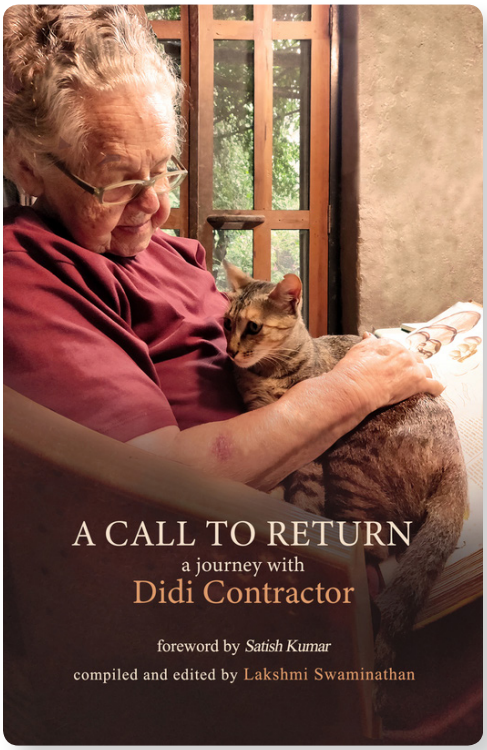
Review by Saptarshi Sanyal, Architectural Historian & Conservation Architect
| saptarshi@spa.ac.in

ARCHITECTURE THAT'S 'GROWN', NOT BUILT

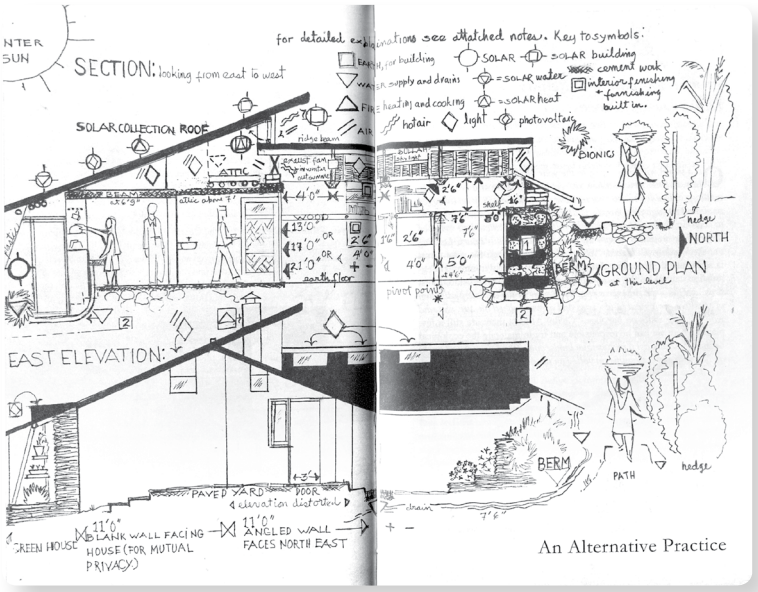


Values of slowing down, living with nature, cooperation instead of competition, people-centric development, conservation of natural resources, and many other lessons on sustainable living on planet Earth find reflection in the works of Didi Contractor, one of the country's most influential designers in the field of vernacular architecture. The book is a compilation of various talks and lectures by Didi, coupled with anecdotes of her everyday life.

A CALL TO RETURN: A JOURNEY WITH DIDI CONTRACTOR
Compiled and Edited by Lakshmi Swaminathan
Published by Banyan Tree, Indore, 2024
Size: 152.4 mm x 228.6 mm x 18.5 mm
168 Pages, Paperback
ISBN: 978-93-82400-46-2

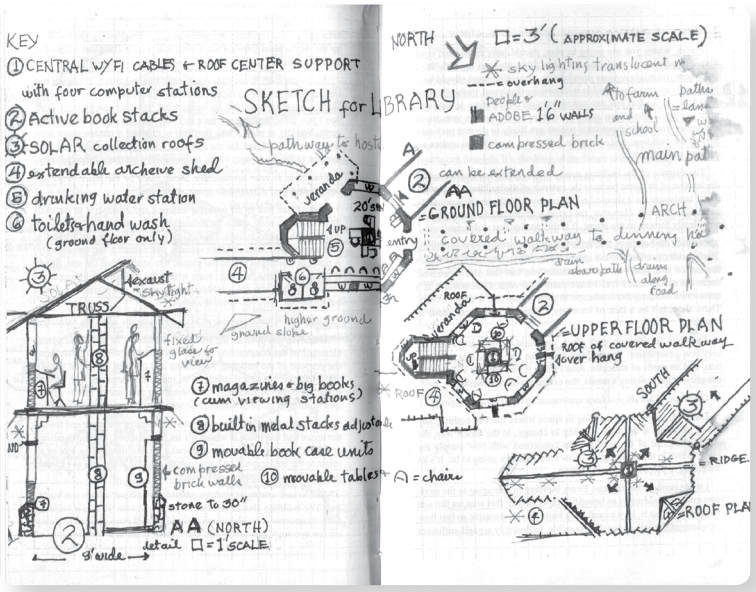
For those who painfully struggle to remain conscientious in the study and practice of architecture in India, ethics seems to be a declining currency. Helplessly, often hopelessly, we witness a rapid and efficient 'demonetization' of ethics permeating myriad technologies, disciplines, and professions that shape our society. The business of fashioning its habitats through architecture and design (buildings, landscapes, urbanisms, including how we treat built heritage) and space planning (cities, towns, regions, environments, or transport networks)—remains no exception.

