CHAPTER – VII

ASSESSMENT OF CREATIVE MERIT
ARCHITECTURE

The assessment of the creative merit of Sri Harmandar Sahib may now be done in terms of those very parameters and elements in which the Building Design of the Holy Shrine has been analysed on a comparative method in the previous sections. These are: Space, Structure, Form, Time, and their Technical Aspects: Architecture, Engineering, and Aesthetics.

**SPACE** [Ref.: Plate No. V, VI, VII and VIII] : This element may be seen as: Concept, Function, and Vision, which together constitute Architecture.

Concept is the Genetic Imperative of different forms of Creativity, which is the most distinguished of all human endowments. It is the *mul-mantra* of Culture that produces a whole gamut of artifacts: customs, beliefs, social mores, art, science, humanities, languages, architecture, engineering, aesthetics, etc. Concept being the *seed-idea* of Creativity, it stands to reason that its plant, flower, and fruit would be as healthy as its own “genes” permit. To my knowledge, understanding, study, and experience, Religion is the single most omnipotent idea borne by a given culture. It motivates, unites, and sustains the “Collective Unconscious” of the peoples of the world. This titanic task it accomplishes by showing the masses a particular path to the realisation of ultimate Reality. This being the plain truth, it should not be difficult to appreciate that the source of such a Concept must lie in the sacred scriptures of the community.

I have traced the concept of Sri Harmandar Sahib to the pronouncements of Guru Nanak Dev who admittedly spoke nothing that was not first inspired by Divine indulgence. His
Bani (the Revealed Word) is description, sprung from an unconditioned spontaneity (sahj), of what the Divine-Husband (khasam) prompted him to pronounce. So the primacy of the Concept of Sri Harmandar Sahib flows from the delineation of God's Divinity enshrined in His primary attribute: Truth. Thus, Truth with its Omnipresence over four yugas, and before the birth and after the death of Time, becomes the Building Design principle of the Holy Shrine, and its Plan automatically assumes the geometrical shape of a Square. Just as this is the FORM-al expression of God's Transcendence, His Immanence is depicted by the semi-Hexagon. The two are linked by a covered passage symbolising the tutelage of the Holy Preceptor, without whose willing indulgence the experience of the ultimate Reality is absolutely impossible.

The Space, which produces the plan as "the generator", is conceived from this seed-idea of God’s Transcendence as Changelessness (the Square) and His Immanence as Progressional Change (the semi-Hexagon), constituting Architecture of Sri Harmandar Sahib.

What is the Function of this Space?

To demarcate the place of Sachch Khand (Realm of Truth) and to create within it its nucleus, the Parkash Asthan, where the Adi Granth (as the Living Embodiment of God) would be installed to mark the Dawn of Enlightenment. This is the first part of Function: its Utility.

The natural extension of this plan into its complementary function of consecration of water as “Father”, which is savoured as amrit (elixir) at Har-ki-Pauri, marks the comprehensivity of the Concept of the Golden Temple. Thus this compound Plan of Square-with-half-Hexagon outlines on ground the “generative” power that would enable it to express itself as Architecture fashioned out of Mass and Surface which together create the
Elevation(s) or the third dimension of the Holy Shrine. The Elevation is the second part of Function: its Aesthetic.

The catholicity of the Space (ie Architecture) of Sri Harmandar Sahib is admirably expressed in Plan by four doors, one in each of the Square's sides. These four points of entry also allude to the four Cardinal Points: north, south, east, and west. The Sikh Faith's Cardinal Principle (*Humility*) may be discerned in the modest dimensions of the Holy Shrine's Space. The *Parkash Asthan* is barely 15'-4" x 15'-4", and the Square of the Plan totals to no more than 40'-7"x40'-7" on the outside. Considering that the Sikh Faith exhorts its followers to collective worship, these dimensions are, indeed, very modest.

