

Habib Fida Ali

Reputed to have designed over two-hundred houses and many commercial interiors, Habib Fida Ali's recent works have been larger buildings and interiors. Today, he is one of the best-known architects in Pakistan. He runs a small but thriving office which works almost exclusively on private sector projects.

Fida Ali was born in 1936 in Karachi, Pakistan. He was educated in Lahore until he went to London in 1956 to study at the Architectural Association School of Architecture. Between 1960 and 1963 he worked in London,

after which he returned to Pakistan to practise with William Perry Associates. In 1965 he established his own office in Karachi where he continues to work and live.

The architect was interviewed a few months ago in Karachi by Sabir Khan, an architecture student at Princeton University and even more recently in Singapore by MIMAR's Hasan-Uddin Khan, resulting in this profile. Although his own house interior has been published in Architectural Digest, this is the first major international coverage of his work.

MIMAR: You are known primarily as an architect concerned with "Design", with a capital "D", rather than as an architect with an ideology or even having a direction in his work. Would you comment on that?

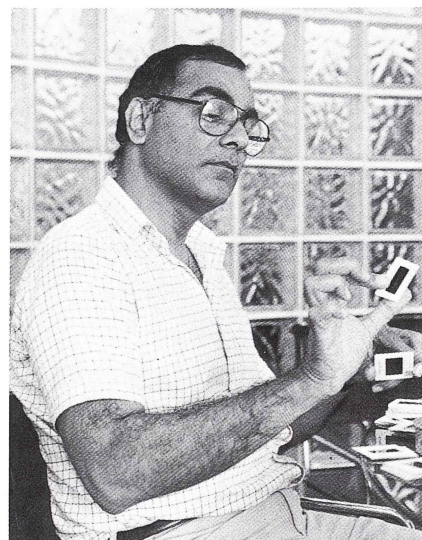
Fida Ali: I am not an ideological architect. I try to keep the didactic value of my buildings limited to solutions that are pertinent to their own contextual requirements. I am not advocating that architects should design buildings in isolation, solely from briefs. But I believe that if a design solution meets immediate cultural, socio-economic, technical and climatic considerations, the resulting building will in itself be exemplary and educative because of its honesty and contextual validity.

MIMAR: Don't you think that architects need to have a direction in their work: that he or she needs a framework for design in a Third World country?

Fida Ali: What is needed of architects in Third World countries is for them to get off their high horses, bridle their egos and attend honestly and seriously to the business of design. The quality of our built environment will not improve until architects get down to designing *each and every* building as honestly and as well as they can.

Some of my contemporaries feel that the issues confronting the Third World are "more serious than the design of aesthetically pleasing or even 'good' buildings," for such buildings are "totally unreal, unrelated to the problems of the common man." Structures that the upper and middle classes build for themselves do absorb large proportions of national wealth. However, these will continue to be built unless there is complete societal transformation. To insist that spending creative and monetary resources on such buildings is socially irresponsible and inappropriate is, in essence, also to let oneself off the creative hook, to hide behind one's own theories. If we approach each design with clear intentions, our cities would perhaps be in a less sorry state and we would be spared the sad sight of (ostensibly well-meaning) architects denouncing their own buildings as inappropriate and wasteful.

Architects should have the courage to build according to their convictions. To place every project in a macro-social con-



Photograph: Carl Larson.

"... the emphasis on the creation of national aesthetics and architectural models to correspond with political identity could result in an officially sanctioned but creatively sterile stylistic interpretation of architecture ..."

text, relating the creative consideration a project merits to some calculus of national need, may be commendable for its idealism but is a dangerous exercise. Such an attitude could lead to an architecture coloured by polemics and circumscribed by the architect's personal understanding of the hierarchy of social need. It could also create rather convenient rationalisations for bad architecture.

MIMAR: For the time being, let us assume that architectural ideology is undesirable. A related issue we have taken up time and again in our interviews with architects is the concern with the development of national,

Article by Sabir Khan and Hasan-Uddin Khan.
Photographs by Timothy Hursley and Farooq Turab.
Illustrations courtesy of the architect.

regional and even Islamic identities in architecture. How do you feel about this movement?

Fida Ali: People in our part of the world are increasingly talking about the necessity of a national architecture and of voluntary and legislative controls and codes to nurse its development. I am quite lost as to how one can ever tabulate a code of ethics that would ensure the "Malay-ness" or "Pakistani-ness" of new constructions. Such definitions aside, how does one ever force an architecture to extol "national" values and be in tune with "the aspirations of the people" as a Malay architect demanded in a recent issue of your magazine! Regional and vernacular identities in architecture develop slowly and organically and thus any architecture given caesarian birth by such codes could only be an architecture of the academic, if not the political, elite. However, this emphasis on the creation of national

"... there exists a need to objectively evaluate our traditional models for their validity in a changing society ..."

aesthetics and architectural models to correspond with political identity could result in an officially sanctioned but creatively sterile stylistic interpretation of architecture, falling back upon visual catch-symbols.

While this debate continues, our cityscapes come up all over with an aczematic rash of unregulated apartment buildings, cardboard constructions and callously inhuman structures. Meanwhile the building, zoning and quality-of-life regulations which are of prime importance remain unenforced and flouted by all of us.

MIMAR: Although these regulations are part of our colonial legacy, we have only ourselves to blame if we consider them inadequate. We need to develop our own rules, perhaps based on indigenous culture, to rid ourselves of this excuse.

Fida Ali: In the Third World we still tend to suffer from a post-colonial inferiority complex which gives us a big chip on our intellectual shoulders when it comes to the question of indigenous culture. Cultural policies in our part of the world tend to be negative in conception — very quick off the draw in proscribing activities deemed alien but by and large unable to define or encourage what is deemed indigenous and national.

While attempts to manipulate architectural development in the name of national identity should be avoided, it remains essential for us to understand traditional spatial typologies.

We have much to learn from the way regional models accommodate climatic and institutional considerations. We need to understand the fundamental principles behind Islamic and subcontinental architectural traditions and not pander to popular notions as to what they ought to look like. But we should be aware of the fact that an understanding and replication of these fundamental principles will not necessarily provide a panacea for our contemporary urban ills. Thus, I feel, there exists a concurrent need to objectively evaluate our traditional models for their validity in a changing society.

The cultural incoherence that exists in our societies today manifests itself in the controversies that accompany questions of architectural design, idiom, structures, aesthetics, forms and social responsibility. The chaos that exists in the built environment of our countries does not arise only from importation of Western architectural models and the resulting suffocation of traditional models. The demise of an organic design consensus, the lack of standards for the quality of the environment and the unholy mess of kitsch and nouveau riche ostentatiousness that typifies most of our urban architecture, all testify to the existence of wide-ranging cultural influences as well as the changing socio-economic ground-rules. The feudal-rural petit-bourgeois-urban society that turned architectural models to its own needs is itself out of kilter.

MIMAR: I agree with you. But you seem to be contradicting yourself to some extent. On one hand you believe that architecture should beware of an ideological basis, yet on the other hand you want to create an architecture that understands and caters to social needs. In trying to create an appropriate architecture for a region isn't there the need to develop a design vocabulary?

Fida Ali: Perhaps but my concerns parallel and yet differ from what can be called the "rhetoric of appropriateness" currently ascendant in developing and especially in the Islamic World.

