CHAPTER - XI
Pre-Columbian Architecture

While in Europe, Huxley observes, urban architecture has to be looked at, too often, with the eye of faith, as some of the most splendid monuments of past and present times are hidden by other buildings and all but invisible, the architects of pre-Columbian America were more fortunate. Their masterpieces stood magnificently isolated. While European Cathedrals were built within the walls of cities, the temples of the aboriginal Americans seem, in most cases, to have stood outside. Monte Alban, for instance, was evidently the cathedral of a whole diocese — a cathedral without the cathedral town. Few architects have had such a sense of austerely dramatic grandeur as these temple-builders of the great Toltec1 tradition, and few have been given so free a hand. Religious considerations were never allowed to interfere

1. Toltecs, ancient Mexican people who flourished from the seventh to eleventh century, A.D.
with the realization of a grand architectural scheme. Too often, in other countries, a particular patch of ground is held to be so holy that as many shrines as possible shall be built upon it, so that Delos and Delphi become, architecturally, just sacred slums. Many Christian churches, too, have been ruined architecturally for similar reasons. On the other hand, like the Egyptians, the pre-Columbian Americans preferred art to magic — "rather had the wit to see that the most effective magic is the magic associated with the finest art." Hence, at Monte Alban, they allowed nothing to get in the way of the architects.

The pre-Columbian architects were fortunate in the religion they served. Astronomical observation being a sacred rite, this necessitated an unimpeded view of the sky and a clearly defined lay-out. Also, while in Europe each generation built more and more new shrines in the sacred enclosures, in America, each succeeding generation merely enlarged the existing works, by surrounding them with a new layer of masonry. In short,

1. Delos, small Greek island in the Aegean Sea, known for the ruins of the Temple of Apollo; scene of Ionic festival in antiquity.

2. Delphi, town in ancient Greece, famous for the precinct of Pythian Apollo.
Monte Alban is the work of men who knew their architectural business consummately well.¹

**Earthquakes and Architecture:**

While it is hard to guess the date of any building in Antigua, Huxley writes, as all buildings are just indistinctly colonial baroque, one explanation for the apparent contemporaneity of churches built at widely separated periods may be found. Antigua being a place of earthquakes, the façades must have got a new face every few years. But earthquakes influenced the Antiguan style of architecture in another way. In their attempts to build something that would withstand the constant tremors, the local architects evolved an almost Saxon style.

Considered technically, Huxley goes on to generalize, the history of ecclesiastical architecture is the history of the increasingly successful efforts of engineers to build a stone-roofed greenhouse. The problem was solved in late Gothic times. "In King's College chapel all the space between piers is glass, and the roof is a stone vault," making it a perfect machine-for-praying in, as Le Corbusier would put it. At Antigua, a similar process

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was reversed, and the architects retreated from the greenhouse towards the massive artificial caverns of their barbarian predecessors.  

Antigua:

While the reaction of Huxleyan critics to Antigua — all baroque and colonial rococo — would be one of unequivocal disapproval, Huxley found Antigua one of the most romantic towns in the world. He would not say that it contains any great masterpiece of architecture, but he certainly found there much that is charming, surprising and queer, picturesque and romantic in the most extravagantly eighteenth-century style.  

Steps in Architecture:

Writing about the Chichi-castenango Churches, which were built at a certain height and approached by considerable flights of steps, Huxley says that steps play an important part in architecture. "They sometimes serve as a stage-setting for the religious ceremonies. They heighten the spectacular quality of the processions and dramatically emphasize every act of individual worship."

1. Beyond the Mexique Bay; Chatto & Windus, 1949; pp.130-32.  
2. Ibid., p.125.
Straying into history, Huxley remarks how steps have played an important part in most of the highly organized religions. "The Teocallis" of Mexico and the Babylonian Ziggurats were just staircases and nothing more. So was the Pergamene altar of Zeus. So were the pyramid temples of Tikal and Chichen-itza and Teotihuacan. Steps also play a considerable part in Christian architecture. Despots, too, favour staircases and the ritual of worship to which the staircase lends itself. The throne is the traditional ally of the altar, and both, for the same ceremonial reasons, have steps.