In the light of this exposition, it should be self-evident that the Architecture of Sri Harmandar Sahib is neither a derivation from, nor an adaptation of, any other place of worship in terms of its Concept, Cardinal Principles, and Space dimensions. The Holy Shrine is a refreshing new addition to the repertory of Religious Architecture of the World.

**STRUCTURE** [Ref.: Plate No. IX and X]; The Structure or Support System of Sri Harmandar Sahib is a combination of *trabeate* and *arcuate* principles. The domed room atop the *Parkash Asthan* at the terrace-level has its floor built on the post-and-lintel system, which shows the builders' ability to solve the structural problem of the crowning feature also by the trabeate system. The fact that they did not do so should substantiate the contention that those builders, indeed, had full appreciation of the symbiotic value of the dome to make its ingenious exploitation in the Building Design of the Holy Shrine. Thus, though the elliptical dome used is a sound Structure, based on the arcuate principle, its use was apparently made for its expressive properties such as its visual appeal as a symbol of Humility, which is the Cardinal Principle.
of the Sikh Faith. There was absolutely no need for adopting the Mughal dome, which is almost invariably an onion-shaped cupola, to roof the sanctum sanctorum. It is only its universal applicability to problems of Structure that the dome has been used. But its appropriateness of use for expressive purposes is an absolutely original enterprise.

Since the Structure (as the building’s skeleton) is what primarily defines Space inside, and determines Form outside, combination of the trabeate and arcuate structure systems has created a lively variety to enhance the expressive quality of the Holy Shrine—such as would not readily be possible with the use of only the post-and-lintel or arch-vault-dome structure system. Besides, the deployment of straight lines (of the trabeate system) and curves (of the arcuate system) is a healthy combination symbolising, respectively, Reason and Emotion, whose synergetic functioning is indispensable to human beings’ Ascent to the Realm of Spiritual Life.

Structure, as a support system, is an abstract principle of how a building would stand in deference for the Laws of Nature. It transcends the geographical boundaries of its historic origins, to solve problems of a universal kind. It has nothing to do with architectural styles of the world though scholars and historians erroneously tend to confuse it with Form which is its external manifestation: its internal evidence lies in the way it delineates and qualifies Space.

Appropriateness of Structure is the first hallmark of such Building Design as lies in the realm of significance. Sri Harmandar Sahib exemplifies such an artistic significance through its Structure. This aspect is further elaborated under Engineering—subsequently.

FORM [Ref.: Plate No. IV and XI]: Goethe defined Architecture as Frozen Music. Music is a compounding of
melody and mathematics whereby an Edifice of Sound is raised. Melody provides the rhythm; Mathematics supplies the geometric ordering. The product is a Form which expresses structural unity and, by its intrinsic quality, moves the soul via the ears. When the eye hears the music of proportions (like palpably related sound-units or notes) Architecture of Goethe's definition is born.

Form transforms areas delineated by Plan (two-dimensional) into Space, a pulsating volumetric void, by virtue of the third dimension supplied by the Elevation of the building. Form is developed from Mass conjured up by Structure. Mass in the raw has an unshaped Surface made of solids (wall-sections of the enclosing material) and voids (doors, windows, and other openings, including covered passages integral to the plan). Form can be seen as well as felt (by virtue of its Surface quality or texture). Space can only be experienced, holistically (i.e. by the synergetic, simultaneous, apprehension of all the five senses: visual, audial, tactile, olfactory, gustatory). In this special sense, Form is that which the Mind itself contributes (experientially) as the condition of knowing. Form, as the expression of Space vis-à-vis Structure is that in which the essence of a thing consists.

