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Temple Architecture A Brief Overview and Its Symbolism

Purushottama Bilimoria

The Origins

THE temple, it is needless to say, is not an Indian invention, for civilisations elsewhere had temples and sacred sanctuaries erected for the purposes of worship or dedication to the deceased ones; the Greeks had their *oikos*, the Jews their roving Covenant (Hebrew *baitel*, later the 'synagogue').¹ It is likely, though, that the idea of the Indian temple was a somewhat independent development, whose origin recedes into obscurity, as several notable scholars, including Stella Kramrisch in her monumental work on Hindu temples (1946) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1977: 3-10) have remarked. From all accounts, however, it would appear that the earliest origins of the Hindu temple go far back to the fire altar used for Vedic sacrifice (*yajna*), whereby the burned offerings were conveyed to the gods with the smoke of the fire (*agni*), sacredly or magically energised by the incantation of *mantras*. Bricks were piled to give an ascending pathway for the fire,² (figs. 4.1-2) and this hypaethral, or open-to-the-sky, symbol

¹ Possibly the world's first temple, built 11,600 years ago, has been excavated at Gobekli Tepe in Turkey. See, Charles Mann and Vincent J. Muni, 'Dawn of Civilization', *National Geographic*, June 2011, pp. 39-59.

² The now no longer extant and most interesting of Vedic rites, the Agnicayana, required some 10,000 bricks in sequence of five layers, resembling a falcon (signifying the body of Prajapati) with the sacrificial fire (signifying the 'spirit' intending immortality) (fig. 4.3) Since 1975 with the encouragement of the Indologist, the late Frits Staal, Agnicayana has been performed a few times in Kerala, south India. see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pl0lJJeHj4A&list=PLx1fjYDXjQ2FGvJppIRzFLmbuFj5XWP5U>. For a more recent performance of Athirathram Yajna (at Panjal); see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FISuF_kJS4A.

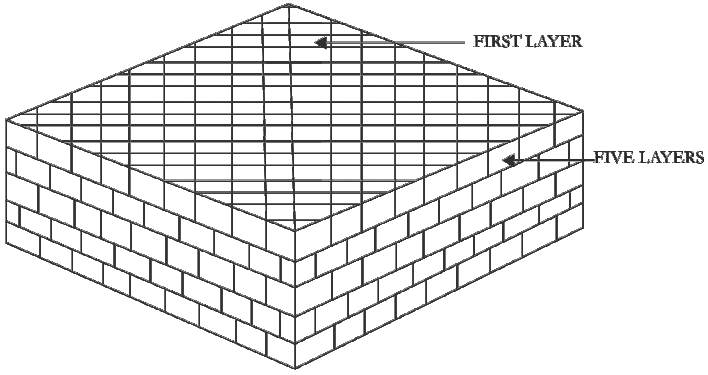


fig. 4.1: Layout of a Vedic altar, brick by brick

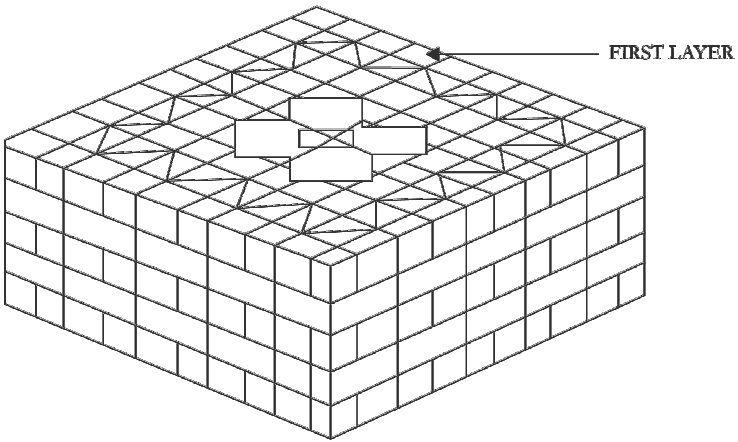


fig. 4.2: Centrepiece tending heavenwards

The Ritual Enclosure (not to scale)

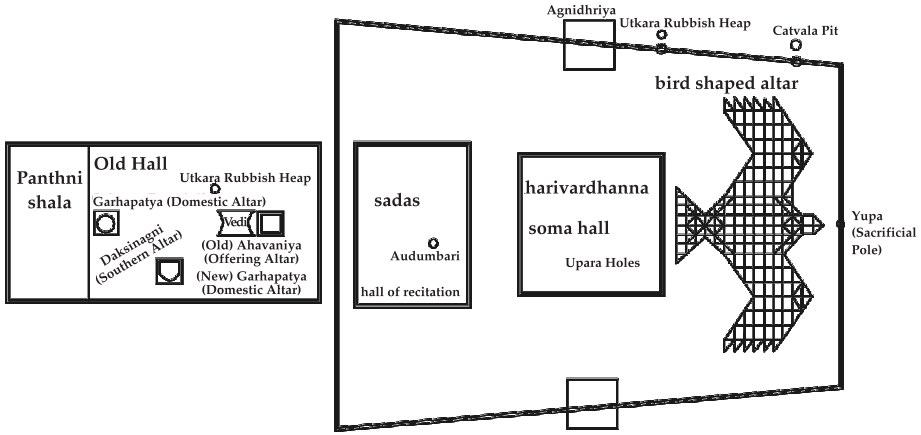


fig. 4.3: The ritual enclosure (not to scale)

became the mainstay of not only later Hindu shrines or temporary enclosures, to which the gods were expected to resort, but also of Buddhist *stupas*.