I attempt to maintain a congruency between what I believe and what I actually build. Each individual building is an individual challenge. When I design, I am very conscious of the exterior in its simplicity I try to create interest. In my work I aim at specificity whereby each part speaks for itself, and I attempt a commitment to a certain standard and to an understated non-idiosyncratic style.

MIMAR: Talking of style: your buildings are often seen as being "fashionable"; seldom making any statements beyond being aesthetically pleasing. Sometimes one gets the impression that it is the look of your projects that matters and not its content.

Fida Ali: I try not to dominate the environment perhaps this is why, for a long time, I did almost nothing but houses — they kept

Project Data

Interior design for a hotel restaurant at Karachi airport.

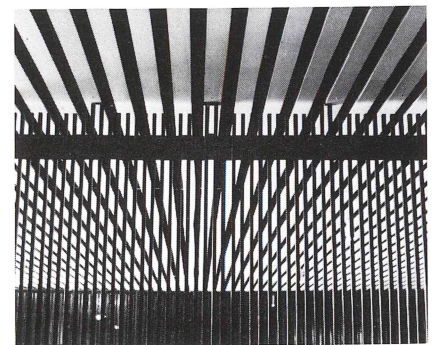
Owner: Midway House Limited

Cost: Rs. 1.2 million (US\$150,000)

Design Team: H. Fida Ali, M. Kalam Baig

Completion: 1974

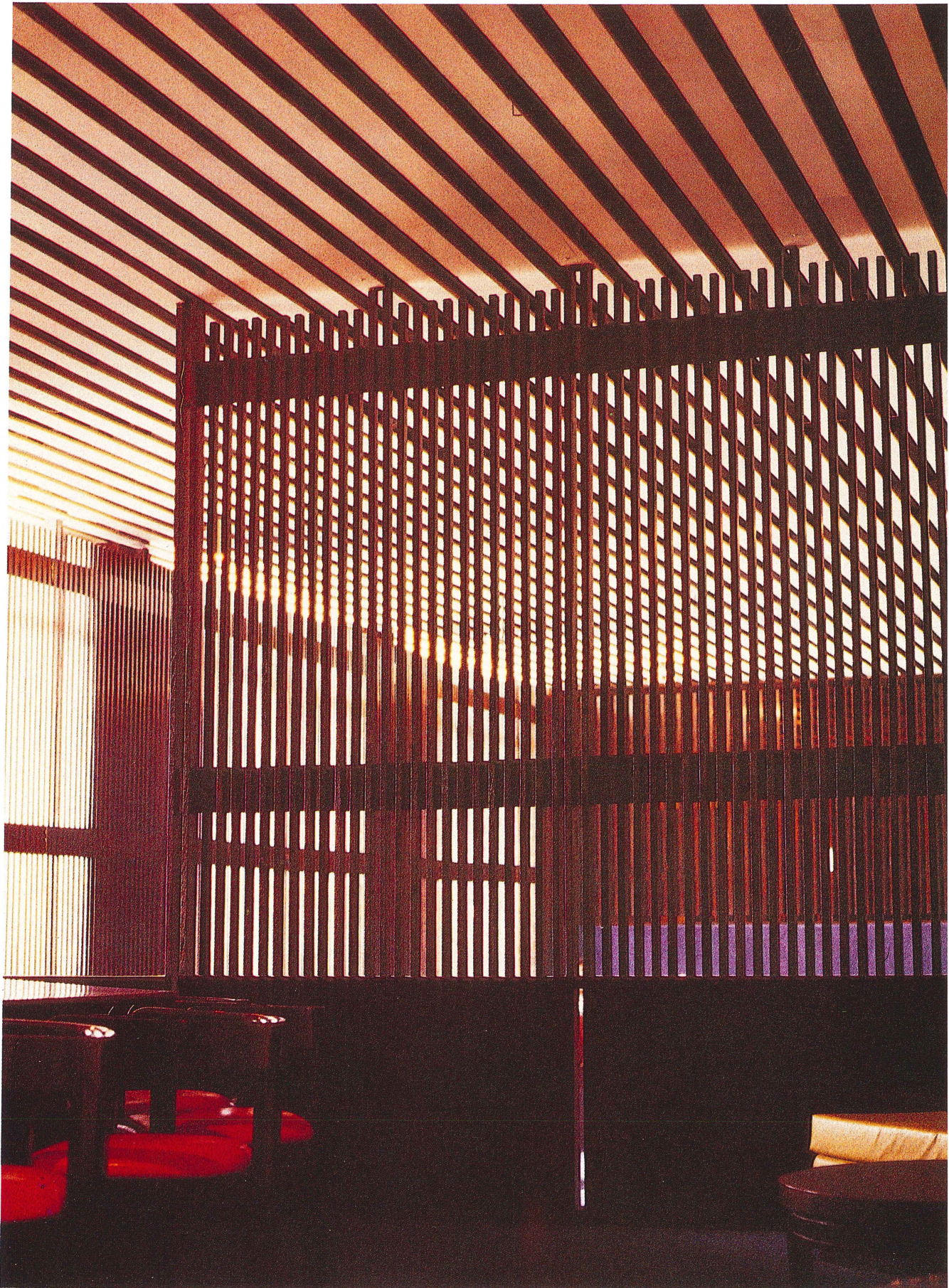
One of Fida Ali's earlier interiors, photographed this year, the restaurant still retains its crispness and drama. The play between the verticals of the screen, dividing the bar area from the eating area, and the ceiling horizontals combined with the bright red seating, creates rich optical effects.



Above and right: The dark varnished wood lattice rises from floor to ceiling. The false ceiling reverses the colours, with white painted planks of wood which also conceal the air-conditioning ductwork.

Photographs: Farooq Turab

Midway House Restaurant, Karachi



the scale human manageable! I do concentrate on an idea, a look for a building, but I try to combine this initial idea with its function. The two — form and function — are inseparable; not to have both aspects in a building is rather like the idea of a person without a soul. My architecture does have “content”. I may emphasise the aesthetic but I try not to make too strong a statement with my buildings.

MIMAR: I notice that your architecture appears to be changing. I see returning in your designs elements of your early architecture. Have your more recent larger buildings, such as the Pakistan Burmah-Shell (PBS) building and the bank in Quetta, affected your approach to design?

Fida Ali: Yes, I think that my architecture is changing. I am going through a cleansing process. A moment ago you talked of the “fashionable” aspect of my architecture — it is true that for several years I did much to please clients and created fashions — but I

on-the-job would be to play with the quality of life of a great number of people.

Secondly, I believe that the urban crisis faced by Pakistani cities can be best tackled by an enlightened administrative policy towards issues of land control and zoning. Initiative must come from politicians and government planners who should recognize the fact that what we face is not a “housing problem” but its urban and temporal dimension, a “settlement problem”.

People at all income levels are capable of providing their own housing according to their needs, resources and extent of legal security. Government housing agencies should restrict themselves to the provision of legal land tenure at the locations desired (invariably near sources of employment) and the development of infrastructural and social services.

The actual planning of the physical and spatial frameworks should be carried out with the groups of prospective residents.

“I see myself ... returning to some of my earlier ideas, I feel I now have the maturity ... and strength to take them forward with much less compromise.”

Both architects and planners should be aware of the fact that very rarely can their plans replicate the organic processes and the rational and resourceful planning of traditional urban and contemporary spontaneous settlements. Government agencies must not sink their limited capital resources in actual housing unit construction, but provide cheap and simple technologies for the residents of areas they develop.