Mexican vs. Guatemalan:

For some odd reason, Huxley remarks, Mexican ecclesiastical architecture is inferior, on the whole, to that of Guatemala. Overlong for its width, the façade of the typical Mexican church has an uncomfortably hunched appearance. In Guatemala, church fronts are wider.

1. Teocalli, pyramidal mound or edifice erected by pre-Columbian inhabitants of Mexico and Central America as temple or public building.
2. Ziggurat, temple tower characteristic of Babylonian and Assyrian architecture.
3. Pergamon (Pergamene), ancient city in Asia Minor. As capital of a small Greek kingdom it rose to fame under Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.), who built the great Altar of Zeus.
4. Beyond the Mexique Bay; Chatto & Windus, 1949; p.150.
in proportion to their height. Why there should be a difference between the architectural traditions of the two contiguous provinces Huxley is unable to say; perhaps Guatemala had an architect who had seen the baroque churches of Rome. 

**Textile Designs in Architecture:**

Mitla is strangely unlike any of the other pre-Columbian remains in Mexico and Guatemala. Within and without, the walls of the buildings, are decorated with geometrical patterns of a kind to be met with nowhere else in Central America; what is odd is that these patterns are all manifestly based upon textile designs — so that we have here a sort of petrified weaving.

**Mogul Architecture**

Writing about the Taj Mahal, Huxley says that he always feels uncomfortable when he finds himself unable to admire something which all the rest of the world admires. Is the world's taste bad or his? Thus, when even great poets say that Spenser is a great poet, he is at a loss. For to him, Spenser seems only a virtuoso, who has the art of saying nothing at length.

1. *Beyond the Mexican Bay; Chatto & Windus, 1949; p.310.*
2. *Ibid., p.288.*
The Taj:

And while at Agra, Huxley is afflicted by the same sense of discomfort in the presence of one of the seven wonders of the world. His failure to appreciate the Taj is due, he says, to the fact that, while he is very fond of architecture and the decorative arts, he is very little interested in the expensive or the picturesque as such and by themselves. Now the great qualities of the Taj are precisely those of expensiveness and picturesqueness. Milk-white amongst its dark cypresses, flawlessly mirrored, it is positively the Toteninsel of Arnold Boecklin\(^1\) come true. And its costliness is fabulous. Its marbles are carved and filigreed, are patterned with an inlay of precious stones. The smallest rose or poppy on the royal tombs is an affair of twenty or thirty cornelians, onyxes, agates, chrysolites. The New Jerusalem\(^2\) was not more rich in variety of precious pebbles.

Expensiveness is always admired:

Strangely enough, if most people are disappointed with the Taj, it is because the building is not quite so

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1. Arnold Boecklin (1827-1901), Swiss painter; best known for landscapes, often graced with mythological figures. His influence on German painting, especially on the Munich school, was very great.

2. The Old City of Jerusalem belongs to Jordan. The New Jerusalem, which is separated from the Old City by the city walls and by a single street, is the capital of Israel.
expensive as they thought it was. They have found that the marble is only a veneer. Meanwhile the guides insist on the Taj's costliness. "All marble", they say, "all precious stones". Expensiveness is everywhere admired. The average Englishman is moved to greater raptures by St. Peter's1 than by his own St. Paul's. The interior of the Roman basilica is all marble. St. Paul's is only Portland stone. The relative architectural merits of the two churches are not for a moment considered.

The Minarets:

Architecturally, the four thin tapering towers — the minarets — standing at the four corners of the platform on which the Taj is built are among the ugliest structures ever erected by human hands. The architect would plead that, the dimensions of the main building and the platform being what they are, it was impossible to give the four subsidiary structures more than a certain limited mass between them. Huxley himself feels it would have been best to put this limited mass into four low comparatively large buildings. But, unfortunately, the exigencies of religion made it necessary to put the available mass into minarets, and those had to be very thin for their height.

