Remembering Charles Correa

From Affordable Housing to Affordable Cities

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CONTENTS

"Affordable housing isn't something that happens in a vacuum – it is a direct result of the correlation between the pattern of public transport and employment distribution in the city."
Charles Correa

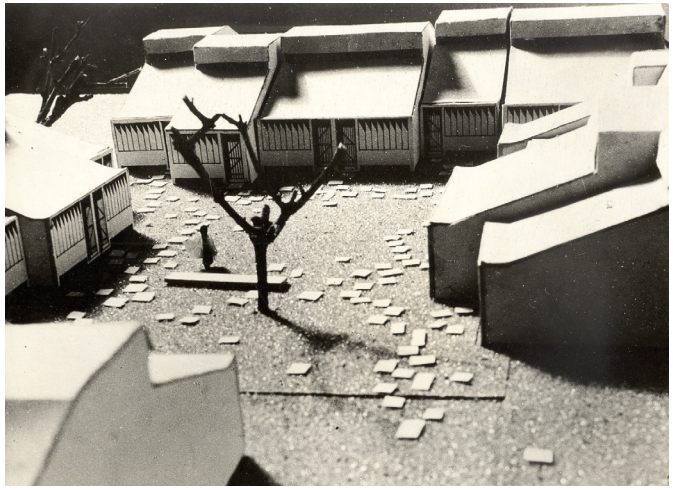
In 2009, I found myself in the fortunate position of working as a young architect in Charles Correa's office and assisting him on what would be his last book. Closing the circle on a lifetime spent writing and theorizing on architectural and urban issues, A Place in the Shade: The New Landscape & Other Essays is a collection of about thirty short texts that gives one an insight into Correa's incisive and analytical mind on a wide range of topics: from architecture and art to planning and politics. Sometimes reflective, and almost always provocative, the essays illustrate Correa's confident command of these diverse topics and his ability to connect them to the agency of the architect – a role that he was convinced comprised not just of designing buildings but one that also needed to engage with urban issues through public writing, teaching and advocacy.

Starting in the early 1960s, Correa would maintain this model of practice till the very end. Over the years, this expanded practice would see him rise not just to the top of his profession but position him within national and international circles as a planner, activist, educator, and theoretician. In other words, Correa didn't just leave his mark as a prolific architect but helped shape urban and cultural discourse as a public intellectual.

Having just graduated from architecture school, the experience of being around Correa was for me both thrilling and intimidating. But I will avoid slipping further into a memoiristic or even nostalgic tone with anecdotes of the innumerable lessons we all learned as young architects at 9, Mathew Road. 'What one learned from Correa' is an article worth writing, but I leave that for another occasion. Instead, I want to touch upon a specific trait that I find fascinating in Correa's projects and writings on housing that illustrates his remarkable ability to oscillate between scales – from the micro (the dwelling) to the macro (the regional and even national scale) –and why we can all learn from his holistic thinking.

Housing as Architecture

Correa's concerns with the scale of the house and that of the city are evident right from the very start of his career. In 1961, barely three years into private practice, Correa would win a national competition for affordable housing in Ahmedabad with a scheme called the Tube House.



The Tube House served as a prototype for a number of Correa's experiments with energy-passive architecture.

Designed and built for the Gujarat Housing Board, the project was an elegant architectural solution that achieved the densities required at the site without resorting to the typical walk-up apartment model. Instead, Correa's scheme ingeniously clustered long and narrow "tube houses" with sloping roofs and an internal patio to allow for cross-ventilation with an air-vent as the main feature of the design.

Driven by his belief that "form follows climate", the conceptual clarity, material simplicity and sectional beauty of the Tube House would go on to influence many of his other architectural projects. The un-built Boyce Houses in Pune from 1962 and the Ramkrishna House built for a wealthy merchant in Ahmedabad from 1964 are only two examples from a much longer list of projects of this first period where both low-income and high-income housing (another remarkable trait) were all designed with the 'climate section' and 'clustering' in mind. Over the coming decades, and as commissions took Correa to newer geographies and climates, he would actively fine-tune these themes. As time went on, more themes would be layered, such as those of the 'community spine' and 'incrementality' as highlighted by Dick van Gameren and myself in our exhibition and book 'Living Ideals' that analysed twenty projects from Correa's housing portfolio through the lens of these four themes. But as Correa was refining his architectural principles regarding housing design in these early formative years, he was also becoming deeply aware of the need to look at the bigger picture: urbanization, land-use allocations, and planning policies.

