendra as microcosm of the cosmos – Jaipur – the parent city. Even in globalised world he proved that ‘market places are civic nodes’ if designed so with ethos and vitality of Indian streets rather than closed boxes as shopping malls, at Kolkata. Even use of graffiti on the walls as ‘Spatial feature’. Controversial at the time, it felt nothing but integral, convincing and even contextually appropriate, as hangover of Portuguese, legacy at Cidade de Goa. In fact the capping argument of his was economic concern rather than artistic, that he found long time employment for the local painter/artist through patronage of his architecture.

His architecture, even though realised two generations ago, remained the case studies for the teachers in their classrooms at the scale of city, neighbourhood, buildings or even elements and art, as relevant and as modern even today...The real tribute to the creator is to ensure that these creations are preserved for posterity and emulated in essence to build modern India.

Thank you Architect Correa – the Indian ambassador to global architectural fraternity. The modern architect of traditional India.
REMEmBERING CHARLES CORREa

My first encounter with Charles Correa and his architecture was at his Sabarmati Ashram when I was studying at CEPT in Ahmedabad. Though in my first or second year, the place touched me deep within. It’s simplicity, the interplay of enclosed, semi-enclosed and open spaces, the frangipani courts have all made a permanent place in my architectural sub-conscience.

Later, he and his wife had stopped by at my Nadhavade farmhouse on their way to Goa. He liked the place very much, though our working styles are different. He looked around and said – “Shirish, you must start something like Taliesin here. Many students would like to come here to do your architectural work and would happily help you with your farm work... for free”

Every project of his that I visited has been a cherished experience. Living spaces that almost spoke to me and became embodiments of the immeasurable values of life. Somehow, everything seemed to be in harmony with the universal order of things. Though very much contemporary in form, they somehow expressed an essential Indian ethos and quality, without any typically Indian arches, jaalis etc.

My heart felt respects to an architect whose refreshing, innovative work has continued to delight us, mentor us right up to his recent, fascinating Champalimaud centre in Portugal.

A lot has been said and written about the oeuvre of India’s most brilliant architect, Charles Correa and the memorable buildings he created in a career spanning close to six decades. His impact on the profession and society at large can be seen across varying scales and context – policies for urbanisation; master plans for cities; urban design of public spaces; designs for buildings.

An uncompromising professional, with limited patience for clients (who appointed him) or architects (who worked for him), Correa choose to work on a limited number of projects (contrary to the opportunities that his stature provided him with). Projects did not fully occupy him. Correa built a practice that valued the principles guiding his work much more than the adrenaline that volumes of projects might have brought. The time and space between these limited projects was consciously consumed, with writing essays and directing documentaries; giving lectures and developing exhibitions; attending juries and chairing committees. He conceived and nurtured two enduring institutions, the Urban Design Research Institute (in 1984) and the Charles Correa Foundation (in 2011). Both organisations have evolved into robust and independent institutions that will continue to address issues affecting our cities for many years to come.

Each of these contributions would have been very demanding on his time, energy and patience. None of them would have ever been financially rewarding. These contributions are not only seminal to our understanding of his work but would have been equally important in enriching his built works, which we greatly admire. It is important for us to understand and recognise that a practise is not just about what we build but equally about the thoughts that define what we build; the concerns we raise and the issues we choose to address.
When I decided to come to Ahmedabad, on my first visit to India in 1968 as a Fulbright Fellow, I was attracted to the city by my youthful images of Le Corbusier’s Mill Owner’s Association Building and Luis Kahn’s Indian Institute of Management. These were commanding architectural images of the mid-1960’s.

But when I reached Ahmedabad I was amazed to discover unknown images that lured me even deeper into the heart of India. Doshi’s School of Architecture and Charles Correa’s Gandhi Ashram were the two most compelling buildings, and as I moved about the city on a bicycle I found many pieces of very functional, yet artistic, buildings by Charles Correa, including the Sardar Patel Stadium, the municipal bus depot and repair shop and simple bus stands, like the one near our school in Navrangpura. There was an experimental house for the Housing Board and a beautiful bungalow rising up.

