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HARSHAD PATEL
RALINO DE SOUSA
HAFEEZ CONTRACTOR
+
Introducing
HOMES AND INTERIORS
+
Also included
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HAFEEZ CONTRACTOR BOMBAY Text by Himanshu Burte

Just a loud shout away from the Bombay Stock Exchange, from the unspectacular first floor of an old office building, Hafeez Contractor continues to direct the operation of painting the town red . . . yellow, pink and purple. In a decade of independent practice he has done an astonishing amount of work, and his popularity outside professional circles is phenomenal. Predictably, that has earned him a lot of flak from within the profession, chiefly because he respects no hallowed theories, and is seen to have 'sold out' to the builders.

Contractor is peculiarly a Bombay phenomenon. His architecture is an attempt to make the best of the cramping site and by-law conditions in Bombay to which is attributed, even by other architects, the lack of aesthetic merit in most of the city's architecture. Builders form the majority among his clients, and the market therefore, influences Contractor's work to a good extent. The converse is also true as is evidenced by the army of clones he has spawned, whose work is mistaken for his, much to his chagrin.

Physical requirements in builder housing remain the same, only the sizes and combinations change across projects. "After all, what is my material, eh?" he asks. "Bedroom, kitchen, living room and toilet? That, too in the same dosage? To make that bland thing beautiful day in and day out, you have to do something interesting." So, you make pediments and punch portholes.

Builder housing is for selling, and no money is supposed to be wasted on frills. Yet, the builders now-a-days recognize the crucial part looks play in the marketability of buildings. This desire for better looking products is a new force in the market. It is also an unfocused force. The increasingly prosperous inhabitants of this fiercely competitive city realize that their residences too, can emphasize their status (a concept often confused with individuality), and make a statement. The act of

making a statement becomes more important than its content, so there is a rush for anything that is literally outstanding. Contractor responds to the trend (did he begin it?) by capitalizing on the one straw the by-laws do hold out — the 2'6" deep architectural projection. He acknowledges that at times his architecture is only that deep. The surface then, becomes his playground and, "there's no law on paint."

Thus, Contractor has successfully ridden the rising tide of conspicuous consumption, and is responsible to an extent for the 'consumer durables' image housing seems to have acquired. Marketing, packaging and the designer series (the Hafeez High Rise?) are concepts that are no more out of place in the building industry.

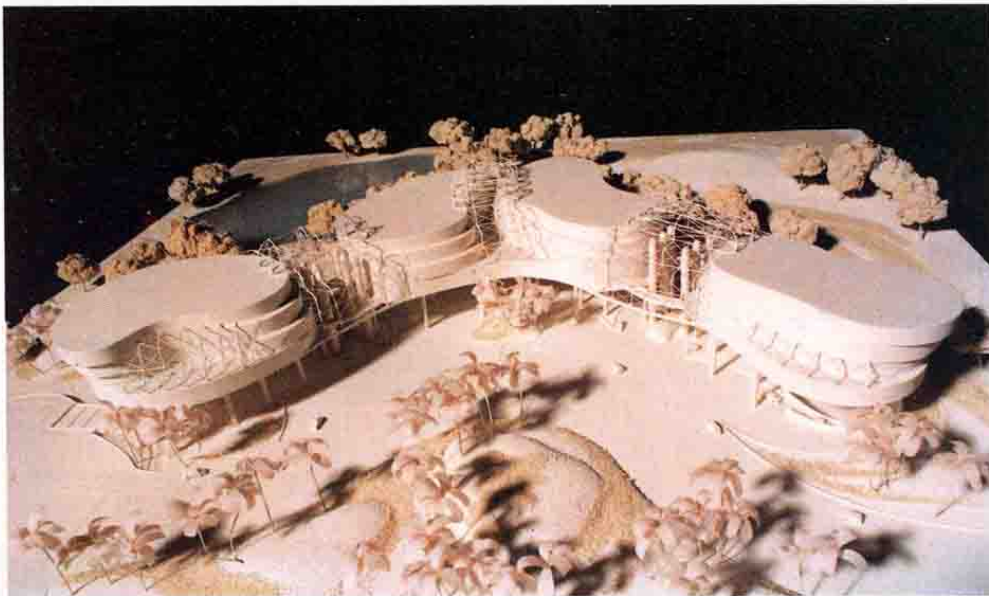
So where does it all begin? How does Contractor approach his work, his practice? Realist that he is, one of the first things he talks about is the client.

"I never refuse a job," says he. "Any person who enters my office and asks me to design something for him is my client."

He does all kinds of work — buildings, interiors, and even pure facade (2'6" deep) jobs. The last horrifies the orthodoxy with its implicit acceptance of the structure/facade dichotomy. Characteristically, Contractor can't see why he shouldn't do it.

"When a client has come to me with all his aspirations, how can I tell him to go away? Of course, I suggest ways of improving the plan, and often nothing beautiful is possible with it. Still, I try to give the client the best possible thing within the limitations," he says.

This is an interesting stance. In general, Contractor treats clients with a respect that approaches function. Behind the respect is probably the realization that a happy client returns for more. And that when all requirements are fulfilled, a client is more likely to be happy. He listens patiently to a client's opinion at



Proposed office for a finance company, Bombay. This free-form curtain walled structure is more traditionally modern in its exploration of formal possibilities, and a refreshing departure from Contractor's obsession with classical formal strategies.

every stage on the planning, economics, operation, and the aesthetic choices for a building. The last, at least, has traditionally been considered the architect's territory, to be yielded only in survival threatening situations. Contractor, the original survivor, starts by welcoming the client into this preserve. He takes the client's aesthetic preferences seriously as a starting point, trying to arrive at a 'beautiful' design from that direction. In effect, then, he is looking at architecture as a service industry, offering design services, rather than as a fine art to be practised in aristocratic seclusion.

