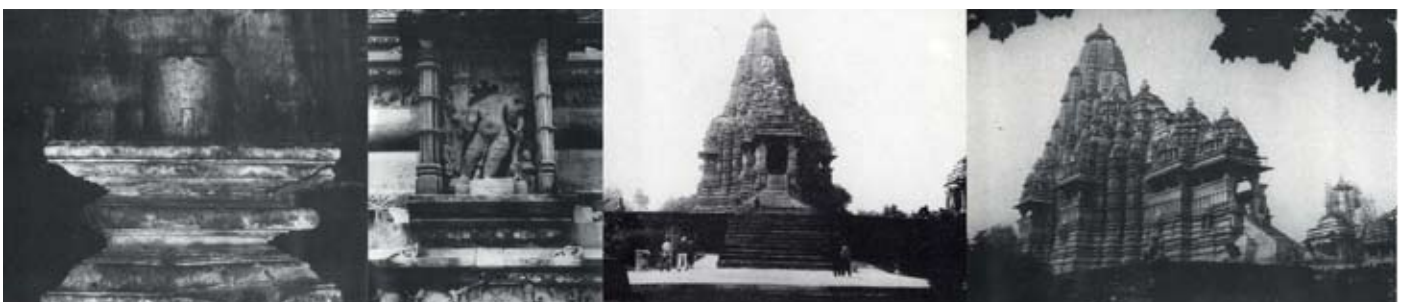


Natasha Rajmohan
Ancient Indian Sacred Architecture



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Introduction

Religion plays a dominant factor in society, the impact it has upon wars and peace within the world epitomizes this. As well as religion having a major influence on a global scale the influence it has upon individuals is also important as it helps give answers. The many different religions in the world highlight the complex nature of this area.

In this dissertation I will discuss one religion in particular; Hinduism. Exploring the nature of the religion and discussing the effects it has on the Hindu temple. I begin by looking at Indian architecture in-general and the overall idea of what a temple is.

I will touch upon, theoretical perspectives, and refer to the opposing notion of the archaic world not always being formulated by a theoretical language but by symbolic images and myths, which will involve analyzing man's attitudes and behaviors towards everyday life.

The Sree Padmanabhaswamy and Kandariya Madadeva temple are the two temples that will be used as examples to express the relationship of the building with the religious man. This will include analyzing the location of where old Indian temples have been built, their plan and its vertical structure. A distinguishing aspect of the structures are the decorative sculptures carved into the external and inner facades on the majority of these sacred buildings (fig.15). They may just seem like excellent craftsmanship of gods, animals and people but it will be discussed further the deeper meaning to them within the dissertation.

The main objective of going into a temple is to pray and find connection with God. As one walks around the temple, the sense of peace, comfort and warmth is over whelming. Creating a presence, that makes you hardly realize that other people are around u. Its harmony created within makes you walk around in silence.

The key aim in this dissertation is to find out how this kind of feeling is created through such sacred buildings and how that one to one connection between man and god is manifested.

Fig. 1 shows a ritual taking place, where worshippers are gathered in front of the deity to pray.



Chapter 1

Indian Architecture

1.1 - General information about Indian Architecture (Vastu Shastra)

' Architecture has its own realm. It has a special relationship with life.' Peter Zumtor

Architecture is designing and constructing space that reflects social, functional and aesthetic consideration. It is often seen as cultural and political symbols, as well as works of art. Historical cultures and their development over time are identified with their surviving architectural achievements.

Architecture in India is rooted in its culture, history and religion. The most sacred buildings in India are Hindu temples. So for a building to be sacred, the architectural principles on the physical level should integrate with structure on a metaphysical level.

Old Indian literature provides evidence of a close and deep relationship with numerals, astrology and other branches of science.

Within the Hindu philosophy the study of being and knowledge is called Vastu Shastra, believed to be the science of architecture, that considers directional alignments. It is a building treatise written in the old Indian language, Sanskrit which deals formally and systematically with the design of any construction.

It is probably the oldest known treatise in the world today, which also has links with the Chinese Feng Shui.

Vastu Pursha Mandala (fig.2) is the mathematical plan and a diagrammatic basis for generating design which symbolically represents the cosmos, incorporating the course of the heavenly bodies and the supernatural forces.

The structure is 'comprehended through the dual study of man and the heavens.'

Vastu explains how nature consists of five basic elements. The human body is also seen to be made up of these elements which are:-