1. The Vatican hill has been since early times considered the place of St. Peter's martyrdom, and St. Peter's Church houses his tomb, one of the great shrines of the Roman Catholic Church.
The Taj vs. St. Paul's and the Rotonda:

The elegance of the Taj itself is at the best of a very dry and negative kind. The architectural forms of which it is composed lack variety. There are, for all practical purposes, only two contrasting formal elements in the whole design — the onion dome and the flat wall surface with its sharply rectangular limits. In St. Paul's, the number of component forms in its design is very large. It is not only that St. Paul's is a very much larger building. Palladio's Rotonda at Vicenza, a building somewhat smaller than the Taj and, like it, of regular design and domed, consists of a far larger number of formal elements than does the Taj, and its elegance, in consequence, is much richer, much more subtle and various than the poor, dry, negative elegance characteristic of the Indian building.

Mohammedan vs. Hindu Art:

But it is not necessary to go as far as Europe. The Hindu architects produced buildings incomparably more rich and interesting as works of art. Southern

1. Andrea Palladio (1508-1580), Italian architect. He was one of the greatest Italian architects of the late Renaissance, and the style which he used has received the name Palladian.
2. Rotonda (or rotunda), a building that is round both on the outside and inside.
India (which, incidentally, Huxley did not visit) has the finest specimens of Hindu architecture. Even the art of Rajputana (which he saw) convinced him of its enormous superiority to any work of the Mohammedans. The temples at Chitor, for example, are specimens of true classicism. They are the products of a prodigious, an almost excessive, fancy, held in check and directed by the most judicious intelligence. Their elegance is an opulent and subtle elegance, full of unexpected felicities.

Hindu ornament is decidedly superior to that employed by the later Moguls. The pietra dura work at the Taj and the Shahadara tombs at Lahore is marvellously neat in execution and of extravagant costliness. These qualities are admirable enough in their way; but they have nothing to do with the decorative value of the work considered as art. As works of art, the pietra dura decorations of the Taj are poor and uninteresting. Arabesques of far finer design are to be seen in the carved and painted ornamentation of Rajput palaces and temples. As for the bas-reliefs of flowers which adorn the gateway of the Taj — they are frankly bad. No one who has ever seen a fine specimen of decorative flower-painting or flower-carving, whether Hindu or European, can possibly admire these feebly laborious reliefs. But the
Imperial Mausoleum is made of marble. And marble, says Huxley, covers a multitude of sins.

Fatehpur Sikri:

The architecture of Fatehpur Sikri is comparatively refreshing. Akbar was a patron of the indigenous Hindu art of India, and the architecture of his capital is marked by something of the genuine Hindu vigour and wealth of imagination. In the liwan, or covered portion of the mosque, the characteristically Hindu ceilings are supported by a number of very tall Hindu columns. The building is superb in proportion and detail. And yet, such is the prestige of expensive material that poor uninteresting buildings, wholly lacking in grandeur or originality, like the Pearl Mosque of Agra, the pavilions by the lake at Ajmere are much more widely celebrated. They are of marble; Fatehpur is only of sandstone.

Mirror Rooms of Amber:

There is a mirror-room in the fort of Agra; there are others in almost all the palaces of Rajputana; but the prettiest of them all, says Huxley, are the mirror rooms in the palace of Amber. Here the mirrors are slightly convex, so that every piece gives back its own small particular image of the world.