If these agencies assessed the aspirations, needs and resources of the lower income groups before creating programmes for them, and if they dealt with the primary problem of location of such developments, then the literature on low income mass-housing settlements and development schemes would be more cheerful.

We (architects and planners) have to learn that we can't solve everything and recreate entire functioning human environments that would be acceptable to the people for whom they were designed.

Unfortunately, both architects and government planners in our countries are still victims of their visions, the former blinded by its intensity to the real limits on their abilities to comprehend the problems who-istically; the latter rendered myopic by procedure and precedence.

MIMAR: For an architect not involved in urban development you certainly have a lot to say about it! I can now understand your

Project Data

Shezan Kohsar Restaurant, Hill Park, Karachi
Owner: Shahnawaz Limited
Cost: Rs 1 million (US\$120,000)
Design Team: H. Fida Ali, M. Kalam Baig
Completion: 1971

The restaurant, situated on Karachi's high-est hill, overlooks the city. It is divided into two areas; an indoor dining room, kitchen and toilets, and an outdoor eating space. The outdoor area is covered by a wood canopy, consisting of a series of pyramid shaped squares, supported on a concrete frame structure. The frame itself is cantilevered from four columns.

The photographs show the outdoor covered dining area. The wooden canopy provides shade during the day and allows hot air to escape through it at night and its open-ness captures the south-westerly breeze. The semi-open roof creates slowly changing shadow patterns on the floor. The use of strips is reminiscent of the Midway House, but (being in the open) gives this restaurant a very different feel. Photographs: Farooq Turab



Photograph: Carl Larson.

am through with doing that. I am now doing what I want to do and doing it honestly.

The PBS building was the turning-point in my career. It made me realise that clients were ready to explore new ideas with the architect — be it in actual layout or the uses of materials. This building helped me re-evaluate my own ideas.

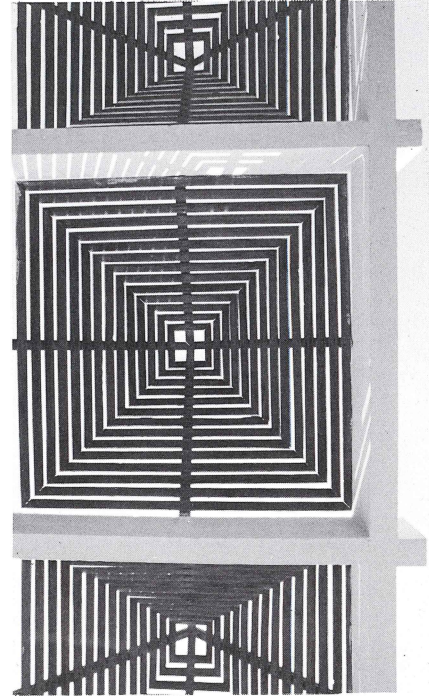
I see myself at present in a cyclical situation where I am returning to some of my earlier ideas, but I feel I now have the maturity with which to handle them, and a strength to take them forward with much less compromise.

MIMAR: It is interesting to see your getting involved in larger projects. I have often wondered why you have not worked on any major urban redevelopment or mass-housing schemes — I know that the opportunity has arisen on several occasions. What is the reason for this?

Fida Ali: First of all I am not an urban planner by training and to attempt to learn



Kohsar Restaurant, Karachi



not getting involved in such schemes. But, more and more, can we afford not to be involved in urban forms if we are to be able to synthesize all the different vocabularies into designs?

Fida Ali: I feel that it is essential for us to synthesize hybrid forms incorporating a new aesthetic, indeed a new architectural vocabulary that also includes forms and types for situations for which traditional models is not available. The widespread use of Western technology also provides an impetus for a new architectural vocabulary as it introduces new materials with their own innate design possibilities.

Architects in our part of the world should draw on both their Western learning and their own heritage to develop design excellence; to educate the very visible upper and middle classes through intelligently articulated design in proportion, practicability and simplicity.

Our work should have the integrity of inspiration which is grounded in reality; it should not take wing on our egos nor get carried away on clouds of rhetoric. Let there be honesty and sensitivity in the selection of form and idiom. Let it not be governed by the architect's whim, the socialist's vision, the nationalist's patriotic pride, the academic's pet theories, the accountant's balance sheet, the foreign expert's pronouncements — by the worst in all of us.

Habib Fida Ali: Major Works

Interior designs and renovations are marked with an asterisk. All projects are located in Karachi, unless otherwise indicated.

1970 Singer Showrooms and Offices*

1971 Kohsar Restaurant*

1974 Hotel Midway House*

1976 PBS Building
Citibank*

1979 Dubai, Oman, Union and Indosuez
French Banks*

1980 Middle East Bank*
Dubai Banks* Multan and
Faisabad

1981 National Bank, Quetta
Hotel Intercontinental*

1982 Chase Manhattan and Hong Kong
and Shanghai Banks*

Under "The Inn" Hotel extension
construction Midway House Hotel extension

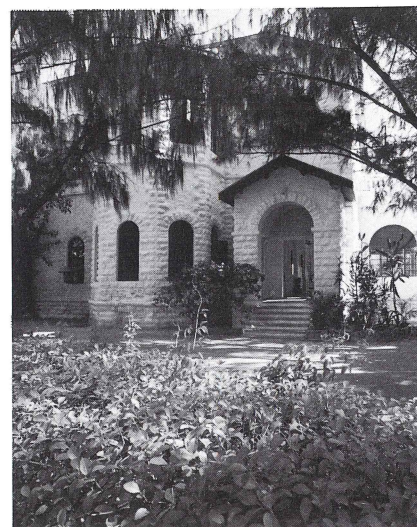
Design stage Office and Shopping Complex
American Express Office
Citibank Office, Lahore
Pakistan Carpet Industries
Complex
Sui Northern Office Building
Danul Falah (welfare home)

Project Data

*Restoration and interior design of a 19th century stone house, Khaliquzzaman Road, Karachi.
Completed: 1974*

This old house, one of the few remaining from the British period, was restored by Fida Ali as his own residence. The house serves as a reminder of an age gone by and is a quiet oasis in the middle of the busy city.

It took the architect two years to restore and decorate the house which bears his very personal imprint. The contrast of the stark white walls and the re-finished teak floors, provide a back-drop for his furnishings and objects of art which are displayed with carefully calculated elegance.



Architect's Residence, Karachi

Left: The house stands shadily secluded amidst the bustle of Karachi, its white-washed stone walls shine brightly in the sunlight.

Left, below: A seating alcove off the living room, white like the rest of the house, forms a cosy seating area. The carved inlaid wood chair is Pakistani.

Left, bottom: Fida Ali's own bedroom is furnished simply. The stark walls and bare floors provided a backdrop for the architect's art objects.

Right: The veranda is furnished in white Sindhi furniture; Dutch hanging lamps and an old chest stands on the refinished teak floors.

Below and bottom: Hand-blocked Ajrak cloth panels (designed by the architect) line the walls of the thematic black and white dining room.