What struck me was the huge contrast between Doshi’s and Correa’s work and with Le Corbusier and Kahn’s work. All were enamored with exposed concrete and brick, but Charles Correa understood deeper secrets of India: the play of light and shadows; the integration of exterior gardens with interior pavilions; human scale and proportion. The materiality of the floors, ceilings, roofs and pillars integrated the parts into a poetic whole.

Climate and context friendly architecture can never appear the same across sites and projects. Most architects fail to realize this and design same signature architecture everywhere. With Correa, variety was the essence. To someone who does know of Correa, Bay Island resort in Andaman, Cidade De Goa, Gandhi Samarak Sangrhalaya, Ahmedabad, Kanchanjunga Apartments in Mumbai and LIC Tower, Bangalore would surely appear as designed by different architects, but they all are the creations of Correa – functionally, aesthetically and contextually.

I feel very proud to say few words on Ar. Charles Correa, the most recognised architect, who was born in Hyderabad and honoured with Padma Vibhushan, Royal gold medal and many more to his name.

He being an architectural activist has made invaluable contribution to contemporary architecture. His Kanchanjunga apartments in Mumbai took some time for people to digest, as it was one of the most outstanding contemporary buildings – with bright colors on the walls of the balconies – which made his expression as a spectrum of colors in modern architecture, referring to his other innumerous works.

I personally like the Gandhi Smarak Sangrhalaya where you see the few of modern and open concept, touching the mind & nature.
REMEMBERING CHARLES CORREA

Satyajit Ray, Ravindranath Tagore, Charles Correa. All of them, Grand Masters of their genre in the pantheon of modern Indian creativity. Any endeavour to co-relate their genius will instantly recognize the effortless artistry with which their narratives are navigated. A strong sutra of conscious creative frugality characterizes their shared skill of telling the most while talking the least. The timelessness of their craft evolves from the depths of Indianness which manifests its origins in the formalism of style while the technique is contextual contemporary society. Emotional, sensuous and lyrical, their dynamism sweeps the canvas with the virtuosity of Mozart.

Ray evokes pathos through the genius loci of intense emotions in Charulatha. Tagore evokes raw patriotism through his prayer for the nation, “where the mind is without fear…” Charles Correa evokes moving reverentiality through the hushed spaces of the Gandhi Smarak Sangrahalaya. Their iconic works arouse the senses of the beholder in profoundly expressive ways. All three will continue to be venerated in perpetuity by creative practioners of cinema, literature and architecture. All three will continue to be applauded by the plurality of India.

An out-and-out Mumbai professional with a Goa background, Charles Correa’s architecture practice drew inspiration from both sources. His forms have always been a reincarnation in the dreary landscape. His expression of ideas renewed buildings with a new order of freshness. An influential architect credited for the creation of modern architecture in post-Independence India, he was celebrated for his sensitivity to the needs of the urban poor and for his use of traditional methods and materials.

Unlike other architects, he had his own unique individual style not aping to the west. He drew with great ease from a deepening well of history and tradition, while simultaneously seeking a fearless approach to experimental living, two major examples of the same being in Belapur, Navi Mumbai, Correa’s low-cost housing footprint tracks the pattern of courtyard life and gives it the legitimacy of modern design. In a contrasting structure, the Kanchanjunga building on Napean Sea Road inserts two storied houses into an apartment block. Verandahs on the ninth floor leave you with the sensation of bungalow life, suspended above the sea. His simplicity, honesty and timeless compositions make him a reference point for the next generation. Shaping the future of modern architecture through his buildings and writings, he is commendable for highlighting the need to design quality builds in areas of economic despair. One of the quality that resonates with me was his inspiring essence to being vacuous while remaining authentic to context was of prime importance to his brief.