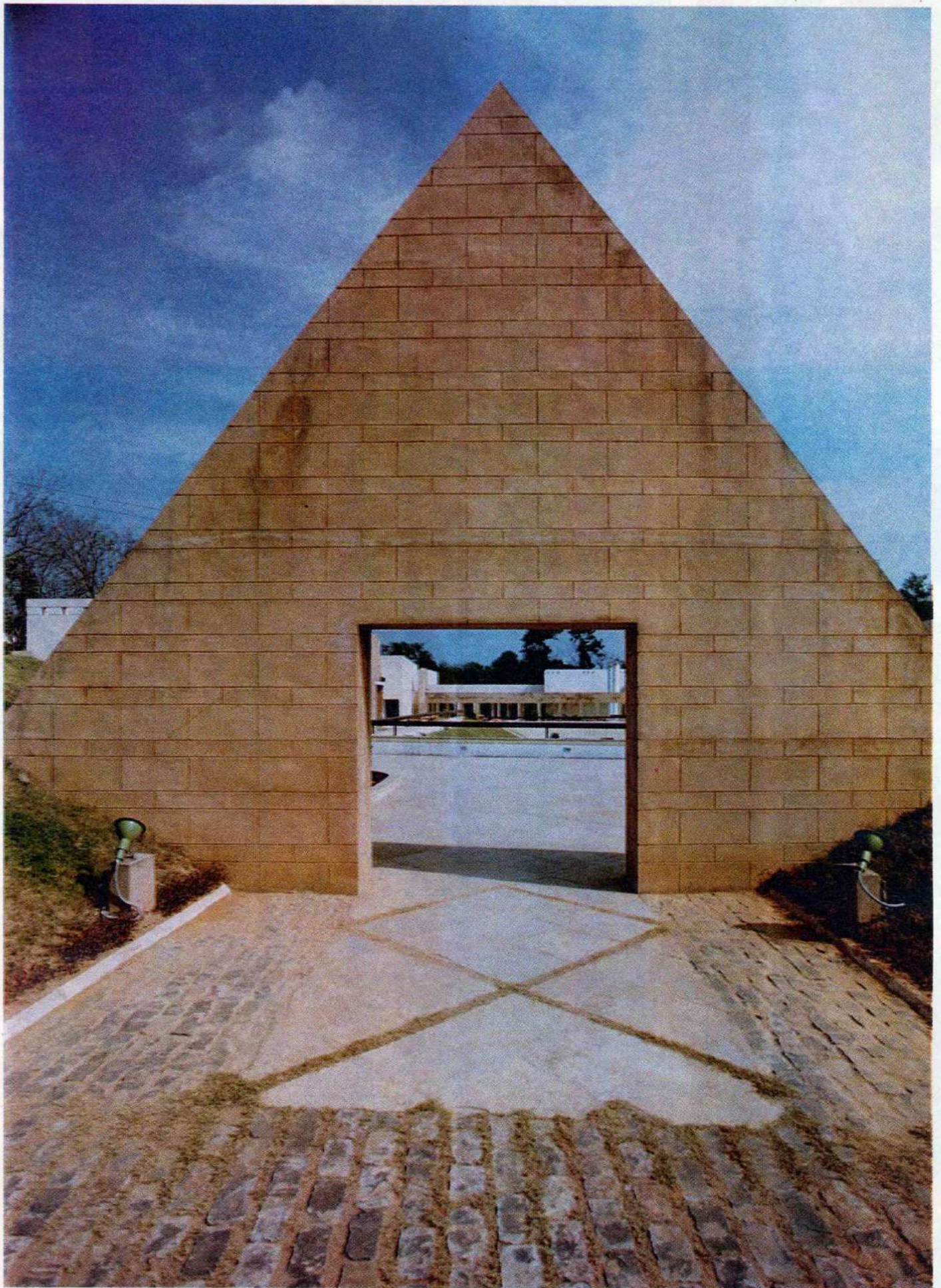


INSIDE OUTSIDE

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THE RUSSI MODY CENTRE FOR EXCELLENCE

Tata Steel, India's top-notch industry house has always been associated with eminence. This quality is evident in their recently constructed Centre For Excellence, named in honour of their ex-Chairman Russi Mody.

