

# Between Tradition and Modernity Case Study - Mangaldas Girdhardas Town Hall, Ahmedabad

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**Abstract**—Architecture and Urban forms frame all human activity in their domain impacting the social cultural and power proclamation of the city. They constitute an essential part of human experience of identity in a city. Established by Sultan Ahmed Shah in 1411 A.D. on the left bank of the river Sabarmati, the historic city of Ahmedabad was listed as India's first UNESCO World Heritage City in 2017. It became one of the Mughal Empire's thriving centers of trade, mainly in textiles back in mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century only to be later disrupted between the conflict of Peshwa's and Gaekwad's during the Maratha reign. The British East India Company took over the city in 1818 establishing the cantonment in 1824 and a municipal government in 1858.

Over the centuries, it withstood as the terrain of many intersects—cultural, political, military, urban and architectural. It has architecture from the Solanki's, Sultanate, Mughal, Maratha, Dutch and British periods. The city urban form exhibits a mix of Islamic, Hindu and Jain architecture highlighting the great building traditions of the region.

Gandhian era in support to Swadeshi movement gained popularity among its citizen following the minimalist ideas of simplicity and sovereignty. Vernacular forms, built spaces with local materials and empowering the people soon set the stage for city's development through industrialization. Civic collaboration and benign capitalism of wealthy industrialist brought the city at forefront to major infrastructure developments, community progressions alongside cultural and artistic formations.

Setting of public Institutions and built architectural visions encouraged invited architects to the city during this period. Town Hall established in 1930's by British architect Claude Batley series the advent of Modern architectural interventions. Classical massing, simplicity in form and exposed brickwork portrays the sensitization of Batley's understanding of Indian Architecture overlaid with then prevalent Art Deco style. The author puts forwards the lineage of architectural empiricism of a city, its acceptance and adaptation in making it a cauldron of earliest Modernism in India, whilst being on the list of UNESCO's world heritage city.

**Keywords:** Architecture, Tradition, Modernity, Gandhian Ideology, Heritage City.

## 1. INTRODUCTION – THE CONTINUED PAST

Established by Sultan Ahmed Shah in 1411 A.D. on the left bank of the river Sabarmati, the historic city of Ahmedabad was listed as UNESCO World Heritage City in 2017. A fort wall enclosed the city six miles in the circumference comprising of 12 gates, 189 bastions and over 6000 battlements in 1487 A.D. by Mohammed Begdo, grandson of Ahmed Shah, to protect it from outside invaders. It was planned according to the ancient Indo-Aryan tradition of a royal capital with main roads, thoroughfares and subsidiary roads.<sup>1</sup> The city wall was made of terracotta bricks, lime mortar and lime plaster. The city gates were made of bricks veneered with stone. K.V. Soundara Rajan, the noted scholar of the Archaeological Survey of India, has described the Sultanate architecture of Gujarat as the originator of the Gujarat style. He writes:

“By the incidence of its examples, as by the ambitious scales of composition, reveals alike the assiduous patronage and vigor of the Ahmad-Shahi rulers to whom these owed their genesis, as the complementary and profound cultural traditions of the ruled. The Gujarat style became by far the most successfully indigenous subversion of the Islamic architectural requirements bearing subtle undertones of Hindu architectural principles consciously adapted by the artisans to suit the demands of the Muslims.”<sup>2</sup>

The second half of the fifteenth century saw some of the best examples of the Sultanate architecture in Ahmedabad during the Mughal reign around 1573 A.D. It became one of the Empire's thriving centers of trade, mainly in textiles, which were exported as far as Europe. The Mughal ruler Shah Jahan spent the prime of his life in the city, sponsoring the construction of the Moti Shahi Mahal in Shahibaug. Ahmedabad remained the provincial headquarters of the Mughals until 1758, when they surrendered the city to the

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<sup>1</sup> "History of Ahmedabad". Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, [egovamc.com](http://egovamc.com). [Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Annals of Reinvention, Discovering Ahmedabad, Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, 2009. Pp.33

Marathas.<sup>3</sup> During the period of Maratha Empire governance, the city became the centre of a conflict between the Peshwa of Poona and the Gaekwad of Baroda.<sup>4</sup>

The British East India Company took over the city in 1818 during the Third Anglo-Maratha War. A military cantonment was established in 1824 and a municipal government in 1858.<sup>5</sup> Incorporated into the Bombay Presidency during British rule, Ahmedabad became one of the most important cities in the Gujarat region.

