

inside and outside, built and unbuilt, finished and unfinished, manmade and natural, transparent and enclosed, subtle and apparent, light and shade, together form contrasts, contrasts define patterns and patterns define architecture.

This is the mystique of the open-to-sky room or the "Courtyard". It would be unjust to call the courtyard a mere element of vernacular architecture. For it formed, the very core of the vernacular idiom.

In vastu, the courtyard has been given the *brahmasthana* or centre for it is believed that a concentration of energies exists there. Be it the haveli of northern India, wada of Maharashtra, Nahukettu of Kerala, Rajbari of Bengal, or the Dewdi of Hyderabad, the courtyard obliquely controlled the environment inside and fulfilled the myriad needs of its inhabitants. Though the character of the courtyard differed with the region, community, class and individual, the rationale behind its presence transcended all barriers.

With time the courtyard has changed radically. The craftsman of the vernacular tradition has been replaced by the architect of today. Steel and concrete have replaced wood and stone, but the delight of inviting the sky into one's house remains. A part of one's house is transformed into a stage. As the drama unfolds, light changes from orange to white to red and a number of other undefined shades in between, relieving the interiors of claustrophobia.

The number of interpretations of the word 'courtyard' remains unchanged even today. A patch of greenery for the green fingered, a sacred spot for the religious minded or an informal space for the entire family sharing all its joys and sorrows. Splashed with colours during Holi or glittering with diyas during Diwali.

In many a Hyderabad courtyard house such as Fateh Manzil



belonging to the Kunj-Behari Lal family, one has watched Kathak being performed; listened to nights of mellifluous ghazals; played teen-patta on sparkling Diwali evenings, and spent endlessly enjoyable hours of *gup-shup* to the heady nocturnal aroma of Mogra under a galactic tent of twinkling

stars. By day, butterflies and birds flit between the shrubbery while mica-starved dupattas dry in the noon day sun. Life actually happens here.

The proportion of the width of the courtyard to its height and elements such as paving, planting, sculptures and water-bodies impart character and individuality to courtyards.

Being a developing country, the courtyard holds special implications for us. We cannot afford over reliance on active means of climate control (i.e., using mechanical devices such as fans, air-conditioners, and air coolers).

In such a scenario, the courtyard comes to our rescue as a passive means of climate control. Through it, the warm sunrays filter during winter and the hot air escapes in summer, thus making the interiors much more habitable.

In the urban scene, where land is a precious commodity, the courtyard is viewed as a costly, space-consuming proposition, since the courtyard also consumes some additional area as transitory space all around its perimeter.

Existing bylaws requiring setbacks all around the building are contradictory to the very concept of an introverted courtyard house.

Also in the apartment system with different families on each floor (unlike the joint families of the past), the courtyard can hamper privacy. New materials such as acrylic sheets, fibre reinforced plastics and polycarbonates offer the possibility of preventing the rain from entering and diffusing the sunlight. Spaces below and around the courtyard become more usable.

"...Prevailing technology changes every few decades. And each time this happens, architecture must reinvent the statement of mythic images and values on which it is based."



Yashwant Ramamurthy is a consulting architect. Please send your queries with detailed drawings to property_times@indiatimes.com.



The charm of Courtyards