Air - life supporting element/a life source

Fire - represents light and heat

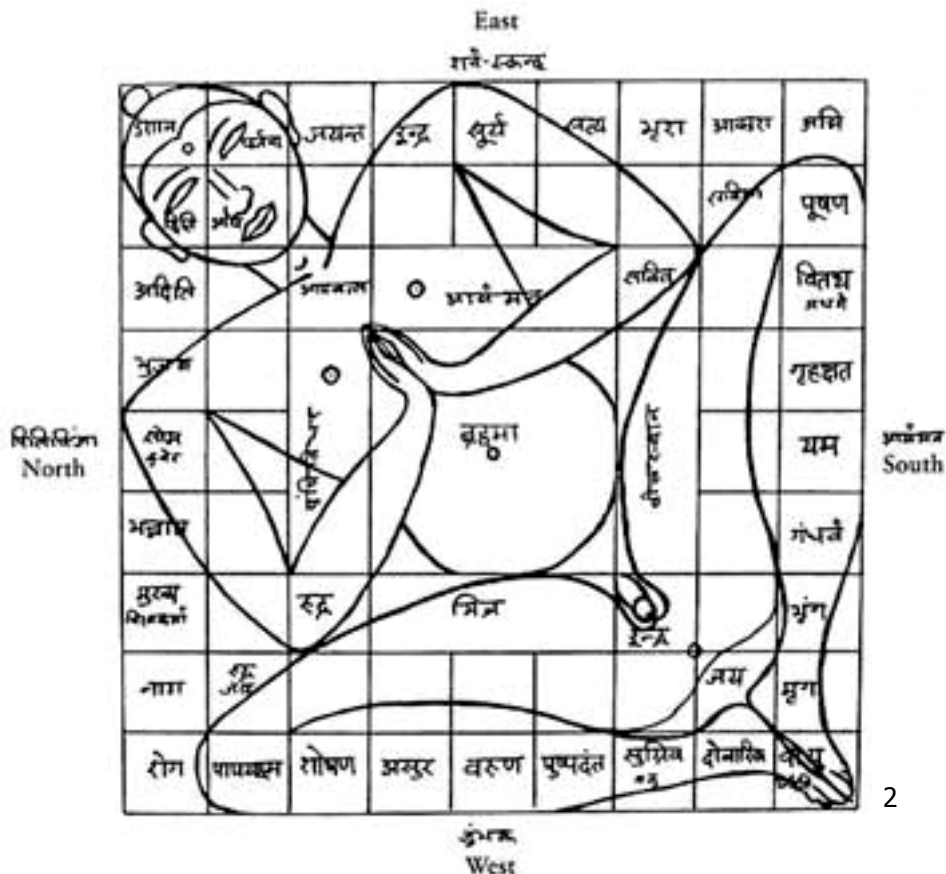
Water - forms part of all animals and plants. Blood is water combined with other elements

Earth - magnetic field and gravitational force has considerable effects on everything on the earth, living and non living

Space/Cosmic energy - primary conductor of all energy sources within the universal context.

Vastu combines all these five elements of nature and balances them with man and material. When our place of business interacts with nature's energies, the location becomes a dynamic location, which becomes the bridge between man and nature.

The diagram below is The Vastu Pursha Mandala. It is the underlying plan for most Indian architecture. Seen as perfection beyond life and death.



'The Hindu temple is designed to bring about contact between man and the gods, it is here that gods appear to man'

So the temple symbolically represents this quest by dissolving the boundaries between man and the divine with the use of Vastu Shastra, as the god's presence could be felt when the icons are properly enshrined. When this connection is made, the presence created in the temples can nourish the man both emotionally and spiritually.

1.2 - General information about Hindu Temples

A Mandir also known as a Hindu temple is a place of worship for the followers of Hinduism.

'In the Hindu notion the act of prayer is very personal and a one-to-one connection is sought between the devotee and the deity. In order to facilitate such a notion the architecture of the temple must be complementary.² It is seen as the 'house of the Gods' as the universal essence, the principal of all things becomes the form, the bodily existence, which is symbolized as the temple. So to compliment the sacred functions that take place in the temple, the Hindu thought believes that the universe is the very greatest, like the divine, so this paramount should be identified through the fabrics of a temple, as the temple would become an image, a reconstitution of the universe. Therefore the temple would echo 'the centre of the world,' as it highlights its importance. The work of the gods, the universe, would be seen to have been repeated and imitated by men on their own scale.

'Such an identification is achieved through the form and meaning of those architectural elements that are considered fundamental to the temple. Hence the significance attached to the site of the temple, its ground plan and vertical elevation.'³

Temple construction in India started nearly 2000 years ago. The oldest ones were built of brick and wood which no longer exist today, but can be recognized with the way stone was used. The basic temple consists of an inner sanctum, where the main idol is enshrined, which is kept in the Garbhagriha also called the womb-chamber, a congregation hall, where people can pray together and where religious festivals take place. It can also include a porch or antechamber.

Most temples are dedicated to a particular God and smaller associated idols of Gods surround the main one. The sanctum is where the main deity is enshrined and the temple is built around it.

North India has substantial differences in architecture from the South known as the Dravidian style.

This Southern style is the earliest of the two main styles. (Fig.3) The most distinctive feature is the articulation of the entire towered sanctuary from the base to the finial called the Vimana/Gopuram which is a trapezoidal structure. Most of these pyramid shaped temples are located in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. These temples only differ according to the age in which they were executed, such as arrangement in various manners.

An example of a Dravidian style temple. Every temple varies but are identified with their pyramid-shape entrance.



The northern style also known as the Nagara style (fig.4) is exemplified in central India, Orissa the east coast and some parts of west India. What defines the characteristics of this style is the shape of the Sikhara, the raised tower and the roofs of the hall leading to the sanctum, as the temples are more of a beehive shape in comparison to the pyramid shaped Dravidian style.