The elaborateness of those mirror rooms surpasses that even of the famous mirror room at Bagheria. But whereas the latter is nothing more than the old-fashioned glass-and-gilding merry-go-round made stationary, the Indian rooms are a marvel of cool and elegant refinement. One must not come to India expecting to find, grandiose specimens of interior architecture. There are "no long colonnaded vistas, no galleries receding interminably according to all the laws of perspective, no colossal staircases, no vaults so high that at night the lamplight can hardly reach them." In India, there are only small rooms adorned with the elaborate decoration that is meant to be looked at from close and in detail. Such are the mirror rooms at Amber. The reason is not far to seek. In a country where it rains with a punctual regularity and only at one season of the year, large rooms of assembly are unnecessary.

Windows:

Just as there is no need of grand interior architecture in a country like India, there is no need of many windows either. In a tropical land, an architect would try to keep the light out, instead of letting it in.

1. Bagheria, a town in Sicily, eight miles east-south-east of Palermo. It has many fine seventeenth- and eighteenth-century villas.
Windows, says Gumbril Senior in *Antic Hay*, are the curse of architecture in a country like England. The walls there have to be like sieves, all holes.¹

**Architecture in Bombay:**

While in Bombay, Huxley could see some of its architectural specimens of the recent past. Most of its buildings were designed and executed between 1860 and 1900. The Presidential Secretariat is in the Venetian Gothic style. The University hall (completed in 1874), which is in the French Decorated style of the fifteenth century, rubs shoulders with the Early English Law Courts (opened in 1879). The University Library, harking back to an earlier century than the Hall, is in the style of fourteenth century Gothic. The Old General Post Office is designed in the medieval style. The Telegraph Office is Romanesque.² The Victoria Station, of which the style is Italian Gothic with certain Oriental modifications in the domes, confronts the Municipal Buildings, in which the Oriental feeling introduced into the Gothic architecture has a pleasing

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² The type of architecture developed by the monks in the tenth century was at first a crude copy of Roman architecture. This style is called Romanesque. It was based largely on low, wide arches, thick walls and heavy supports, all of which were made necessary originally by the builders' lack of skill.
effect. More frankly Oriental are the Gateway of India and the Prince of Wales Museum. The Hotel Majestic is more wildly Mohamedan than anything that the most orthodox of the Great Moguls ever dreamed of, and the gigantic Taj Mahal Hotel combines the style of the South Kensington Natural History Museum with that of an Indian pavilion at an International Exhibition. The Town Hall, which is a quiet, late-Georgian affair, was built in the 'thirties. Long and low, with its flight of steps, its central pediment, its Doric colonnade, it has an air of calm and quiet decency. Among so many architectural cads and pretentious bounders, it is almost the only gentleman. In Bombay, it seems as good as the Parthenon.² ³

Buddhist Architecture:

From India Huxley went to Burma where he saw Buddhist architecture. The precincts of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda contain the world’s finest specimens of what may be

1. Doric Order, earliest and most characteristic type of Greek architecture, of which the Parthenon at Athens is a fine example. The Doric column is a massive fluted pillar imposing in its severity and absence of adornment.

2. Parthenon, most celebrated Doric temple of ancient Greece, and one of the finest pieces of architecture in the world, receives its name from its dedication to the virgin goddess Athena.

called the merry-go-round style/architecture and decoration. The huge bell-shaped spire, gilded from top to bottom and shining towards the sun with intolerable high lights, stands in the midst; and round it are grouped the hundreds of subsidiary shrines.  

French Architecture in Tunisia:

When Huxley visited North Africa, he could see oriental architecture that was practised by the French. In Tunisia, he says, nobody now takes the trouble to practise the local art — nobody, that is, except the Europeans who, with characteristic energy, have used and wildly abused the traditional ornamentation on the walls of the station and the principal hotel. It is a curious and significant fact that, whenever in Tunisia one sees a particularly Oriental piece of architecture, it is sure to have been built by the French, since 1881. The Cathedral of Carthage, the law courts and schools of Tunis — these are more Moorish than the Alhambra, Moorish as only Oriental tearooms in Paris or London can be Moorish. In thirty years the French have produced buildings more typically and intensely Arabian than the Arabs themselves contrived to do in the course of thirteen centuries.