

Debating tactile engagements

Conceived as a 'tribal hamlet', the Museum of Tribal Heritage in Bhopal designed by Kamath Design Studio opens up a range of questions regarding architectural language, collective consciousness as well as cultural representations. The building is designed to emphasise the experience of ideas and visual figures of speech through a built geography that is 'vaguely familiar' and non-alienating.

Design
Kamath Design Studio

Text
Suprio Bhattacharjee

Photos
Kamath Design Studio



"So you wanted a white box?"

We live in a country where our very relationship with the nation's original inhabitants is contentious. Labelled 'tribals' by colonial settlers and socially victimised by the caste-system, these communities have, over thousands of years, evolved a way of life that stems from a 'one-ness' with the land and the direct experience of the life-world'. This engenders a collective consciousness, a 'living heritage' that is manifest in their daily rituals, their social customs, and the objects and patterns that enliven their everyday — what we label as their 'art'. As such, this art is representative of, and a product of, the values and beliefs of the community, and not of the individual. This is not in the manner of art as understood today — 'art for art's sake'. Far from being the intellectualised 'object' created in isolation for display in a clinical environment devoid of context (in the manner of 'modern' art), tribal art is intertwined with everyday rituals and living. It becomes inseparable — forming the tools and mechanisms of everyday existence, whose meaning and sense of purpose derives from the very cultural context it has been evolved within. As John Berger explores, the very meaning of such specific works can be lost by a distortion of context. The act 're-contexting' or mere 'replication' would thus make us wonder 'how its (the art work's) unique existence (should be) evaluated and defined in our present culture' such that they do not become objects of 'bogus religiosity'. There is an understanding of the inherent schism in this presumably 'accommodative' view — in the persistence of the 'us' and 'them'.

At its worst, this leads to the common prevalence of perceiving these 'objects' as exotic relics. This is a challenge any museum dedicated to anthropological studies would need to engage with, and as a container of the museological programme, so too the architecture.

A new museum building dedicated to the tribal heritage of Madhya Pradesh in Bhopal seeks to engage with this challenge. Designed by Revathi Kamath of Delhi's Kamath Design Studio, this is not the usual snazzy white-box museum in chic designer wear. Far from offering a reductionist environment with discreet objects in a hermetic environment, this building intends to be a heterotopia of polychromatic textural delight — full, 'messy' (as opposed to the white-box), lived-in and through its adaptable and transformative nature, representative of a 'living heritage' — a space in which the architect hopes to embody the 'spontaneous energy and innate wisdom' of these communities. In opposition to a container for the display of lifeless relics past their time, this museum intends to be 'alive'.

Conceived as a 'tribal hamlet' with an enfilade of raised pavilions anchored off an arced processional route, the project negotiates a substantial gradient and allows users to explore its spaces in an uninhibited fashion. The building becomes an experience in itself and has a sense of remarkable permeability. It is open to the elements, making it a part of the museum's experience. The formal gestures are 'vaguely familiar' and non-alienating — a significant aspect. The lower level is conceived of as a generous



March 2013



View of the gallery courtyard from the lower level corridor



shed-like spaces, with few openings for natural light. These spaces, as seen when vacant, strike one as dark and mysterious, in contrast. Revathi Kamath explains that these are intentionally dimly lit to allude to 'dark spaces that are part of the tribal consciousness'. As a broader strategy though, one can see this connect to an innate stream of consciousness in eastern spatial thinking — that is less actually about the 'tribals' themselves, but about our primordial urge for womb-like spatial enclosures. Perhaps the sheds then, in that case, may come across as a bit overscaled.

On this upper level, the project's most striking iconographic gesture — the lace-like truss elements — can be experienced up-close. Composed of a filigree arrangement of welded steel bars in pairs or trios, these trusses with their almost 'ornament-like' disposition become the project's most memorable aspect. The scale of their 'braiding' transforms with the nature of geometry and support conditions. At times though, they appear to be too frail to be actually carrying the cumbersome load, leaving the viewer a bit confused as to their true structural function, besides appearing clunky — as in the connecting verandah. The practice has used steel to dramatic fashion before — in the roof of the St. Joseph's Cathedral in Imphal, Manipur. But whereas in that project, the steel roof had an overbearing presence, here the spatial effect within the sheds is light and buoyant, as the eye follows the triumphant arcs traced by the bottom chords of the trusses. The use of steel can be seen in continuity with the