The Buddhist *stupa* was a circular tumulus of bricks or stones, or a sacred mound or memorial, commemorative of the Buddha's enlightenment (i.e. his entry to the 'gateway of liberation') (fig. 4.4). The Buddhists erected *stupas* and pillars on holy spots and these in the course of time were developed into magnificent structures embellished with exquisite carvings and bas-relief sculptures. The *stupa* symbolised the way to escape conditioned existence (*samsara*), and it was entered through a gateway (*torana*) of freestanding columns and pillars, often sculptured from rocks, with architraves and an abacus across its capital carrying Buddhist symbols and inscriptions. At Sanchi, in modern-day Madhya Pradesh, many *stupas*, dating from 1st century BCE, were erected from rock-cuts in Stonehenge-like arrangement (fig. 4.5); there were similar ones at Amaravati (2nd century BCE) in Andhra Pradesh. The *stupa* probably influenced the idea of the steeple or inverted conical finial or spire (*sikhara*) for the temple, which, again, also resembled the heaven-tending rising fire of the Vedic altar. This is attested to in Buddhist shrine structures, such as the Mahabodhi tower at Bodh-Gaya (2nd century CE) in Bihar, others later in Taxila (3rd-4th centuries, fig. 4.6) in the north-west and in the famous learning centre of Nalanda (5th century), also in

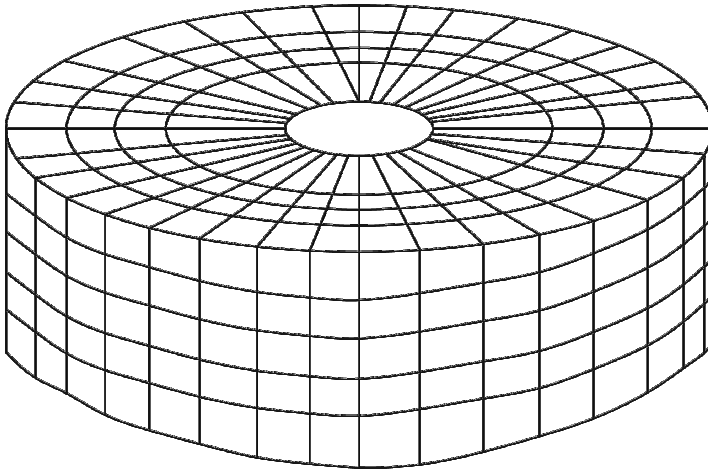


fig. 4.4: Tumuls

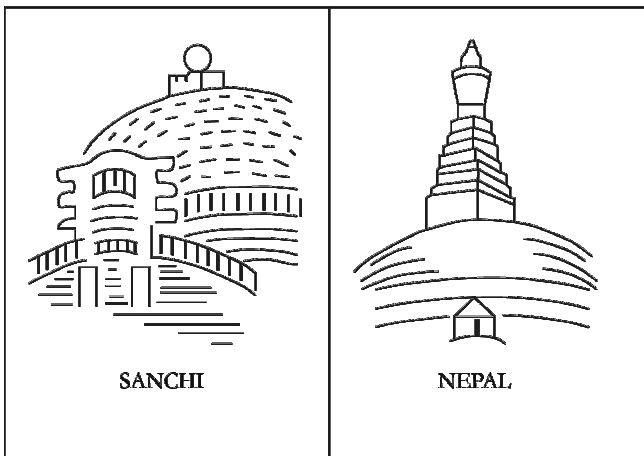


fig. 4.5: Stupas in Sanchi and Nepal

Bihar. The Jains followed the Buddhists and erected similar *stupas*, ruins of which are found in parts of north India. And both Buddhists and Jains fortified their places of worship with rock-cut caves and barrel-vaulted *chaitya*-halls, often carved on face-cliffs.

Image worship, which is central to an Indian temple, was absent in Vedic times, although worship of sacred relics was prominent during the Mauryan emperor Ashoka's time (c. 250 BCE). Buddhist influence in regard

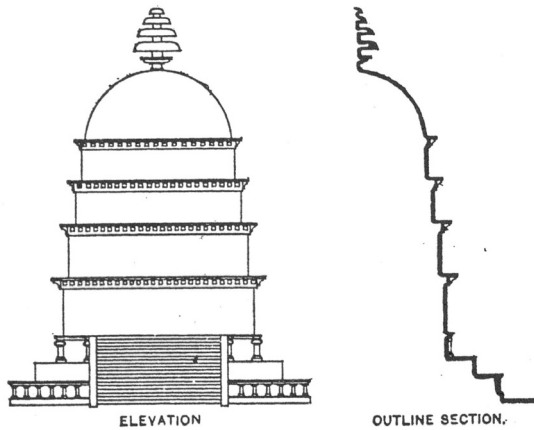


fig. 4.6: Kushan Stupa modelled on Taxila Stupa of Kunala

(Source: *Indian Architecture in India and Abroad*, P.K. Acharya, J.K. Publishing House, Bhopal, 1979, Pl. XVIII, p. 41)

to image worship has not been ruled out, and Brahmanical shrines dedicated to the divinity Vasudeva seem to have been in existence around 2nd century BCE. Heliiodorus, a Greek convert to the cult of Vasudeva, apparently erected a pillar with an inscription mentioning a shrine dedicated to Bhagavata or Vishnu at Besnagar in Madhya Pradesh. Inscriptions and remains of structural shrines in Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh appear to suggest the early prevalence of temple-worship among Hindus. On the architectural side, elaborate popular timber architecture was in evidence by the time Megasthenes visited Chandragupta Maurya's court in north India (c. 300 BCE).

