



column: parisien portrait

The Windsor Windfall

by Raana Haider

A piece of cake and that too sixty-one years old left one American couple \$29,900 short. This was a boxed and ribbon-tied piece of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's wedding cake of 1937 which was sold at the auction of the year by Sotheby's in February 1998 in New York. Benjamin and Amanda Yim of San Francisco flew to New York for the auction. Asked what he was planning to do with the cake, Yim replied, "Well, I'm sure not going to eat it." "I think that was a record for a piece of wedding cake," said a stunned Diane Brooke, Sotheby's chief executive and one of the auctioneers at the celebrated international auction house. As someone once remarked "celebrity auctions prove that it is possible and painful to die twice."

The 1937 wedding-cake symbolized the marriage of the former King Edward VIII of Great Britain and its colonies who abdicated from the throne in order to marry "the woman he loved" — Wallis Simpson, the twice-divorced American. The French government welcomed the former king and his wife; now the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. Paris hosted the couple now-in-disgrace from 1953 till the deaths of the Duke of Windsor in 1972 and the Duchess in 1986 in Paris. They took up residence at a turn-of-the-century built, Louis VI-style villa; at 4, route du Champs-d'Entertainment in the west of Bois de Boulogne placed at

their disposal by the city of Paris.

A love letter dated 1935 from Wallis Simpson to the Prince of Wales estimated by Sotheby's at \$1000 to \$1500, sold for \$5462. The Australian Vice Consul in New York, Trevor Kreis bought on behalf of the National Library of Australia the private and unofficial diary of the Prince of Wales' tour of Australia, New Zealand and the colonies in the Atlantic and Pacific for \$3737. A portrait of the Duchess of Windsor by the renowned society and fashion photographer, Cecil Beaton fetched \$134,500. The Duchess was listed at the top of the ten best-dressed women in the world in 1946. She had an inborn sense of glitz and glamour.

A tender portrait of the couple in 1957, estimated at \$500 to \$800 was sold at \$3750. A 1920 painting by Albert Munnings of the then Prince of Wales on his chestnut hunter, Forest Witch fetched \$2.3 million. The previous estimate for the painting was between \$600,000 to \$800,000. A record price for a Munnings painting. From the first British royal library to come on the market was a copy of 'A King's Story' by the former king written in 1951 and dedicated to John F Kennedy by 'Edward'. The book estimated between \$1000 to \$1500 brought \$74,000. A London television producer bought for \$3500 a recording of the King's abdication speech — a 78 rpm record (in itself, an item from a past era). "It's going back to England," declared the producer of a

documentary of the royal couple. "Very sad for Great Britain. It's like selling the family itself."

A unique historical item on sale was the mahogany writing desk dating from 1755 on which King Edward VIII signed his abdication in 1936 in order to marry Wallis Simpson, "the woman he loved". The desk was bought for \$415,000 by an anonymous American buyer. A copper plaque on the king's desk noted, "On this table the King Edward VIII signed the act of abdication the 10th December 1936 at ten-thirty in the morning." The abdication act was performed in the presence of King Edward VIII's three brothers; the Duke of York (the next King George VI and grandfather of Prince Charles, the Duke of Gloucester and the Duke of Kent). Prince Charles married and divorced the woman he did not love but will he or can he marry the woman he loves and still ascend the throne? This was an option his grand-uncle never had.

A French magazine covering international top-of-the-market real estate and their furnishings, 'Demeures et Chateaux' reports that Mohamed al-Fayed, the Egyptian-born international business man had offered the historical desk to the British royal family but Queen Elizabeth had refused the offer. He had acquired the royal villa and its contents in 1988 and by 1993 was negotiating its sale. The auction had been scheduled for September 1997. Following the fatal accident of August 1997, the event was postponed. It then took

place in February 1998. Should Fate have dealt the occupants of the doomed Mercedes 280S a different hand on the night of 31 August 1997, Queen Elizabeth's former daughter-in-law, Princess Diana in the event of her marrying Mohamed al-Fayed's son, Dodi-al-Fayed may have one day been seated at the very desk from which King Edward VIII had signed his self-removal (as she did) from the throne of Great Britain. Ironically, one did it out of love and the other — lack of love. (See 'Death of a Princess').

