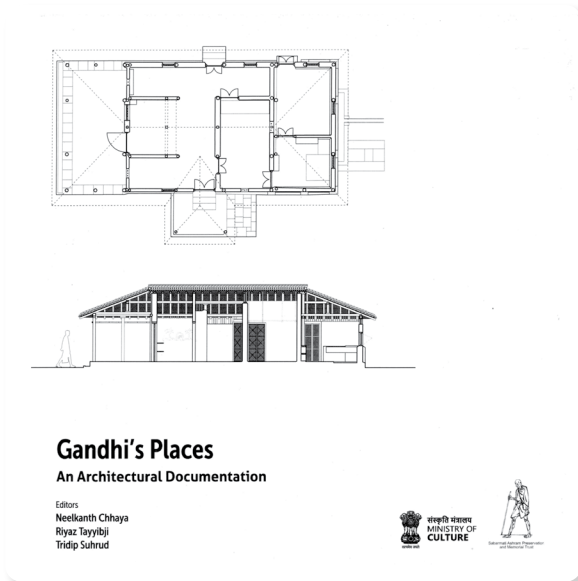


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# A PHILOSOPHY OF SPACES



## GANDHI'S PLACES AN ARCHITECTURAL DOCUMENTATION

Editor: Neelkanth Chhaya, Riyaz Tayyibji  
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'Gandhi's Places' offers a profound exploration of spaces that shaped Gandhi's life, emphasizing simplicity, communal living, and the connection between architecture and philosophy.

**G**andhi's Places, an initiative by the Ministry of Culture, Government of India is certainly a masterpiece that documents places and buildings that defined Gandhi and consequently were defined by him. The compilation of drawings and reflections showcased in this book is a treasure trove of information for those who avidly follow Gandhi as well as those with an academic interest. For architects, the narratives that lead to the illustrations kindle introspection. The editors Nilkanth Chhaya, Riyaz Tayyibji, and Tridip Suhrud have done a fine job of orchestrating a pleasing symphony of plans, elevation, and sections that are simple illustrations echoing the sentiments of a simple life.

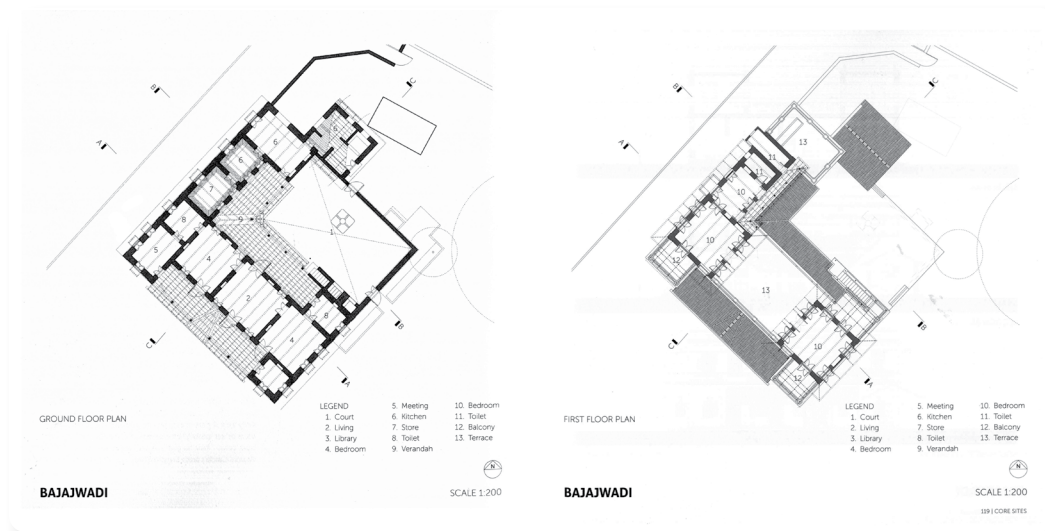
The essays by Riyaz and Chhaya at the start and by Tridip at the close are sublime as they decode for the reader the deep relationship between the spaces that came to life with the presence of Gandhi and the community that lived with him. These same spaces also infused lives into those that occupied them.

Riyaz, taking reference from Gandhi's life and his various abodes, introduces the reader to the morphology of spaces and gently but powerfully presents the analogy between the human body and a built form. The inner being, the body, and the external world are compared to the inside, the semi-open, and the open, constantly reinforcing that the philosophy of life is inseparably enmeshed with the philosophy of spaces. Weaving in the different buildings inhabited by Gandhi, he begins with the darkroom in the house he was born in Porbandar, Gujarat, and the delo-type house he grew up in Rajkot, both of which had a strong sense of the personal (*ordo*), the semi-open (*osri*) and the public. The reader is then taken to Gandhi's small house in London, the Tolstoy farm in South Africa, the Phoenix Settlement in Johannesburg,