17th Street House, Karachi

Project Data

House in Defence Housing Society, Karachi
 Owner: Habib Fida Ali
 Design Team: H. Fida Ali, M. Kalam Baig
 Completion: June 1979

From the mid-1970's the direction of Fida Ali's designs started to change. He experimented with his own house, which though not built for himself (it is rented to an embassy), incorporates several of his recent ideas on house design. (Note how different this building is from the earlier Kabrajee House which is a typical example

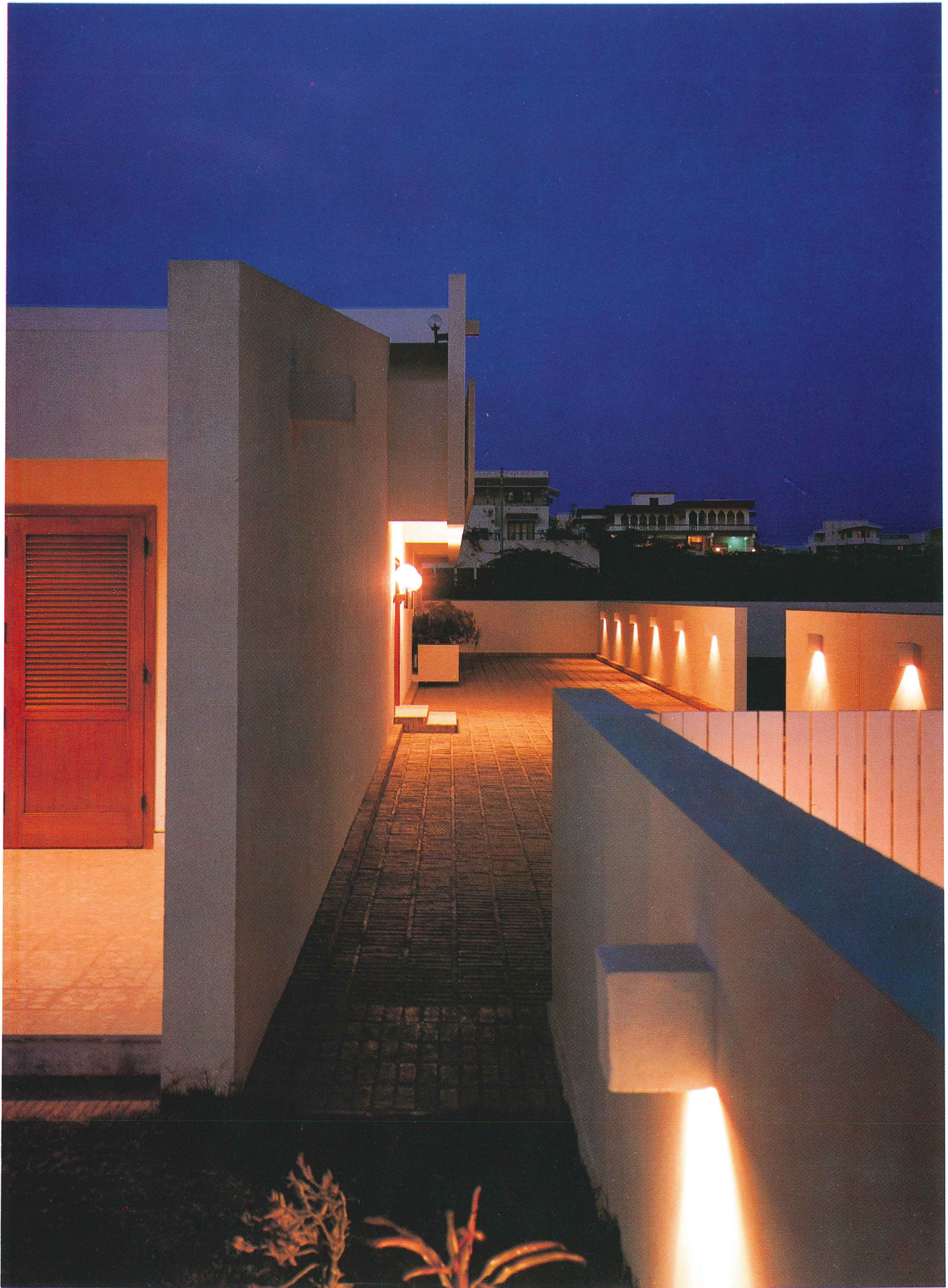
of the architect's 1960's and 1970's buildings.)

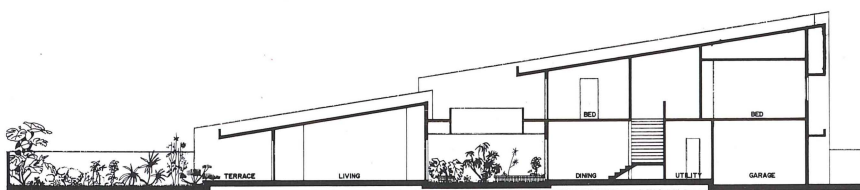
The site for the 17th Street House was a long and narrow rectangle (60 feet × 120 feet) with residential plots on both the north and south sides. The house has been oriented toward the prevailing breezes, with the living areas in the front and the services



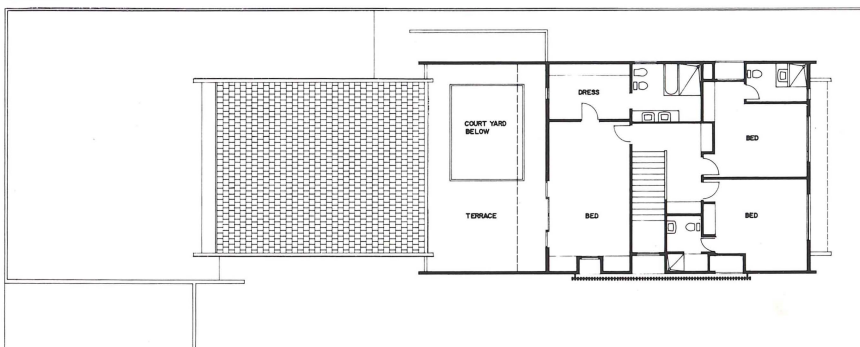
Above: The house seen from the side shows a simple profile sloping towards the front. The vertical wood slats protect the staircase and other windows from the sun.
 Right: The entrance driveway to the house cuts into the plot to allow for a more central approach to the front door and also creates a private garden in the front.
 Far right: The entry courtyard, lit as night falls, leads the visitor to the main entrance to the house. To the left is the living room which overlooks the garden.
 Photographs: Timothy Hursley.



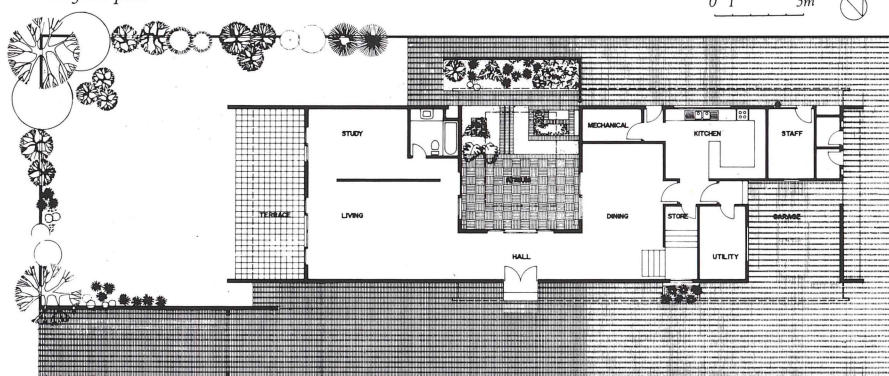




Section



First floor plan



Ground floor plan

to the rear. The bedrooms, with their own small utility area, are on the first floor. The Master Bedroom upstairs commands a view across the lawn, as well as into the court from a private terrace. The ground floor is basically an open plan wrapped around an interior court. The staircase window is shaded by a simple but dramatic screen of vertical slats of wood, painted white.