An example of a Nagara style Temple



1.3 The study of two Temples

The two main temples explored in the dissertation are, Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple and Kanda-riya Madadeva temple. One will be an example of the Dravidian, Southern Indian style and the other will be from the North referring to the Nagara/northern style.

Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple is an important landmark located in the city of Kerala, South India (Fig.5). Thiruvananthapuram, the name of the city derived from the presence of this temple. It is considered to be one of the 108 sacred shrines of Lord Vishnu.

It is dedicated to the Lord Mahavishnu and famous for the sleeping posture idol kept in the inner sanctum (heart of the temple) where the deity is reclining on the sacred serpent. The idol measures 18 feet in length and is covered with gold and other precious stones.

It is noted that the temple only permits Hindus inside and dress codes are to be strictly followed before entering the temple.

'While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time when the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple was consecrated there is no doubt about its great age and ancient character.'⁵ It has been estimated by many it was constructed at least 1600 years ago.

The Gopuram (main entrance to the temple) rises 35 meters in height, seven storied high with steps leading to the top. Each story has a window like opening in the centre that is light up every evening. The temple has a large corridor of 365 and a quarter sculptures granite-stone pillars that has exquisite carvings.

The second is the Kandariya Mahadeva temple (fig.6). The largest and most ornate temple within the group of medieval temples located in Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva and dates back to 1000 BC.

It is a 30 meters high, 20 meters in width, historic sandstone structure built entirely without the use of cement and mortar. Although the four smaller shrines that once stood around the main temple are no longer there, the central shrine is still in superb condition.

'The Chandella rulers constructed as many as 85 temples at Khajuraho, but only 25 temples now stands in varying stages of preservation.'

In a short span of 100 years, from 950 AD - 1050 AD, saw the completion of all the temples.

The area was originally supplied with abundant waterworks supplied by tanks and canals, however the temple is now displayed in a beautiful, park-like setting.

It stands on a high platform, called the Jagati, which elevates the temple from its environment. There are 646 figures on the external walls of the temple and 226 figures in the interior, with some of them reaching 3 feet high. Inside the sanctum is a marble linga representing Shiva.