The Form of Sri Harmandar Sahib is closest to elementary geometry: a cuboid integrated with a prism of half-hexagon. A completely unadorned Form would be austere, a mere Mass, appropriate to the nature of Space for Sachch Khand. But its Surface has been livened up by bas-relief in repoussé work to extend Ek Omkar's Transcendence into Progressional Immamence. This has been achieved by the exercise of an utmost restraint, to symbolise "simple living and high thinking" as a prerequisite to a Life of the Spirit.
The symbolism of the elliptical dome of the Golden Temple has already been described. To this may be added the significance of the inverted lotus on the dome of the Holy Shrine. The inversion suggests a cerebral collection of the five senses and their internalisation into Reflection (veechar) whose cultivation is an essential discipline for a seeker of Truth. Reflection, in my view, is a psycho-emotional mirror-image in which thought looks at itself. Guru Nanak has underscored the role of Reflection time and again. To wit, “Amrit vela sachch(u) naao vadiyi veechaar(u)” (Pauri 4, Japuji). [Meditate ye on the glory of the True One’s Name/in the ambrosial hours preceding dawn.] In simpler terms, Reflection is tantamount to the chewing of all Food for Thought collected by the five senses during workaday existence, so that the Life-Force inherent in it can become absorbed as God’s Omnipotence (the Divine Name) in the Mind. Seen in this light, the cuboid of the Sachch Khand, crowned by the inverted lotus of the elliptical dome, is a beatific vision, architecturally speaking, of God’s Divine Essence. It is a Form that transforms the corporeality of the building materials into an exalted experience of ethereality.

The entire Form of Sri Harmandar Sahib is dematerialised by its reflection in the water of the Amrit-Sarovar, thereby uplifting its modest size to pulsating spiritual majesty. The scale of the holy precincts also contributes significantly to the creation of a unique ambience that impels reflection and reverence as a reward for the devotees’ obeisance. The scale of the waterbody in relation to the building of the Holy Shrine is very large. This sense of vastness is accentuated by the wide parkarma all around the Amrit-Sarovar. The result is that the Space pulsates as Essence and the Form suggests its animating nucleus sanctified by the Adi Granth as a living embodiment of God’s Omnipresence, Omnipotence, and Omniscience. The primevalness of the Primal Person (Karta Purakh) comes alive in
the unremitting reverence expressed for Him by preserving the Ber (jejube-tree) trees from the original site of the Holy Shrine. This is in keeping with Guru Nanak's dictum that Nature is God's Might (qudrat). Says he: "Balihaari qudrat vasia, Tera ant(u) na jaayi Lakkia". (Sloka M-1, Raiharas.)

"I'm a sacrifice unto Thee who art
Nature's indwelling spirit
It's within no one's power to describe Thy limit."

The modest scale of the Holy Shrine gains an added significance when seen in the light of the prescriptions in the Shilpa Shastra (ancient Hindu treatises on architecture). "In the Shilpa Shastras, the social stratification and the sense of belonging to a class of people is not only reflected in the plan but also in the vertical section. Thus the kings were supposed to have buildings of the ground floor and seven and a half storeys; Brahmins, the ground plus six and a half floors; the Kshatriyas ground plus five and a half floors; and the Shudras the ground plus two and a half.\(^1\) However, Sri Harmandar Sahib, as already noted, has ground plus one and half floors—a size smaller than even the one prescribed for the lowest class of the Shudras: two-and-a-half floor structure. Thus, the physical built-Form of the Abode of The Formless One (Nirankaar) is closer to that of the Shudras' and very distant from a temporal king's. This point too is crucial in understanding the significance of Humility as the Cardinal Principle of The Sikh Faith. Also, the physical structure of the Sri Harmandar Sahib has three levels, each of which corresponds to the Attributes of Ek Omkar. The word "OM" consists of three sounds akin to the sound of each letter: a, u, and m. "u" is Urdham which means above; "A" is Ardham for below; and "M" stands for Madhyam,

meaning middle. Thus, OM encompasses that which is Above, in the Middle, and Below, thereby meaning the entire cosmos. The word “Omkar” means the Performer of all the three functions of Creation, Preservation, and Dissolution. Guru Nanak's Sacred Formula thus, it may be recapitulated, written as *Ek Omkar* (ॐ), stands for One Universal Being. The three levels of the sanctum sanctorum, as noted above, together constitute one and a half floors, with the middle level being more like a viewing gallery, from which *darshan* of the Holy Book can be had by virtue of the double-height of the Parkash Asthan. The upper level too contains a small room crowned by the elliptical dome while the larger part of it forms the terrace. This defies the prescriptions of the Shilpa Shastras. Therefore, the upshot is that Sri Harmandar Sahib, neither in terms of its Space concept nor in its Form expressive of that intention, is derived from the ancient Indian tradition. So also is its Structure based largely on the arcuate system which was not extant in temple-design throughout the country.