Unsurprisingly, Contractor is a fast worker since he has to cater to a construction industry that absorbs huge investments. The speed, more often than not, results in formulaic designs relying on Greek and Italian clichés. This is seen to be his style. But, Contractor insists that he has no one style. Each project requires a different treatment, he says, pointing to the free form modern design, complete with curtain walls for a finance agency's office, or to the more 'propah' design of the Russi Mody Centre at Jamshedpur for the Tatas.

So what is one to make of his work? One of the first things one discovers is that his reputation within the profession as 'a mere cosmetician without planning abilities' is unjust. Either the green monster, or ignorance of his complete range of projects, is responsible for this. Actually, in his best works, function and form quite rightly enrich each other. And as far as the functioning of his buildings is concerned his repeat client record says it all.



Hafeez Contractor (b 1950) did his GD Arch from Bombay in 1975, completing his graduate studies in architecture and urban design from Columbia University, USA, on a Tata Scholarship. Since setting up independent practice in Bombay in 1982, he has handled a wide variety of projects and won a number of awards, amongst which are: The Accommodation Times Award for Architect of the Year 1991, and the Interiors Today Award for Excellence in Design and Architecture 1991.

Leaving aside his kitschy residential work for builders, one comes across some bold and innovative designs, especially in corporate jobs. Where more elbow room is available Contractor does explore newer forms, managing to transcend mere surface work. Unfortunately, his inventiveness often runs away with an overworked design. With more restraint and careful editing, one realizes, many of his 'middling' projects could have fared much better.

He also seems to ignore his responsibility for the content of visual devices, by locating his starting point within the builder-client's preferences. The latter, without the benefit of an aesthetic education, is in no position to evaluate the significance of images that are chiefly a gift of the media and of itinerant tourism. Thus, appropriateness is possibly being sacrificed at the altar of client satisfaction.

Moreover, obsession with the surface often results (in spite of the exceptions) in a lopsided design that relies excessively on the decoration for its identity. Apart from the vacuity that irrelevant decoration evokes, it denies the relation between interior happenings and the exterior. Style is no more a complete system of working, but mere applique work. And his success could very easily reinforce the popular perception of architects as facade fetishists, and nothing more.

Having said this, one wonders whether this kind of reaction was not more or less inevitable. The rain streaked bleakness of architecture Bombay style couldn't possibly have been accepted



Konark Estate, Pune. A restrained composition that responds to its context. The beautiful sloping roof of a nearby bungalow prompted Contractor to adopt pitched roofs in this building, one of his earliest.

Bharat Petroleum, Bombay. The form and function again dovetailed quite well in the projecting semi-circular dining halls that maximize the view of the garden.



Lake Castle Powai, Bombay

for long. Isn't the craze for Contractor's decorative delights a popular reaction to the lazy interpretation of 'minimalism' as 'minimumism' that mediocre architects have foisted on Bombay?

Contractor's success throws light upon the peculiar predicament architects find themselves in. We recognize the obvious shortcomings of the modern approach (or the corrupted shortcut version that we see all around) right from the definition of 'function' to the aloofness from 'context'. Yet, the moral appeal of a 'clean', 'pure', 'honest' architecture (along with its convenience) prevents us from exploring the possibility of a more interactive architecture. After all, Contractor succeeds to a great extent chiefly because he responds to the immediate visual needs of the people.

Contractor has actually made a pragmatic (cynical?) choice in opting for populism. Prevalent dogma sneers at populism, yet doesn't provide any conceptual framework for integrating the creative and the pragmatic aspects of the profession cleanly. The market, for instance, is supposed to exert no influence on the architect who is still expected to strike anti-money poses. Thus, confused rhetoric is naturally honoured more by covert rejection, and only lands us in a soup called hypocrisy.

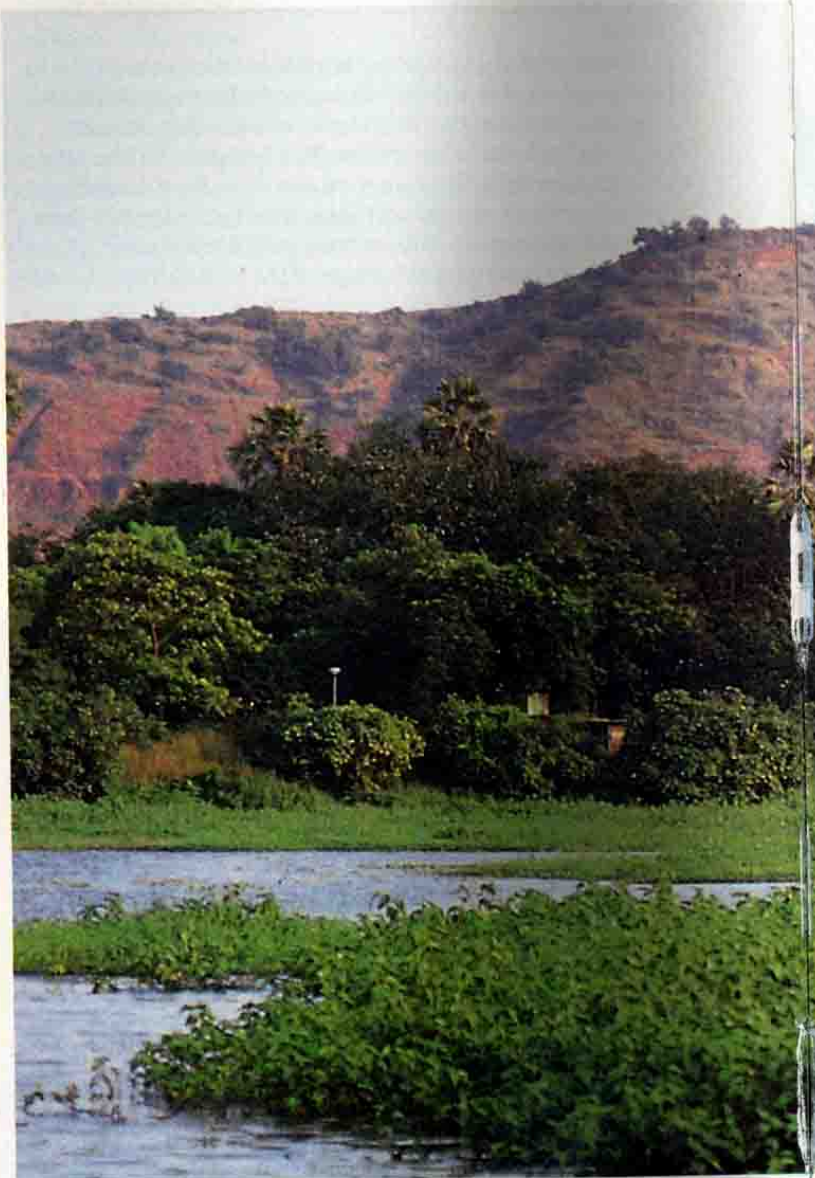
Candour and Contractor go together some distance. Impatient, but astute, he finds his way through bureaucratic tangles, as energetically as he attempts to develop a 'Hansel and Gretel' style in response to a new demand. And in his unspectacular office on Bank Street, he begins another forceful conversation, "Look, I'm basically a Bombay architect!" ✦