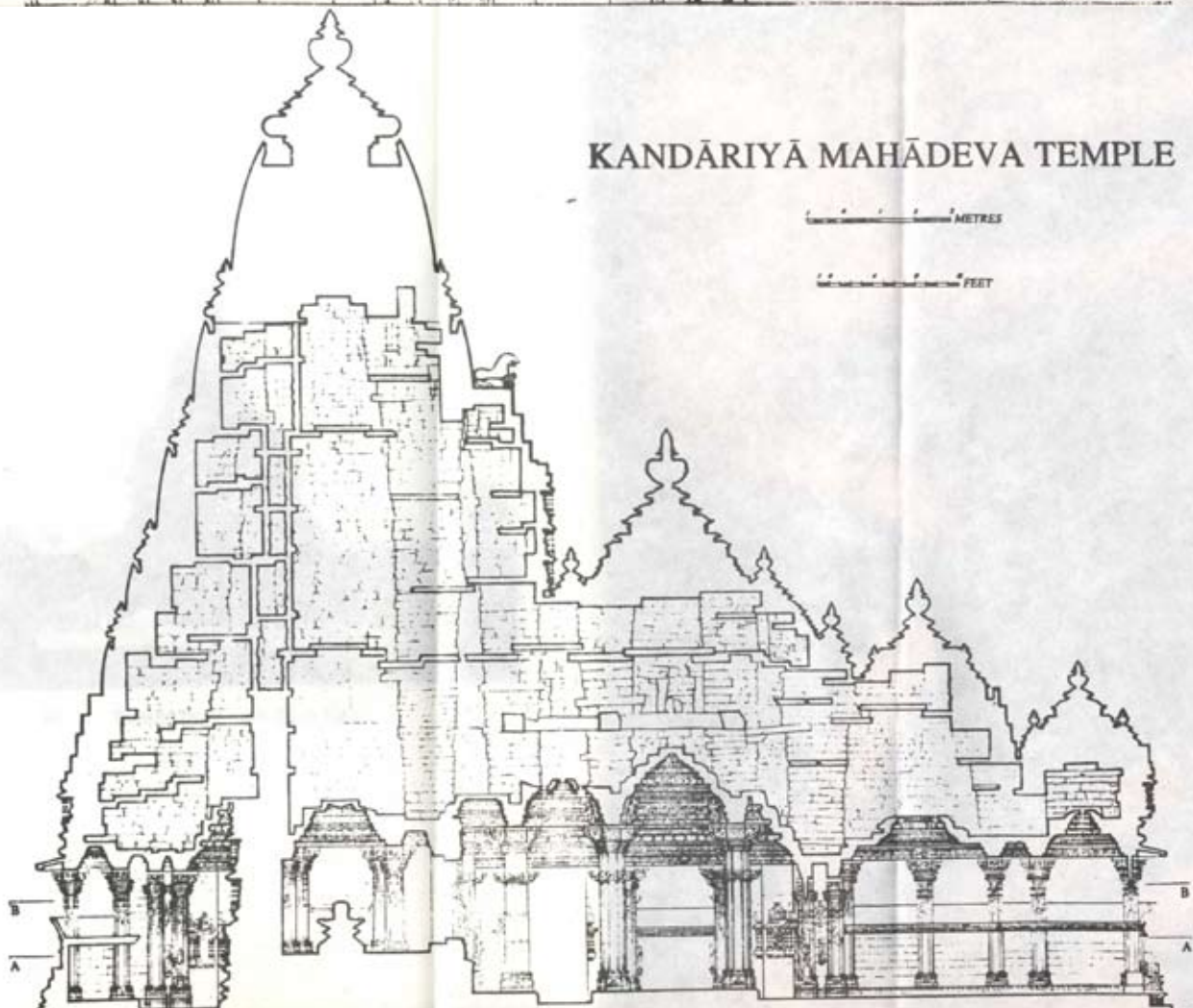
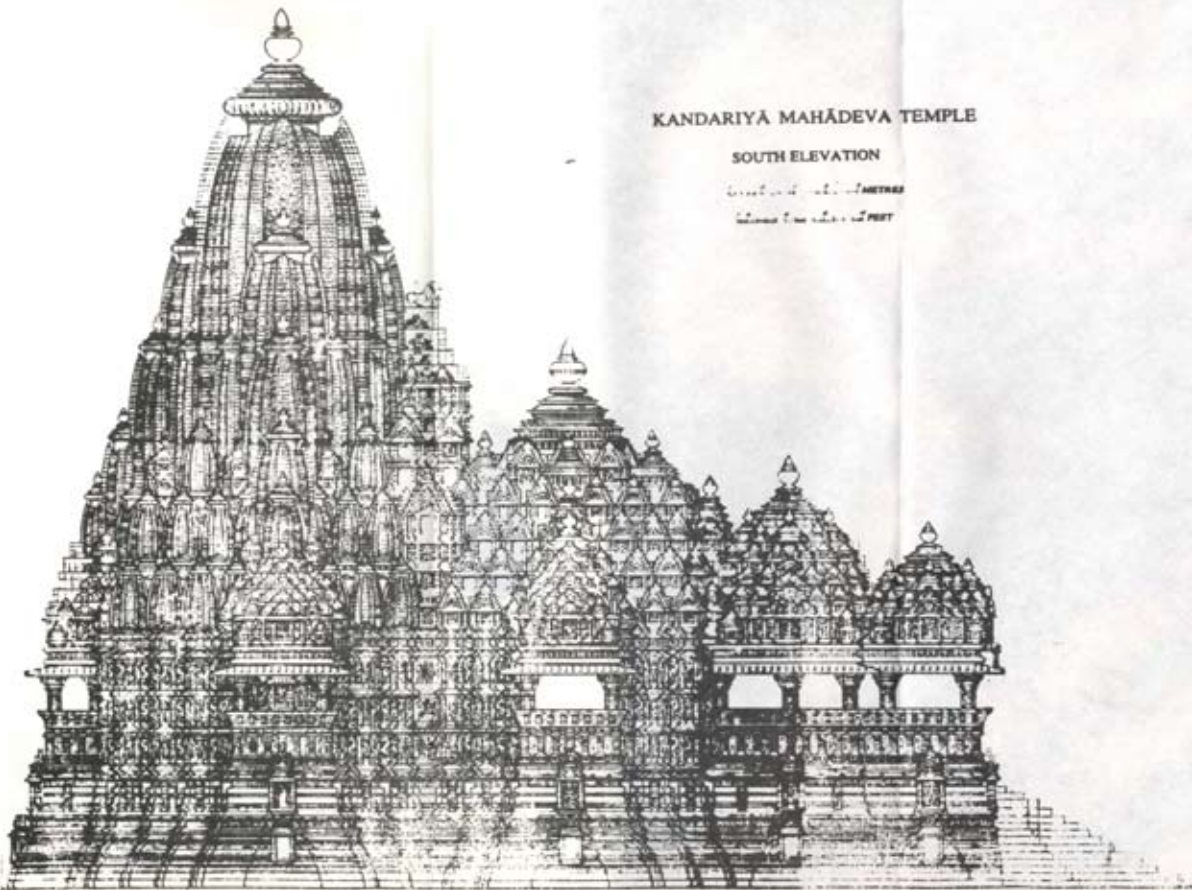




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6. The Kandariya Mahadeva Temple

7. Elevation and Section of Kandariya Mahadeva Temple



Chapter 2

Architecture of a Hindu Temple

2.1 - Finding the right location

The first rule of Vastu Shastra for building a temple is finding the right location. Sacred places were never just built in random locations.

'Men are not free to choose the sacred site, they only seek for it and find it by the help of mysterious signs.'⁷

It shows itself, manifests itself, as something wholly different from the profane. These elements, that are part of our natural 'profane' world such as rivers, stones and trees are not regarded with great respect itself but are worshipped precisely because something sacred shows itself to us. They show something that is no longer a physical element but part of the sacred world. From the most earliest to the most highly developed construction, they are constituted by a great number of manifestations of sacred realities.