In minutes, telephone bids rocketed and more than 40,000 objects including paintings, photographs, carpets, furniture, objects of art, antiques, clothes and personal belongings were presented in 3,200 lots of sale. And so the auction of the year (1998) went on ... surpassing all sale estimates. The first six sessions out of a total of nine, generated a total of \$8.9 million, topping Sotheby's estimate of \$7 million for the entire auction sale. More than \$1.9 million was spent on the first night alone, three times Sotheby's estimate. "This is the biggest auction we've ever held in the US and as a royal collection, more or less unprecedented in history," said Joe Friedman, a Sotheby's expert. "One has to go back to the seventeenth century to find anything comparable — the sale of the possessions of Charles I."

And a spectacular production is what Sotheby's laid on for the keen watchers and buyers at their previous in New York. An article by Mitchell Owens in

the International Herald Tribune, titled 'Celebrity and Acquisition' describes the sale preview. Owens writes, "Sotheby's specialists have used the Windsor windfall to exercise a curatorial breadth and narrative swagger that is more typical of museums than of auction floors Instead of simply setting out the possessions like so much merchandise to be moved, it has transformed two selling floors into a theatrical fun house ... Half documentary and half high-tone estate sale, the auction and its installation carry a poignant subtext that gives visitors an experience that may be more serious than they, and perhaps even Sotheby's bargained for. The Windsor story, as seen here, is a contemplative and deeply moving visual biography that tells several cautionary tales — of consumerism run amok, of lives unfulfilled, of chances wasted and of cultural wounds that remain resolutely unhealed."

More than ten years ago — in 1987 — a year following her death, Sotheby's sold in a tent on the shores of Lake Geneva the superb and unique jewellery collection of the Duchess of Windsor. It alone fetched some \$30 million. That sale heralded the beginning of an entirely new category of sellers, buyers of style and prices. The biscuit jars of Andy Warhol, the ballet shoes of Rudolph Nureyev, the fake pearl necklace of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the evening dresses of Princess Diana have all benefited from the celebrity of the owner and eclipsed any intrinsic value.

Well-known British author, Robert Lacey in 'Sotheby's — Bidding for Class' (1998) notes that "since 1987 celebrity sales have seen normally sane mortals fighting with each other to purchase fragments of dreams at fantasy prices Death, divorce, disaster — Sotheby's can take almost anything and turn it into a profitable fete. Along with Christie's its bitter rival, it has made itself the ultimate illusionist of the consumer culture."

Roger Rosenblutt in an essay in Time magazine writes, "Sotheby's invented them (auctions) in 1744 when a bookseller named Samuel Baker wanted to live better ... Since then, they have grown into wonderful weird hybrids of culture and capitalism. Brawlers compete in cool frenzies of acquisitiveness." In today's culture of cash consumerism and conspicuous consumption, many a soul seeks to possess a piece of a famous past. And if one is willing to pay the price — one can achieve instant fame in the process. Media coverage of such events is intensive and globally screened. It was Andy Warhol who proclaimed, "everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes."

The sale of the personal possessions of the exiled Duke and Duchess of Windsor, formerly King Edward VIII of Great Britain and its colonies and Wallis Simpson, the American divorcee brought to an end the chapter of the most celebrated love story of the twentieth century.

book review

South Asian Americans The New Americans

by Karen Isaksen Leonard

IMMIGRANTS From South Asian countries are among the fastest growing segment of our population. This work, designed for students and interested readers, provides the first in-depth examination of recent South Asian immigrant groups—their history and background, current facts, comparative cultures, and contributions to contemporary American life. Groups discussed include Indians, Pakistanis,

Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Nepalis, and Afghans. The topics covered include patterns of immigration, adaption to American life and work, cultural traditions, religious traditions, women's roles, the family, adolescence, and dating and marriage. Controversial questions are examined: Does the American political economy welcome or exploit South Asian immigrants? Are American and South Asian values compatible? Leonard shows how the American social, religious, and cul-

tural landscape looks to these immigrants and the contributions they make to it, and she outlines the experiences and views of the various South Asian groups. Statistics and tables provide information on migration, population, income, and employment. Biographical profiles of noted South Asian Americans, a glossary of terms, and selected maps and photos complete the text.

The opening chapter introduces the reader to South Asian history, culture, and politics, material on which the rest

of the book draws because of its continuing relevance to South Asians settled in the United States. Leonard provides a fascinating look at the early South Asian immigrant Punjabi Mexican American community whose second and third generations are grappling with the issue of being Mexican, Hindu, and American. A comparative examination of immigrant groups from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan illuminates the similarities and differences

of their rich cultural and religious traditions, the social fabric of their communities, and how these immigrants have adapted to American life. Leonard looks closely at the diversity of cultural traditions—music, dance, poetry, foods, fashion, yoga, fine arts, entertainment, and literature—and how these traditions have changed in the United States. Keeping the family together is important to these immigrants. Leonard examines family issues, second generation identities, adolescence,

making marriages, and wedding traditions. This work provides a wealth of information for students and interested readers to help them understand South Asian immigrant life, culture, and contributions to American life.

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An Odyssey Through The Architectural History of Bengal

by Perween Hasan

Pundranagar to Sherebanglanagar: Architecture in Bangladesh. Edited by Saif Ul Haque, Raziul Ahsan, and Kazi Khaleed Ashraf. Chetana Sthapatya Unnooyon Society, Dhaka, 1997. 205 pages Price: Tk 2000.