Form of the Holy Shrine is as original as the concept of its Space and the system of its Structure. It is an evocative expression, through masterly Architecture, of God’s Transcendence as a Living Force that may be experienced within the Immanence of His illimitable glory reflected in the created world.

At this crucial juncture of the assessment of Sri Harmandar Sahib creative merit, it is pertinent to quote Le Corbusier, who was the greatest architect of the 20th century. In his epoch-making book, “Towards A New Architecture”, he has categorically pronounced that:-

> ARCHITECTURE has nothing to do with the “styles”. It brings into play the highest faculties by its very abstraction.
Architectural abstraction has this about it which is magnificently peculiar to itself, that while it is rooted in hard fact, it spiritualizes it. The naked fact is a medium for an idea only by reason of the "order" that is applied to it.

Mass and surface are the elements by which architecture manifests itself. Mass and surface are determined by the plan. The plan is the generator. So much the worse for those who lack imagination!

In the exposition, and analysis based on the comparative method, I have tried to show in unambiguous terms that the design concept of the Holy Shrine, on which its Plan, "the generator", is developed, is a creation of inspiration, an act that is far superior to the one accomplished by mere imagination. Imagination is the faculty of forming images in the mind, whereas Inspiration is spiritual stimulation by Divine grace. The latter condition has clearly been shown to have arisen from Guru's Word (Gurbani), as an embodiment of Divine grace. It is God's own manifest creativity, much above the cerebral circus of image-making. Though Gurbani has been written in poetry, which I hold to be the Language of Prophecy, it is not Poetry, as a literary art. Much less is it Metaphysics (the art of thinking things out to their ultimate significance) or Mythology (a body and/or study of myths) or Science. It is not even Mysticism (religion of the élite) as is reputed to be esoteric knowledge. Gurbani is God's Word (shabad) revealed to Guru Nanak, and, therefore, an inspired description of the cosmos, its laws and modes, without recourse to the faculties of reason, emotion, imagination, intuition, and so forth.

\(^2\) CORBUSIER, op. cit., p. 45.
Poetry is the literary art of versification guided by prosody and related rules. Beside making an extensive use of Imagination, Poetry makes offbeat departures from convention by the deployment of poetic licence. Mythology is the highest creation of the human Imagination. Metaphysics is a major branch of Philosophy, and, like its mother discipline, draws heavily upon speculation which, at best, is theorising or mere guesswork. It has also been called the Science of Being, and is supposed to investigate the first principles of nature and thought. Science is hypothesis-based knowledge ascertained by observation and experiment, critically tested, systematised and brought under general principles. Mysticism is a repertory of sacredly obscure or secret experiences of one who seeks or attains direct intercourse with God in elevated religious feeling or ecstasy. In common parlance, Mysticism suggests fogginess and unreality of thought.

Building Design of Sri Harmandar Sahib, in this peculiar sense, transcends the "styles", and shows how that, which is a mere building-type in mundane terms, is exalted to the realm of spiritual glory, by its very design concept being rooted in The Source. It is an original creation of the Sikh Faith and thus an incomparable contribution to the repertory of Religious Architecture of the World. The evidence of this contention lies in the fact that Guru Arjan Dev, who was the architect-visionary of Sri Harmandar Sahib, took no credit for its creation. On the contrary, when the holy project was completed, the Guru burst forth into the following hymn (shabad):