The architect has retained a clarity of line in the design and has emphasised one organizational element — the central courtyard. He avoided exterior add-ons, such as the ledges or sun-shades, that wrap around most of the Karachi houses. His solution was to cantilever the top floor over the ground floor and then set back both windows and unit air-conditioners. In the interior, the spaces on both sides of these recesses became convenient built-in storage niches.

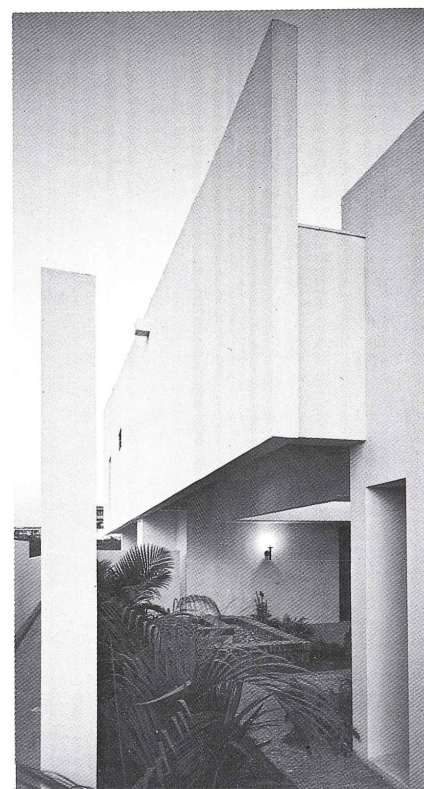
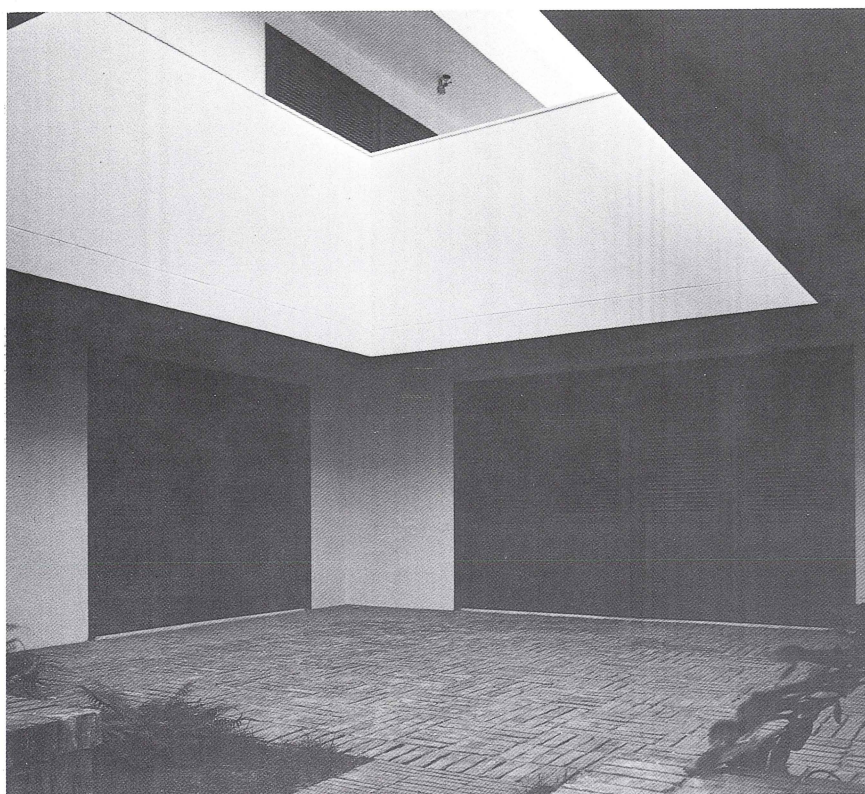
Much of Karachi's urban landscape is such a multi-hued and elaborate concoction, it is ironical that the uncluttered facade of this house makes it appear almost alien by contrast.

Right, top: The internal courtyard is partially open to the sky. It is a private space, mainly paved in brick and usable during much of the day.

Right, below: Side elevation of the house.

Below, left: The central court is surrounded by the more public rooms on the ground floor and bedrooms above.

Below: The central courtyard spills out to a narrow side garden. The free standing wall, at centre, is for privacy. Photographs: Timothy Hursley.





Kabrajee House, Karachi

Project Data

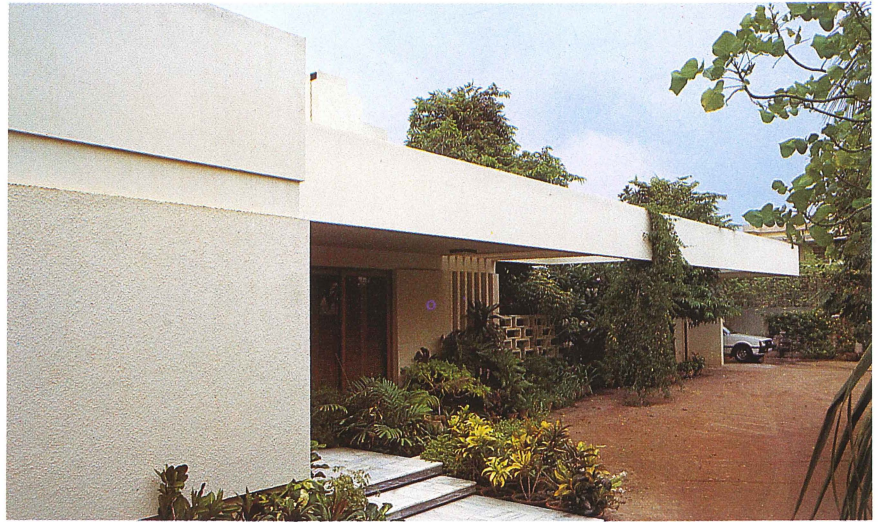
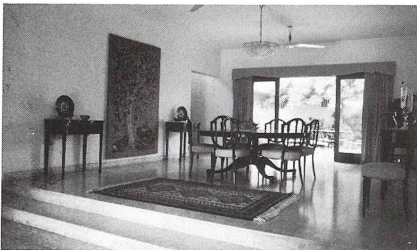
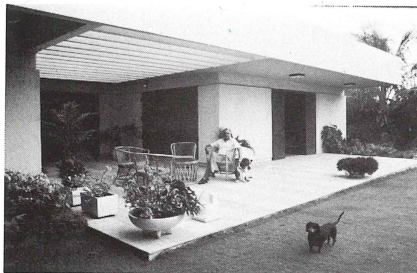
House for the Kabrajee family, Kehkashan, Karachi

Owner: Mr. Kabrajee

Design Team: H. Fida Ali, M. Kalam Baig

Completion: September, 1975

The architect says that this is one of his favourite houses in which he took his time and care in designing. The client gave him a relatively "free hand" and accepted the design with only minor changes. If user satisfaction is any measure by which to judge a building, then this house is a very successful design.