Photographs by Noshir Gobhai

Himanshu Burté is a Bombay based architect and a graduate of the J J School of Architecture, Bombay.

This project differs from Contractor's other residential blocks in scale and treatment. It is a 183 m building placed on an unusual site — long and narrow with Lake Powai at one end, a forest at the other, and hills behind. The brief specified utilizing the FSI in a manner that allowed all flats to face the lake.

Initial design experiments with four buildings laid out on site indicated that this would result in many in-between exterior spaces. The final design



effectively integrates all four blocks into one long building. Each block retains its own staircase at the rear and has three rooms facing the lake. Further, some apartments have been provided with balconies, increasing options available to prospective buyers.

This huge building is treated in a manner that minimalizes its intrusion on the site. The FSI could have been consumed in 17 or 18 floors, but Contractor kept the end blocks low while pulling the central one up, creating a

stepped wall-like mass which complements the hills behind.

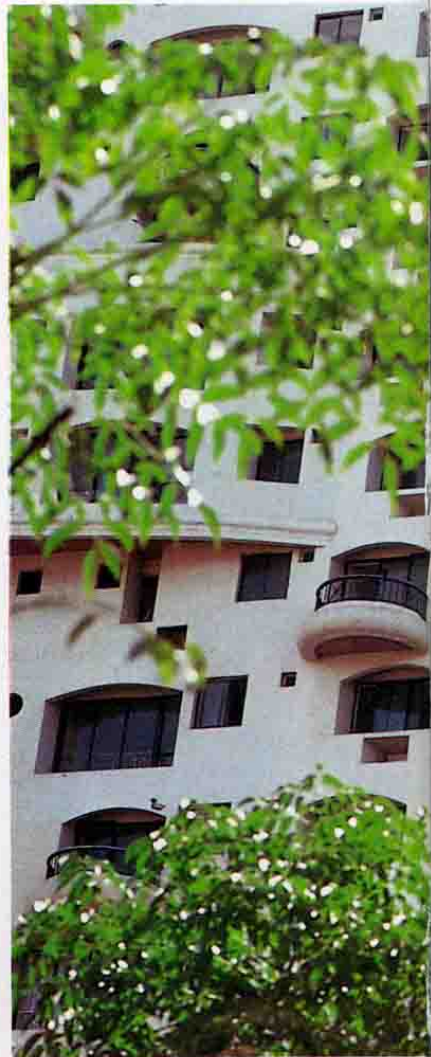
The 'wallness' of the building is further broken by puncturing square cut-outs in the mass. These give a dramatic view of the sky through the building. Access to the terraces so created is from the larger apartments turning them into sky courts high above ground level. All the windows are recessed within the double exterior wall which is detailed colourfully but with restraint.

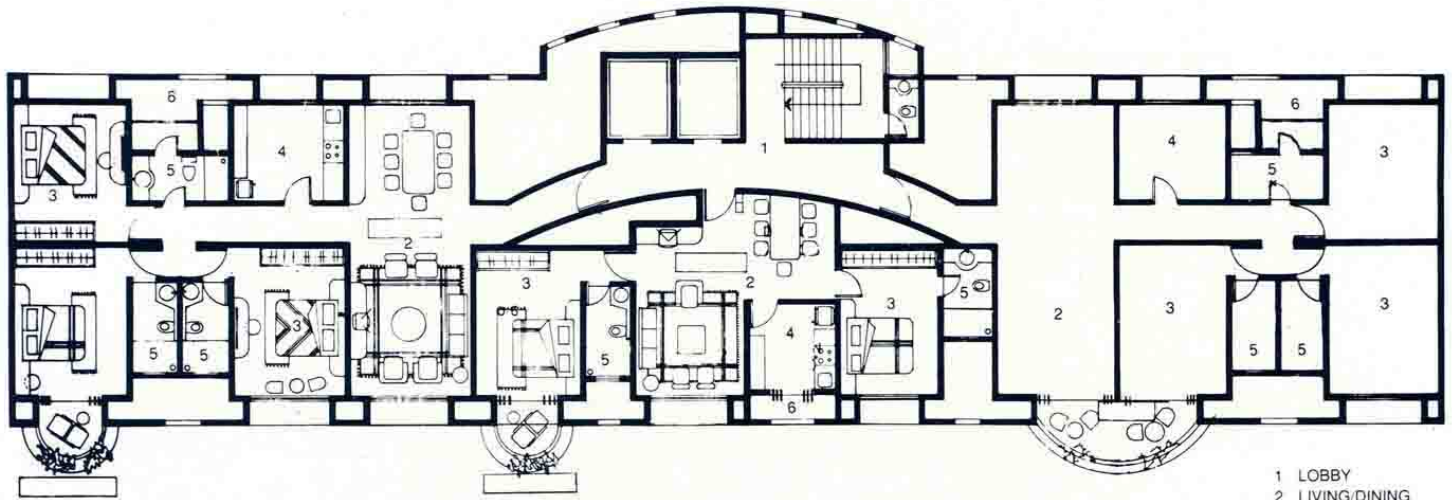
An example of the formal need generating a unique selling point for the building. These projected masses improve the plan by giving an individual character to many flats even from inside.