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\text{The Creator-Lord Himself became my prop}
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\text{And protected me from all harm}
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\text{The Guru hath approved my ablutions}
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\[
\text{And contemplating the Lord, my sins have been washed off.}
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O Saints, beauteous is the Pool of Ram Das;
Yea, whosoever takes bath in it,
his whole progeny is blest.
He is acclaimed by the whole world,
And all the desires of his heart are fulfilled.
Bathing, his mind attains peace,
For, he contemplates God, his Lord.
He who bathes in this Pool of Saints
Receiveth Supreme Bliss.
He dieth not, nor cometh, nor goeth;
(For) he dwelleth only upon the Lord’s Name.
He alone knoweth this Wisdom of the Lord
Whom the Lord Himself blesseth with mercy.
Nanak seeketh the refuge of God, the Lord,
And all his woes and cares are past. (SGGS, p.623)

Louis I Kahn hit the nail on the head when he said that “Architecture doesn’t exist. Only the spirit of architecture exists3.”

In the case of Sri Harmandar Sahib, the Spirit of Architecture has been caught in a billowing breath of devotion, in total surrender to God, Who in His own sweet Will, joyously filled the architect’s heart, completely cleansed of egotism, as a worthy receptacle of His Grace. This architecture is thus a Religion of Feeling concretised in the elements of Space, Structure, and Form—at once Universal and Timeless, like God’s Own Immanent Divine Creativity. An Architecture in which Religion dwells as a Living Force to reunite souls,

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3 WURMAN, op. cit., p. 15.
wandering on the wasteland of Maya (illusion), with the Logos or God’s Word (shabad).

TIME: Time is a very potent element in the lives of human beings and in everything that they create. Time manifests itself as the changeless Law of Change. Nothing, except God Himself, is beyond the vagaries of change. Peoples of the world, places, things, and events—indeed, the entire cosmos—is subject to change. Time, along with Space, constitutes two most ubiquitous primal entities through which God manifests His Immanence, and His Creativity as Divine Sport (Leela) in the form of creatures and creation which he fashions out of Matter. It is Matter which becomes the embodiment of God’s Creativity—ininitely (illimitability of Space) and eternally (immeasurability of Time). In this sense, Past is Time in solid state; present is Time in liquid state; and Future is Time in gaseous (ie nebulous) state. In other words, any given period of human history is an index of what Time had done, and to what point it had brought progress—which is both a process, and a product. A product is Time frozen in Space—whereby it becomes period-specific and place-specific. This curious peculiarity of Time makes it incumbent upon human beings, who are essentially “tool-making animals”, to travel from one place to another to have access to (and thereby be benefited from; the tool-making techniques (Technology) of other peoples of the world. The purpose of such travel is to collect Information, while the mode of travel is conditioned by the dynamics of land, sea, and air. Now that such exchange has become INSTANT by virtue of satellites, technology itself has become Information Technology (IT): a new mode which has far-reaching socio-economic and politico-cultural consequences. In one word, IT is the truly democratic way of learning from proactive, reactive, coactive, and interactive Internationalism. The World has become one vast, sprawling City.
Tools, which peoples of the world make, are, at bottom, of only two types: power tools, and shaping tools. Interestingly, the progress of the world as a FACT of LIFE has been made possible by these tool-types. Without them, Progress was confined to either ratiocinative cerebration, or philosophic speculation, or flights of imagination. It should be evident that, without physical access to what another man had done, no man could copy. But if he did succeed in producing something of the kind another fellow elsewhere in the world had done it was regarded (and rationally so) as an independent invention/discovery. The case of the Theory of Evolution substantiates this contention. The same theory was developed succinctly and in complete form by Alfred Russel Wallace independent of Charles Robert Darwin. The so-called Scientific Method recognises that there are no such things as purely inductive (reasoning from particular cases to general conclusions) observations, for if the observer had not already in his head an idea of what he was looking for, as derivative of deduction (the drawing of a particular truth from a general, antecedently known, as distinguished from induction), he would not observe anything at all. The so-called higher truths were accessed by the faculty of Intuition—the power of the Mind by which it immediately perceives the truth of things without reasoning or analysis; and as reflected in works of art created by Imagination—the faculty of forming images in the Mind. But, in my own considered opinion, authentic Truth (as Divine Essence) is experienced only by God's Grace: in an extraordinary way as Inspiration, and in an exclusive exaltation as Revelation.