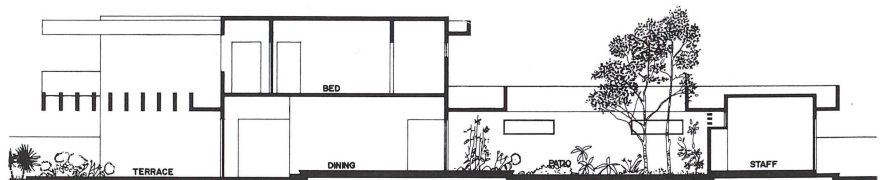
Right, top: Steps lead up to the front door of the house whose sleek lines sweep in bands around the facades.

Right: The Living Room with its silk covered furniture and Pakistani carpets.

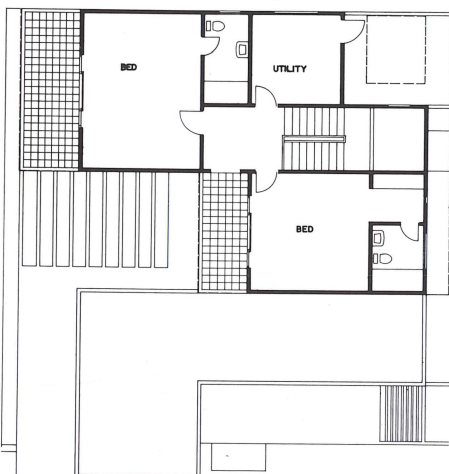
Top: The owner sits on the veranda adjacent to the garden.

Above: The Dining Room displays a wall hanging by Zareen Bokhari, a Pakistani designer. The furniture was made in the country. The cool terrazzo floor is covered by a Pakistani rug.

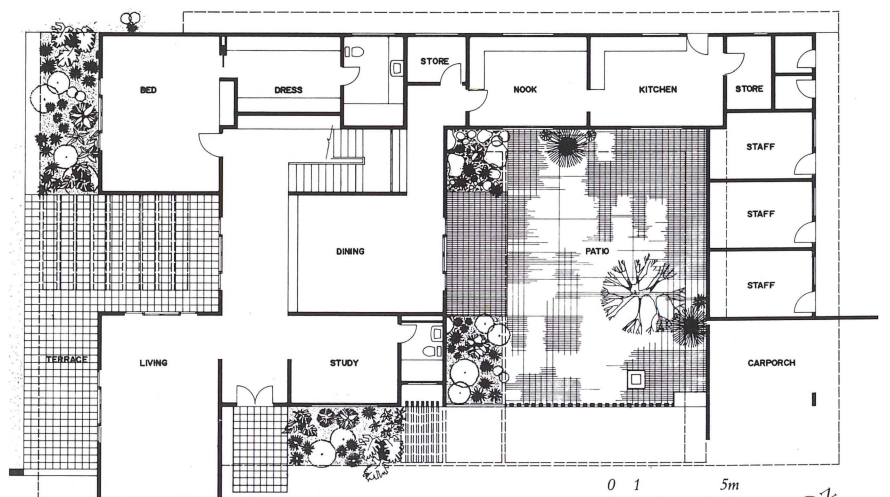
Photographs: Farooq Turab.



Section



First floor plan



Ground floor plan

Chase Manhattan Bank, Karachi

Project Data

Interior design for a banking hall and office,
Karachi

Owner: Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A.

Cost: Rs 4.5 million (US\$450,000)

Area: 7000 square feet

Design Team: H. Fida Ali, H. Lotia

Completion: April 1982

This project for the bank's interior design was executed in the very short period of two months. The banking hall is given an efficient and cool look by the use of marble floors and counters. The marble used is Italian, as the local marble was unavailable in panels of the designed size. The open plan office is divided by wood cabinets, and the dark tones are set-off by the bright corporate green coloured carpeting.

Right, top: The counter in marble gives the bank an air of subdued opulence.

Right, centre: The Board Room is stark in its simplicity. The painting is by Bashir Mirza, a Karachi artist.

Right, below: The office desks, adjacent to the windows are separated from other work areas by wood cabinets. Below: A corner waiting area continues the green and white colour scheme.

Bottom: The banking area has marble floors, whilst other circulation and office areas have the corporate green carpeting.

Photographs: Farooq Turab.



PBS Building, Karachi

Project Data

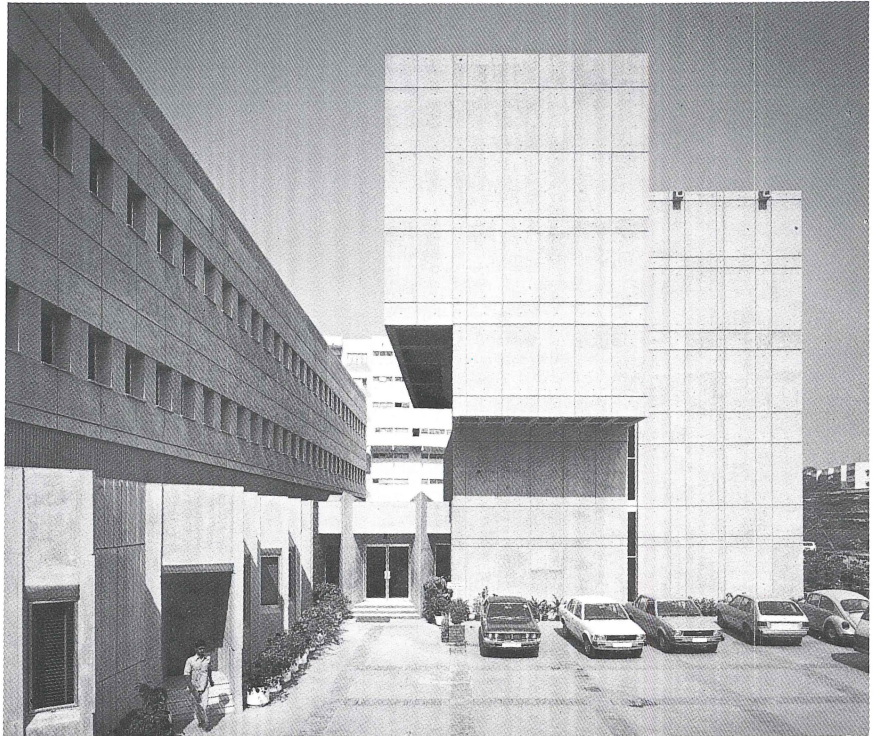
Pakistan Burnmah-Shell Oil Company
Corporate headquarters, Khaliquzzaman Road,
Karachi
Owner: Pakistan Burnmah-Shell (PBS) Limited
Cost: Rs 25 million (US\$2.5 million)
Covered Area: 76,000 square feet
Architect's Team: H. Fida Ali, S.P. Ahmed,
M. Rizvi
Structural Engineers: Mushtaq & Bilal
Electrical Engineer: W.J. Associates
Contractor: Yasin Bahdur
Owner's Coordinator: B.I. Sheikh
Completion: September, 1976 (7 months for
design and 2½ years to build)

The PBS Building was Fida Ali's first major project. He won the contract in a limited competition in 1973.