It was only a matter of time before image-worship and architecture would combine to create a more enduring edifice that embodied the sacredness associated with the relics, signs and images. Buddhist and Jaina monks took up habitation in *viharas* or *sangharama* (monastic dwellings) carved into the face of rocky mountains, which were complete with halls and meditation chambers that housed smaller *stupas*. In Gandhara (c. 300 BCE) in the north-west, Hellenistic art influenced representational forms, plasticity and details, which later appeared in the frescos, reliefs, friezes and figurine carvings on the walls of Buddhist *viharas*, such as at Ajanta (c. CE +500) in western India.

Thus, over the centuries, from the Vedic altar, Brahmanical shrines,

Buddhist and Jaina *stupas*, as well as relic worship and rock cuts, a sophisticated groundplan for the Hindu temple emerged. The impersonal powers of nature, the fecundity associated with earth, and the lofty resourceful gods of the sky were grounded in visible, concrete and material embodiments, housed in elaborately decorated god-houses (*garbhagrihas*) (actually oil-lit chambers), and attended to as highly-honoured guests (*atithi*). After the 3rd century CE, when Hinduism heralded a new era of revivalism under the Gupta regime in the north, image-representation and construction of simple shrines and temples were undertaken with some zeal in order to promote a more popular acceptance of Hinduism and Hindu culture, hitherto eclipsed by the dominance of Buddhism on the Indian scene. These had become quite prominent by the close of the 4th century CE, as recorded in the copious notes taken by Faxien, the Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to India at that time.

By the 5th century CE, under the Chalukya dynasty, which was powerful in the south, temple structures had attained their recognisable form. Indeed, the earliest temples that survive in India date from this period. By the 6th century, stone had replaced bricks and timber, and by the 7th century, under the Pallavas (CE 600–900), temples were constructed as rock-hewn, pagoda-style monoliths, as found in the shore temples of Mamallapuram (or Mahabalipuram), just outside Chennai. The years between 6th and 8th centuries CE also saw the rise of wonderful rock architecture in north India, such as the Hindu rock-cut caves of Badari, Elephanta, and the famous Kailasa Temple in Ellora (probably a reaction to the earlier Buddhist structures in Ajanta and Ellora). The leogriff motif of the Pallava style, which dominated the south, was a type of pilaster with a prominent, moulded, lion on it surrounded by carvings and ornately fluted beams. Several temples were built in this style in Tamil Nadu, but they were located in open space rather than hidden behind the façade of rocky cliff faces. The Chalukyan temples of Aihole and Mahakutesvara, and the Pallava temples of Kanchipuram and Mamallapuram, as well as the early temples of Bhubaneswar in Orissa (8th century), are monuments to this exciting era of temple architecture in India.

It was the Chola dynasty (c. CE 900–1150) that contributed overhanging cornices, façades and, more significantly, *sikhara* over *vimana* (pyramidal tower) in a multi-tiered structure. It is said that with the Cholas the genius

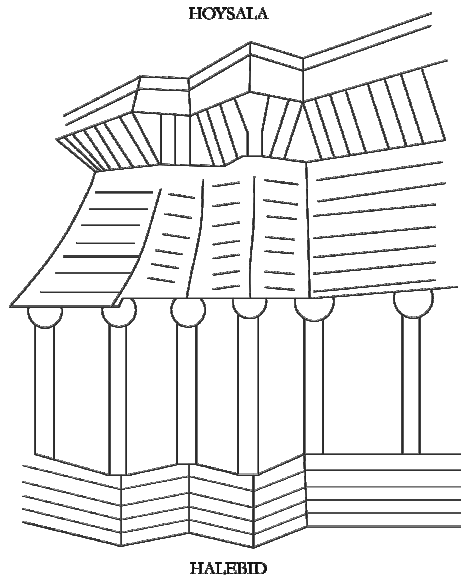


fig. 4.7: The temple architecture at Halebid, Vijayanagara

of Dravidian architecture attained its profoundest expression. The Cholas were succeeded by the Pandyas (c. CE 1100–1350), who added further visual art and elaboration to the outer structures, particularly to enhance the façades with elaborate crutches, corbels, florid ornamentation and so on. The outer surrounding grounds or patios were also landscaped and the courtyard aesthetically integrated with the temple precinct.

Last but not least came the famous Vijayanagara empire (CE 1350–1560), which greatly transformed the spirit and substance of temple architecture. Possibly due to the inspiration of the sage-philosopher Vidyanaraya (after whom the founders of the empire, Harihara and Bukka, named the empire, first as Vidyanagara, then Vijayanagara, or ‘City of Victory’), temple or sacerdotal art during the two centuries of the empire reached an ‘extreme limit of florid magnificence’, with much embellishment and flamboyancy to niches and pilasters, the inverted lotus bud (*padma*) in corbels, and the harmonizing of form and formless in single representations (Brown 1971: 47-50) (fig. 4.7).