As potent sites where gods reveal themselves are described in many ancient texts, 'the gods always play where gods are, near rivers, mountains and springs and in towns with pleasure-gardens, states the Brihatsamhita.'⁸ In ancient times, temples would be built over these sacred areas to manifest the gods.

Nowadays, it is rare for man to be aware of religious experiences that are strong enough to act upon by building a temple. However, elements that connects all these sites are that they are all linked with the natural world, where the presence can be felt so building a temple in such places can be seen to gain the full benefit of creating a closer connection between man and the higher deities. As the supernatural is seen to be indissolubly connected with the natural world. 'Nature always expresses something that transcends it.'⁹

When the temple begins to consecrate, the distinction between the artificial world and the naturally sacred places disappears.

The most important symbolic features associated with finding the right site are water, shade and seclusion.

The river Ganges, which issues from the mountain of Shiva are celebrated for its healing and purifying powers creating a sacred relationship with all rivers, springs and lakes as these powers are seen to be out the ordinary.

If there is no lakes or rivers, artificial reservoirs are constructed nearby to resemble the purifying powers of the lakes and rivers. They are also identified with their most characteristic flower, the Lotus. Shade and seclusion can take place near trees as the location is considered to be a place where meditation is possible.

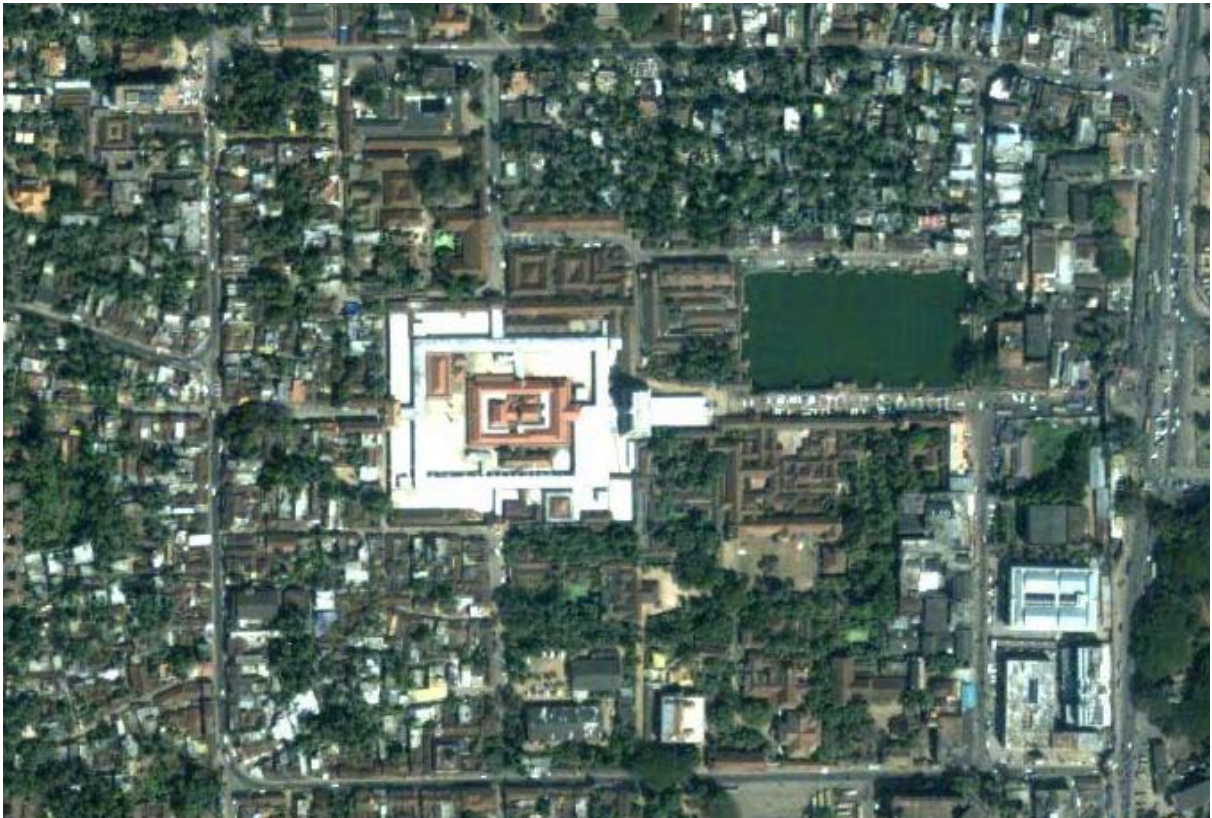
There is no hard evidence how Kandariya Mahadeva temple came about but it has been discovered that there were large natural water tanks near the site. Now, however, all that is present is a large open green area, set on the outskirts of the man-made town. So the main deity is believed to have revealed themselves hundreds of years ago in this location for it to be chosen as a site for the construction of the temple.