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verandah offering spaces for workshops conducted by craftsmen and artisans, defined by the superposed structural order of steel columns and castellated steel beams that support the building volumes floating overhead. The scale of this space is intimate and allows for a sense of 'tactile engagement'. This verandah becomes a belvedere, offering views to the landscape beyond. The upper verandah traces the same arc as below, accessed through ramps that encompass generous courtyards. The route takes the visitor past courtyards between the pavilions on one side, while the other side overlooks a focal amphitheatre. The pavilions are large



metal working traditions of the region since the Iron and Bronze Ages as well as in the more contemporary truck body-building industry in nearby Indore.

In addition, the building features an ambitious environmental programme — roofs are meant to be grassed over (administrative 'usage-making' exercises have resulted in the use of thatch on some roofs instead) — angled to 30 degrees — the optimum angle of repose — to contain soil and prevent its run-off until the rhizome-like doob grass has sufficiently grown. The earth offers insulation, tempering the hot and dry climate of the region. Additionally, the courtyards shall have atomisers to induce a more humid micro-climate. Rainwater run-off is intended to be stored too.

As a set of flexible spatial environments, the museum's decidedly self-effacing architecture succeeds in creating an enabling environment that the exhibiting communities can immediately identify with and appropriate as their own. Clearly, this 'de-objectified' architecture does not display an aversion to this, but rather welcomes it. The office's early collages illustrate ideas of how the buildings could become an active participant in the curatorial programme. This open-ended nature reflects the process of the building's complex making, through a participatory design agenda — over a series of workshops with the participating communities, government officials, anthropologists and ethnographers, where ideas were evolved through common consensus.





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"The German Lebenswelt — as introduced by Edmund Husserl in 1936 in the *Crisis of European Sciences: The world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life*, as sharply distinguished from the objective "worlds" of the sciences." (Source: *Encyclopedia Britannica*)

"See John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin, London, 1972).

His discussion on this subject within a specific cultural context is nonetheless relevant across the gamut of the visual arts.

"Ibid., p. 21

"Ibid."

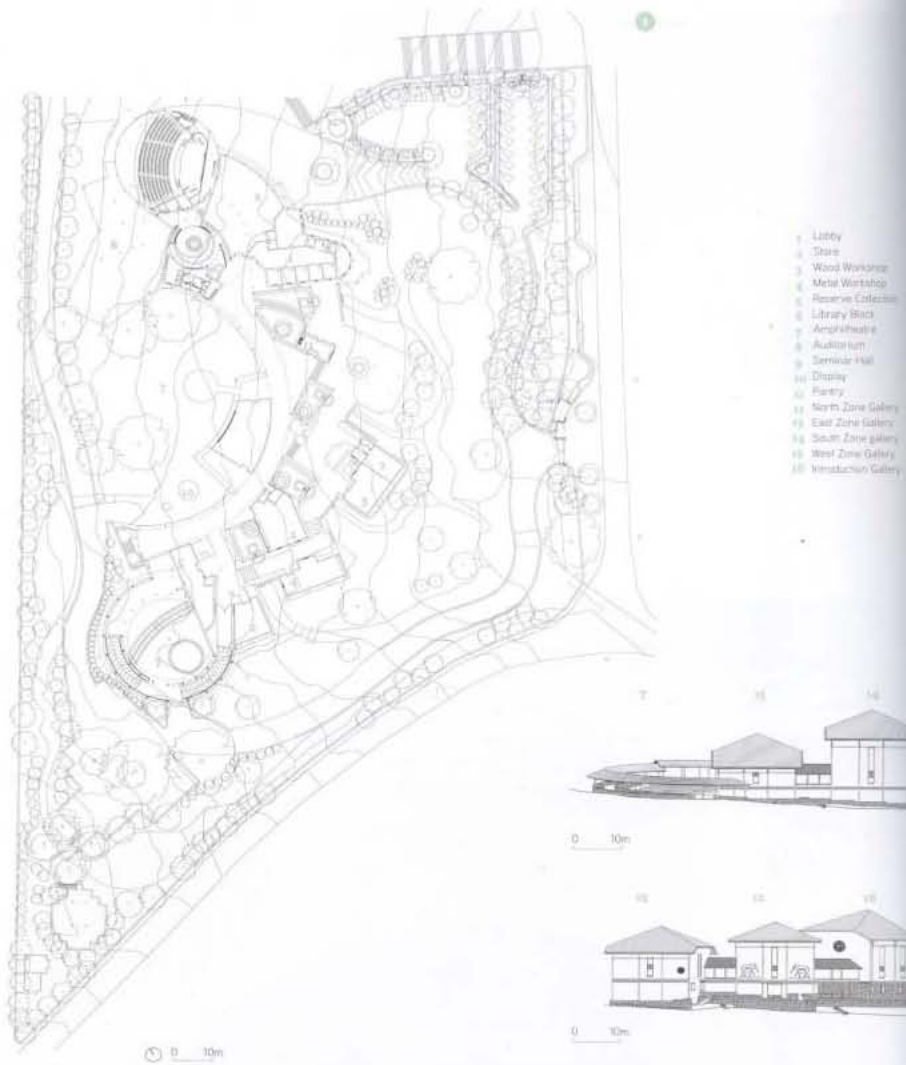
"Derived from ideas of Michel Foucault explored in 1966-7. A space of multiplicity and non-hierarchy, especially