TEXT: AMITA SARWAL . PHOTOGRAPHS: NOSHIR GOBHAI

*Opposite: Looking at the courtyard and beyond, at the archives gallery, through the stone gateway.
Above: The curved pathway leading to the triangular, Shabbad stone gateway.*

When architect Hafeez Contractor came into the picture, the company's in-house team had already drawn out some plans on how they visualised their Centre, situated in the heart of the Steel City, Jamshedpur.

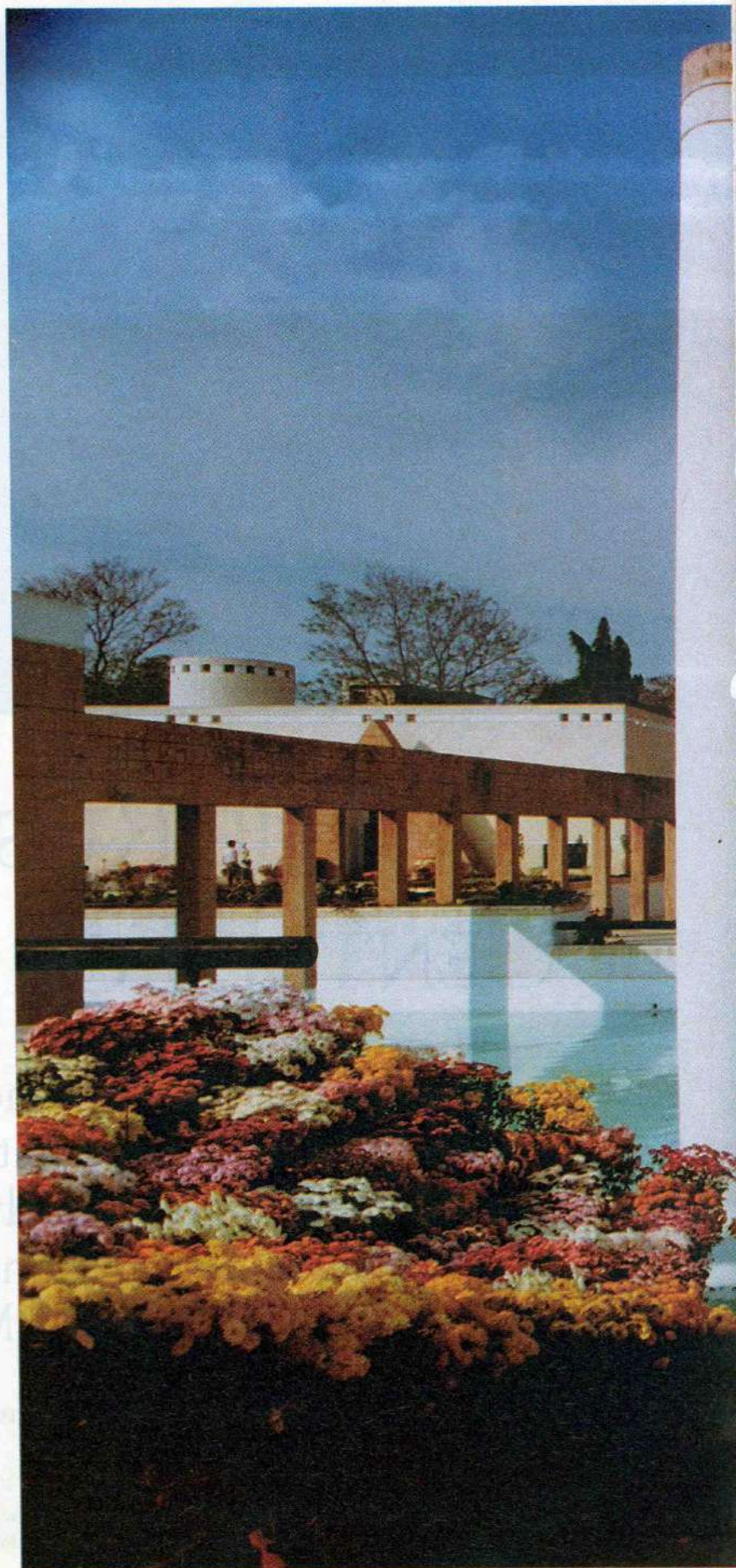
'About three years ago, Mr S A Sabavala, Director, Tata Steel, called me, and showed me the plans they had, but weren't too happy with,' explains Contractor. 'Before starting on my drawings I asked for the site layout, town-planning and topographical maps. On a visit to Jamshedpur, I discovered that the site was located in Jubilee Park, one of the greenest sectors of the city — one could almost term it a "forest" — low buildings hugging the ground, surrounded it. Most of these were residences, and though the Centre was going to be a public building, I felt it should be such that, while making its presence known, it should not disturb the residential area.'