The culmination of south Indian temple architecture occurred in Madurai (16th-18th century CE) where gateways and towers basically duplicate those that encompass the entire city on the outer walls. The Meenakshi Temple in the Madurai district of Tamil Nadu bears testimony to this style (fig. 4.8);

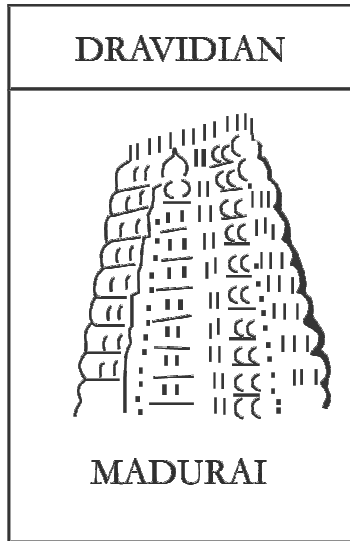


fig. 4.8: The Meenakshi Temple, Madurai

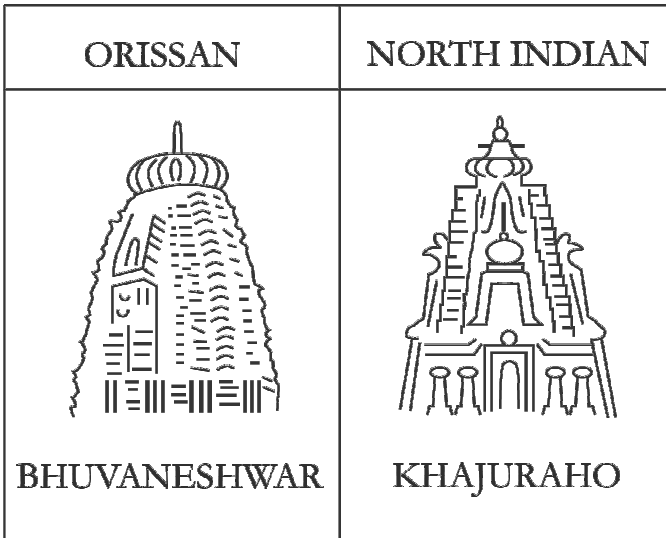


fig. 4.9: Shikhara of the Lingaraja Temple Bhubaneswar, Orissa

fig. 4.10: Shikhara of the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple, Khajuraho

another example is the Srirangam Temple (17th century) near Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu, which not so long ago inaugurated what has been described as the world’s tallest gateway (*gopuram*).

One of the outstanding characteristics of Hindu temples built since the 9th century is the towering height of their *shikharas* or their heavenward

(*akashaka*) elongation, a development that reached its zenith all over India in the 11th century. *Figures 4.9 and 4.10* show the varying styles of *shikharas* from one part of India to another.

This feature is exemplified in the Lingaraja (c. CE 1000) and Raja-Rani temples of Bhubaneswar in Orissa, the Rajarajesvara and Brihadishvara temples of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, the Kandariya Mahadeva (c. CE 1000) and other (erotic) Temples of Khajuraho in Madhya Pradesh, and the Nilakantheshvara Temple of Udayapur in Nepal. The increased elaboration of temple decoration, between the 12th and 16th centuries, especially in south India, is exemplified in the Nataraja Temple of Chidambaram and the temples of Tiruvannamalai (post-Chola), the Pampapati and Hazara Ramasvami temples of Hampi in Karnataka, the site of the city of Vijayanagara, and the stupendous Sun Temple of Konarka in Orissa. Such latter-day temples as these, in the words of Stella Kramrisch (1946: 6), teem with forms which have the urge and fullness of Indian nature in their towering shapes to the last point of their height, step by step, level by level, they lead the eye and mind of the devotee from this world to the worlds above. The temples rise from a broad base: differently built according to specific types, they have their variations in time and place and their shapes were elaborated in many schools. As they are today in southern India their high superstructures ascend in pyramidal form, while in northern India they fling their curvilinear faces towards a meeting point above the sanctuary.

Mandala of the Gods: Ritual in Temple Building

THE COSMOLOGY OF THE TEMPLE

Before we turn to the profound transcendental and at the same time arrestingly earthly aesthetic symbolism germane to Hindu temple (*oikos*) architecture, a digression is apposite. We visit the thoughts on the temple more generally (and particularly in the ancient Greek context) of the 20th-century German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, who wrote a major work on art and aesthetics. In his long essay, 'The Origin of the Work of Art' (written in 1936), Heidegger has these observations to make:

It is the temple-work that first fits together and at the same time gathers around itself the unity of those paths and relations in which birth and death, disaster and blessing, victory and disgrace,

endurance and decline acquire the shape of destiny for human beings. The all-governing expanse of this open relational context is the world of this historical people. . . .


Standing there, the building rests on the rocky ground. This resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock's clumsy yet spontaneous support. Standing there, the building holds its ground against the storm raging above it and so first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence. . . . The temple's firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air.

. . . we call this ground the *earth*. . . .