Over the centuries, it withstood at the terrain of many intersects—cultural, political, military, urban and architectural. It has architecture from the Solanki, Sultanate, Mughal, Maratha, Dutch and British periods. The city urban form exhibits a mix of Islamic, Hindu and Jain architecture highlighting the great building traditions of the region. [Image 1,2,3,4,5,6]



**Image 1. Jami Mosque, 1424**



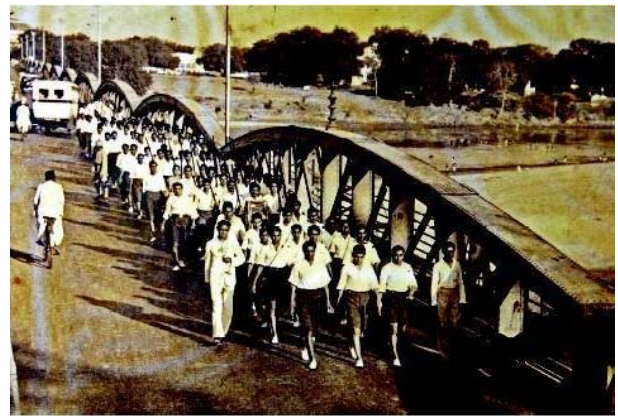
**Image 2. Sarkhej Roja, 1445**



**Image 3. Adalaj Step Well, 1499**



**Image 4. Hutheesing Jain Temple, 1848**



**Image 5. Ellis Bridge, 1892**

<sup>3</sup> "History of Ahmedabad".

[https://ahmedabadcity.gov.in/portal/jsp/Static\\_pages/history.jsp](https://ahmedabadcity.gov.in/portal/jsp/Static_pages/history.jsp)  
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<sup>4</sup> Kalia, Ravi (2004). "The Politics of Site". *Gandhinagar: Building National Identity in Postcolonial India*. University of South Carolina Press. pp. 30–59. ISBN 1-57003-544-X.

<sup>5</sup> "History of Ahmedabad". Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, [egovamc.com](http://egovamc.com). [Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018].



Image 6. Calico Dome, 1962

### Beyond the Walled – The Gandhian Minimalism

Ahmedabad proved pivotal in role of country's struggle for freedom under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel and others who made the city, there home. On his return from South Africa, Gandhi stayed and constructed his ashram in 1917 at Sabarmati, outside the main city and demonstrated his ideology of simplicity and self-sufficiency in its architecture.



Image 7: Gandhi Ashram, Ahmedabad 1917

Gandhi's Ashram depicted his perception on empowering our villages as focus of Indian life and showed a model way of living to a young country striving for independence. A central open space served as the prayer area surrounded by simple structures with deep verandah and vernacular forms built in mud and brick covered with red tiled roof. *In nationalist terms, the complex represents a repudiation of contemporary British Imperial architectural designs and construction process*<sup>6</sup>. It encouraged then prevalent Swadeshi Movement in belief and approach. His principles were well received and propagated, as the ashram soon became the centre for his leading the Independence moment. The city until today has

ardent Gandhian followers, in daily approach, built spaces and material usage.

### The Industrial Mill Evolution

Architecture and Urban forms frame all human activity in their domain impacting the social cultural and power statement of the city. They constitute an essential part of human experience of life in a city. The onset of industrial revolution brought the setting up of cotton Textile mills in Ahmedabad by British. Refereed as "Manchester of the East" Industrialization came earlier to Ahmedabad than in any other Indian city. Then on, it stood forefront to major infrastructure developments, community progressions alongside cultural and artistic formations.

Visionary Industrialist and learned families of the city initiated the establishment of educational and vocational institutes thus creating a new urban culture with liberal and secularized thought process. Besides supporting the freedom moment they shouldered responsibility of justice and equality for the society.

*Gandhi made them see that their own wealth depended on the well being of their workers. This is a unique point of difference from the periods that have followed and clearly derives from Gandhi's concept of trusteeship.*<sup>7</sup>

Onset of 1930's, city started to witness growth of early modern structures into the urban skyline towards the west of Sabarmati across Ellis Bridge. Well-known architects were invited for the construction of public and private buildings. Remarkable among them include the Gujarat College, MJ Library, Town Hall, Old Circuit House, and the administrative buildings in the Bhadra court complex.