These were some of Contractor's main concerns. He wanted the Centre to be like a gateway to Jubilee Park, with the complex spread out over the complete site rather than just as one monumental block. Finally, it had to be the kind of public building Tata Steel wanted, able to house, exhibition halls, an archives block, an auditorium, library, cafeteria and offices for associated organisations.

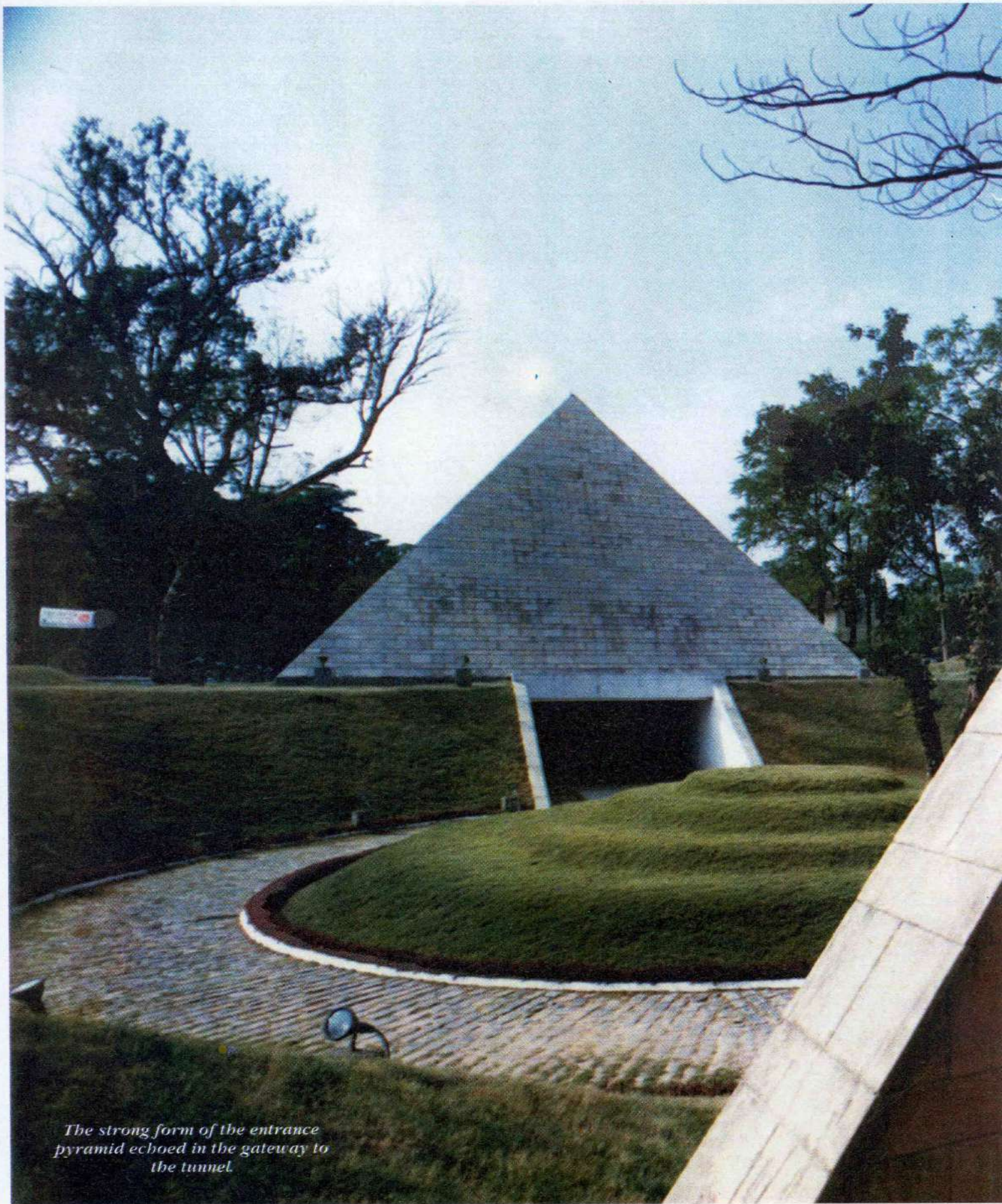
'With these considerations I started with the prime notion that I didn't want any structure to jut out and be seen from the road, disturbing the natural beauty of the environs. Instead, I took the whole building virtually underground. The complex hardly rises above the ground, and with grass mounds growing over most of the site in various contours, it provides a varied, yet unobtrusive facade to the passer-by. The complex is virtually an extension of the landscape. Similarly, a visitor entering the Centre doesn't see any of the neighbouring structures and is totally immersed in a different milieu, without being distracted by the encircling buildings.'

