

Dwelling in Shantiniketan

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Shantiniketan meaning 'abode of peace', is a campus town one hundred miles north of Kolkata and was the site of architectural experimentation in early twentieth century India. The art produced at Shantiniketan is considered to be an example of contextual modernity, with its origins in the local craft aesthetic and historic art motifs, reinterpreted in a new stylistic grammar (Kumar 1997). The architecture of Shantiniketan is modern as well, derived from the rural vernacular and ancient Indic forms, all creatively synthesized to produce something new that had no direct precedent. The houses built for the noble laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore were designed to satisfy his urge to be in communion with nature. They are examples of contextual modernity, but in a way different from other campus buildings, in that they were domestic spaces for living. They enabled the poet to dwell, i.e. to be at home and be his creative self.

The paper explores the notion of 'dwelling' as living in harmony with nature. The architecture of dwelling does not resist or dominate nature but is derived from nature's forms and principles. Tagore's pantheistic view of nature, akin to American transcendentalist thinking which influenced the designs of Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright, shaped his and his collaborators' approach to design. Tagore's houses in Shantiniketan parallel Frank Lloyd Wright's experiments in modern architecture and his organic theory of design. They demonstrate a style congruent with natural forms, are rooted in the local building vernacular, scaled to the human body and respond to the landscape in myriad ways. The dialogical relationship of architecture with natural surroundings occurred in the house's location on the site, connections between interior and exterior spaces, flow of spaces within the house, mimesis of natural forms, and use of natural materials.

In five houses designed by Surendranath Kar, between 1919-1938 and collectively known as 'Uttarayan', are spaces conducive to Tagore's habits of living, thinking, and working, and his deeply felt desire to be amidst nature (Figure 1). The buildings were 'dwellings' where Tagore was most at home. They nurtured his creative self and supported its growth towards individuation. East was the favored location of three of the houses in 'Uttarayan', a term that signifies movement of the sun into the northern hemisphere in India. The houses were named 'Udayan' meaning dawn, 'Udichi' to rise, 'Konarak' or sun's rays and were a play upon Tagore's name Rabindranath with its etymology in the Sanskrit word 'Ravi' (Rabi in Bengali) meaning sun (Sanyal 2015).

The south facing 'Shyamali' mimics the cave in its dark windowless interior where Tagore wished to spend his last days. Its façade resembles the famous *chaitya* arch of Buddhist cave monasteries and the exterior walls are covered with Buddhist art murals (Figure 2). An example of mud architecture with earthen pots embedded in its walls for passive cooling and ceiling of

wooden rafters, it was inspired by the rural Bengali hut built with local natural materials. It appears to belong to the earth and embedded in nature, an aesthetically refined successor to the earlier mud house with thatched roof, 'Dehali' where Tagore briefly lived from 1904-06 after the death of his wife. Dwelling on the earth in a womb like space was a healing experience and a return to the beginnings.

Topological analysis of the houses reveals the pattern of centrality in the spatial layout, demonstrating Louis Kahn's concept of served and service spaces. Anterooms and closed verandahs wrap around the central room, thus making it a functionally and visually dominant space. The interior spaces are not always demarcated by walls but by subtle level differences in floors and ceilings, and archways, creating rooms within rooms. Niches articulate wall surfaces; alcoves create proximate spaces scaled to the human body.

Dwelling was living with the sky, feeling the monsoon breeze, and hearing the leaves rustle. The interiors are connected to the outdoors in myriad ways--terrace, verandah, balcony, and porch—for views to gardens and the landscape beyond. 'Udichi' for example was built as a one roomed house on stilts for Tagore to gaze at the horizon, and the roofless porch in 'Punascha' had seat walls for Tagore to read and paint (Figure 3). The terrace of 'Udayan' and 'Konarak's verandah were performance spaces where Tagore staged his plays and dance dramas. The houses are located amidst tree groves. Nature was improved in keeping with Tagore's desire to live in a forest. Nature was perfected in gardens to the south and west of 'Udayan' and 'Udichi'. They were designed by Ratindranath, son of Rabindranath Tagore and Kasahara, a Japanese artisan, in a creative *mélange* of Indo-Islamic, Chinese, and Japanese garden styles.

Tagore's artistic creativity inspired by nature's rhythms was sustained by the unique design of these homes and their landscape. They display a modern sensibility yet are rooted in ancient Indic ideal of living in harmony with nature that Tagore imbibed and promoted. The houses represent the archetypal form of dwelling in their mimesis of natural forms, in creation of proximate spaces scaled to the human body, and in-between spaces between the indoors and outdoors. Nature was improved and perfected to be within and nearby, to be viewed and experienced through the senses.

References

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Figure 1: Uttarayan



Figure 2: Tagore in Shyamali (source: Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Visva-Bharati University)



Figure 3: Rabindranath Tagore in Punascha (source: Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Visva-Bharati University)