

Frances Anderton

AIM OF THE KAMATHS

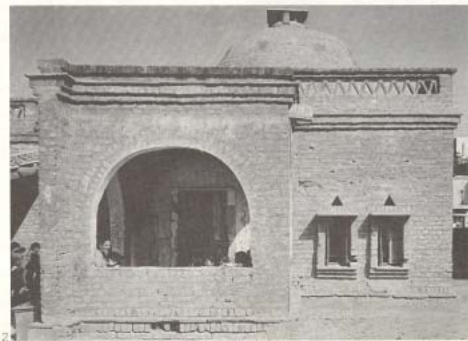
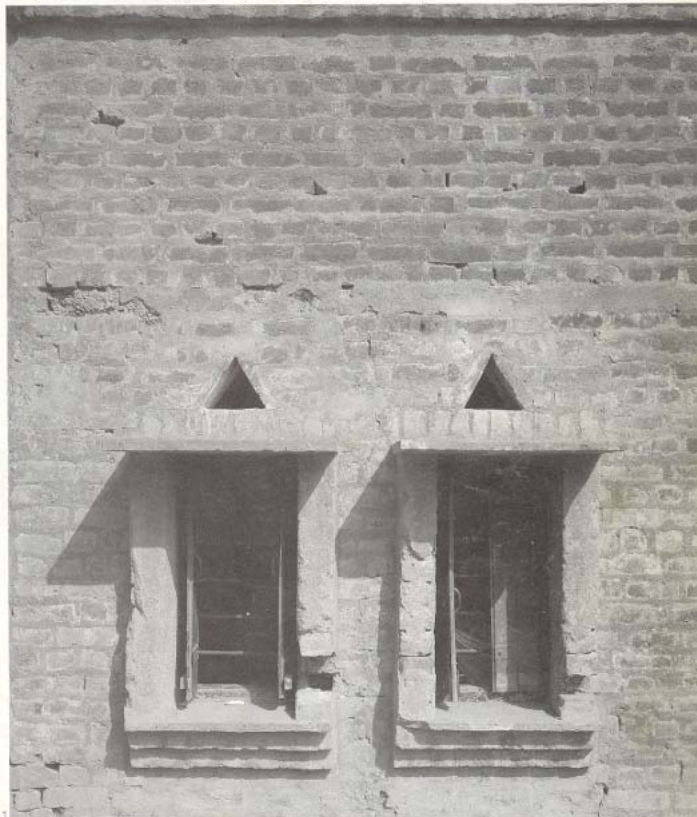
Vasant and Revathi Kamath are a husband and wife team of architects based in Delhi who have designed a series of buildings and projects that not only take inspiration from, and revitalise, strong vernacular traditions but which also reflect close consultation between client and user.

The Kamath's aim—to achieve inexpensive, sensitive architecture using indigenous construction methods, local materials and craftsmen—is demonstrated in a series of schemes which all reflect the architects' desire to produce designs that display the aspirations and requirements of client and user.

The Mobile Crèche* is the one community building in Seemapuri, a particularly deprived government resettlement area on the edge of Delhi, consisting of self-built hometsteads with little infrastructure to knit the ramshackle parts together. The infants' school is charming. Built of brick, its white-stuccoed interior comprises a series of small teaching spaces, defined by brick arches and capped with domes. However, thanks to the incompetence of local labour, the domes have an endearing but decidedly irregular profile. This suggests that such a device was inspired less by practical expediency or example than by architectural preference, a suspicion confirmed by the architects' irritation at the sudden appearance of an ugly unintended lean-to on one side of the building. The inability to accommodate *ad-hoc* additions, a prerequisite of vernacular architecture, has here defeated the architectural pretensions.

The flaws suggest a tailoring of real conditions to suit rather romantic notions about traditional buildings, exemplified in the Kamaths' project for new weavers' housing at Maheshwara. The architects insisted not only on the use of mud over the more desirable but costlier brick, but also on the use of a dung render, despite opposition from the future inhabitants, who want modern homes, and horrified doctors: 'Do you want to spread tetanus?'

The weavers' mill at Kharikhana Noida outside Delhi is a recent project whose low budget has been achieved at the expense of sound construction and good materials. The brief called for economic construction and a domestic feel (fabric printers traditionally worked at home). Climatic conditions were to be controlled naturally. Perforated boxes above



1, window details in the Mobile Crèche at Seemapuri: the economy of the construction has nearly obscured the ingenuity and sensitivity of the design.
2, the playing verandah with lavatory block on the right and domed crèche behind.

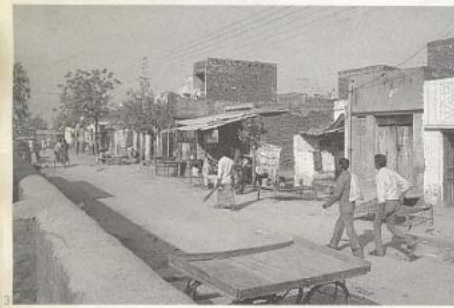
*The Mobile Crèche is so called because it allows the parents mobility in the pursuit of their employment by caring for their children during the day.

the windows provide ventilation along the ceiling which gets maximum heat from the flat roof above and hot air rising from below. To combat the sun's intensity there is a thick roof consisting of roof slab, a layer of sand, hollow pots and a surface covering of bricks, upon which dry the cloths. The windows have been designed to allow regular but not direct sunlight. The box above creates shade so the top panes are always in shadow and shutters below control low sunlight. Glazed brick skylights filter light from above. The mill's printing rooms and offices are divided over the large, flexible basement and ground floor. A tower is formed by the staircase topped with a water tank and simple muslim motifs on some of the external details are reminders of home. The sensible and thoughtful design of the mill has unfortunately not been matched by the quality of construction, whose poor finishes and rapid deterioration, accelerated by the client's failure to maintain or even complete the building, suggest that traditional and local materials are highly problematic if craft mastery no longer exists.

