The characteristic that distinguishes a traditional society is order, the sense of coherence in every aspect of life. This order or coherence derives from a shared knowledge of origins and gives validity to every event. In a traditional society the creation myth normally serves as the basis for the organization of society, territory, dwelling and family. The myth embodies a metaphysical doctrine and inspires every act and every artifact. This study is an attempt to understand the metaphysical doctrine that inspires, or gives life to, the physical structure of the dwelling in traditional Hindu society.

I will first lay out the central metaphysical ideas frequently referred to as the primary source of, and ultimate justification for, every institution in the Hindu great tradition. I will then try to see how these ideas are expressed through the rituals of building and the form of the traditional dwelling. This chapter will look at rituals that are practiced today and the prescriptions and practices from which they are derived. And it will trace the etymological roots of terms used to refer to various parts of the building and determine if inferences can be drawn from the use of certain ornamental motifs. Rituals and practices in a traditional society express a certain world view and serve to establish the position of the building, or any artifact, within the larger order of the universe.
This embodies a fundamental way of thinking about man-made things and their relationship with ultimate reality.

**METAPHYSICAL CONSTRUCT:**
**THE MEANING OF RESIDENCE**

One encounters the image of the human being as a microcosm of the macrocosmic universe repeatedly in the art and architecture of various cultures at various periods in their history. These images express the idea of a supreme unifying order in the universe which is embodied in man. It is this order that man has tried to grasp and imbibe in his works. The Hindu conception of the relationship between macrocosm and microcosm is not only that man is the image of the universe and vice versa, but that he is the universe.

As mentioned earlier, the creation myth of a traditional society inspires and, in a sense, legitimizes every human act. The *Veda,* the set of hymns which constitute the earliest source of information about Hindu rituals and practices, describes the creation of the universe as occurring through a sacrifice in which the offering made by the gods was *Puruṣa,* cosmic man, or *Prajāpati,* the progenitor (FIG. 1). It was through this sacrifice that the world and its order were established. Every ritual in the Hindu tradition has its roots in this primordial act, and the performance of each such ritual marks a renewal and regeneration of the order of the universe. Gradually this elaborate ritual which involved several actors came to be internalized to the extent that the patron for whom the sacrifice was performed came to be identified with *Puruṣa* or *Prajāpati,* and he was seen as both the sacrificer and the offering.

In the description of the cosmic sacrifice the dismembered body of *Prajāpati,* "spent in the act of creation," was restored by the gods through a sacrifice. The part left over in the cosmic ritual, the residue, was considered the immanent cause of all that exists. This residue was known as *vāstu,* from *vas,* "to assume a form." *Vāstu* also signifies residence, since *vas* can also mean, "to abide in a given condition." The part left over from the sacrifice signifies all individual existence within which Unity or the Supreme Principle is said to reside. Thus every existing thing *vāstu* (*vastu* is a commonly used to mean "thing" or "object") is a residence in the true sense. It is with this understanding that the *Prāśāda,* the Hindu temple, is seen as the body of the divinity residing within. The human body is the visible outer casement of the invisible *Puruṣa.* The word *Puruṣa* derives from *pr,* "to fill."

The realization that every existing thing is a residence is critical to the understanding of traditional Hindu architecture. This architecture, which often makes analogical references to the human being
and to the universe, is neither anthropocentric nor cosmocentric, but aims at imitating the divine archetype, the Supreme Principle, which is reflected in man and the universe. This purely intuitive knowledge of Unity is gained through introspection and can only be expressed through analogy; thus both man and the universe are explained reciprocally, one in terms of the other. The attempt here is to see how this knowledge of ultimate form or purpose is reflected in the dwelling itself.

The clearest evidence of the knowledge of correspondence between man, universe and building, and of each of these as a residence in the true sense, is preserved today in building rituals. Bhumi Pujan, performed before the building is built, and Vastu Śānti, performed after it is completed, both make very clear references to the Vedic sacrifice which re-enacts the creation of the universe. The rituals described in various texts vary greatly in detail, but the purpose here is to draw from them the common thread of a deeper knowledge.