The privilege to receive such knowledge and the honour to use it for the benefit of Mankind transcend both Time and Space. Information Technology of the Soul is transmitted spiritually to the beneficiary by Divine Grace.
Considered in this light, the Time was ripe and the Space was blessed so that Guru Nanak may receive God’s Word (shabad) through Revelation, beyond the limiting factors of the other stated methods. The three states of Time—solid, liquid, and gaseous—commingled to create their own Space in the heart of the Prophet of the Sikh Faith for implanting Truth, at once Timeless and Universal. There was thus no scope for reference to any “styles” of Architecture. The new Architecture assumed Form in a fitful flash of realisation (The Light of Revelation). When the Time was ripe to realise on ground a new building-type, Guru Arjan Dev already had the prototype of Dharamsala, along with requisite Cardinal Principles, Design Imperatives—rooted in the seed-idea, the Concept of Sri Harmandar Sahib.

The Holy Shrine is, therefore, a Marvel of Religious Architecture, transcending Time and Space, and belongs to the entire Humanity.

ENGINEERING [Ref.: Plate No. IX and X]: Since, as already pointed out, the building is the only physical Form in which the Spirit of Architecture can be embodied, Engineering played an all-important role in the making of the Holy Shrine in terms of materials, construction, which together constitute Structure, and the huge waterbody (Amrit-Sarovar). All these Engineering Aspects were meticulously taken care of by Sikh artisans, craftsmen, masons, carpenters, metal-workers, and so forth. The chief building material was Nanak Shahi brick, actually a baked tile, and lime concrete. Right from the foundations of the Holy Shrine, to the retaining-walls of the huge waterbody, and the superstructure, along with exquisite craftsmanship in surface finishes and decorative motifs, everything was built from out of a consummation of the marriage of soul-Bride with the Divine Husband in a rare
spiritual conjugation. The system of water supply to the Pool of Nectar and its maintenance, including desiltation (through Kar Sewa) are feats of Engineering which compel notice and appreciation.

AESTHETICS [Ref.: Plate No. XI and IV]: As was pointed out earlier, Aesthetics is a wondrous experience of Beauty resulting from a visual encounter with Form which Building Design eventually assumes when realised as an object of art in flesh and blood, as it were. Analysis of the Geometric Ordering of the main façade of Sri Hamandar Sahib has revealed the sensitivity and precision with which different constituent parts of the elevation were PROPORTIONED, and brought together into an organic whole, expressing Unity and Balance. That the Design has yielded such a result substantiates the fact that the beautiful elevation is a product of premeditated, enlightened endeavour, and not of any stray accident. A masterly use of solids and voids, projections and recesses, contrasting (yet harmonious) juxtaposition of materials (white marble and copper gilding), straight lines and curves, cuboids, spheroids, elliptoids, etc., has created a distinct Aesthetics of the Holy Shrine.

Aesthetics, as a metaphysical dimensions of Form, is "a pure creation of the spirit", and evokes emotion when significant Building Design stirs our soul in tune with a universe whose laws we obey, recognise, and respect— to use Le Corbusier's pithy expression. In the case of Sri Harmandar Sahib such obedience, recognition, and respect go much deeper to The Source: The Edict-Fiat (hukam) of Lord God himself. Its Aesthetics thus transcends the mundane and the secular into the universalness and timelessness of Religious Experience. No

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CORBUSIER, op. cit., p. 23.
wonder the Holy Shrine appeals to all genres of visitors from India and abroad, beyond their ethnic eccentricities and national prejudices. Such an Aesthetics, though rooted in the physicality of Form, directly communicates with the human Spirit, and exalts it to higher realms of Consciousness.