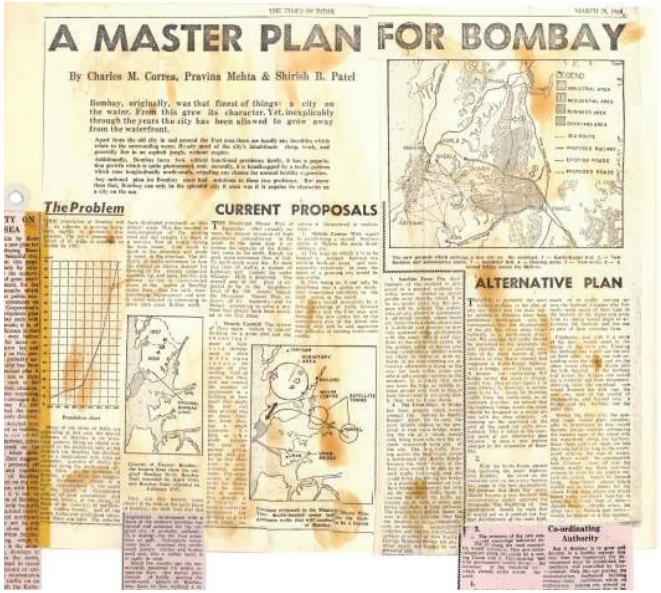
Exhibition at TU Delft: models to study high-rise high-income housing as well as low-rise low income housing. Photo: Machteld Schœp

Housing in the context of Rapid Urbanization

By the 1960s, Mumbai (then Bombay), where Correa lived and worked, was growing at an alarming rate. With a population of 4.5 million that was expected to double over the next twenty years, the demand for affordable housing far exceeded any supply the public or private authorities were able to provide. The city's geography further exacerbated the problem. Surrounded by water, a majority of jobs had naturally coalesced near the docks at the island's southern end, with the rest of the city growing endlessly northwards. Despite the obvious problems to such a pattern of growth, the municipality published their Development Plan in 1964 that offered no change in strategy to deal with these growing numbers.

Reacting sharply to this plan, Correa, together with his colleagues Pravina Mehta and Shirish Patel (all in their thirties, I should add), set out to reconfigure the city's future growth with a proposal to develop a "twin city" across the harbour called 'New Bombay' (now Navi Mumbai). Their vision, in contrast to the one proposed by the government, was to convert the city's monocentric north-south structure into a circular and polycentric urban system around the bay – one that through the creation of new job centres and serviced land (structured along public transport lines) could absorb some of the distress migration heading towards Mumbai.

Over the next half a decade, Correa would passionately argue for building this new urban centre through a multitude of platforms that ranged from speaking at



A MASTER PLAN FOR BOMBAY

By Charles M. Correa, Pravina Mehta & Shirish B. Patel

Bombay, originally, was that finest of things: a city on the water. From this grew its character. Yet, inexplicably through the years the city has been allowed to grow away from the waterfront.

The Problem

CURRENT PROPOSALS

ALTERNATIVE PLAN

The 'New Bombay' plan published in the Times of India on March 29th, 1964.

numerable government committees to writing in local newspapers. These efforts would finally pay off in 1970 when the government accepted the plan and acquired 22,000 hectares for development with Correa as its Chief Architect. From 1970 onwards, Correa immersed himself in this new role – a period during which he would also be invited to several international seminars and conferences not just in his capacity as an emerging figure in contemporary architecture, but increasingly also as an urban planner. The invitation extended to him by the Government of Peru in 1969 to participate in the now-famous PREVI Lima project alongside the world's architectural elite, as well as the invitation to speak at the United Nations conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1973 (and later on as

a consultant to the UN Secretary-General for the landmark conference on 'HABITAT' in Vancouver in 1976), are only a couple of examples that showcase Correa's growing stature as a major public figure for Third World Development. And although Correa – never the conformist – would leave his post as the Chief Architect of Navi Mumbai in 1974 dismayed at the way the new city was being developed, the process of tackling the larger scale and all its complexities had allowed him to mature as an architect who was now equally at ease operating at both ends of the spectrum.