reflective of our multi-cultural society explored by human geographers today

"Telephone conversation with Ravi Kishan on 16 February 2010

"See Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *Place of Shadows*, translated by Edward G. Seidenicker (Lester's Island books, Chicago, 1977)





- 1 Lobby
- 2 Store
- 3 Wood Workshop
- 4 Metal Workshop
- 5 Reserve Collection
- 6 Library Block
- 7 Amphitheatre
- 8 Auditorium
- 9 Seminar Hall
- 10 Display
- 11 Party
- 12 North Zone Gallery
- 13 East Zone gallery
- 14 South Zone gallery
- 15 West Zone Gallery
- 16 Introduction Gallery

MUSEUM OF TRIBAL HERITAGE

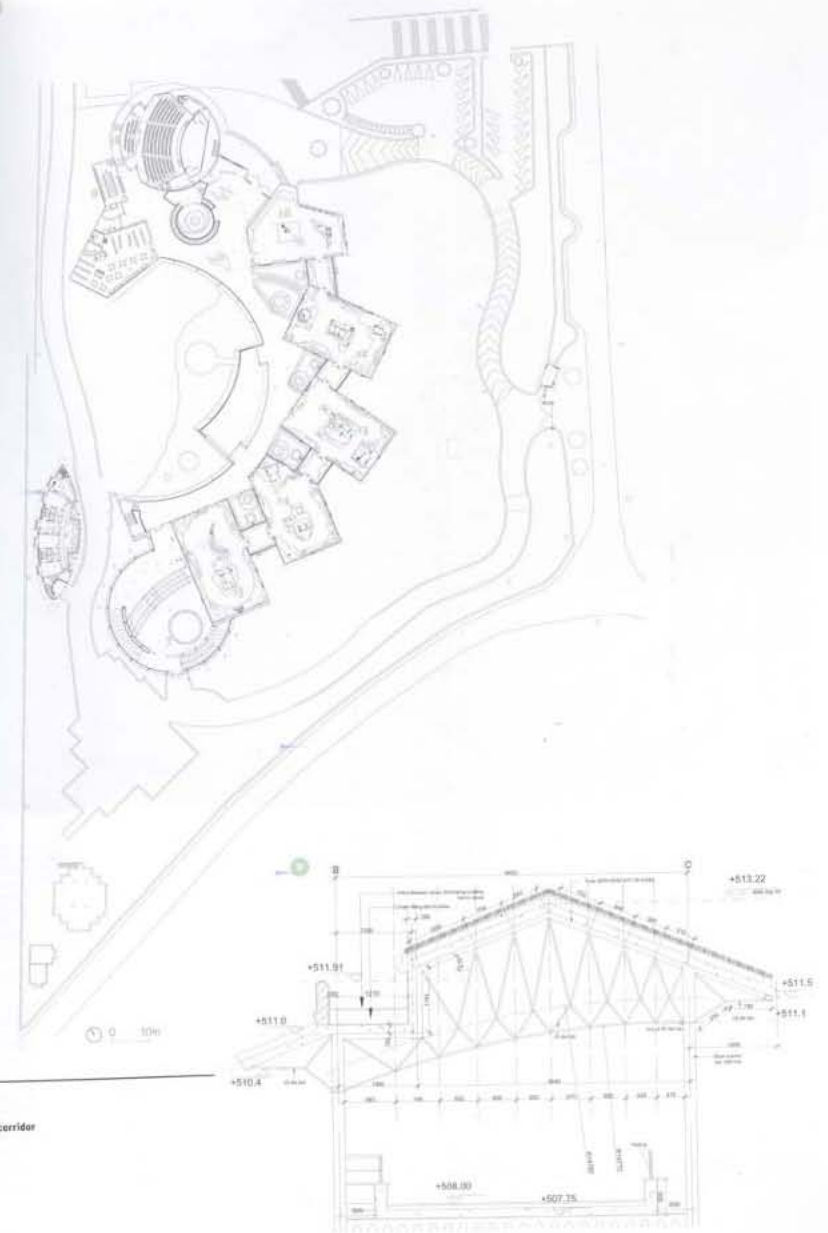
Design
Kamath Design Studio
Principal Architect
Revathi Kamath
Design Team
Revathi Kamath, Ayodh Kamath, Usman Khan, Senjay Das, Manoj Gupta
Chief Consultant
Dilip Gangwani