Across these domains, artifice seems to reign. We romanticize vernacular traditions or develop 'models' for sustainable buildings, environments, and cities that often contradict what goes on in our offices and are executed at our sites. We oscillate between advocating for or employing high technology and, recently, the equally fashionable 'traditional (or Indian) knowledge systems' to strengthen our case. We deploy vocabularies that make the extractive nature of architectural and planning practices about natural resources or human labor appear benign. We forge languages to veil the unchecked impact of capital and profit that drives urban growth and industrial development that fosters social inequality through displacement or disenfranchisement. The jargon of sustainability, circularity, regenerative design—the list goes on—must convince us and others that our professions possess relevance, and are necessary, even beneficial, to grow economies and enhance our life's quality. This is all done in a hurry; change, we recognize, is fast and unforgiving. It requires swift follow-throughs. We enthusiastically or grudgingly admit we have no control over change.



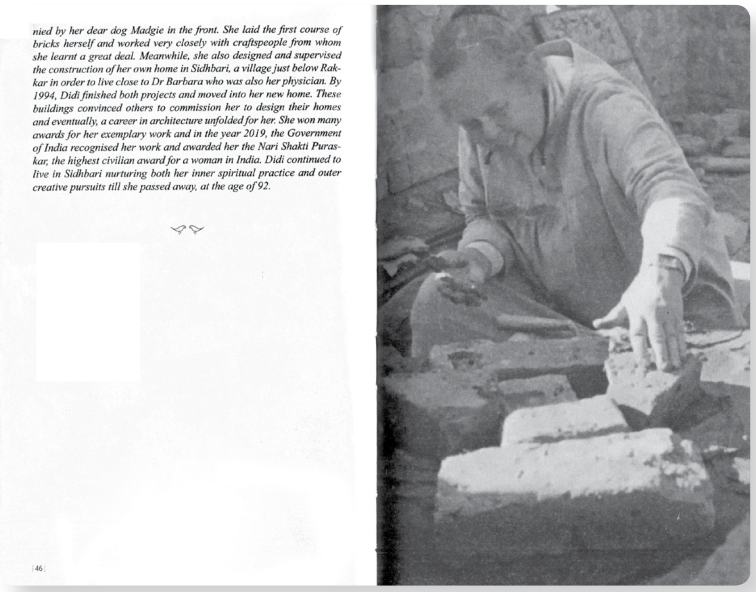
Yet, when a diminutive publication like *A Call to Return* centers the ethics of its protagonist, we architect-types might want to take notice. This little book can be more accurately described as fragments of an archive and oral history rather than a biography. Its protagonist, the late Didi Contractor, was an émigré designer and architect of German-American descent who made India her home for seven decades (since 1951), until her death in July 2021. In many ways, Contractor calls to mind another expat architect, the Quaker and Englishman Laurie Baker, who made India his home for six decades since the 1940s.

The book's content, authored by a protégé of Contractor for the last five years of her life (since 2017), makes her (Contractor's) ethics come alive in delightfully subversive ways. In the 1960s, Contractor abandoned a thriving interior design practice in Bombay. She was triggered by the realities of slum dwellers in the city defecating on open rail tracks as her client wished to use "more marble in [my] her bathroom because [I] she can afford it". She highlighted the fetishization of "vernacular" building by those who have never lived in or experienced Indian village life at length and never worked with rural craftspeople or builders on the ground. "Sustainability has become a buzzword through overuse", we find Contractor lamenting. In the 2010s, she commented on the hypocrisy of organizations like the United Nations holding conferences on climate change in air-conditioned or heated buildings with glass windows, handing out plastic bottles and styrofoam cups to drink water out of, as they determine futures of how the world copes with environmental crises. Critically informed about historic systems of building technologies and arts through authors as diverse as Aldous Huxley, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and A.K. Coomaraswamy, Contractor was convinced that current modes of applying "Vaastu", are "superstitious, meaningless ritual, detached from the active understanding [of] connecting a specific individual, [inhabiting her] building at a specific site, to the larger cosmos".