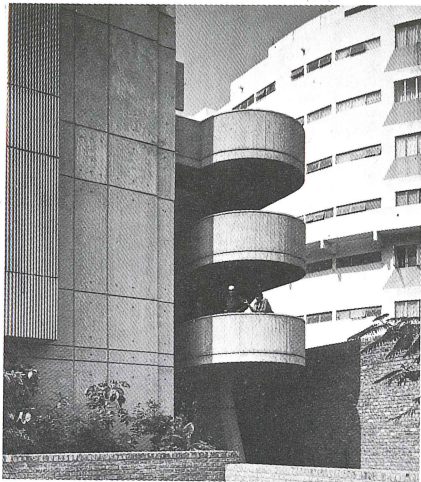
The complex consists of two buildings — a straight-forward three storeyed rectangular office block floating on a double height base facing west which is connected to a service block facing east. The multi-functional use of the service block (mechanical, staff rooms, lecture halls and a flat) has generated a more sculptured form where the plastic qualities of concrete are more fully exploited than in the main office building. It is something of an anomaly that the service building and the side entrance are more interesting than the main block and public facade.

The division of the functions into the two interconnected buildings strengthens the domestic scale of the complex, creating an atmosphere of harmony and intimacy — something of a rarity in corporate buildings.

The building uses fair-face concrete which is appropriate in terms of maintenance in Karachi's gritty and windy environment. However, it took Fida Ali some



Above, right: The staff entrance to the building is strategically placed between the office and service blocks.
Above: A general view of the building in its context — the flanking buildings are flats.
Right: The double-height entrance lobby with its coffered ceiling is a totally internal space. A raised platform defines the small waiting area.
Photographs: Timothy Hursley.



time to convince the client "that the fair-face look is not an 'unfinished' one but an aesthetic one in its own right". Fida Ali is a strong advocate of bare concrete finishes and structures and has used them for three of his subsequent major buildings.

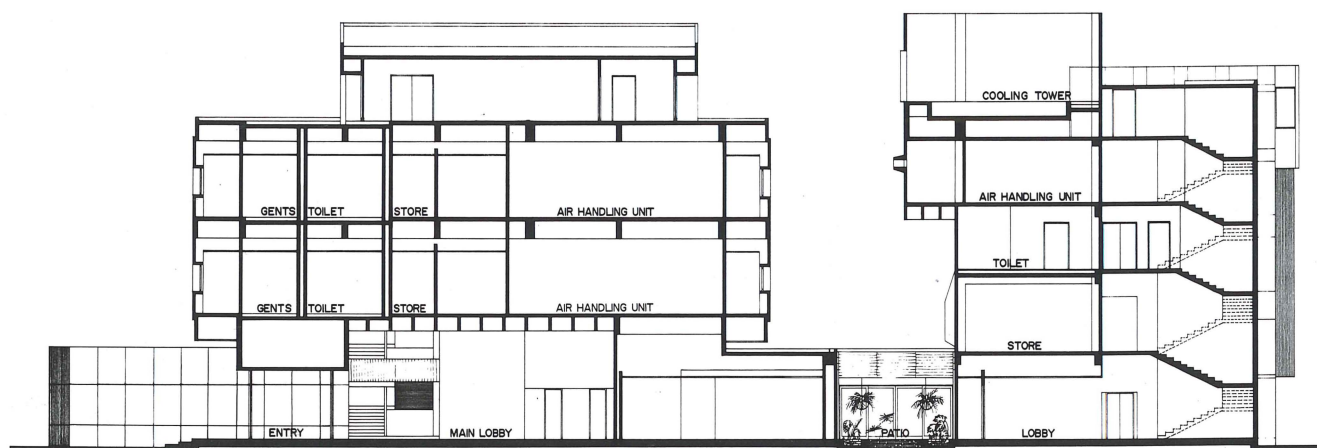
At a later stage he was asked to design the interiors of the building, including furniture and fixtures. Almost all the materials used were manufactured in Pakistan.

Top: The rear view of the office, with its sculptural service block in the foreground.

Above: The service stairs is one of the fine plastic elements of the project.

Right: The building viewed from the public entrance road. The ground floor protrusions are those of the training centre. The fair-face concrete has been poured in a series of equal modules, while the top is capped with a low ribbed concrete parapet.

Photographs: Timothy Hursley.

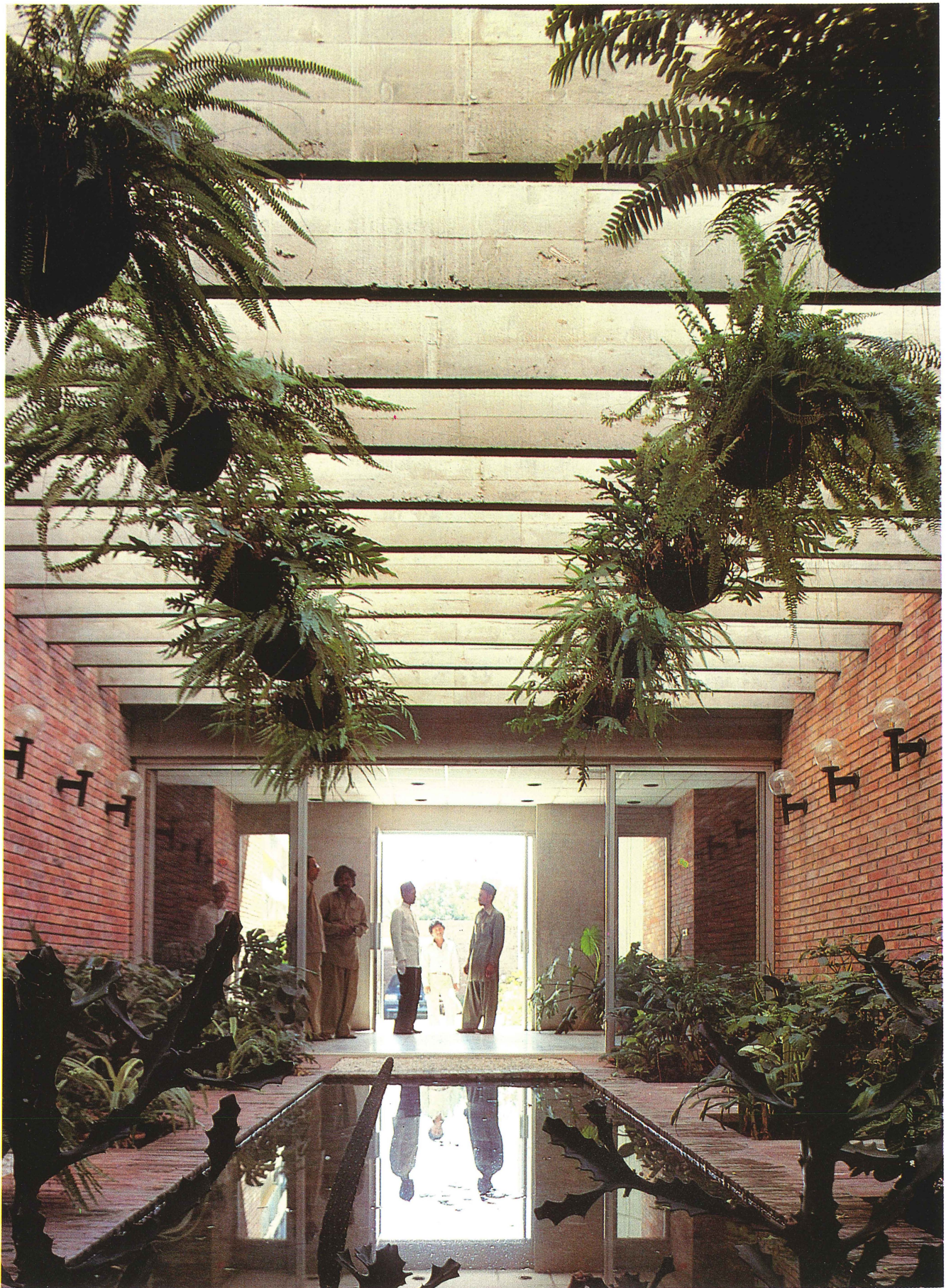


Section



Ground floor plan

Right: A small pooled courtyard acts as the transition area between the two parts of the complex. To the rear is the staff entrance.
Photograph: Timothy Hursley.