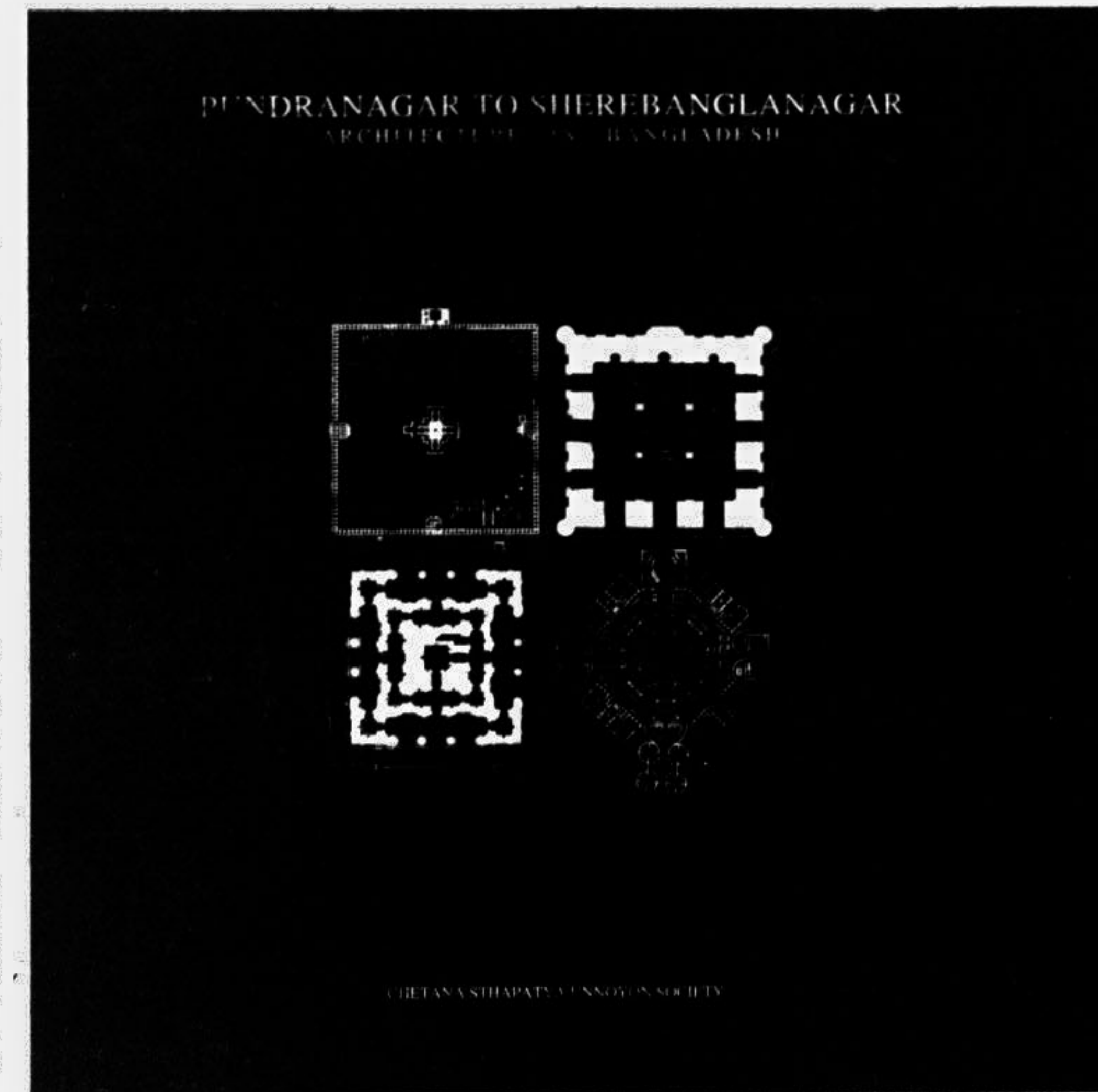
PUNDRANAGAR to Sherebanglanagar sweeps through the whole history of architecture of this area in a language most easily understandable to architects — drawings and photographs. This superbly designed and produced book has three sections, namely a brief but extremely informative introduction, a large section of drawings which includes floor plans and elevations of buildings, concluded by a section of colored photographs. The written text that precedes the visual sections, poetically entitled "Wind, Water, and Clay: The Architecture of Bangladesh", is an introduction to the forces that shaped the built heritage of this country during the last 1000 years or more. Acknowledging the difficulty of having to deal with only a fragmented part of what was once a much larger geo-political entity, Kazi Khaleed Ashraf describes the nature of the Bengal delta. It has through the ages attracted waves of traders and conquerors, who then proceeded to settle in this 'hell full of boons' and left an indelible imprint on her culture. The most enduring legacies of this cultural interaction are intangible and can be perceived in the religions, languages, and laws of the land. Unfortunately, architecture, the most visually potent symbol of that cultural interaction, is also very perishable, so that only the most monumental symbols of that legacy have survived, the rest turned to rubble.

In the lucidly written and nearly impeccably edited introduction (only three typos to be exact) Ashraf succinctly describes the various phases of cultural impact resulting from the political in-

terventions. He notes that from the earliest representations of ancient temples in manuscript paintings, and the ruins of surviving temples, right up to the time of the bungalow, when the British adopted the hut and made it their own, the most important indigenous input in the development of a delta architecture was the village hut or pavilion structure. In our entire built heritage this seems to be the basic module and most recurrent theme. This indigenous input was given an added boost during the 15th century, the time of the independent Sultans of Bengal, when forms of the hut, built of bamboo, mud, and straw were literally translated into brick. It is significant that the Sultan who sponsored this strong Bengali style, was Jalaluddin Muhammad who was the converted son of a local raja, and therefore the first Muslim Sultan of local origin. From there things proceeded towards the Mughals and on to the first European contacts which brought in its wake the Bengal Renaissance and on to the threshold of Bengal modernism, and the building of Sherebanglanagar.