There are other temples placed in the same area (fig.8), meaning a significant religious experience must have taken place here in Khajuraho for so many temples to be manifested in the same area.



There are many legends and myths explaining how the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple (fig.9) materialized. One explanation is said that, a sage prayed to Vishnu asking him to appear in a form that he could comprehend with his limited human vision.

There are small pleasure gardens surrounding it, but no lakes or rivers so a large artificial reservoir has been constructed called Padma Theertham meaning the lotus spring, resembling the purifying powers of the Ganges.



Padmanabhaswamy temple is enclosed by a wall measuring 20 feet high. Isolating the temple from the profane world allowing total concentration to take place during meditation, preventing noise pollution etc from becoming a form of distraction.

2.2 The Ground plan

For a religious man, space is not homogeneous. 'There is then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.'¹⁰

In a homogeneous world, no point of reference is possible, therefore no orientation can be established. So this kind of break effected in space allows the world to be a part of a whole. This reveals an absolute fixed point, the central axis for orientation to take place. 'Nothing can begin, nothing can be done, without a previous orientation - and any orientation implies acquiring a fixed point.'¹¹ The discovery of a fixed point, the center is seen to be equivalent to the creation of the world, the universe.

An Indian myth states that the God Brahma stood on a huge, thousand petaled lotus and turned his eyes to the four points of the compass. The survey from the circle of the lotus was a kind of initial orientation. This spatial orientation performed by Brahma may be regarded as symbolic of the human need for psychic orientation.

'Legend of cosmogenic origination in India often spoke of the created universe as spreading from a point in the four cardinal directions, thus forming a square, the Vastu Mandala. The underlying foundation for all construction.'¹²

The directions of the cardinal points spread specific energies, which affects our body and mind, so using this diagram as the plan of constructing the temple, it manifests the energy of getting closer to god, to find that connection. The four functions of consciousness, thought, feeling, intuition and sensation, equip man to deal with life obstacles. The mandala orienting the universe symbolizes the necessary integration of these four functions that man must achieve.

First a ceremony takes place and then the diagram is drawn out for the preliminary laying of construction materials (fig.10). Using the mandala as the plan of such a construction can help the energy created within flow out into the profane world successfully from the four cardinal points. Which again symbolizes the idea of the temple being the center axis, the 'centre of the world.'

The whole of the habitable world extends around the fixed point, (the center of the universe). So the sequence of religious conceptions would be seen as :-

'a) a sacred place constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space

this break is symbolized by an opening by which passage from one cosmic region to another is made possible (from heaven to earth and vice versa)

communication with the heaven is expressed by one or another of certain images, all of which refer to the axis mundi: mountain, tree etc.

around this cosmic axis lies the world (our world), hence the world is located 'in the middle' at the 'navel of the earth,' it is the center of the world.'¹³

This symbolism of the center of the world explains the majority of religious behavior in respect to the space in which they live in.



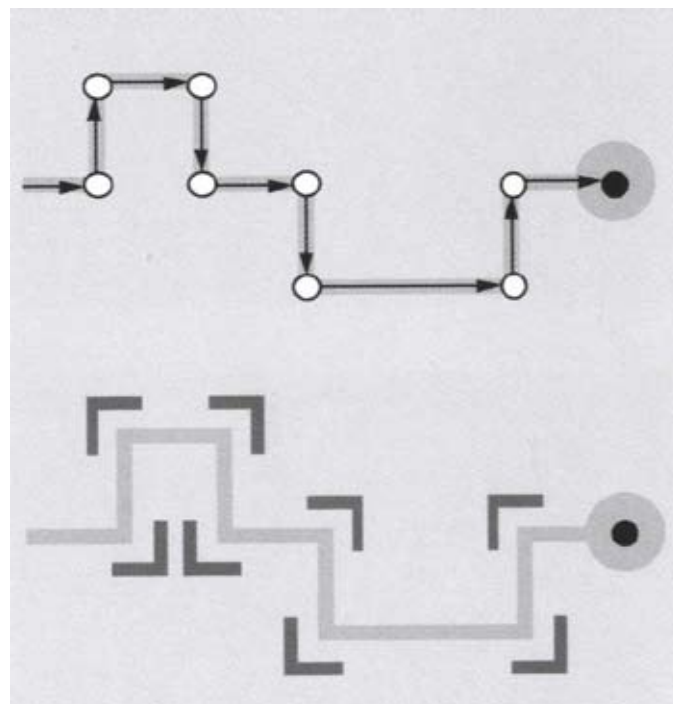
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Initial stages of laying the temple. The center and four cardinal points have been highlighted.

In the construction of a home the center of it is kept empty or as a courtyard as the energy created would be too overwhelming to live in. Whereas in the temple the idol of the main deity is enshrined in the small, unlit center called the Sanctum, which can intensify the power of the god. 'Man desires to have his abode in a space opening upward, that is, communicating with the divine world. To live near to a Center of the World is, in short, equivalent to living as close as possible to the gods.'¹⁴

With all Southern style temples, including the Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple, devotees have to walk clockwise around to get to the Sanctum where man can worship the idol of the main deity and with Kandariya Madadeva temple, the entrance is on the far east of the building, where the sanctum is on the opposing side.