This book, in the main, is assembled into four parts, each containing a few thematic essays. These core parts are prefaced with an introduction about the book's genesis, and followed by a few letters from Contractor and a moving postscript describing her last days. In the essays, the author's voice in the italicized text provides context and structure to the main content, presented as Didi Contractor's own (unformatted) voice, a separation that proves both legible and useful for the reader. Each of the four parts deals with key moments or value bases of Contractor's life. The first of these is the most historical, recalling how Contractor got her name (she was born Delia Kinzinger in 1929 in the United States), what she learned from her parents, other influences, her education as an artist and even a troubled, early domestic life in India in a rather conservative Gujarati household. Through the other three parts, we learn in some detail about Contractor's value orientation, for example, her gentle, yet bold, spiritual stance on the fields of nature and building. She views "errors […] as divine intervention". Contractor locates her goal as a builder through a deep ecological view of nature and earth as the nurturing Mother, and therefore pursued building practice that actively seeks to cause minimal violence. We even learn of her sophisticated perspective on natural processes of decay as having their aesthetic.

Throughout the vignettes presented, despite the overwhelming speed of our time, Contractor assures us that we needn't build in a hurry. Her voice, as apparent from her journey—the author is privy to these recollections—urges us to slow down. Contractor's first architectural project, a small village clinic in Rakkar, in the Kangra district in Himachal Pradesh, commenced when she was in her mid-sixties (in the mid-1990s). Contractor was already quite ill by then. She was a rheumatic since childhood and, later a cancer survivor. Yet, she engaged with a significant quantum of the building work on-site at an age when most professionals or even educators of architecture have happily retired, or at best, remain passive practitioners by delegating work carrying their name to juniors. As a marked departure to the latter model, through both her building practice and her outlook on interpersonal relations, Contractor emphasizes her belief in the "idea of horizontal power as opposed to vertical power […] democracy as opposed to hierarchy". A year before her direct foray into building, she had already developed an innovative solar cooker to eliminate the dependence on firewood stoves in the villages around her. The cooking process would be slow but nutritious and with minimal environmental damage.


nied by her dear dog Madgie in the front. She laid the first course of bricks herself and worked very closely with craftspeople from whom she learnt a great deal. Meanwhile, she also designed and supervised the construction of her own home in Sidhbari, a village just below Rakkar in order to live close to Dr Barbara who was also her physician. By 1994, Didi finished both projects and moved into her new home. These buildings convinced others to commission her to design their homes and eventually, a career in architecture unfolded for her. She won many awards for her exemplary work and in the year 2019, the Government of India recognised her work and awarded her the Nari Shakti Puraskar, the highest civilian award for a woman in India. Didi continued to live in Sidhbari nurturing both her inner spiritual practice and outer creative pursuits till she passed away, at the age of 92.

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Just this kind of slowness, we learn, shaped how Contractor dealt with architecture in a material sense too. She respected the natural forms of found materials and argued, as much through speech as her acts of building, about the responsibility of the builder to look carefully at, say, the way the "grains [of stone] meander and flow into one another [...] it is a luxury to be able to stop and look at them, look at what you're using, see their inherent quality and where they can be best used" (this is how she remodeled her garden in 2020, less than a year before her passing). This approach, according to Contractor, fostered the kind of "balance and harmony [that] could support interiority [...] the play of imagination, the stimulus of [the] space". A particularly delightful section of the book, about bringing the qualities of play to architecture reveals Contractor's nuanced views on time and racing against it, best read in her own words:

I think we pervert the instinct to play. We mix it up with the instinct to win. And somewhere we've taken the joy out of play [...] it's a little like music; you practice for hours and hours to have the agility to make that one little note. Then there is great delight when you can play the phrase the way you heard it. You can play. But you've had hours of discipline behind that play.

It is tempting to assume that Didi Contractor inhabited a utopian world in a rural setting in the middle Himalayas, hermetically sealed from the world outside. This was hardly the case, however. Be it global news, film, music, new architectural projects, entertaining friends from her neighborhood alongside those from around the world, or mentoring students and fresh graduates, Contractor's outlook, we learn, was eminently current and quite contemporary to her times, and in critical dialogue with it.

At the heart of this dialogue, which this book brings to us without too many frills, sparsely populated with carefully chosen photographs and many of Contractor's drawings, is how architecture can be grown from the land it inhabits, rather than being built in a hurry. It is of little surprise that the epigraph of the publication is a poem the poet, writer, and educator Rabindranath Tagore wrote about a house built for him in the mid-1930s called 'S(h)yamali', a dwelling that "when it crumbles, will be like falling asleep in the lap of the earth[...] no broken pillars will be left [...] nor cracked walls with their ribs exposed to harbor the ghosts of lost days".

Indeed, *A Call to Return,* through the ethical stance of Didi Contractor, seeks to remind us that, even today, an architecture of slowness, an architecture that is grown and can be subsumed back into the earth, remains relevant.