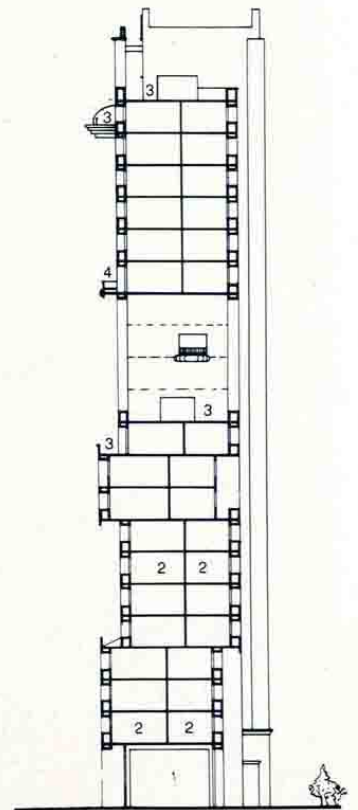
The north face of the apartment complex. The sky court can be seen clearly.





TYPICAL FLOOR

- 1 LOBBY
- 2 LIVING/DINING
- 3 BEDROOM
- 4 KITCHEN
- 5 TOILET
- 6 DRYING BALCONY



SCHEMATIC SECTION

- 1 STILT
- 2 ROOM
- 3 TERRACE
- 4 BALCONY

The wall-like mass of the apartment complex.





Clients *Hiranandani Builders*
Consultants *Mahimtura Consultants (structural)*
Contractors *Hiranandani Construction (civil and services)*
Built-up area 27880 sq m

Rear view showing the four staircase blocks.



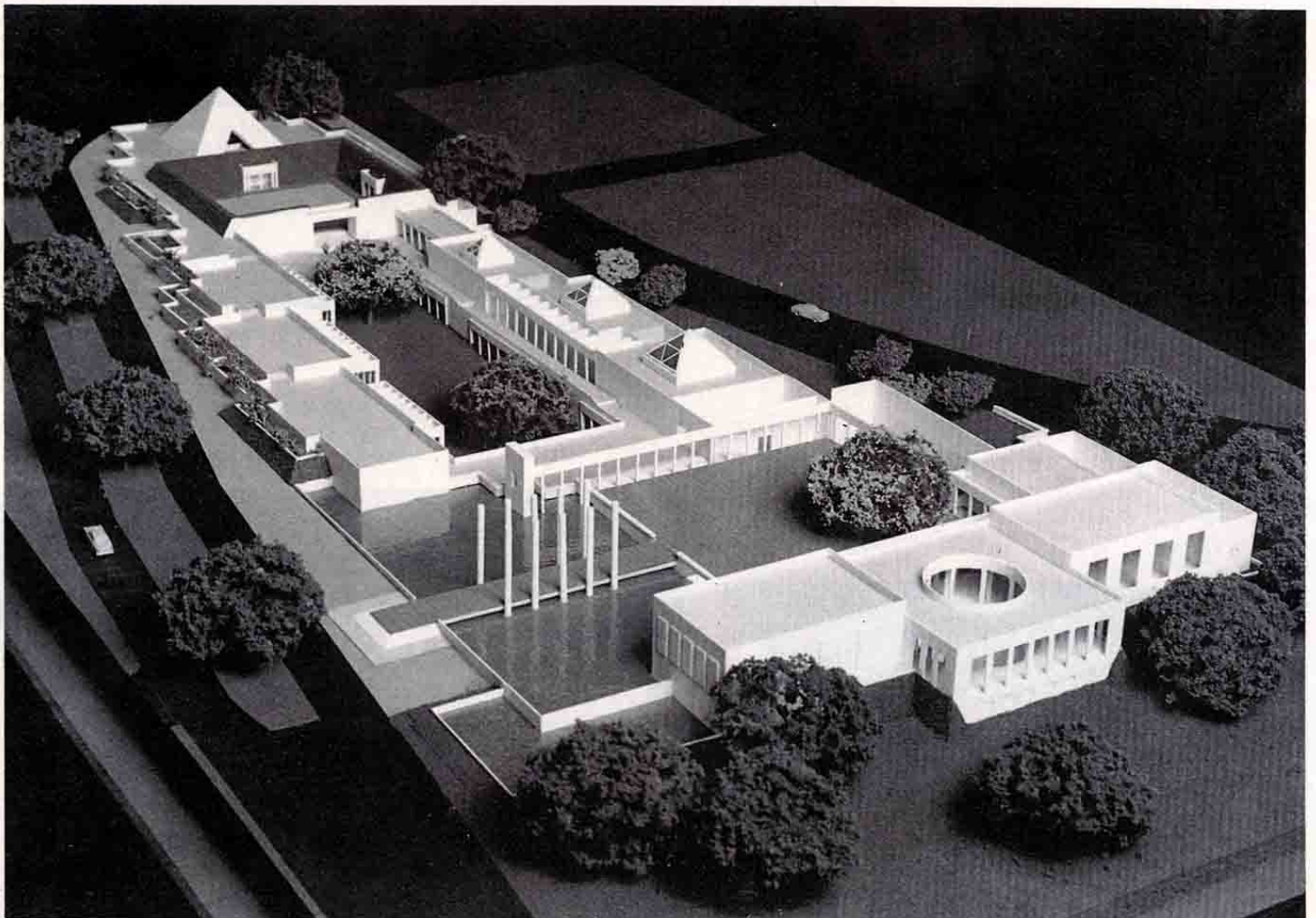
Russi Mody Centre for Excellence Jamshedpur