There are two entrances to the complex. The one on the west side is through an imposing pyramid-

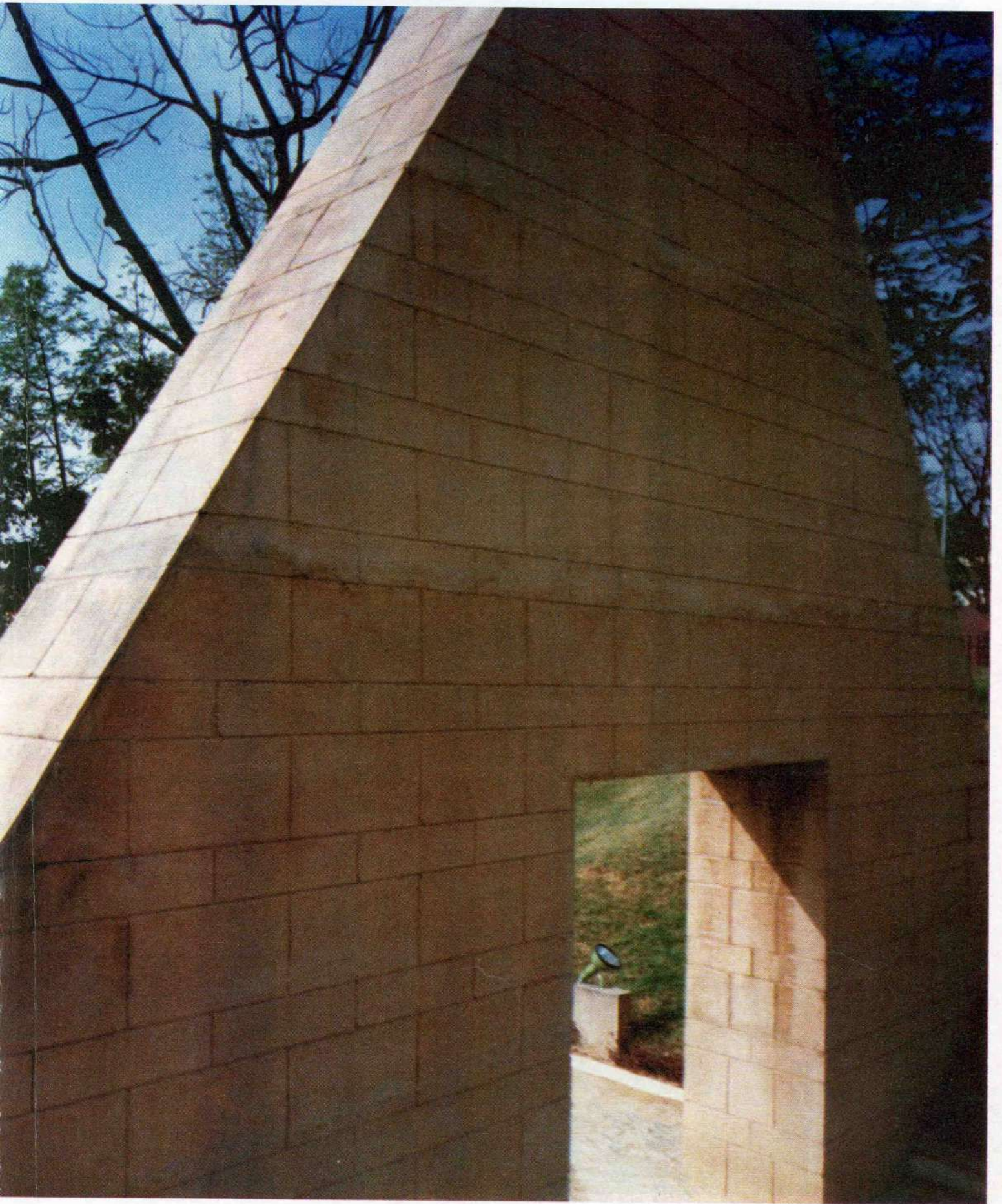
The official entrance at the south-east end of the Centre is marked by a paved column-lined pathway across a water body. At right, are the auditorium, cafeteria and archives gallery. In front is the electrical services room. The Shabbad stone colonnade visually segregates this area from the exhibition hall at far left.