RITUAL DIAGRAM:
THE VĀSTUPURUṢAMANDALA

Traditionally every stage in the development of a building is regulated by astrological consultations. The regents of the stars and planets have their locations on a diagram, the vāstumandala, which represents the universe and is a forecast of the building. The vāstumandala is a yantra, a geometrical contrivance by which any aspect of the Supreme Principle may be bound to any spot for the purpose of concentration. "The manifest form of the Supreme Principle, or Brahman, is Purusa."4

The Vāstupuruṣa is always identified with the square diagram of the vāstumandala and is represented as lying diagonally within the square, face downward with his head in the northeast corner (FIG. 2). Though this ritual diagram is neither the ground plan of the building nor of the site, it regulates them nonetheless. The square form of the vāstupuruṣamandala, as also the form of the Vedic fire altar, derives from the image of the earth as square when ruled over by the heavenly order. The story of the descent of the Vāstupuruṣa out of a nameless, formless state is again one of creation from a primordial sacrifice. There is a clear identification of Vāstupuruṣa with Prajāpati. In the rituals of construction the householder is identified with Vāstupuruṣa-Prajāpati.5
THE BUILDING RITUALS: BHUMI PUJAN AND VASTU SANTI

On the auspicious day and time determined by a priest a pit is dug in preparation for the ceremony. The priest establishes to his left Ganapati, a deity symbolizing prosperity, and his two consorts, the household deity and Vastu Deva, the embryo of the house. The embryo consists of a small copper jar with an image of the serpent Anant the Endless inside. Beside these he places five unbaked bricks which are Bhumi (earth), Kurma (tortoise), Anant, Varaha (the boar) and Vastu. The tortoise, the serpent and the boar are all images from myth that have to do with the creation and sustenance of the universe.

At the time of depositing the embryo, the architect, who is referred to as Visvakarma, the all-worker or creator, and the householder holding the embryo in both hands enter the pit. The householder places the embryo in a small depression at the bottom of the pit over which the five bricks are then placed in order -- the first three running north to south and the other two running east to west over them. The architect then proceeds to cement the bricks in place, after which the pit is filled by pouring water and earth simultaneously into it (FIG. 3).

The ploughing or digging of the site in preparation for this ceremony is prescribed by all authorities. In some cases a ploughman performs the rite, and in others the patron or the patron and the architect perform it. This corresponds very closely to the ploughing of the site in preparation for setting up the fire altar for the Vedic sacrifice. The presence of a young woman with a red full-bloomed lotus is prescribed in some cases. Her presence increases the fertility of the earth. The placing of the embryo and the five bricks is described somewhat differently, but the images and their significance remain. The Tantrasamuchaya, a ritual text, prescribes, "... place a Nidhikumbha [the embryo] made of copper or stone... over this place a lotus, above this a tortoise made of stone." This corresponds to the setting up of the layers of the Vedic fire altar: "He then puts down a lotus-leaf, the lotus leaf is a womb... He then puts a gold plate thereon... he then lays the gold man thereon -- he is Prajapati, he is Agni, he is the sacrificer... it is a man for Prajapati is the Man... He then puts down a [living] tortoise... that lower shell of it is this [terrestrial] world... And that upper shell of it is yonder sky... and what is between is the air... that [tortoise] thus is these worlds; it is these worlds he thus lays down..." The act of digging or ploughing in these rituals has direct sexual significance. In cases where the driving in of a stake or pin is prescribed at the commencement of building operations, the association is the same -- the Earth is being fertilized and the building is being born.

Within the completed building a fire altar is set up in the central room (FIG. 4). This is the domestic hearth, which usually also signifies a new marriage. The ceremony is performed by the householder and his wife, instructed by a priest. After the customary chanting of hymns and invocations to the gods, the couple are instructed to take the small copper vessel and together deposit it in a small pit already dug inside the house to the right side of the
entrance. The pit in this case is within the plinth of the house. The husband and wife, both holding the embryo in their hands, lower it into the pit after which it is covered as before. The priest then pours offerings of ghee, clarified butter, and rice into the fire, blessing the couple with prosperity and progeny.10

Once again the ritual sacrifice is performed in which the householder is Prajāpati the progenitor. The fire altar is the domestic hearth or womb. "Our allusion is, in fact, to the metaphysical identification of woman with the household fire, and the act of insemination with a ritual offering in this fire."11 The ritual, besides being the re-enactment of an event, constitutes also a virtual return to the instant before creation began. The creative act is the creation of the universe anew -- cosmogony. The building then is a likeness of the universe.

Further evidence of this common understanding of the deep structure of the building is to be found in terms referring to different parts of the dwelling, which were once in regular usage and may be found in descriptive literature or prescriptive architectural texts. Since it was the rule that only timber and other impermanent materials could be used for human dwellings, since stone could only be used for temples and other permanent structures, we have no real physical evidence of the houses described in these texts, except for those represented in narrative paintings or sculptures.12

Making a broad classification, one can differentiate between two types of houses as described in literary works and texts. The first were those with an open quadrangle or court as the essential element. The second were those categorized by the number of stories.