The layout of temples allow you to see the Sanctum from the entrance but you cannot walk straight there. A sense of discovery is created through this indirect path of movement in the temple.



11

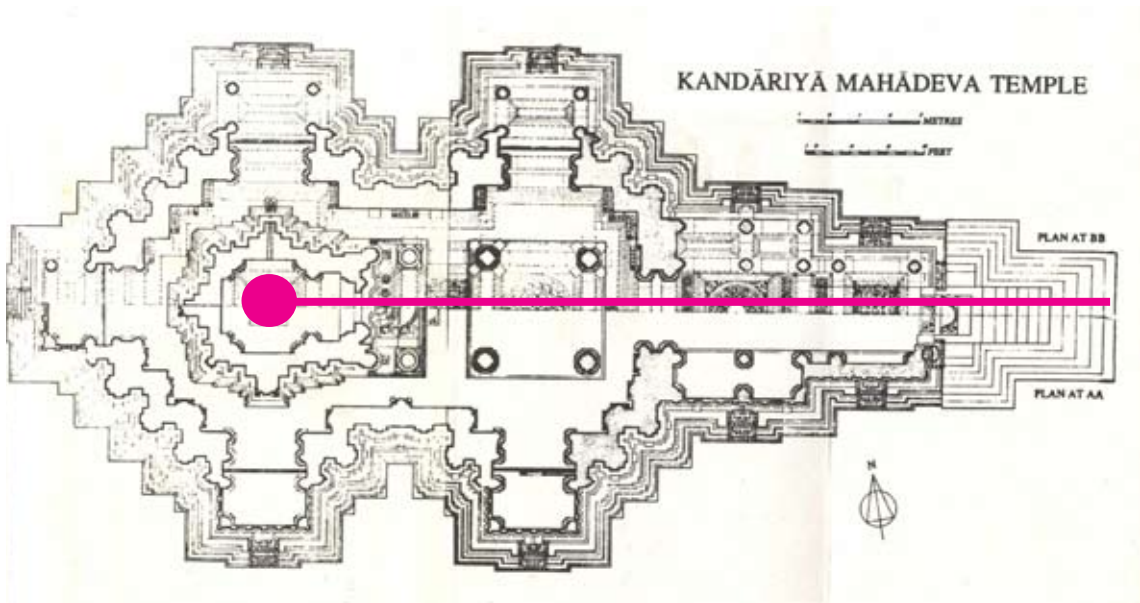
The religious man is aware he has come to pray, but the temple does not allow him to physically do this immediately but guides him with visual aids through the building. 'This extended movement, adding the element of time over space, helps in the conditioning of the mind. This makes the journey both physically and mentally engaging and, this, fulfilling.'¹⁵

A non-religious man can too experience a certain discontinuity of time. For example he has a repetitive time of, his work and then the time of celebration, in short, 'festal time,' living in varying temporal rhythms.

However the religious man in comparison, experiences time that is 'sacred,' that has no relation to worldly affairs, but 'have a wholly different structure and origin, for they are of a primordial time, sanctified by the gods.'¹⁶ This form of discontinuity of time is made present by the nourishing journey through the temples before getting to the Sanctum and allowing the divine presence to take place. As this form of time has a cosmic relation, it is an experience that is not seen as a norm within the everyday life of any man. Thus triggering the mind to become alert, as it will then allowing the realities within the temple to take over the mind.



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Above, both temples show where the Sanctum is kept and the journey taken to get to the Sanctum.

2.3 Vertical Elevation

The structure to the temples provide the visual reference from a far distance. It acts like a magnet, luring the eye and attracting one towards it. It appears as a notion of connecting the earth and the religious realm.

They both have a harmonies rhythm created through the fabrics of the facade. This sense of ordered rhythm has a pleasing effect. It imitates the cosmos and its ordered rhythm.

Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple physically symbolizes the link between earth and the sky through the elevation with its seven store high entrance, the Gopuram. The eye works up the building to the sky, the universe, the god. As it ascends, it is symbolically equivalent to an ecstatic journey to the center of the world. It expresses a break through from plane to plane; he reaches the 'pure region' (the heavens), transcending from the profane world.

As the temple represents the image of the world, it can also comprise a temporal symbolism. 'The temple was an imago mundi; being at the Center of the World, it sanctified not only the entire cosmos but also cosmic life - that is, time.' p75 profane world The intimate connection between the cosmos and time is powerful, as they are both divine creations. As the cosmos is a typical model of construction and every kind of creation, it equally implies the creation of time. With no cosmic time, the cosmos could not come into existence. Before a plant was created, the time that causes it to grow, make fruit, and die did not exist. So we imagine that every creation takes place at the beginning of time, meaning that the cosmogonic time serves as a model for all sacred times.

'This is why myth plays such an important role; the way in which a reality came into existence is revealed by its myth.'¹⁷

The reality of each temple is not only the cosmos remade but the year is built too.