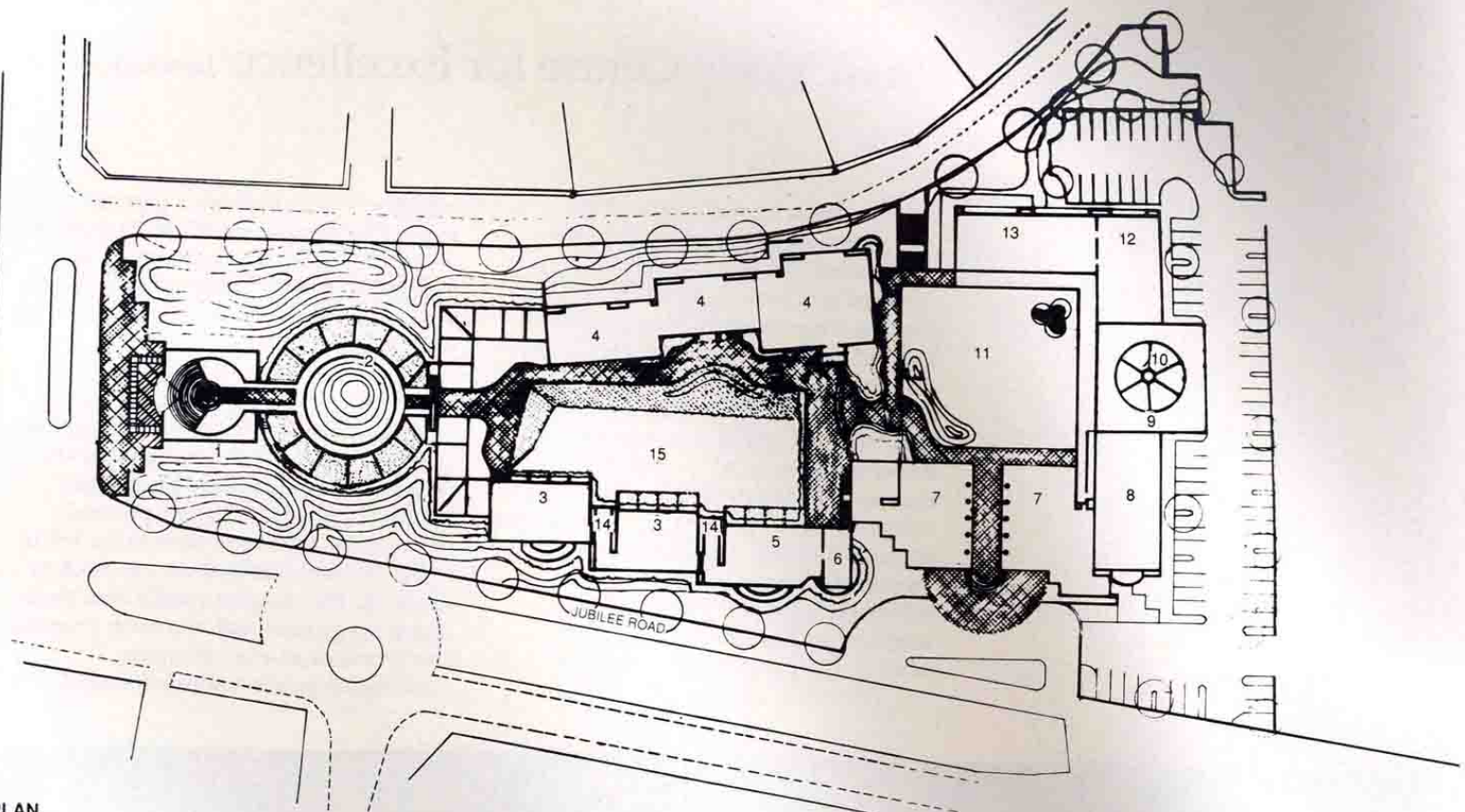
The site is located in one of the greenest sectors of Jamshedpur called Jubilee Park. The building is designed as a formal gate to the Jubilee gardens where most buildings are built low and close to the ground. The clients, major steel industrialists of India, wanted a structure that reflects the work culture at Tata Steel. The design attempts to create this environment and the buildings are in the same scale as those around. It was thus conceived as an ensemble of low structures spread over the site, rather than as a monumental block. The Centre has exhibition halls, an archives block, a seminar/auditorium and offices for associated organizations.

There are two main entrances to the

complex. One is through a gigantic pyramidal gateway which leads down to a tunnel, beyond which is a lush green circular courtyard. This journey prepares the visitor for the series of exhibition halls which again face an internal courtyard with office blocks at the other end.

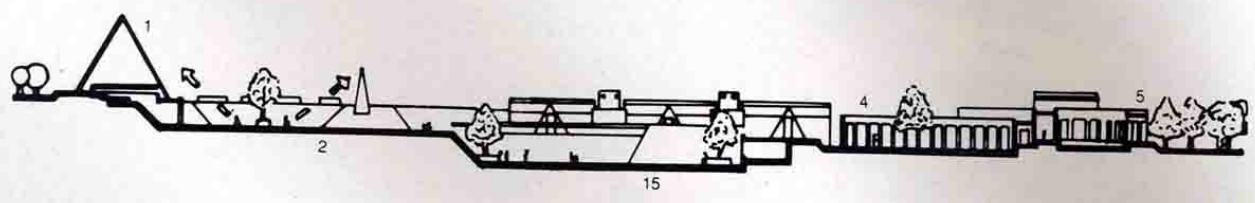
The other entrance leads to the complex over a water body in which the building and its landscaped setting are reflected. Moving to the square plaza defined by a colonnade one proceeds either to the exhibition halls to the left or to the archives and auditorium block to the right. The complex hardly ever rises above the ground with the earth covering that provides an ever changing unobtrusive facade towards the road.