An Expanded Practice

Along with his development as an architect and planner, Correa was by the mid-1970s also honing his skills as a writer, activist and educator on architecture and urban issues. The Charles Correa Archives contain hundreds of memorandums, papers and lectures he delivered in this period and over the course of his entire career.

Take for instance his 1971 article for the Architectural Review titled 'Programmes & Priorities' where he laments the myopic view of the profession interested more in building one-off buildings rather than the overall environment. Or, the paper 'New Bombay: Self-Help City' that was published in the journal Architectural Design in 1974, where Correa would use the ideas of the new city under construction to expand discourse beyond the topic of 'self-help housing' that was very much in vogue throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

Several of these essays would eventually find their way in the form of an influential book that Correa would publish in 1985. Largely written to explain the ideas – necessity! – for building Navi Mumbai, The New Landscape is a manifesto that based on empirical and theoretical evidence from India and around the world offered possible solutions to a wide range of design challenges: from rethinking housing densities to ideas on public transportation systems. In an extract from one of its chapters titled 'Equity', Correa drew an analogy, as he often did, to make a point on housing:

"If people are starving, it is not because they don't know how to cook, it is because they do not possess the ingredients."

So, what then are the ingredients that make housing? For Correa, the irony was that indigenous towns across the world had for centuries cracked the code when it came to building habitat. It was only in the context of rapidly urbanising cities where one could see the machine breaking down. These indigenous towns – and by extension, vernacular architecture – would remain for Correa a lifelong source of inspiration, finding expression in all his projects – from his very first built housing project, the Tube House, to his designs for the layout of Navi Mumbai. Over the years, Correa would learn from vernacular architecture, contextualize it to the needs of society in India, and theorize them in the form of what he called 'A Bill of Rights for housing in the Third World'. A manifesto in its own right, the bill put forth the crucial importance of eight principles – ingredients – for housing. These were: 'incrementality'; 'open-to-sky space'; 'equity'; 'disaggregation'; 'pluralism'; 'malleability'; 'participation'; and 'income generation'. The architect's role, then, for Correa, was to bring together these ingredients in a clever site plan that addressed again several scales, arguing that:

"Urban living involves much more than just the use of a small room of say, 10 sqm. The room, the cell, is only one element in a whole system of spaces that people need."

Correa's "system of spaces" diagram that also served as the theme for the 2020 Z-Axis conference and competition organized by CCF.

The most direct translation of these principles can be found in the 1983 incremental housing project built in Belapur , Navi Mumbai. Similar to his earlier schemes for low-rise high-density housing such as the PREVI project in Lima from the early 1970s, there is a focus on the malleability of individual dwellings and user participation.

But instead of long and narrow row-housing as seen both in PREVI and in the earlier Tube House, the scheme in Belapur contains a range of differently sized stand-alone units that can grow, centred around the use of open-to-sky courtyards. In fact, in Belapur, with the architecture programmed to be morphed by dwellers over time, it is the urban design that prevails and generates community. When seen today on Google Earth, one can easily mistake Belapur for an Indian village grown organically over the centuries. The six-hectare site showcases Correa's skills as a site-planner with clusters of various scales repeated to form a neighbourhood with a clear hierarchy of private and community spaces.

Incremental Housing at Belapur: a direct translation of Correa's 'Bill of Rights for Housing in the Third World'.

The ideas explored in Belapur would surface again in different forms in projects of the following decade, such as in the scheme for HUDCO Housing in Jodhpur (un-built, 1986) and in larger planning assignments for New Bagalkot (1985) and Ulwe (1991). But it would be his appointment by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi as the Chairman of India's first National Commission on Urbanisation in 1985 that would allow Correa to take stock of the entire problem while at the same time running a successful architectural practice that was building everything from cultural institutions to commercial offices.

After months of travelling to all the states within India, meeting with central ministries, local authorities and citizen groups, Correa and his colleagues published in 1988 their

URBAN FORM

an extract from the report of *The National Commission on Urbanization*
(Chairman C M Correa, Vice Chairman M N Buch)
which was presented to the Prime Minister in August 1988

Cities are extremely complex mechanisms, generated by many diverse factors. Looked at one way, they are the outcome of economic and fiscal policies; from another point of view, they are the direct expression of the socio-political forces at work in society. Then again (and perhaps in the final analysis), they are material entities existing, like other pieces of hardware, in a physical world.