Hinduism highly believes in the notation of reincarnation and that rebirth is a birth. An example is that the cosmos is reborn every year because at every New Year, time begins again with a beginning and an end. Within the corridor of the Sree Padmanabha Swamy temple stands 365 and a quarter granite pillars. A year is equivalent to 365.242199 days which is symbolically represented through these large

granite-stone pillars. The duration of walking through the corridor, from the entrance to the end of it, allows the man to leave the profane world and enter the sacred world of the gods. This highlights the notion of renewing the mind, a pure time, that existed the moment creation took place, 'a time that was 'new,' 'pure,' 'holly' - because not yet worn - comes into existence.'18 p.76

The temple in the North depicts Mount Meru, the holy mountain of Shiva.(fig.14) The tallest spire is where the sanctum is kept.

The cosmic mountain real or mythical, is an axis mundi that expresses the connection between heaven and earth, hence it is believed to be at the center of the world. In a sense it touches the heaven, making it the highest point.

Therefore this kind of belief expresses a feeling which is seen to be profoundly religious.

'Our world, is holy ground because it is the place nearest to heaven, because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven.'19

So temples are seen to be symbolisms that are replicas of the cosmic mountain which constitutes the pre-eminent 'link' between heaven and earth.



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The above image of a mountain range, depicts the vertical elevation of Kandariya Mahadeva Temple.

Chapter 3

Art

3.1 Animal Sculptures

The way natural features such as the lotus, lakes and trees symbolize the supreme, animal attributes are also used to represent gods.

Vision is the primary sense of perception, as it can guide and dictate behavior. A static, blank wall may guide the movement, but the same wall, overlaid with motifs and symbols, communicates further through what they conjure. The symbolic animal associated with the divine is reinforced visually through the motifs found on the walls of temples.

The boundless significance of animal symbolism does not merely emphasize the importance of the symbol but shows how crucial it is for men to integrate into their lives the symbol's psychic instinct. 'An animal is good nor evil, it is a piece of nature.'²⁰

It can obey its instinct, which may seem mysterious to man but it is the foundation of human nature. There is an 'animal being' in every man, creating a link between the man and the religious animal. Since man has the power to control their instinct by suppressing, distorting and wounding it, they come to the temple to be connected with nature, to heal the animal, to gain wholeness within, so it becomes his helpful companion. Therefore creating an environment that expresses symbolism through sight, sound or smell taps into the unconscious mind, conveying what the Hindu religion is there to do. 'The acceptance of the animal soul is the condition for wholeness and a fully lived life.'²¹

3.2 Erotic Sculptures

Aside from the mandala another common yantra motif is formed of two interpenetrating triangles. 'Traditionally, this shape symbolizes the union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female divinities.'²² As well as this motif there are various erotic sculptures carved through the facade of the temples expressing this union.

It psychologically expresses the union of opposites, 'the union of the personal, temporal, world of the ego with the non-personal, timeless world of the non ego.'²³ It is the union between man and the gods, the union of fulfillment. Like what the animal sculptures depict, it also represents the wholeness of the psyche, of which consciousness is just as much a part of the unconscious, the 'animal being' within.

However Karl Marx, a German philosopher argues that this fulfillment created within the temple, depicted by symbolic sculptures, is due to underlying structures within society. It explains how religion is a way of controlling people. The feeling that an individual receives when entering a temple is one that has been manipulated.

'Religion is the impotence of the human mind to deal with occurrences it cannot understand,'

Karl Marx

The sense of ease and security has been filtered down from the bourgeoisie to the individual to perceive that everything is how it should be.



Amazing carvings found through out the facades of temples.

Conclusion

After writing this dissertation, conclusions that can be drawn from it is that the physical elements that make a temple disappear while man becomes part of the sacred world. This relationship takes place within the temple through finding a dynamic location that integrates with nature, which to the religious man is seen as the main connection between the supernatural world and nature. The plan considers the cardinal orientation, where the center is where the powerful energy is created, so to highlight this notion the main deity is enshrined here. This idea of energy being created at the center is considered to link with the cosmos which is symbolically identified throughout the temple's vertical elevation. So the natural energies can be combined with earth magnetic fields with the heavenly bodies symbolized by the vertical structure. This complements the facilities that take place within the temple as man tries to communicate with god.

It is all to do with symbolism and myths. Though, all these analyses also, is a form of phenomena as it is what the senses or the mind of a holy man perceives. A non-religious man can also experience these phenomena if the mind is willing.

However all of this symbolism of the universe and myths may be, but in the other hand it could have nothing to do with architectural influences on man's connection with god. It could be related more to do with the society man lives in today, compared to the initial time when the temples were built, when time was pure.

Everything experienced within the temple maybe lost in the mind when the man returns to his everyday life but because it has had, an unconscious effect on the psyche, which may not be seen but only felt may trigger thoughts that could help overcome life obstacles. It nourishes the man both emotionally and spiritually.

'Part of the unconscious consists of a multitude of temporarily obscured thoughts, impressions, and images that, in spite of being lost, continue to influence our conscious minds.'²⁴

As this kind of religious behavior can be seen to contribute to maintaining the sanctity of the world so that it is not lost in history.

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