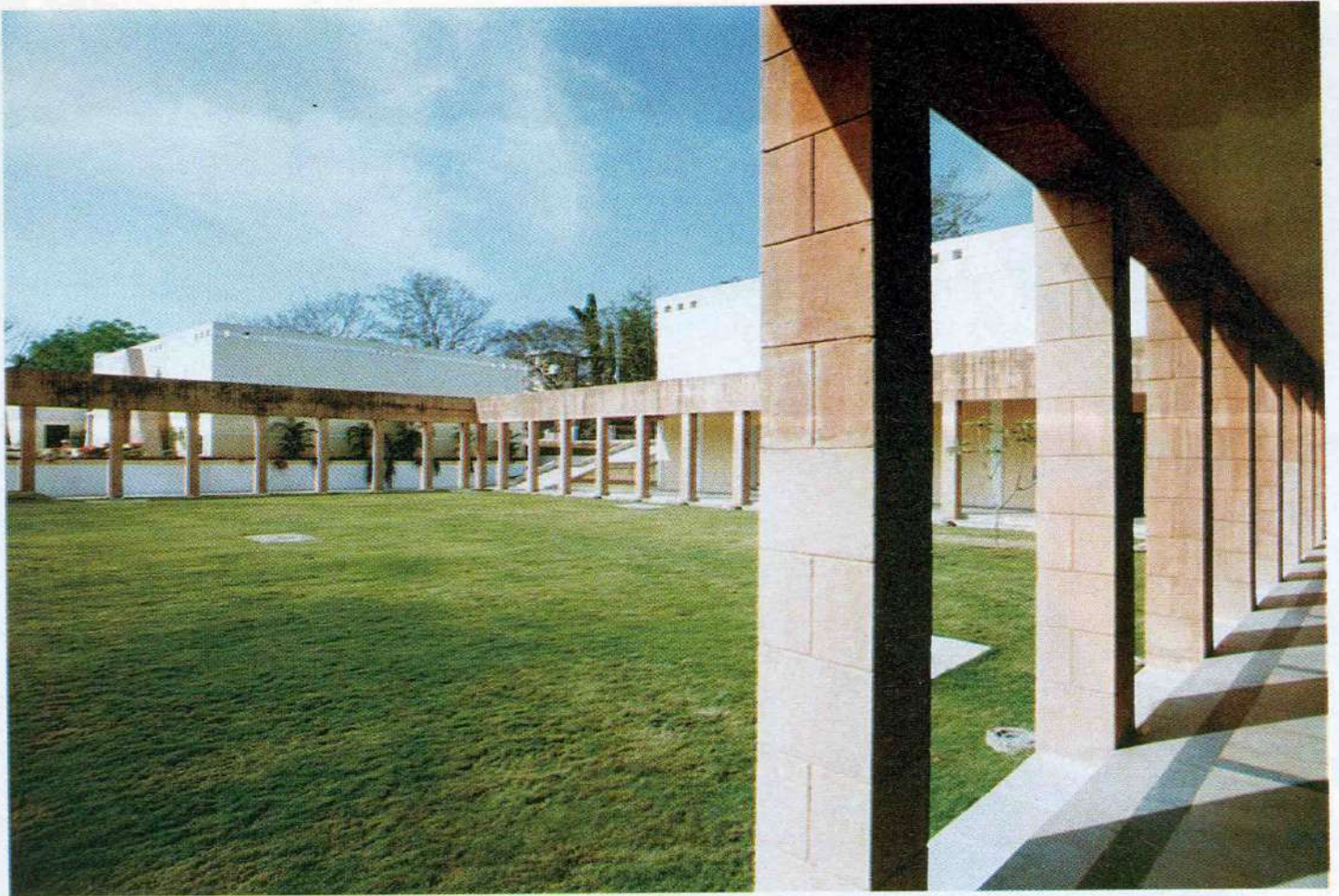






The strong form of the entrance pyramid echoed in the gateway to the tunnel.

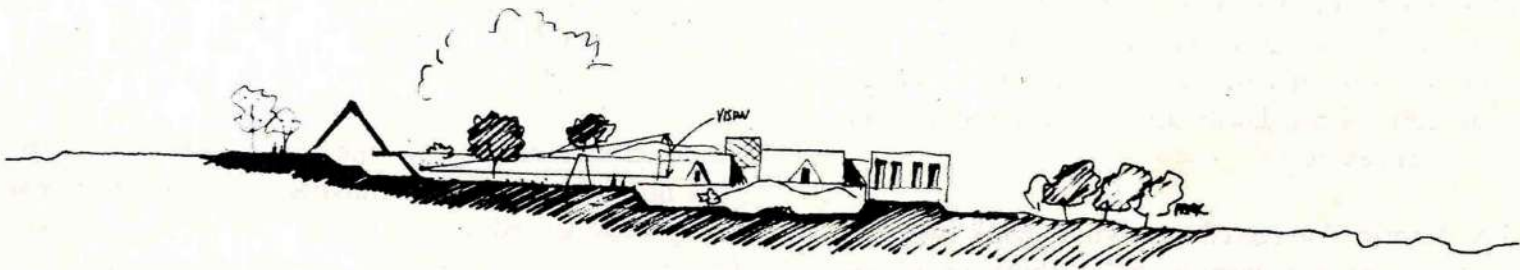




shaped gateway, through which one descends into a tunnel. This leads to a lush green, circular, cobbled courtyard with a central multi-layered mound. A brick pathway goes under a triangular gate leading to a series of interconnected exhibition halls, with circular foyers in between. Each foyer has a triangular stone facade similar to the pyramidal arch. The halls face a sunken courtyard, across which is a row of offices.