Attention has also been drawn to the fact that we have long regarded North India and the lands further to the west as the fountainhead of all our sources. It is time to shift our gaze to the contiguous land masses to the south and east, which have a great deal in common with the climate and culture of Bengal.

Architectural styles changed with the changing ideologies of the ruling elite, yet the identity of the delta could always be perceived. Just as Sultanate architecture had a strong local flavor, setting it apart from the contemporary architecture of Delhi, Mughal buildings, even though they reflect the imperial traditions of the courts of Delhi and Agra, were not exactly the same as their prototypes. They are smaller in scale, less ostentatious and are not built of precious marble and stone. Even the buildings built by the British that have



survived here, are never exactly like their counterparts in Britain. Although contemporary neo-classical elements like columns and pediments stand out, their high ceilings, deep verandahs, and organization of space reflect an understanding of local climate and cultural traditions.

For reasons incomprehensible to me, there has been a tendency to regard the architecture of the British period in a very condescending manner, often using the term 'hybrid' in a pejorative

sense to describe it.

If we take the term to mean something of mixed origin then the British were certainly not the first ones to experiment with elements drawn from different sources. Unfortunately in his otherwise immaculate introduction, Ashraf chooses to follow the same convention. Describing the architectural environment inherited by the earliest modern architects in what was then East Pakistan, value loaded phrases such as 'stigmatized colonial forms' and

'hybrid concoctions' are used.

The monuments that have been selected for publication have been carefully culled by the editors from a long historical period so that they reflect not only the changing architectural styles but also represent the various religious denominations of this area. The drawings of floor plans are excellent, but some of the colored photographs lack the brilliance and sharpness of the original photographs when they were seen in the exhibition preceding the publication. The book is all the more significant because it is the first one to record the architectural history of this country, designed, conceived and published by architects. Before 1985 when the Aga Khan Award for Architecture sponsored a seminar on "Regionalism in Architecture," architectural education in Bangladesh seemed largely apathetic to history. This book records a dramatic change of attitude. It should be an indispensable reference book for every practicing architect in this country so that he/she can absorb our built heritage in visual terms. The question a fresh young graduate might ask is, 'Of what relevance are these old and crumbling buildings, when clients demand according to the current fashionable modes of Europe and America?' The answer is simple: 'You must know these in order to know yourself.'

The matter of knowing history or tradition to know oneself, essential for the purpose of creativeness, is eloquently written about by the American born British critic and writer T. S. Eliot, who lived and wrote through the grater half of the present century. In his essay called "Tradition and Individual Talent" he includes the whole of culture and cultural history in his definition of tradition, the knowledge of which, he stipulates, cannot be inherited but must be obtained by great labour. The value of knowing it lies not in the reason that we want to return to some previous condition, or because we want to sentimental-

ize the past, but because it is essential for a poet (by application, all creative people) to have a historical sense. The historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence, so that the creative person has not only his own generation in this bones, but can feel that his entire heritage (literary or any other) has a 'simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'. This perception makes him aware that the mind of his country was never static; it is a mind that always changes, and this change is a development that abandons nothing en route.

Our own identities are therefore a sum total of all our past heritages, the different strands being interwoven, often in an intricate and imperceptible manner. Architects must not think of the past merely as a source for particular motifs which can be picked out and added on without any reference to the context. We remember how one of our former presidents in his desire to give an Islamic flavor to the city, ordered that all buildings including walls that border roads should have arches painted on them. Standing on the threshold of a new millennium, we have at least a thousand years of architectural history that we must claim as our own, irrespective of whether the sponsors were Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims or Christians, indigenous people, emigrants, Turks Mughals, or Europeans. Designers must feel this in their bones, as part of their very existence. We hope that the publication of *Pundranagar to Sherebanglanagar* will facilitate the cultivation of this feeling. I congratulate Chetana Sthapatya Society for taking this bold step in the reclamation of our architectural history, and hope that this is just a promising beginning for better things to come.

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