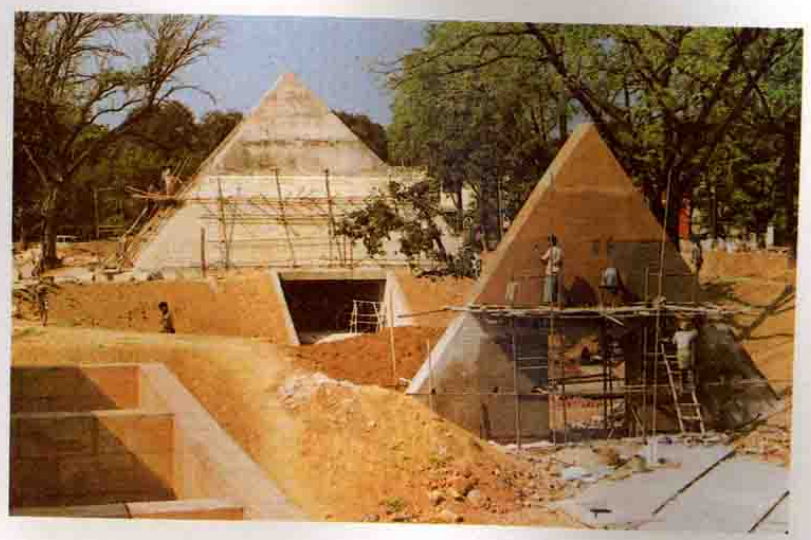
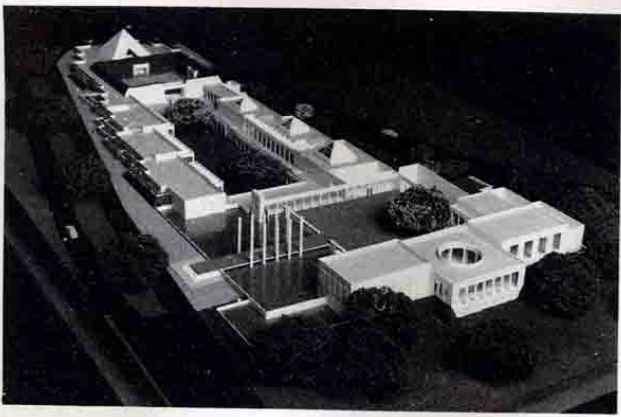
PLAN

- | | | | | |
|--------------------|--------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| 1 ENTRANCE PYRAMID | 4 EXHIBITION | 7 WATER BODY | 10 CAFETERIA | 13 ELECTRICAL SERVICES |
| 2 SUNKEN COURTYARD | 5 LIBRARY | 8 AUDITORIUM | 11 PLAZA | 14 AHU |
| 3 OFFICE | 6 TOILET | 9 ENTRANCE FOYER | 12 ARCHIVES BLOCK | 15 SUNKEN GARDEN |



SECTION

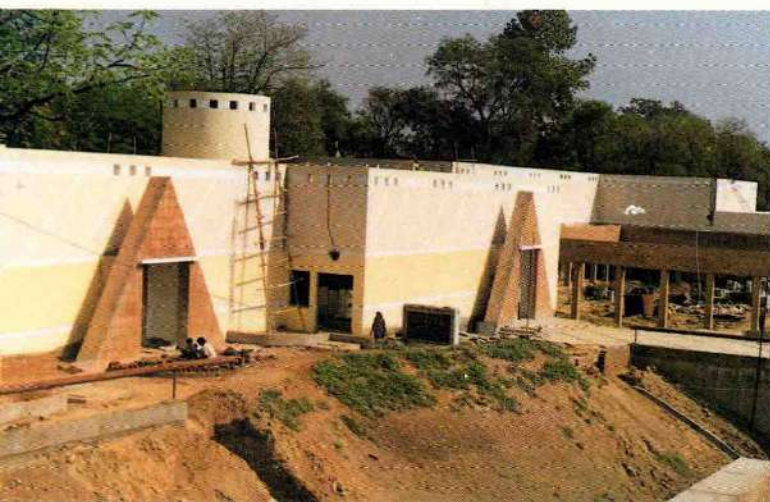
The gigantic pyramidal gateway on the west leads down to a tunnel which opens onto a lush green courtyard.





Moving through the colonnade one enters a square plaza. The exhibition halls are housed in the left wing; the archives and auditorium blocks in the right.

Clients Tata Steel
Architect-in-charge Sunil Gambani
Consultants Y S Sane (structural), Eskayem Consultants Pvt Ltd (services)
Contractors Navratan Das and Company (civil), Voltas (air-conditioning)
Built-up area 2,788 sq m
Expected completion Feb 1993



The Osho Commune Pune

The Osho Commune is the base from which Bhagwan Rajneesh (who in his later years called himself, 'Osho'), started his philosophical teachings in Pune. The community, consisting of people from all over the world, lives in a tightly protected environment. Osho himself was accessible to a favoured few and fiercely protected by loyal devotees. Hence, his cryptic brief to Contractor — a thick book with a photograph of a barn shot at sunset and the words, "Black, black, black," was all Contractor had to guide him in interpreting the requirements of the design.

Fundamentally different from anything that Contractor has ever done, the final design for the Commune is a simple cluster of four buildings, relying on form and colour for impact. The photograph of the barn decided the form — pyramidal. The colour was obviously to be black, relieved only by blue tinted windows. Black contains within it all colours, harnesses cosmic energies and is stable. Blue signifies the first colour one perceives after enlightenment — the halo

of life. The solid pyramids are large meditation halls with smaller halls below them. An L-shaped building has small rooms where people can come and stay.