National Bank, Quetta

Project Data

National Bank of Pakistan, Quetta branch office

Owner: National Bank of Pakistan

Cost: Rs 20 million (US\$2 million)

Covered Area: 55,000 square feet

Design Team: H. Fida Ali, I. Haque

Structural Engineers: Mushtaq & Bilal

Electrical Engineers: WJ. Associates

Mechanical Engineer: A. Sadat

Contractor: Mughal Limited

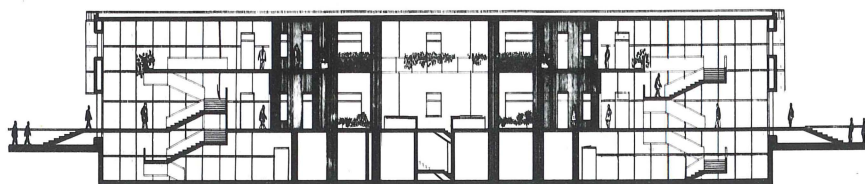
Completion: September 1981

Even though Quetta is the capital of Baluchistan, it is still a provincial settlement with a rather haphazard pattern of growth. The architect recalls that doing a project in Quetta was quite a challenge, as the town was very different from Karachi, where he had done most of his work. Moreover, the proposed site was not in the older British township but in the newer mixed-use open spaces of the Cantonment area. There was not much in terms of contextual support that this bank building could count upon or play against.

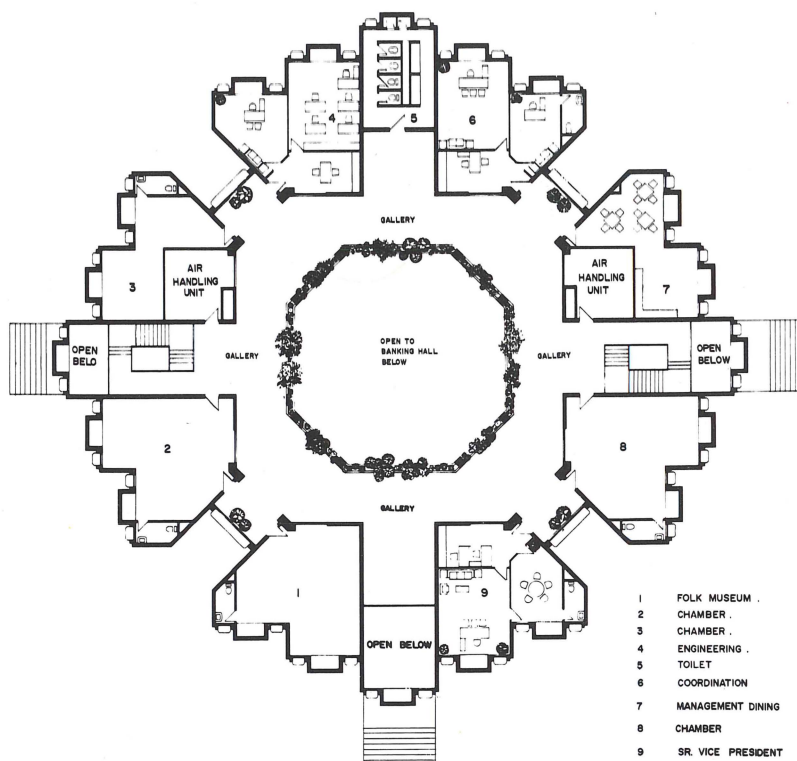
In somewhat of a departure from his usual practice, Fida Ali decided that his design would make a strong statement. He decided to base the design on some local vernacular form. As he explained, "I was inspired by the craggy shape and power of the old Baluchi forts. Once the visual parallels were established — the necessity for both forts and banks to give the impression of being strongholds — it was all rather straight-forward". The Baluchi forts were built of sun-dried brick and covered with a mud-plaster. So the architect decided that a smooth fair-face concrete finish would help in his attempted visual and psychological connections. In fact, set against the encircling mountains, the building's monolithic forms enter into a dramatic dialogue with the barren and rocky landscape.

Quetta is in the seismic zone, and the structure had to be designed to meet fairly severe earthquake conditions. For this reason too, local planning authorities will not give permission to build over two-storeys and encourage the use of basements. The architect designed this building to be two storeys high with a semi-basement area for the strong-room, storage and services.

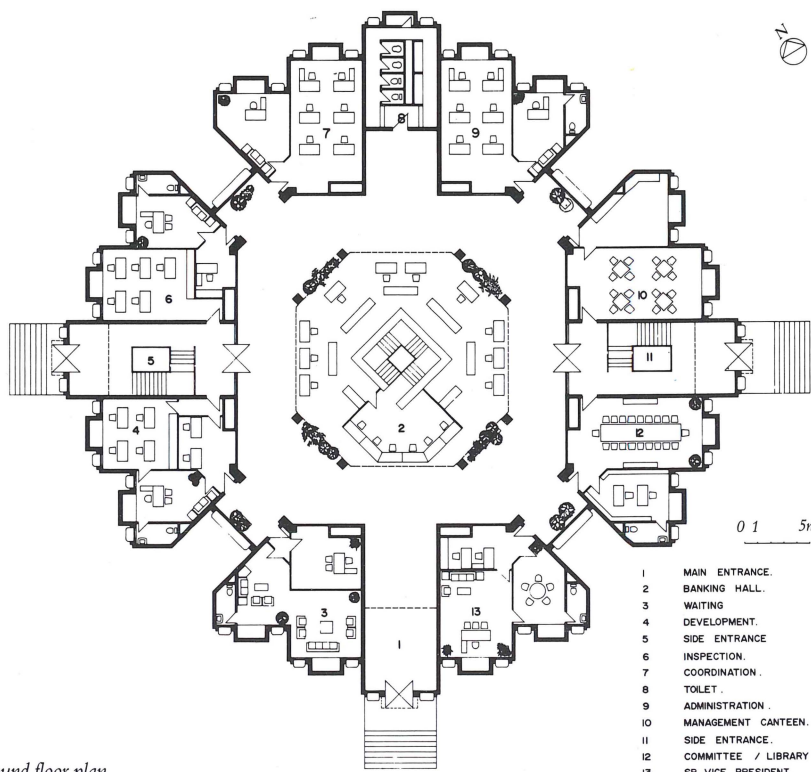
The plan is basically an octagon with entries along the diagonals. The brief called for a large banking hall on the ground floor. This was made into a central double storeyed space with offices on two floors symmetrically arranged around it — thus becoming a unifying element. The design is totally self-contained and non-expandable. At present it functions to 50% of its capacity and though the building may be criticised as being over-designed, the owners saw this as well designed built-in expansion.



Section



First floor plan



Ground floor plan



Left: The main entrance to the bank rises half a level.

Below: The smooth fair-face concrete pillars rise imposingly, accentuating the fort-like appearance of the building, even though it is only two-and-a-half storeys high.

Photographs: Farooq Turab