The temple-work, standing there, opens up a world and at the same time sets this world back again on earth, which itself only thus emerges as native ground. — Heidegger 1971: 42

Explaining the symbolism alluded to by Heidegger in this short description, Jeff Malpas notes that the temple opens up a place for 'the "between" of human dwelling' by holding together the earth and world in a creative tension or what Malpas calls an 'oppositional belonging' and Heidegger the 'intimacy of striving' (Malpas 2006: 199). What this means, in the words of another scholar, is that the 'tension of their striving with one another thus "makes space for" the appearing of earth and world, and for human existence in relation to both of them' (Heidegger 1971: 45;



fig. 4.11: [^]Greek temple **called Athens**  delete 'called Athens', replace in square brackets (photo: Philip Hughes)

[^]add 'Ancient'

MacKinlay 2010: 505). Furthermore, the temple is built in order to make visible the 'world of meaning and value in which we dwell, and to make space for decision about action in that world'. And, finally, the temple itself can appear as a being, rather than as a piece of equipment. 'That it is', which is true of all beings, only appears when a being is withdrawn from the usefulness in which beings generally disappear (Heidegger 1971: 65; fig. 4.12). Heidegger concludes that a building like the temple, that is a work of art, 'in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves' (cited in MacKinlay 2010: 506).

delete ref.
 'fig 4.12)

Heidegger paves the way for us to now examine in more detail the imagery of the Hindu temple, which resonates with Heidegger's topology of 'temple-work', but in other ways stands out as something unique and particular to the religio-spiritual culture in which the temple has its origins. Heidegger makes no mention in his account of the space of the divine or the sacred or rather the 'transcendental' non-work peculiar to the *telos* or purpose of the Hindu *oikos* or *templum*. Thus, we may note that everything about the Hindu temple design and particularly the location — i.e. the earth on which it stands, the image of the rocky hill, the running water, the axial elevation of the superstructure that looks out into the world, and so on — signify a sacred geography that goes towards breaking down the boundaries between the human and the 'other world'. As Georg Michell puts it: 'A sacred mathematics is created, composed of a language of precise measurements, which permits a symbolic realisation of the underlying cosmic ideas' (Michell 1977: 61). This is the symbol of the *mandala* that permits, through dynamic rituals and ceremonies, the realisation of these ideas so that the Hindu temple functions as a place of transcendence, where the human may progress from the world of illusion to a universe of knowledge and truth.

The word *mandala* literally means 'circle' and in *Rigveda*, the term refers to a set of hymns that appear in sequence (hence a circle of hymns). (*Rigveda* consists of ten *mandalas*.) But *mandala* is also a mystic picture of the entire reality; a pictorial representation of the homology between microcosm and macrocosm. This representation often has geometric dimensions, and is thus known as *yantra*, which is replete with a magical efficacy (fig. 4.12).



fig. 4.12: Sri Yantra

Basically, as a geometric symbol, a *mandala* may be a closed polygon or square that can at the same time be converted into a triangle, a hexagon or an octagon, while retaining the basic measurement (*pramana*) for the model desired. And there can be other variations, also, such as the multiple overlays of triangles to form a tantric *yantra*, as in the well-known Sri Chakra used for the worship of the Hindu feminine deity. Again, a *mandala* can be structured so as to encapsulate the analogous relationship between the body (*sarira, purusha*), the groundplan, representing the microcosm, and the superstructure, as an edifice (*vastu* or *alaya*), representing the macrocosm, i.e. the universe. It is this latter signification of the *mandala* that concerns us most here.

It may be noted in passing that Buddhists have a somewhat different conception of the function of *mandala*. The geometric principles are, by and large, the same for Hindu and Buddhist *mandalas*, but more specifically the Buddhist *mandala* 'is essentially a vehicle for concentrating the mind so that it may pass beyond its usual fetters' (Arguelles and Miriam 1972: 15). In Buddhism, therefore, the function of a *mandala* is therapeutic, as it assists an individual to become aware of the levels of consciousness within, as well as the energy that unifies him or her with the environment.

Elaborate *mandalas* accompanied by ritual performances and mystic intonations are offered to the deities or to the cosmic processes.

By contrast, in the Hindu conception, a *mandala* symbolises the integration of the ontology of the universe, in which existence is represented by the *purusha* principle, the supernal or cosmic being, and the earth or terrestrial principle by *vastu*. *Vastu* in traditional literature is described as the residue of sacrifice: what has been left over. This residue, in which the gods reside (*vas*), is also the place of the germ of things to be and of the order of things. Thus we get the idea of a *vastumandala* (sacred geometric diagram) that is the microscopic configuration of the essential structure and order of the universe. This is synchronised with the supernal being (*vastu* as *purusha*). In plain terms, if we take *vastu* as signifying the site or foundation of a building, *vastumandala* as the plan for the building, and *vastupurusha* as the subtle 'body' that infuses the site (i.e. its deity) then the identification of the expansive but intangible 'body' with the spreadsheet of the plan results in the *vastupurusha-mandala* (Kramrisch 1946: 45-49).

The first function of the *vastupurusha-mandala* is to delimit the area where the temple is to be constructed: in this regard it provides a 'ritual' groundplan for the Hindu temple. In its diagrammatic representation a *vastupurusha-mandala* is built up either from circles or from square spaces, the outer limits of which define the 'templum' for the overall structure. The square, more than the circle, is considered to be fundamental and sacred in Indian architectural symbolism. This square figure must be divided into 64 or 81 parts, in divisions of 8 or 9, respectively. The latter is a more common division. The divisions and the propriety of one over the other type are suffused with rather complex numerological and hierarchical symbolism and significance. The 9- better than the 8-square division accommodates the 32 divinities who settle on the 'body' of great *Purusha*. The nine squares in the inner core symbolise the terrestrial realm, with the central square corresponding to the 'womb' or navel of the cosmos. Each square is presided over by a deity or planetary divinity, and the centre is for the 'descent' of the main deity, *Purusha*, concerned with creation or regeneration (usually but not always Brahma or Prajapati). In the famous Rigvedic hymn, the Purusha-Sukta, the cosmic being is sacrificially dismembered and through this act a whole new world is

issued, whereby each dismembered part represents certain essences or aspects of the world (or the many worlds (*lokas*) bearing in mind that the gods and the ancestors have, as it were, their own realms of existence). The ontological ramifications of this symbolism are enormous.

