

## In Search of the Opposite

*Relativity as motif in architectural spaces*

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Since before the word 'relativity' came into common usage, the concept of relativity has been applicable in all domains. The full purport of an idea is only understood when it is placed beside something which is in stark contrast to it. The qualities of the words *bright*, *tall*, *heavy*, and *wide* hold no meaning without their counterpoints *dim*, *short*, *light*, and *narrow*. Even the phonic of the word *yes* is in contrast to that of its opposite, *no*. This makes the meaning of these two words recognizable in any language, only by their sounds. Just as a person who has been held captive can best describe freedom, it can only be said that a space is *vast* when it is approached through a series of *relatively* constricted spaces. The vastness of the space is entirely realized after the idea of narrowness is introduced. Such is the use of adjectives in the language of architecture. Man is on an eternal, subconscious search for opposites. A splash of color breaks the monotony of a black and white film. A sudden countermove by one member of a dance formation renews the audience's interest in the show. A hairpin turn on a steep mountain road draws attention to the view beyond. Such antonyms satisfy man's quest for the opposite, and are used to provoke. They invoke a response, a gasp of awe, an awakening from a dream which is comfortable by virtue of its predictability.

Architecture is experienced spatially over time. Through the ages, architects have used this characteristic to create spaces that unfold progressively as a series of experiences occurring as one navigates through a building. One of the principles of basic design involves creating a large move in one direction, followed by a counter-move in an opposite direction to achieve balance, contrast, tension. An enclosed room leading to a tall, open atrium, a steep flight of steps leading to a balcony with a view, a dark hallway lit by a series of punctures, a traditional water tank in the midst of a busy concrete jungle... all these are exercises in exploiting the architectural antonym. Complementary opposites satiate the want for an element of surprise, a contradiction.

Applying this assumption to the architecture of heritage structures, it can be argued that over time, a comfortable, predictable and *known* entity often stagnates. Architecture which is renowned as a World Heritage Site remains in a bygone era, a mute testimony to time. Its every nook and cranny has been discovered, photographed and documented. Each step has been tread on by centuries of visitors. Its plan has been replicated in many a publication. There is no search for a denied view, nor is there any reward when it is provided. When everything is known, there

are no surprises. Yet each wall tells a tale, if it can be read carefully. This tale only reveals itself when the architecture is viewed in a new light.

Consider the rigid order of the city of Fatehpur Sikri, its rigorous proportions and the meticulous planning that governed its architecture. A determined geometry decides the placement and repetition of each detail in the ornamentation, the location and shape of fenestrations, the length and width of each tile. Architecture of this caliber is not replicable. Undaunted by time, Fatehpur Sikri is not in want of anything, it is complete. Introduction of form where no void exists is the real challenge.

According to accepted dicta about architectural heritage, any new intervention must be compatible with the existing vocabulary. Contrarily, especially in this case, unnecessary addition of more ornamented surfaces of sandstone would result in a kitschy mockery of the existing architecture, diluting its significance and uprooting its connection with the time in which it was designed. It is possible to respect what exists by introducing something entirely in contrast; this does not mean to compete with the heritage structures or to render them trivial. Instead, to provide serendipitous introductions that incite awe would serve to break the predictability of Fatehpur Sikri with a breath of fresh air.

Any new introduction must strive to fine-tune the existing idea, to strip it down to its rawness, and seat it beside its anti-thesis. When placed against a contrasting background, a figure becomes more significant. The aim is thus to intervene in a subdued manner, only to enhance the beauty of Fatehpur Sikri by the insertion of antonyms, be they in contrast to its existing design, function, material, structure or emotional relevance. None of the architecture of Fatehpur Sikri has a designated use today. Is it necessary for architecture to have a fixed function? A functionless introduction can, on the contrary, accommodate a number of functions and serve a great many uses.

The reference point is a lost city. It is the enclosure within which the design will grow. The intent is to create a contradiction, to invoke a search for the opposite, to reward that search with unpredictable spaces throughout the journey, to allow Fatehpur Sikri to be seen in an entirely new light, and to incite its architecture to speak an untold tale.