The sālā house essentially consisted of rooms arranged around a quadrangle. Its principle components were the sālā, or rooms; ālinda, the verandah and front yard; the garbhagṛaha, literally "womb-of-the-house"; and the entrance and the porch. "The Garbhagṛaha, the interior chamber, though the sacred-most in a temple, was the central compound with vāpi or pushkarini -- the reservoir of water -- laid with a cover over it in the residential house."13 The main entrance or gate of the house was a structure which resembled the gateways of fortified towns, though much smaller. Across it lay a stone threshold or dehli (FIG. 5).14

A special characteristic of houses used to be that every roof of every room was provided with a hole, called uluka. This term has also been rendered uloka, an abridged form of ava-loka or uruloka, meaning the free open or intermediate space that made up either the universe or any division of it, especially the sky or heaven. This description corresponds closely to the images of the Brahmarandhra (cranial foramen) or Sun Door or the occlusus of the dome that serves as the threshold for transmigration from a particular to an unparticular state. This feature is coincident with
the axis of the universe. Images of transmigration are also evident in the climbing rites during a sacrifice and in funerary rituals when the skull is broken.\(^{15}\)

The second type of house form is described by Gupta:

The \textit{Prasada} [a seven storied mansion likened to the universe with its seven worlds] was conceived in the form of a human body with its limbs or components called after the human limbs, such as \textit{pada} [foot] signifying foundation, \textit{bāhus} [arms] the upper parts of the mansion, \textit{prakōṣṭha} [forearm] a room near the gate of a palace, \textit{skandhakuta} [shoulders] the walls, \ldots \textit{nāsika} [nose] the balcony, \textit{aksis} [eyes] the windows, \textit{lalātā} [forehead] the terrace, and \textit{siras} [head] the topmost part of the edifice.\(^{16}\)

The topmost part of the edifice was crowned by the pinnacle known as \textit{stupika}, from \textit{stupa} meaning a top knot of hair, and marked the point at which the cosmic axis pierced through the superstructure. The axis which links all the worlds and is the means of passage between them is often seen as a ladder, post, bridge or sometimes a ship or a chariot. "Just as, formally considered, there is a correspondence between the human body, human building and the whole world, so there is also a teleological correspondence: all these constructions have as their practical function to shelter individual principles on their way from one state of being to another -- to provide in other words, a field of experience in which they can become what they are."\(^{17}\)

\section*{Common Motifs: Plinth, Courtyard and Threshold}

As with the rituals that one can observe even today, the houses in many Indian cities attempt to imitate the same fundamental order described above. A case study of the houses of the old city of Ahmedabad, which are from one hundred to five hundred years old, serves here to bring out this common understanding of what the dwelling is, by studying particular motifs and elements which occur in every instance (FIG. 6).

The plinth of the house is most often ornamented with an edge of lotus leaves (FIG. 7). \textit{Padma Pitha} is the term used for the pedestal
or base of an image or throne, or for the plinth of the temple or Prāśāda. Before constructing the Vedic fire altar, the precursor of the base of the temple and the house, the sacrificer first lays down a lotus leaf. "The lotus means the waters and this earth is a leaf thereof: even as the lotus-leaf here lies spread on the water, so this earth lies spread on the waters." The waters are the waters of chaos above which the earth is raised and forms a support for the superstructure to be raised.

The central courtyard, the most dominant feature of the house, is the womb of the house through which passes the cosmic axis (FIG. 7). A pattern in the flooring, or a diagram, marks the center and is most often octagonal or circular (FIG. 8). The axis of the universe according to the texts is usually cylindrical or four- or eight-angled. Early Indian pillars were usually either cylindrical or eight-angled. This pattern in principle also marks the location of the foundation stone. The earth and the entire manifest world is said to be supported on the head of the serpent Ananta (the endless) or Sesa (the remainder). The ritual performed at the start of building often prescribes that the head of the serpent must be pegged down to stabilize the site and ensure the longevity of the building. A foundation stone with an eight-petalled lotus carved on it is set in mortar above this peg. The laying of the foundation stone is followed by the setting up of the central column or post, coincident with the navel of the earth and the axis of the universe. As described in the Matsya Puranam, "...then that pillar is to be bathed with all medicinal plants by the Brahman...then that pillar is to be fixed by the artisans after putting round it clothes and
ornaments . . . ."19 This description apparently alludes to the body of Prajāpati, "which upholds the falling heaven and earth."