The 'creation' of a temple follows a somewhat analogous symbolism. A temple modelled on the *vastupurusha-mandala* permits an identification of the spatial and physical correspondence between the worlds of gods and of human beings. This symbolic connection (*yantra*) binds the worlds in a cosmology where earth and heaven stand unified. Now a temple regulated by the form of the *vastupurusha-mandala*, based on precise astronomical (and astrological) calculations, becomes more than a symbol for divinity: it is as though it were a structural *avatara*, an incorporation or embodiment of the divine presence in the material form (*vastu*). Ritual and architecture here combine to achieve this union of heaven and earth.

Stella Kramrisch describes this marriage of ritual and architecture:

The drawing of the square plan, or the *vastupurusha-mandala* is imperative prior to building a temple. The knowledge of its meaning and execution is the first discipline which the architect must master . . . the actual drawing of the diagram on the ground which the temple (*prasada*) was to occupy seems to have been the rule. (fig. 4.13) — Ibid.: 39

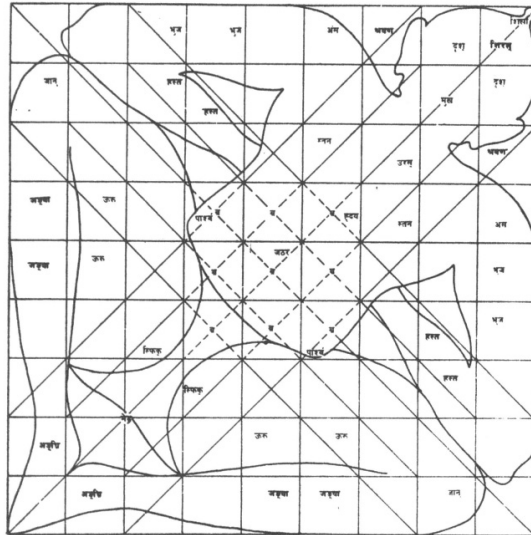


fig. 4.13: The *vastupurusha-mandala*

From the stretching of the cord, or the drawing of lines of *mandala*, everyone of the movements is a rite and sustains, in its own sphere of effectiveness, the sacred building, to the same extent as the actual foundation supports its weight. These movements, rites and meanings are not accessories, nor are they mere accompaniments, as equipment, to the building itself. They go into the making of the 'body-ontology' of the Hindu temple, its shape and proportion and that of every carved detail and every figure, each at its proper place, with rhythms and gestures appropriate to it. If the universe were to be conceived as a large 'body-corporate plan' that stretches over, in and across the spirit of the divine, then the temple is one or more condo or apartment, an individuated sanctuary for the Supreme Soul's earthly dwelling (Bilimoria and Stansell 2010).

Temple Construction and Ritual

There are various terms in Sanskrit for a temple. Coomaraswamy (1977: 4, n. 7) notes *brahmapura* (city of God) from *Atharvaveda* (X.2.30) as one of the very early terms; others more commonly used, and which invariably connote 'abode or house of god(s)' are: *devaniketa-mandala*, *devayatanam*, *devalaya*, *devasthanam*, *devagara*, *devagriham*, *devakulam*, *vesman*, *prasada*, *vimana* and *mandira* (a more popular term used these days). Since a temple is a 'house' (*oikos*, *baitel*, *templum*), with analogical equivalents to the human body on the one hand, and the universe on the other, its dimensions have to be worked out with precision and each part sacralised or consecrated in the process of the construction. Accordingly, elaborate and dynamic rituals are involved at all stages of the construction of a temple, from ground-breaking to its dedication. The groundbreaking ritual involves the burial of *pancashilas* (five stones) (usually blue granites), representing the five *devatas* (heavenly beings) who uphold the structure and ward off bad omens. Often, jewels and ornaments and other precious elements, such as gold and diamond, are also buried. The features of a typical Hindu temple are displayed in *fig. 4.14*.

In accordance with the configuration of *mandala*, the Hindu temple begins with the womb-chamber (*garbhagriha*), which is usually a darkish enclosure or cella where the central shrine (*sanctum*) is to be located. This chamber is enclosed in a towered sanctuary, crowned with a pyramidal dome or a tapering spire (*sikhara*), possibly in several tiers, and finished