Company
Tribal craftsmen
Client
Government of Madhya Pradesh
Location
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh

FACT BOX
Build Area
13,000 m²
Use Area
32,000 m²
Project Cost Estimate
728 crore
Construction Phase
2004-2013 (expected)

DRAWINGS

- 1 Lower level plan
- 2 Part elevation at southern part
- 3 Part elevation at northern part



DRAWINGS

- 1 Upper level plan
- 2 Truss detail over corridor



What fails miserably though, and not to the fault of the architecture, is the curatorial programme. A change in administration midway through the project resulted in a curatorial programme devoid of intellectual strategies, but replete with exoticised image-making that has distorted the larger purpose of an institution of this nature. In the museum's current state, one confronts a visual cacophony of unrelated objects that contest with each other for the viewer's scant attention, much like entering a typical 'crafts emporium' with zillions of tribal artefacts (read: consumable 'goodies') 'crowding' from every corner. A space meant for the contemplation of culture becomes one for conspicuous consumption. Far from representing richness, this has the effect of a 'white noise' that soon becomes unbearable. Should one be amazed at the sheer skill of the craftsmen involved as they inhabit every available corner, or be appalled at the de-contexted, comic translation of the displays into objects of 'delightful charm' for the sheer 'viewing pleasure' of the urban visitor? (like the cute little horses marching on a truss or the flags that actually denote a religious festival) — a cultural Disneyland? This loss of authenticity is a nagging problem — one sees the fallacy of the (overtly sincere but misplaced) curatorial programme — as an engagement with these communities has been reduced to the mere representation of their 'skill' in the production of 'beautiful'

and 'decorative' embellishments — as 'competent artists' of pretty but meaningless infill that makes a mockery of their indigenous intelligence and broader participatory intentions. This museum, unfortunately, has been invaded by a bureaucracy that favours the exotic and the reduction of meaning to mere mannerism.

A lost opportunity? Revathi Kamath is optimistic — "Buildings need to be participatory to allow values of society enter their edifice, where the architect is not solely the 'creator' but is infiltrated by the consciousness of all (the contributors to the process)." She believes that the building's inherent capacity to adapt and transform will ensure its ability to host a more intelligent programme in the future. As such one can consider the museum building to be a work-in-progress, as an adaptive environment that has the capacity to accommodate, or even facilitate, changes in programme. This will be the building's success, in its ability to withstand the test of curatorial and administrative change of hands.