Another L-shaped block of low buildings, perpendicular to the halls and offices, houses the archives, cafeteria and auditorium, plus the electrical services for the complex. A large, square patch of green serves as an open plaza, while two water bodies face the second entrance in the south-east corner of the complex, leading in from Jubilee Road. Ten free-standing, 30-ft-high columns, in two rows of five each, flank the path over the water body, giving this entrance a ceremonial appeal. Leading to the plaza — which in turn is defined by a colonnaded verandah — the stone walkway proceeds to the exhibitions halls and offices at left and the archives, auditorium and cafeteria at right.

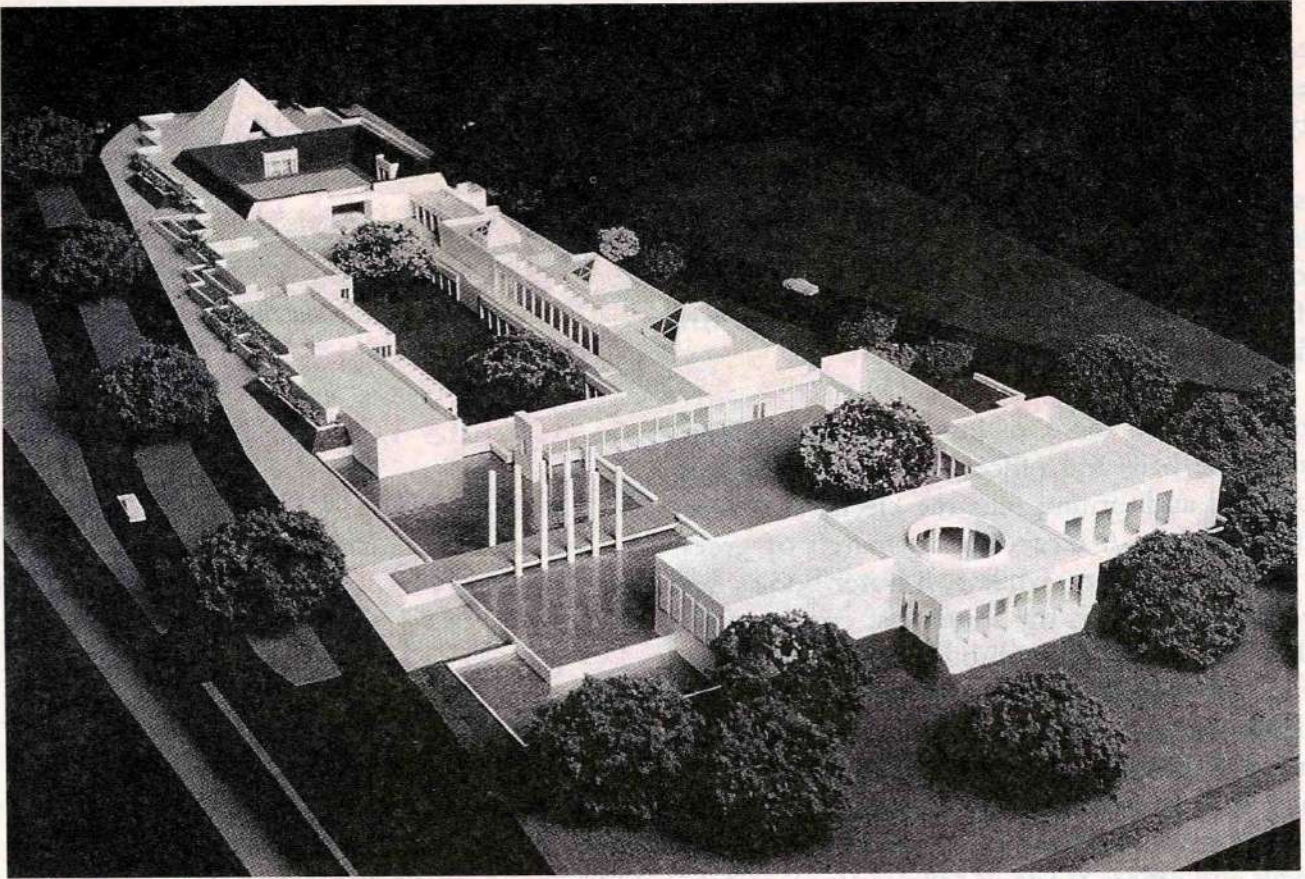
A visitor entering the Centre doesn't see any of the neighbouring structures and is totally immersed in a different milieu, without being distracted by the encircling buildings.