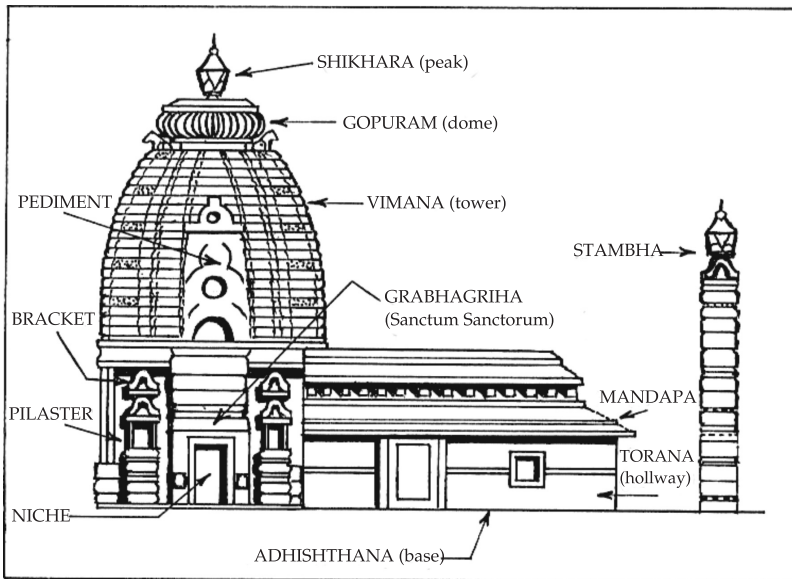
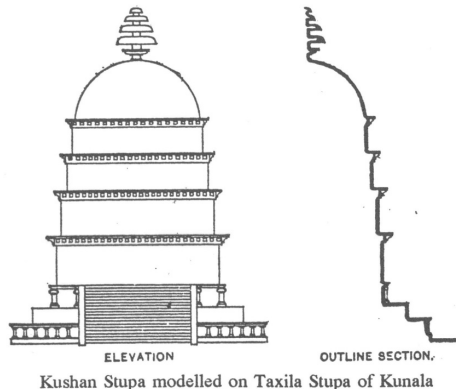


fig. 4.14: The parts and features of a Hindu temple



Kushan Stupa modelled on Taxila Stupa of Kunala

fig. 4.15: Godsgrahas: rear view of NSW temple

with a finial at the pinnacle. The entire sanctuary is called a *vimana*, although the term is also used to refer to the tiered, domed structure as well. The area where *vimana* is to be placed is cleared and consecrated for laying the spiritual foundation.³

The textual sources for these liturgical rituals are usually the Pancharatra Agamas, which comprise one of the two basic sources for ritual worship in

³ Figs. 4.14 and 4.15 are from the temple master plan sketched by V. Janakirama, with stylised production by Brewster Murray, Sydney, 20 September 1983 (courtesy: SVTA).

most Vaishnava temples in south India. Ramanuja, the 11th-century philosopher and peripatetic scholar, whose teachings the Vaishnavas by-and-large follow, favoured and interpreted the temple ritual prescriptions of the Pancharatra Agamas. The textual prescriptions were followed with precision at the Helensburgh site in New South Wales, in the presence of the *sthapati*.

Garbhagriha is approached through a vestibule or an intermediate chamber (*antarala*), which in turn is entered from a hall (*mandapa*) that opens out to a courtyard. The whole structure is surrounded by a low-lying enclosed courtyard, which may house a further complex of shrines, perhaps beginning, close to the entrance, with an independent shrine for God Ganesh. There is also usually an archway, which may be a free-standing monolithic tympanum (*gopura*), marking the gateway to the temple complex. As noted earlier, the Pallavas seem to have initiated *gopura*, which achieved gigantic proportions, almost triangular in shape, in the late Chola period (10th-12th centuries), and especially so under the Pandya rulers of the 12th century.

The Shilpa-Shastras (also part of the more extensive Agama-Shastras) are the standard canons of sacred architecture and they provide the technical details for a temple construction. A master temple architect, however, is expected to be versed in aspects of the Vedas and various branches of the traditional corpus that deal with astronomy, measurement, carving, embedding, building and material sciences, harmony of structures, aesthetics, the history and classification of temple architecture and much else. The Agama texts ordain the use of stone slabs in the construction of temples. By the 12th century, temples in south India would have their walls built of stone, the ceiling of the inner *sanctum* in wood, and the superstructure of bricks. However, bricks alone, made from a particular mix of earth, sand and cement, may suffice for the entire structure, from the outer walls to the inner shrine housing, as indeed was the case in the construction of the Sri Venkateswara temples in Helensburgh.

CONSTRUCTION OF THE 'BIG TEMPLE' OF HELENSBURGH

Shortly after the ground-breaking ceremony, bulldozers, concrete mixers, labourers and engineers moved in to commence their part of the job. Thanks to the conservationist sense of the planners, a healthy spread of gum trees was left to stand all around the courtyard, thus blending the

temple complex harmoniously with the larger surroundings. The first structure to be completed was the Ganesha shrine, located near the entrance of the temple, and facing north-east. This minuscule structure, and a shrine in its own right, was built according to the Shaiva tradition of worship. Some 5.5 m (18 ft) high, it is capped with a large dome, characteristically representing the back of an elephant and crowned by a finial on its pinnacle. Before long, the Ganesha image, until then lodged in the 'Meditation Room' on the campus of the University of New South Wales, was brought out and installed, although its dedication had to wait until the entire complex was ready for inauguration. Ganesha, also known as Sri Vigneshvara, is the first deity worshipped upon entering the temple complex, before one goes towards the main shrine.