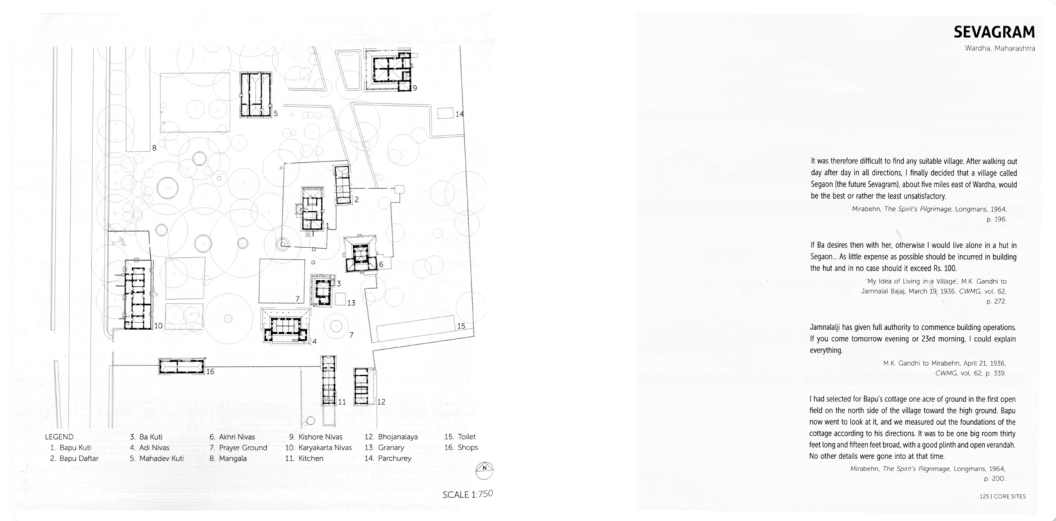
the Sabarmati Ashram, and even his stints in the Sabarmati jail lyrically exploring the movement between the personal and the communal. As Gandhi explored the expanse of the landscapes he lived in through his penchant for walking, his need for the *ordo* or his private spaces diminished. An enclosure became a refuge sought by him only when he wished to listen to his inner voice and even that need dissolved gradually when he adopted Brahmacharya as his way of life. He believed that spaces need to respond to the collective since spaces are never truly owned.

Concerning the material used, we are informed that his preference was towards the ascetic and not the aesthetic. He was closely involved in the design and construction of the buildings he lived in and for the construction materials and methods he adopted, it was always familiarity that prevailed over the new. His first tryst with building materials was the building of a shed for a printing press at Johannesburg's Phoenix settlement. The ethics of modernization were highlighted by Gandhi for whom it was a violation when a building was not at ease with the materials that made it. A parallel is again drawn to the ease of the body with the food and environment that it is exposed to. At Sabarmati Ashram, the predominant materials are brick and wood in keeping with the comfort of people in the region while at the Sevagram in Wardha, it is mud and thatch. It was an unsaid rule that materials would be sourced within a five-mile radius.



Chhaya interestingly explores Gandhi's places from the lens of the liminal states of location, materials, boundaries, and architecture. Belonging nowhere or everywhere is the driving force at the Ashrams. The Sabarmati Ashram was in the city but not of it, ever raising questions for those outside and those within. He highlights this transient state concerning the site of the ashram – between a crematorium (death) and a jail (incarceration). He avers that discipline is a prerequisite to freedom that includes temporal and spatial searches. An ashram calls for shared spaces. Hence the scale and dimensions are based on the uses and the users. He studies the plan of the ashram from the perspective of the man-made and the natural; the personal and the community space and eloquently urges the reader to investigate how one morphs into the other. Gandhi as a creative artisan and as a lawyer converge in this venture of place-making.

While speaking of materials, Chhaya speaks of the parallel between the natural life cycle of the human body and that of a building. A built form is also in a constant state of evolution and growth. He argues that the role of architecture is “to connect and not to enclose”, “to modify as needed and not to control”. While investigating boundaries, he says that in Hriday Kunj – Gandhi's home on the banks of Sabarmati, there are no polarities; there is no attempt to express an ideology or propaganda. The buildings just are. Designs and Creativity do not belong to anyone and are a product of the environment.”



After the reader has assimilated all the drawings, Tridip retraces the evolution of Gandhi's life philosophy directly relating crucial transformations with that of the buildings he built and lived in. His association with Lithuanian-South African architect Hermann Kallenbach inculcated in him a sensibility that is evident in the way he designed Hriday Kunj. The distinctly different styles of the Phoenix Settlement and the Tolstoy Farm in South Africa that culminated into a remarkable vocabulary at the Sabarmati Ashram have been soulfully portrayed by Tridip. This closing essay, aptly titled, *Home for a Mendicant* conveys Gandhi's yearning to be a mendicant – one who is desireless. Hence his sense of being at home with the idea of being without a house. Gandhi in some ways shows us how to live an alternative modernity.

The prose in Gandhi's Places is thought-provoking and the 131 drawings from close to 26 different sites are evocative. The depiction of the dissolution of boundaries and flowing of one form into the other is a reflection of self merging with the all.

