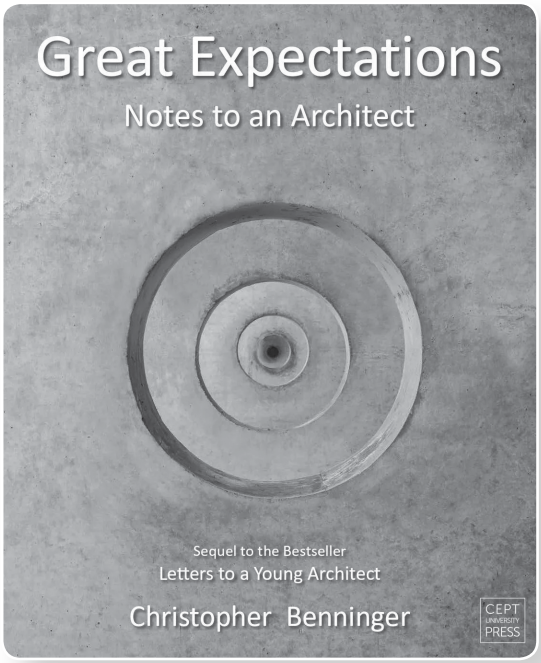
Review by Prof. Kavas Kapadia
| kavas_k@hotmail.com

A DIVINE PROFESSION CALLED ARCHITECTURE



The book is a reflective collection revealing Christopher Benninger's ethical, cultural, and spiritual journey in architecture—blending personal experiences, pedagogy, and practice into a profound call for integrity, humility, and purpose in the profession.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS:
NOTES TO AN ARCHITECT
AUTHOR | Christopher Benninger
COMPILED AND EDITED BY | Karan Gandhi
PUBLISHED BY | CEPT University Press, Ahmedabad, 2024
SIZE | 220 mm x 183 mm x 17 mm
295 Pages, Softcover
ISBN | 978-93-83184-88-0

The book, much like the earlier edition, ' Letters to a young Architect' is a compilation of essays, some speeches and addresses in conferences and others specifically written for the book.

"Great expectations-Notes to an Architect" is a peek in to the mind of Christopher Benninger, arguably one of the most influential architects of the post Independence India and his search for professional perfection and truth through his work as an architect.

The book traces the trajectory of the author's journey as an idealistic young American boy whose heart is set on perusing architecture as a profession on being deeply affected by witnessing the works of master architects .

But Christopher is no ordinary young boy. Even by American standards, a high level of mobility and exposure to education, literature, travel family connections (Adlai Stevenson, an uncle was the US ambassador to the United Nations) and growing up passing by the works of Paul Rudolph, Harry Marriot, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Llyod Write and structures such as the Rockefeller Centre, buildings by SOM leave a deep impression on his young mind.

During his study at Harvard University he had the good fortune of having as his acquaintances, mentor/ tutors such luminaries as Jacqueline Tyrwhitt, Lewis Mumford, Fumihiko Maki, F.C. Turner, Kevin Lynch. Names such as these and others including Jane drew, C.A. Doxiadis, Margret Mead and Edmond Bacon and a host of others who he had the privilege of knowing personally, were names brought to us by our teachers and through library visits. But, let me not diminish his status by this 'biased' introduction. Christopher reveals his "quest for truth" layer by layer, baring his attachment -neigh near worship of- the profession of Architecture as a vehicle of expression and thanksgiving.

The chapters are arranged by titles tackling the complex subjects such as culture, inspiration, civilization, aspirations, metamorphosis self retrospect... and many contemporary problems of Town planning, Urban poor, Historic heritage conservation and public spaces. While he draws unlimited inspiration from the rich Indian past he looks towards the future with concern and hope.

His eternal gratitude towards his teachers, compounded by the reverence he discovered in the Indian ethos towards the 'Guru' is aptly addressed in several episodes. His firm belief in the fact that 'Gyaan and Guru' are inherently intertwined led to his un tiring efforts, way back in 1971 to start a school of architecture in Ahmedabad. The CEPT today stands as a tribute to his timely thinking and intervention.

The true impact of the title 'Great Expectations' hits you as you progress through the four sections namely Architect in the making, Architect in the studio, Architect in the labyrinth and Architect in history where in the author places the profession of Architecture on a pedestal so morally high and mighty that a mortal architect needs to have an unusually high ethical purity and spiritual maturity to achieve, that which in a real world situation seems to belong to a utopian situation. Somewhat like the 'near utopian society' he wishes the world to be, as introduced by Bimal Patel in the earlier part of the book.

His style of writing is simple direct and honest. For instance in the chapter titled *"Source of interpretation and methods of interpretations"*, he attempts to explain the inspiration for some of his well known projects and how his understanding of the historical and cultural contact of the region silently creeps into his creation, be it through the use of local material available nearby or the expression of the typical neighborhood (wada) or the sub conscious use of the Mandala and the Vihars of the Buddhist monasteries.

Even though a lot of ideas and suggestions seem to reappear and overlap in different situations in the chapters, the book is a very informative collection of the experiences and fascinating accumulation of the first hand, ring side world view of a wise man who has seen and traversed the world and the profession at close quarters and his heartfelt concern to bring about a paradigm shift in the process of practice and teaching and ensuring his minor role in the 'passing of the torch'- as he humbly puts it.

The author seems to be on a mission. An evangelical attempt, that of imparting a status of nobility to the profession so dissimilar (and he accepts it in one of the chapters) from the image of the Architect in the popular idiom, that of a freewheeling individual, self-aggrandizing, egoistic creature, asserting his own creations, that you suspect and again as he states, that one must learn to be a humble human before proclaiming yourself to be an Architect.

He travelled the whole world and had the choice of living anywhere on earth but, in retrospect, he would have found no better place other than India to settle down considering his insatiable hunger to imbibe the deeper meaning of life, work, ethics, truth and self discovery. He had made Pune his home till his demise in 2024.

In conclusion , the book is a meaningful collection of individual chapters which may be read independently and yet when put together they only reinforce the rather heavy message of the author "Architecture hides within a spiritual path called LIFE".

Contents

Introduction: Inspiration and Evidence

Foreword by Dr. Bimal Patele

Architect in the Making

Architect in the Studio

Architect in the Labyrinth

Architect in History

Post Script: The Spirit of Architecture

Glossary

Index

Kavas Kapadia, architect and planner, is former Dean of Studies and Head of Urban Planning at SPA Delhi. An educator, researcher and jury member, he has contributed extensively to architecture, planning, water and sustainability, presenting internationally and serving on professional and academic bodies.