Unfortunately, the black envelope, while it looked beautiful, has caused some complications. Excessive heat retention resulted in surface tiles coming off in the summer. These faults have been tackled, but the environmental wisdom of the choice is doubtful.

Each pyramid was conceived as a shell element resting on peripheral beams in turn resting on RC columns. The basic plan measured 16.75m x 16.75m and the pyramid was at an angle of 53.4 degrees with the horizontal. There are six rectangular openings and one that is triangular. Stiffener RC beams are provided near the edges of openings, and the ridge line of the pyramids are stiffened with MS channels.

Interestingly, a dirty municipal *nullah* on site has been converted, at Contractor's suggestion, into a lively water body with landscaping all around, providing a beautiful setting to the Commune.

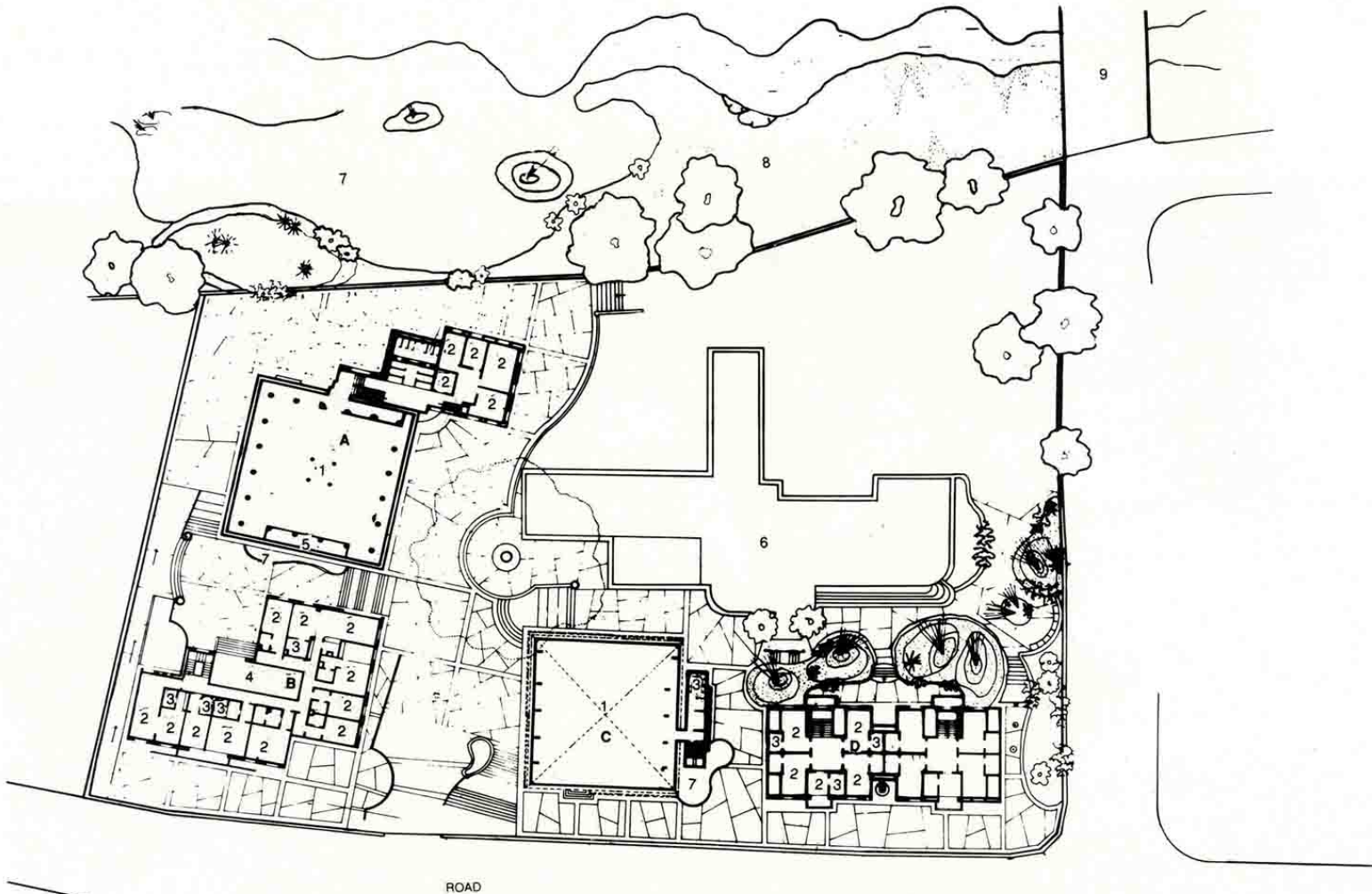
View of residential quarters under pyramid B



The tones of black vary with the materials used. Here the pyramid is clad in highly polished black granite and ceramic tiles, Cuddappah is used for the surface of the courtyards and boundary walls are basalt.