The Kamaths are working at present on the production of holiday homes for a Maharaja of Rajasthan. Though unhampered by financial constraints, this exclusive tourist village is no less a vehicle for experiment with traditional building materials and techniques. In fact, this rather inviting pseudo-township of decorated mud-plastered dwellings is a homage to rusticity. The recreation of typical

have designed for a large community of traditionally nomadic entertainers. The 700-strong troupe, which includes puppeteers, jugglers, acrobats and so on is the protégé of a prominent political figure, who invited the Kamaths to develop a housing proposal. Energetic spokeswoman for the team is Revathi Kamath, whose sex has proved an asset in establishing relations with a conservative Indian community, in which the women are literally the home-makers. Contrary to the usual rather ham-fisted resettlement programmes, Revathi spent a year analysing the make-up of a community that to the uneducated eye appears completely lacking in order. An understanding of the highly complex society was essential for the development of a masterplan. Religion, specific family groupings and social hierarchy were major factors influencing the definition of an initial layout. This was followed by refining the infrastructure and finally the building forms themselves, a design problem complicated by the squatters' innate distrust of permanent structure.

Integral to the success of the scheme is the utilisation of the crafts expertise of the squatters, whom they hope will be responsible for the creation of their own homes. Though untrained as builders, the entertainers have manual skills that the Kamaths believe can be tailored to construction. Having tried and tested their capabilities on the tourist complex it is anticipated that the women, at present



3, the Seemapuri street in which the crèche stands: the township is self-built with the minimum of government or professional

guidance. These one- and two-storey brick houses and shops are typical of the development.

weavers' or stonemasons' huts might seem like a dreadful concession to pastiche but for the Kamaths this is a tremendously useful testing-ground for theories which they hope will culminate in their latest and most controversial project, the squatters' resettlement scheme at Anandgram.

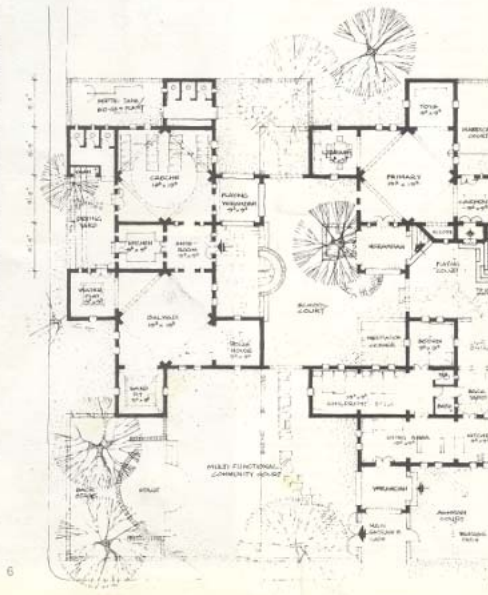
Anandgram lies just outside Delhi and is the site of a permanent housing scheme that the Kamaths

responsible for the minimal mud-structure in their dwellings, will undertake the building and surface decoration with the help of the girls and young boys, whilst the majority of men carry on their work as travelling entertainers. Effectively there will be a bartering of trades. For instance the woodcarvers, at present the puppet-makers, will undertake the carpentry and joinery—their



4, the ad hoc lean-to shed has recently been added to the crèche without reference to the architects.
5, one of the domed crèches.

6, plan of the Mobile Crèche as envisaged originally; only the block on the right has been built and that in reduced form.

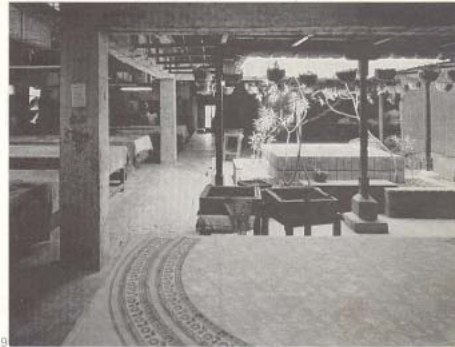


THE ARCHITECTURAL REVIEW



7, side elevation of the weaving mill at Kharkhana, Delhi; the projecting boxes over the windows and the jalis shade and cool the interior.
8, the flat roof on the weaving mill is used for drying cloths while the glass block rooflights and the small atrium help light the interior yet prevent the penetration of direct sunlight.

9, inside the weaving mill looking toward the atrium.
10, 11, exterior and interior views of holiday homes that the Kamaths have designed for a site in Rajasthan.
12, 13, ground plan and sectional elevation of part of the proposed squatters' resettlement scheme at Anandgram.



potential has been tested in the making of parrot-headed columns in the weavers' building—and the painters, employed in the tourist complex, will do the finishes.
The scheme represents a radical and optimistic approach to urban design which will hopefully confirm the Kamaths' faith in the creative potential of indigenous skills and materials. And in seeking to ascertain the very meaning of 'home' from their tent-dwelling clients, the Kamaths have taken participation architecture to its logical conclusion.