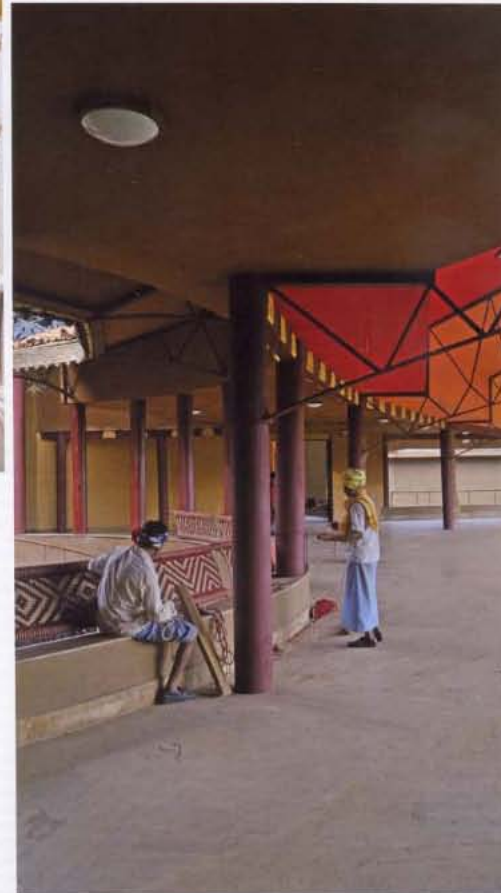
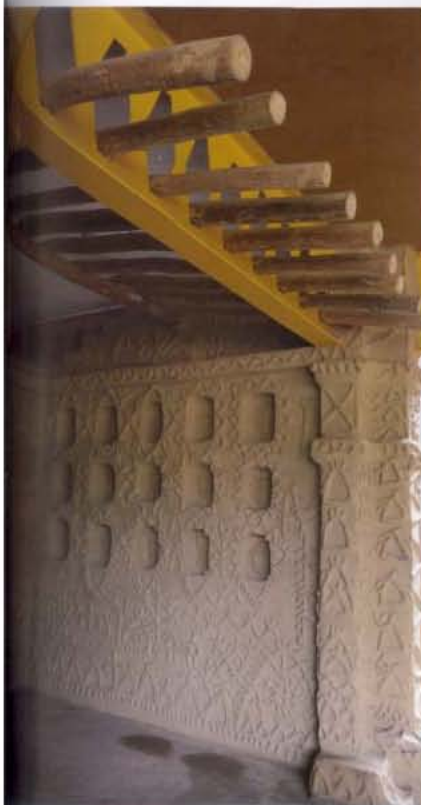
As a piece of architecture, the building's emphasis on enabling a visceral engagement does succeed in translating the direct experience of the life-world — the core from which tribal art forms take their cue. Its raw power ensures its ability to be 'inhabited' — as well as remaining timeless and 'always contemporary' in its referencing of primordial forms of creating

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*Here, the museum programme becomes no more than the 17th-18th century 'cabinet of curiosities' of the British

*Medical Faculty Housing in Woluwe-Saint-Lambert, Leuven, Belgium, 1970-72

*Greg Burgess, Ljura Aboriginal Cultural Centre, near Ayers Rock, Australia, 1977



shelter — much like the nature of tribal art. It fittingly is devoid of the 'architect's voice' but reflective of the spirit it intends to capture. While it does not have the refinement seen in the architect's other works (such as the striking Aga Khan Award nominated Tomar Residence in Delhi), the intentionally 'coarse' nature of the architecture can be seen as a welcome departure from the glitzy, image-driven visual culture invading our cities today. The architect sees this as part of her efforts at 'eroding the mainstream'. The building does manage to raise significant questions about our building culture, and as such is bound to have its many detractors. Yes it is not perfect, yet it has its obvious flaws as an architectural object — but that is missing the point. This project is less about the building but what it enables and represents in the difficult Indian context of building within the archaic confines of the public works system. This barebones celebration of 'unity in diversity' is welcome. Much like the resilient 'cock-a-snook' spirit of Lucien Kroll's *MeMe* and Greg Burgess's deep respect of the genius-loci in the *Ljura-Kunnya*¹⁰ — both significant examples of participatory strategies within architecture, this building challenges established practice cultures whilst celebrating its spirit of purpose.

— SUPRIYO BHATTACHARJEE
Architect

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16 • Volume 02 • Issue 05 • March 2013 / **RKDS, Idnany, Pirani** envelope as a mediator / **Kamath Design Studio, Bhattacharjee** debating tactile engagements / **Nemish Shah** language conversations / a city within the city: Sliced Porosity Block by **Steven Holl Architects** / a tribute to the fearless mind of **Lebbeus Woods** / **William Kentridge** the studio as a self-portrait / **Giampiero Bosoni** architecture of adrenalin / **Abir Karmakar** finding lost rooms

India

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