In the earliest houses constructed over and around a central support -- actually the trunk of a tree -- the central post did serve as the main stay of the entire structure; but in later structures, "the importance of the axis, in principle, is no more necessarily represented by an actual pillar within the building, than it would be possible to demonstrate the empirical existence of an Axis of the Universe, which Axis is indeed always spoken of as a purely spiritual or pneumatic essence."20 It is at this point, in the middle of the central room of the house, that a fire altar is subsequently set up during the Vāstu Śanti ceremony. This altar is the domestic hearth, the navel of the world from which the pillar of smoke rises to escape through the eye in the roof.

The house has usually only one entrance from the street. It is the entrance into the womb of the house with its sun door the opening above (FIGS. 9, 10). The motif of the Pūrna Kalasa, the brimming vessel, enclosed on three sides by three levels is carved on the lintel over the entrance. The Pūrna Kalasa, known commonly as an auspicious symbol, also signifies fertility and is analogous to the womb, or in some cases to a woman. The lotus, the brimming vessel and the goddess Laxmi are all used to connote fertility. The figure enclosing the Kalasa is analogous to the three layers of the domestic hearth and to the three self-perforated bricks of the Vedic altar that signify the three worlds -- Bhu (the terrestrial world), Bhuvar (intermediate space) and Svar (the celestial world). "It can be said with respect to any of the three houses (man, building and cosmos) . . . that one enters into the provided environment at its lowest level (at birth) and departs from it at its highest level (at death) or in other words, that ingress is horizontal, egress vertical."21

CONCLUSION: RE-COGNITION

A metaphysical doctrine has been traced as it has been expressed through prescription, records of earlier practice and observation of building remains. Thus the building, vāstu is seen as originating in the residue of the sacrifice within which the Supreme Principle resides until it is restored to Unity through sacrifice. This central idea is constantly reinforced by rituals, language and the building itself. The forms and metaphors used served as mnemonic devices.
that remind one of the primordial event from which all order was generated. In repeating them, that event is generated anew. This constant renewal and regeneration is the essence of tradition.

The use of these forms in the modern house may have been reduced to little more than a symbol painted over a doorway, but the rituals still form an essential part of any building activity. Their function, however, has become one of legitimization.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. This idea can be said to have been expressed at its most literal level by cultures like the Dogon of Mali and at its most abstract in medieval Christian philosophy or in Hindu philosophy. See Geoffrey Parrinder, African Mythology (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969); A.K. Coomaraswamy, Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art (New York: Dover Publications, 1956).


4. Thus in the arts we have the following: in poetry, Sadabrahman and the Kasyapuruṣa; in music, Nadvabrahman and the Prabhadvapuruṣa; and in architecture, Vastubrahman and the vastupuruṣa. See Bettina Baumer, "Puruṣa and the Origin of Form," in Bettina Baumer, ed., Rupa Pratirupa: Alice Boner Commemoration volume (New Delhi: Biblia Impex, 1982), p. 33.


6. Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple I, pp. 62-63. "A great serpent (naga) moves encircling every site by its movement in the course of a year... it is a manifestation of Ananta or Sesha, the Endless, the Remainder, which encircles in the perpetuity of its movement and also supports on its head, the earth and the entire manifest world."


10. Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple I, p. 12. In the building of a temple, the height at which the embryo is deposited varies with the caste of the patron and indicates the level from which the ascent towards the highest point, the apex, is undertaken. For the Brahmanas it is highest, at the level of the topmost molding of the plinth. It is correspondingly lower for the other castes, but above ground level for all.


12. Kramrisch, The Hindu Temple I, pp. 62-63. The head of the serpent, on which the earth is supported, moves by one degree every day, and with it the Vastupuruṣa is also said to move. This rotating vastu is called caravāstu and is distinguished from the sthira vāstu whose position is fixed with its head in the northeast. For all permanent work like the building of a temple the sthira vāstu is worshipped, and for all impermanent work like the dwellings of men the caravāstu is worshipped. For drawings of domestic architecture reconstructed from descriptions, paintings and sculpture, see K. Krishnamurty, Early Indian Secular Architecture (New Delhi: Sundeepr Prakashan, 1987).


14. This description of the house closely resembles the houses that will be used in the latter part of this study to discuss the motifs and elements used in the houses of the old city of Ahmedabad.

15. Coomaraswamy, Traditional Art and Symbolism, pp. 415-450. Every building, city or country is seen as having its location above the hypothesized center of the universe. The cosmic axis passing through this central point has its image in the pillaring apart of heaven and earth or the rising of the primordial mound from the waters -- a separation of order from chaos. See also John Irwin, "The Stupa and the Cosmic Axis: The Archaeological Evidence," South Asian Archaeology, 1977.


