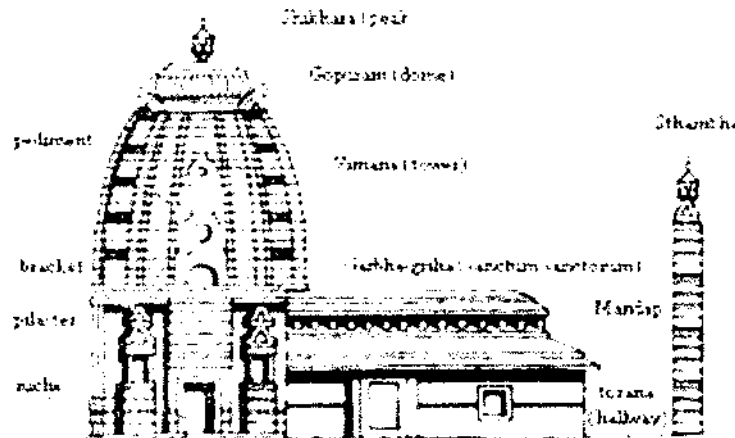


The Significance of Hindu Temple Architecture

In the pantomime of Andhra heat, my fingers spread across cool sandstone pillars. I trace over cattle, flowers, bees, and celestial beings carved from rock older than the New World. Each step echoes against holy chambers that were places of worship for more than a millennium. A priest lights incense just as his father and his father had done for centuries. *Breathtaking* I whisper as my voice carries into the spiritual abode.

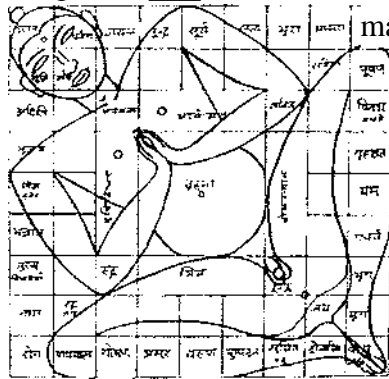
One of the momentous achievements of Hindu civilization is unquestionably its expository architecture. The physical manifestation of the rich heritage of India is over five millennia old. A tradition hailing from the civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, Hindu architecture is that vast tapestry of production of the Indian Subcontinent that encompasses a multitude of expressions over space and time, transformed by the forces of history considered unique to the sub-continent; sometimes destroying, but most of the time absorbing. The result is an evolving range of architectural production that none the less retains a certain amount of continuity across history. But this tradition of stone is not cemented in history solely because of its aesthetically pleasing designs etched into the *balipitha*, but rather of the divine resonance that reverberates in the structures. It is no wonder that these alcoves of faith have been the centers of Hindu life since the dawn of civilization.



In Sanskrit, the word for architecture is "Vastu Shastra" or science of structure. It illustrates the cross-thematic nature of Hindu architecture: It aligns both religious and scientific aspects of humanity. What is truly spectacular about this tradition is the fact that the structure harmonizes the body while educating Hindu society on myths and legends. The first thing one notices about the temple is its sheer size and ascetic appearance. The temple is ornately constructed so that the individual knows that this place is not any other structure. This alcove is the house of the Gods. It astounds the devotee. It moves him as he sees the towers, the highest point in range. Hindu architecture has aspects that are both pleasing to the eye and resonate with

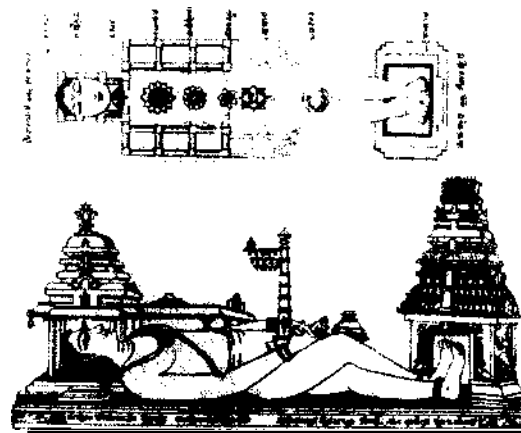
a spiritual and diving meaning. The following is the exploration of beauty, education, and spiritual resonance.

First, we must acknowledge the layout of a Hindu public sphere and its metaphysical manifestation. The basic plan of a Hindu temple is an expression of sacred geometry where the temple is visualized as a grand *mandala* categorized as sacred shape consisting of the intersection of a circle and a square. The plotting of the temple plan is in relation to the cardinal directions and the heavens. The square-shape is symbolic of earth, signifying the four directions which bind and define it while the circle is a metaphor for heaven. Without beginning or end, it signifies timelessness and eternity. The mandala is the meeting ground of heaven and earth. The



mandala is steeped in an ancient legend about the balance of good and evil.

Once when Shiva was engaged in a battle with the demon Andhaka, a drop of sweat fell from Shiva's forehead to the ground. The drop transformed into a beast who attempted to destroy the Universe. The gods, in retaliation, held him down. When the demon fell, the deities lodged themselves onto different parts of his body and compressed him. Thus the Sanskrit word "vastu" gains its significance as 'the lodgment of the gods'. In the diagram, he is illustrated as lying down inside the mandala with his arms and leg, his head pushed into the north-eastern corner of the square.



The temple is modeled after the anatomy of a human body, representing chakras and harmonious aligning as illustrated above

This *vastu-purusha* is the spirit in mother-earth which needs to be pacified and is regarded as a demon whose permission is necessary before any construction can come up on the site. The *vastu-mandala* is divided into square grids with the lodging of the respective deities marked. It also has represented on it the thirty-two *nakshatras*, the constellations that the moon passes through on its monthly course.