It is this physical aspect of the city which we will examine, for the Commission firmly believes that even within the socio-economic-political parameters existing in India, our towns and cities could function considerably better than they now do. In other words, given our levels of per capita income, prevailing technology, physical and financial resources, our urban centres as pieces of hardware, could work better; their functioning could correspond more precisely to our needs.

Today, there is a brutal mismatch between the form of our cities and the way we use them. How they could be refashioned to better suit our purposes is of particular importance to us in India because of the rapid urbanization which lies ahead. The urban environment we see today, both in terms of physical size as well as number of inhabitants, is only about half of what will exist at the end of the next two decades. Thus, we have an extraordinary opportunity (and obligation) to consider new growth options concerning not only the development of urban settlements across the nation, but also the physical form and characteristics within each urban centre, from the largest metropolis to the smallest town.

It is of vital importance that we undertake this task. Because of the prevailing low levels of income, more than half our urban population cannot afford to buy more than 2 or 3 sq m of pukka construction (RC and/or brick) per household. Of course, simple mud and bamboo houses built in sites-and-services schemes would be very much cheaper; but here the cost of desirable urban land becomes exorbitant. Thus, these projects tend to be relegated to unwanted land on the edge of the city — a miserable location, since the inhabitants are far away from public transport lines, and hence, from employment. On the other hand, in high-rise schemes, the cost of service infrastructure, including efficient mass transport, is much lower. However, the cost of the multistoreyed buildings themselves is well beyond the reach of the vast majority of our urban people.

Indeed, as long as we deal with the problem in small bits and pieces, we cannot hope to find any real solutions. To address the urban growth that lies ahead, we must start with an overview; examine the entire system we call 'city' and try to identify those living patterns, those lifestyles, which are of optimal relevance to our economic capabilities, cultural patterns, climate, etc., in their totality — including roads, services, schools, transportation systems, social facilities and, of course, the buildings themselves.

This is the main thrust of this chapter of the Commission's report. We begin with trying to identify appropriate built form in the context of the site; next we examine it from the viewpoint of public spaces; and finally, in terms of the city structure as a whole.

Densities

To identify what might be appropriate built form, let us begin by looking at what we can afford. About 30 per cent of the households in urban India live below the poverty line and have an affordable capital for housing of less than Rs 5,000. The next 30 per cent earn less than Rs 1,000 per month and have an affordable capital of approximately Rs 13,000; for the next 25 per cent, the figures are Rs 2,000 and Rs 40,000 respectively. Only the top 7 per cent households earn more than Rs 3,000 per month and have an affordable capital in excess of Rs 1 lakh.

Fig 1 Polarizing society

An extract on 'Urban Form' as part of the report of the National Commission on Urbanisation and as published by the journal 'Architecture + Design' in their September-October issue of 1990.

recommendations in a report that argued for balanced development across India's small and large urban centres. Echoing some of the concerns that generated Navi Mumbai, the report ran into several volumes and included sections dedicated to topics such as energy, transportation, urban management and urban poverty.

More than three decades later, the report remains unparalleled in its scope and outlook – a pioneering study by experts who recognized the need to dwell both on the detail and the overall picture.

Looking back, could Correa have conceived a housing project like Belapur had he not ventured into city planning or articulated his ideas through years of writing and teaching? And would the National Commission on Urbanisation have delved into issues such as 'urban form' had Correa not also been a practising architect? Among the many facets of Correa's oeuvre, it was perhaps this capacity to link issues and scales and his conscious attempt to curate a career that understood the potential of cross-fertilization that set him apart from many of his peers. Just a month before he passed away, in mid-May 2015, I had the chance to interview Correa for a publication on affordable housing that we were working on at TU Delft. In this interview, he elaborated on many of the ideas discussed here and offered the title: 'Affordable Cities'. His career, like that of Le Corbusier's, expanded the notion of what an architect could be, reminding us all who grew up in his shadow that designing was really about "the ability (in fact, the compulsion) to connect." Of course, not all of us can be like Charles Correa. But at least by studying his life and work, we can raise our standards.