'My intention,' asserts the architect, 'was to make the Centre a pleasing place in which one could walk around at leisure. So I installed some sculptures and put in a waterbody, which acts as a reflecting surface for the surrounding construction and undulating greenery. Each functional area — between 3,000 to 5,000 sq ft — is arranged in clusters around a large central courtyard, with smaller courtyards and gateways placed further on. While driving past on Jubilee Road, all one can see from outside are the pyramid and triangle and mounds of green earth, while the buildings are tucked away inside at a lower level.'

There are full-sized trees within, which Contractor claims resulted from a deliberate effort to try and salvage those that were already there and 'planning around them'. Materials used were plain as he had a budget to work within — plastered surfaces painted to a neutrality, Shahbad paving and sand pebbles.

Opposite above: Colonnaded verandah in front of archives gallery, auditorium and electrical services room. The central plaza provides a place to sit out. Below: The triangular stone gateway leading to the courtyard and exhibition halls at left — with the same 'A' shaped entrance facade.



When I asked him why he has repeated the triangles as a facade to each exhibition hall, Contractor replied, 'It's a form that appeals to me. It is powerful yet not protrusive. It lends very well to the character of the landscape. I consider it symbolic of entrances here.'

The Centre For Excellence which took two years to complete wasn't without its teething problems. 'It was not a rosy picture from Day One. The concept was given to Mr Sabavala at our initial meeting and he was surprised when I told him that I felt most of the functional buildings should be underground, so that from the outside nothing would be visible except the undulating greenery and the entrances. He didn't think it would work. I went to Jamshedpur, studied the site and even flew over it in the company aircraft. It further confirmed my original concept.

'But the first drawing went way beyond the allocated budget so I scrapped it. Interacting primarily with Mr Sabavala, I showed him the second drawing. It was apparently approved by everyone else but Mr Russi Mody didn't like it. So I showed him a few alternatives and told him what I had really wanted to do. He agreed at once saying, "I like that!". I told him what it was likely to cost and that it would never fit into the allo-

cated budget. They had a meeting, the budget was raised and I was asked to modify my plan to fit the revised budget, while giving it the requisite practicality and beauty.'

Contractor reveals a preference for corporate projects. 'It's much simpler. Like walking in a park. Whereas doing a residential one is akin to walking a tight rope. One mistake and you fall off! In this particular case I got the maximum co-operation from Tatas during the execution of the job. It has been a pleasure working for them. Jamshedpur is a difficult place to get contract labour, but we managed. In retrospect, there were no hassles, no heartburn. The client is happy and the public seems pleased with the outcome.'

The Russi Mody Centre For Excellence has succeeded in creating a serene ambience. The quality of space and environment within the complex contributes greatly towards the reflection of a culture and image which is tantamount to Tata Steel's best! **●**

Architect: Hafeez Contractor

Associate Architect: Sunil Ghambhani

Structural Consultant: Y S Sane Structural Consultants Pvt Ltd

Services Consultant: ESKAYEM Consultants Pvt Ltd

Contractor: Navratan Das & Co