There are six attributes to the temple.

1. *Rajagopura* or tower. It represents the feet of a human. The pyramid-like structure shooting up the landscape dominates the skyline. On top of it resides the *shikhara* (peak). It marks the location of the shrine room and rises directly above it.

2. *Lanchana* or copper flag. The lanchana is inscripted with the deity of the temple and is a symbol of the structure's holiness. On the human body, the lanchana represents the loins.

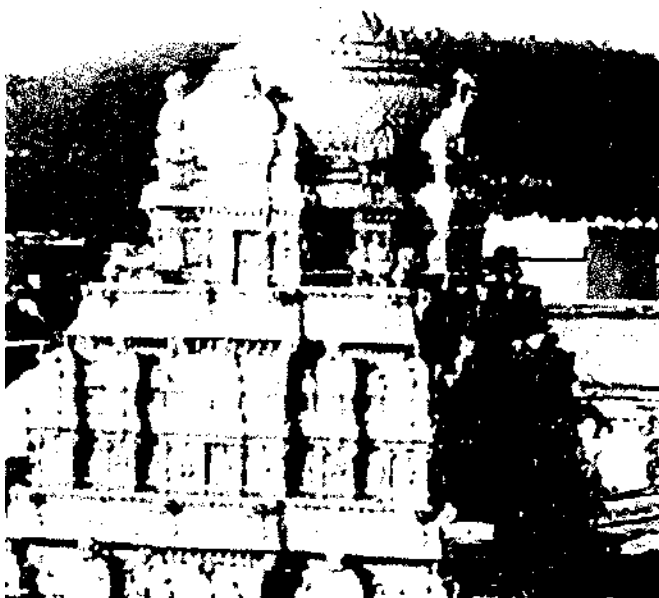
3. *Praakaara*. The third is the walkway. Most temples have a walkway around the walls of the inner chamber for circumambulation by devotees around the deity as a mark of respect to the God in the temple. The field enclosures and pavilions through which he must pass to reach the sanctum are symbolic. They represent the phases of progress in a man's journey towards divinity. According to the scheme of transition, architectural and sculptural details vary from phase to phase in the devotee's onward movement, gradually preparing him for the ultimate experience, which awaits him in the shrine. This process mirrors the four-phased spiritual evolution described in yoga: the waking state (*jagrat*); dream state (*swapna*); the state of deep sleep (*sushupti*); and finally the highest state of awareness, *turiya*. The *prakaram* represents the hands.

4. *Mandapam* or the Temple Hall. Most large temples have a hall meant for the devotees to sit. This is also called the *natya-mandira* (hall for temple-dancing) where, in days of yore, women dancers used to perform dance rituals. Devotees use the hall to sit, meditate, pray, chant or watch the priests perform rituals. The hall is decorated with paintings of deities. On the human body, the *Mandapam* is the abdomen

5. *Antaraala*. The Front Porch: This area of the temple usually has a big metallic bell that hangs from the ceiling. Devotees entering and leaving the porch ring this bell to declare their arrival and departure. On reaching the main gateway, the worshipper bends down and touches the threshold before crossing it. He is ready to pass into the abode. Entering the gateway, he is greeted by a host of figures on the outer walls. The sculptures carved in sandstone tell stories and educate members of society on the stories of creation.

6. *Garbhagriha*. Always in the North-east is the *garbha griha* (sanctum sanctorum) where in the murthi or deity resides (representing the head in the human body). There are no pillars, windows or ventilators. It is the interior and most sacred area of worship in the temple. Finally the shrine, devoid of any ornamentation, and with its plainly adorned entrance, leads the devotee further to the highest achievable state of consciousness of tranquility (*turiya*), where all boundaries vanish and the universe stands forth in its primordial glory. It signifies the coming to rest of all differentiated, relative existence. This utterly quiet, peaceful and blissful state is the ultimate aim of all spiritual activity. The devotee is now fully-absorbed in the beauty and serenity of the icon. He or she is now in the inner square of Brahma in the *vastu-mandala*, and in direct communion with the chief source of power in the temple.

The temple is a place of worship, self-reflection, and education. Every aspect of the architecture of the temple is built for the betterment of the individual and society. The temple educates society on themes. The exterior of the halls and porch are covered with figural sculpture. A series of niches highlight events from the mythology of the enshrined deity, and frequently a place is set aside for a variety of other gods. In addition, temple walls feature repeated banks of scroll-like foliage, images of women, and loving couples known as *mithunas*. Signifying growth, abundance, and prosperity, they were considered auspicious motifs. These sculptures were built to educate. For example, tucked into the hills of Andhra Pradesh sits Tirumala Venkateswara Temple, an ancient temple with a story that is as beautiful and poetic as Hinduism itself. It was once said that Sri Venkateswara himself walked up the hills. This place is beyond holy. The architecture scrolled in the metals that line the temple tells the story of Sri Venkateswara. Every curve of garlands, every deity, and every tree has significance. The ornately designed building has tiny statues carved into the metal to illustrate the story of the divine. These parables have a larger message. They educated the society on respect, devotion, and truth.



Hindu architecture is a fecund, moving, ancient, and spiritual tradition. There is no other physical tradition like it. No other tradition has such sensitivity to the self and the universe; interlocking both self and community, The Hindu temple is the ultimate abode of faith and a sacred place to experience the divinity.

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Washington DC.

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