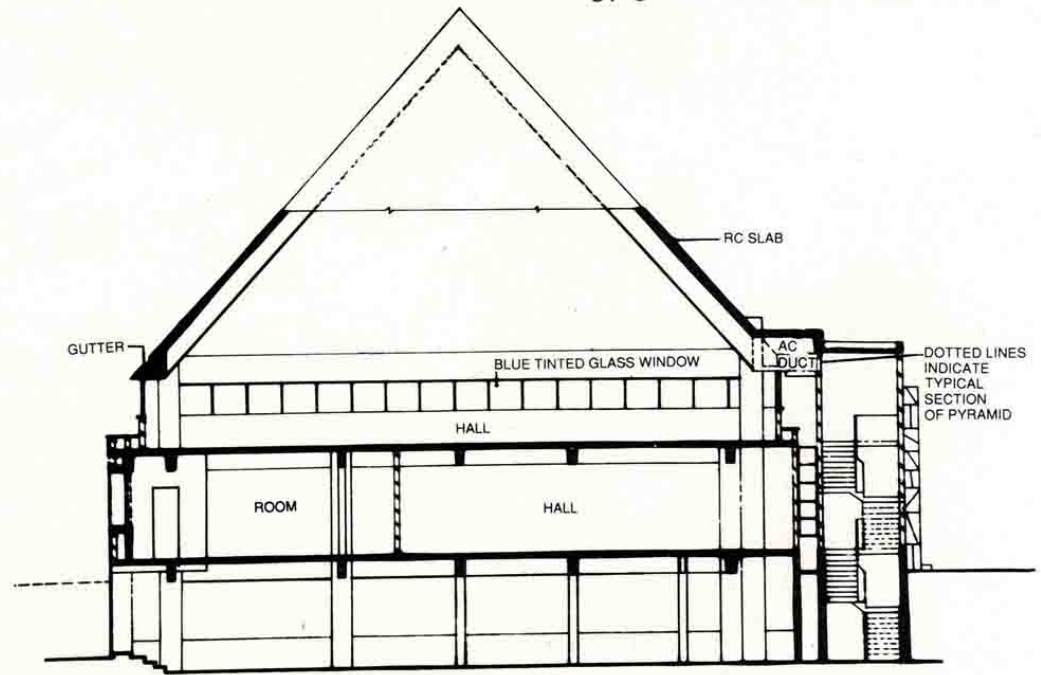


UPPER LEVEL PLAN

- 1 HALL
 - 2 ROOM
 - 3 TOILET
 - 4 CHOWK
 - 5 AC PLANT
 - 6 EXISTING BUILDING
 - 7 WATER BODY
 - 8 PARK
- A, C - HALL**
B, D - RESIDENTIAL

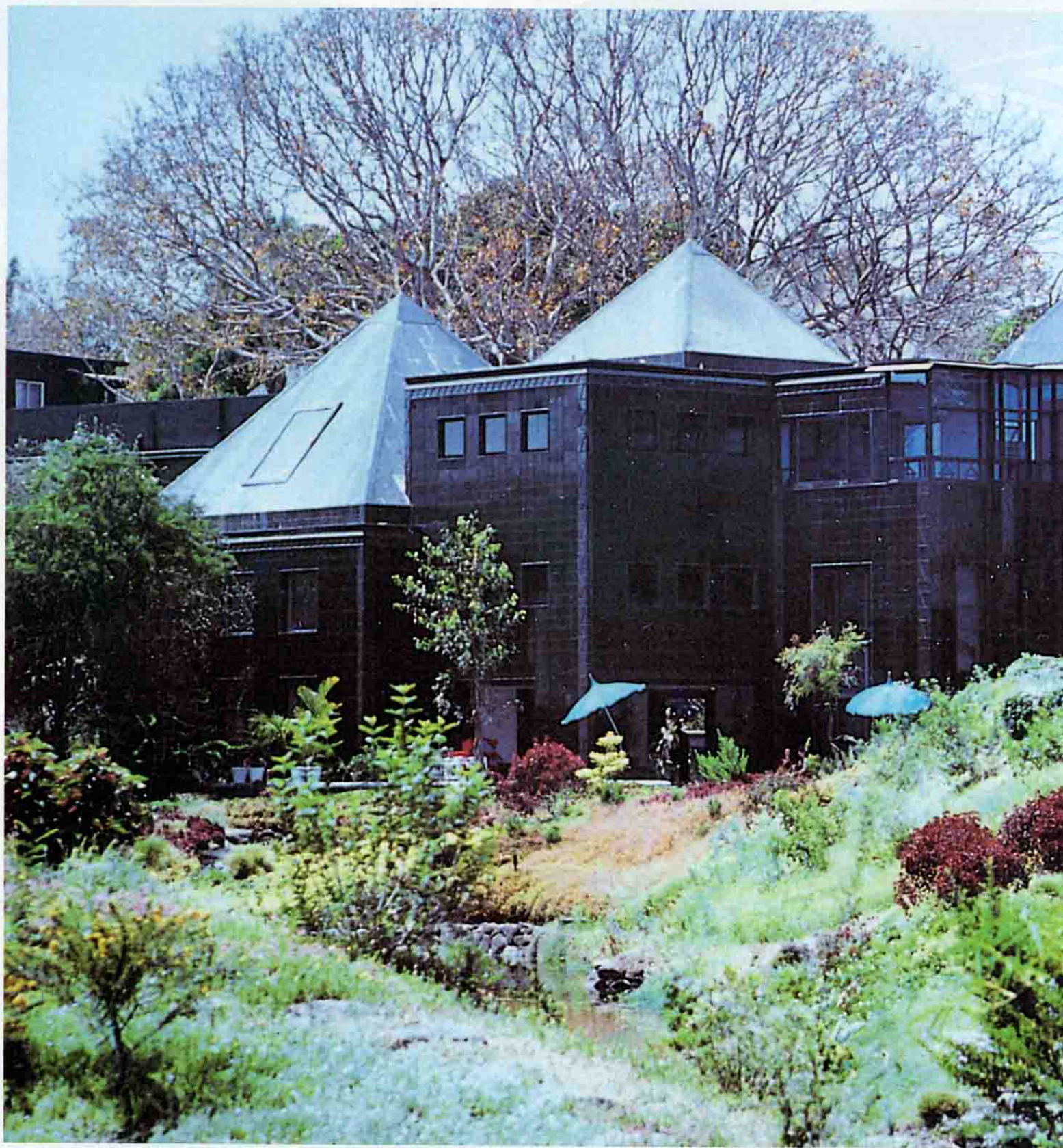


Facing page The internal corridors in pyramid B.



DETAIL SECTION THROUGH PYRAMID C







Built-up area 4646.8 sq m (approx)
Cost Rs 11,836 per sq m

Set amidst beautifully landscaped environs this simple cluster of four buildings relies on colour and form for impact.