### Mangaldas Girdhardas Town Hall, Ahmedabad

Town Hall established in 1930's by British architect Claude Batley series the advent of contemporary architectural interventions in the city. Built, as a memorial for Sheth Mangaldas the building was a congregation space for the industrialists and traders, to be later used as a city auditorium for concerts and theatrical shows. Located at the landmark cross-junction opposite Ellis Bridge, the corner plot was a noticeable entity on the Ashram road, getting an advantage of two faces. Designed on octagonal layout in plan and elevation with classical proportions, the red brick and plaster building portrays the understanding of Indian Traditional architecture in realm of Colonial era.

<sup>6</sup> Lang,John, Desai. Madhvi, Desai, Miki, "Architecture and Independence: The Search for Identity – India, 1880-1980", Oxford University Press, 1998

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thehindu.com/books/Ahmedabad-ales-of-one-city/article12442365.ece> [Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> Jan 2018].



**Image 8. Town Hall, Ahmedabad 1930**

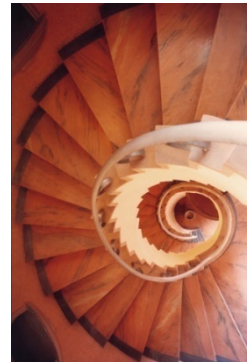
Indian Revival, found ardent supporters among prominent British architects like Claude Batley. Coming to India in 1913, he started a successful independent architectural practice in Bombay with partners Gregson and King. Notable for his contribution in setting of course at JJ school of Architecture and later the Indian Institute of Architecture in 1919. Fervent teacher and passionate learner, he tripped all over the country making measure drawings of buildings of architectural significance with students. He is author of the book - The Design Development of Indian Architecture, a repository of detailed drawings of both Hindu, Mughal and Jain architecture covering cities like Agra, Ahmedabad Baroda, Bijapur, Champaner, Delhi, Fatehpur Sikri, Jaipur and Nasik. His study of the elements of Indian Architecture and its making is phenomenal along with depth of observation to Indian history, tradition, style, craft, materials, rituals and beliefs.

Approached by a exquisite stepped entranceway, with niched ticket counter on either side, the circular staircase leads to the balcony for the first and second level entry of the auditorium. Doors open to a glass brick veiled walkway, an offset before the main seating. Refracted golden lighting and reflection of red lining on walls create an ambience of dramatization through approach. Large domical space of the auditorium with two level seating is a spacious hall with red toned surface finish followed throughout seating tapestries and wall surfaces. The base of the dome has rectangular openings set on the octagonal ring of the ceiling before sloping towards the end towards the load bearing walls. Elegance in style and combined exuberance of Art Deco adds subtlety in contrast to the outside massing of the building.

Use of deep Chajjas and brackets on exteriors, favoring the Indian climat and simplicity of the planning blends exemplary form of new contemporary architecture.



**Image 9. Interiors, Town Hall, Ahmedabad 1930**



**Image 10. Staircase, Town Hall, Ahmedabad 1930**



**Image 11. Auditorium, Town Hall, Ahmedabad 1930**

## 2. CONCLUSION – ENTRUSTED MODERNITY

The concept of “Modernism” in India with its architectural development remains difficult to define with stylistic or period classification. The lineage from earliest cities of Lothal and Dholavera of Indus civilization to trade and port towns of Gupta and Mauryan dynasty, the state of Gujarat has been pivotal. Later, witnessing the conjuncture of Rajput’s, Islamic sultanates, Dutch, Portuguese, French and English bases, the cities roped in people, resources, knowledge and experience.

Essentially a textile city of traders and business families, Ahmedabad boasts of its profound collection of edifices of master builders and architects. After its establishment of walled city to having indigenous pol housing and havelli’s, Gandhian Minimalism and interventions of Architects like Corbusier and Kahn, the city dwells both in past and present.

Axial Alignments of gates, scale of Jami Mosque, intricate Jali work of Rani Sipri Mausoleum, geometry and symmetry at Sarkhej, marvel of ancient step wells and handcrafted Jain and Hindu temples add to the learning’s of glorious traditional past. While, imperial conversations with Claude Batley and like converge to the new contemporary.

Post independence saw the European and American architects commissioned for large administrative and institutional buildings giving the city a global milieu. Principles of Corbusier and proportions of forms and materials in work of Kahn juxtaposed on Indian soil. Schooled under the masters, Doshi, Correa, Kanvinde, Hasmukh C Patel were the earliest of the Indian born architects to build and flourish in Ahmedabad synthesizing the genesis of their ideas and concepts from the city.

Ahmedabad’s experiment with modernity would remain exemplary. Generations of architects and designers would nurture in India under the patronage of this city, within its flux of tradition and modernity it gives wisdom of future and pride of past heritage.

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