In the meantime, on a return visit to India, the *sthapati* had organised the carving of the major images and other idols or figurines in Mahabalipuram in Tamil Nadu, a centre for temple arts. Since he was the architect for both the temple structure and the shrines, he had worked out the exact measurements, shapes and sizes of the images in proportion to the houses they would be lodged in. He then had them shipped out in time for the arrival in Sydney in November 1984 of the seven traditional craftsmen-masons (*shilpis*). By this time the base structure had been completed. It remained for the *shilpis* to complete the details of the sculptural ornamentations and to carve the appropriate images and symbolic decor, so that the temple achieved the grandeur and sanctity of the Dravidian temple, with all its embellishments. The *sthapati* had combined, in harmonious structural form, the three major temple architectural traditions of south India, namely the Pallava, Pandya, Chola and the elaboration achieved in the Vijayanagara arts.

Lotus-corbels, a feature of Vijayanagara style, are in prominence in the Helensburgh temple, as are *kudus*, horseshoe-shaped window frames, which are crowned with lion-heads and foliage that date back to the Chola style. The design of the niche, parapet, pavilion, pillar, pilaster, corbels, and flexured quoin combine features from one or the other, or a mixture, of the traditions. Dwarfs of fierce mien and urchins hiding struts or column brackets and other structural protrusions, are examples of such other syncretic features. While the builders prepared concrete profiles for the domical towers (*shikhara*) and smeared loose plaster over slaps

and beams, pilasters and pavilion-roofs, the craftsmen set to work with a minimum of hand tools (but no geometric devices) to graft intricate decorations and ornate curvatures, corbels, niches, florals and floriated tails, as well as embossing symbolic markings, faces, arms, eyes and carving torsos of fiendish-looking dwarfs and door-keepers or guardian deities (*dvarapalas*), depicting figures and images from folk mythologies. Some of the creatures depicted may have once represented an 'evil' force or tendency in the human collective that was captured by the 'good' gods, and forever entombed in sacred architecture to perform the very minor functions of upholding a pillar, a column, a door strut, or as a gargoyle. The perpetual war between the righteous gods (*devas*) and the unrighteous gods (*asuras*), leading to the triumph of the former, is echoed in the rich and varied symbolism that shapes the exterior of the temple. The façade adorning the vestibule leading into the shrine chambers (*garbhagrihas*) had also to be prepared with the same décor. A majestic structure, and in some ways a unique architectural feat, steadily arose, silhouetted against the indigenous landscape.

The Mandala Anthropomorphised

TEMPLE AS THE SIGN OF COVENANT (PRATIJNA-PATRA)

We noted earlier the cosmological configuration symbolised in *mandala*, but we also mentioned its terrestrial significance, whereby it symbolises a correspondence between the worlds of gods and of human beings. To achieve the latter identification, *mandala* is transformed into a cosmic person, arranged diagonally, and the squares become linked with some portion of the body. This cosmic figure is identified with the process of creation of the universe and its underlying structure (see *fig. 4.13*).⁴

The cosmic person is then stretched out in a horizontal incline or repose. A structural model for a temple is thereby created that at once achieves the correspondence symbolised in the image of a *mandala*. A *mandala* is anthropomorphised:

The anthropomorphic approach imagines the cosmic man (*mahapurusha*) displaying the whole of creation on his body, providing a means of access to higher and more sacred spheres

⁴ *Fig. 4.13* is from Michell 1977.

through his spine which is identified with the vertical axis.

— Michell 1977: 71

A temple, then, from a more grounded perspective, is basically a structure laid on an axis that resembles the repose of a reclining body so that the elevated *garbhagriha*, signifying the head, is axially aligned with the protruding feet, represented by the outer gateway (*gopura*). Each part of the temple, therefore, has to be carefully proportioned in metrical scale so that an overall harmony is achieved in the entire structure. In addition, the vertical axis is associated with a deathless trunk of a tree, supporting the universe by its roots in strategic places. The ascent along the vertical axis symbolises the door to salvation (*moksha-dvara*) and signifies progression towards enlightenment. The goal of this journey is identified with the crowning finial (*kalasha*) that marks the pinnacle of the superstructure of the temple.

Another significant feature of the temple is a large flagpole (*stambha*) erected at the pre-axial by the temple entrance. This is identified with the support of the heavens and likened to the imperious staff of royalty or, which is the same thing, kingship over the kingdom. Since most major temple establishments were patronised or endowed by royal houses, *stambhas* displayed the appropriate emblems. Traditionally, temples face east, so that the early sunlight falls on the deity's face, but the Tirupati Temple in Andhra Pradesh faces west, since Sri Venkateshvara's face is supposed to be blindingly luminous itself and his eyes are thus covered over. The main hall (*mandapa*) adjoining the shrine-chambers covers the rest of the reclining 'body', and is therefore also a sacred space, used for different forms of worship (*bhoga*), offerings (*arcana*) assembly and public celebrations. Just outside the main doorway, at the axial knee-point, is a shelter for the *vighraha* of Garuda (mythic eagle) who is Vishnu's celestial vehicle. Since the Helensburgh temple follows the Tengalai (southern Tamil) tradition as distinct from the Vadagalai (northern Tamil) tradition, the main temple in Helensburgh incorporates three *garbhagrihas*: a large one in the centre for the main deity, Vishnu-Venkateshvara, flanked on either side by two relatively smaller chambers, set slightly back, for the two feminine deities as the 'consorts' of Vishnu. On his right is Sri or Mahalakshmi or Padmavati (who is really Vishnu's inseparable *shakti* (dynamic energy)) and on his left is Andal (redeemer of the world; she is

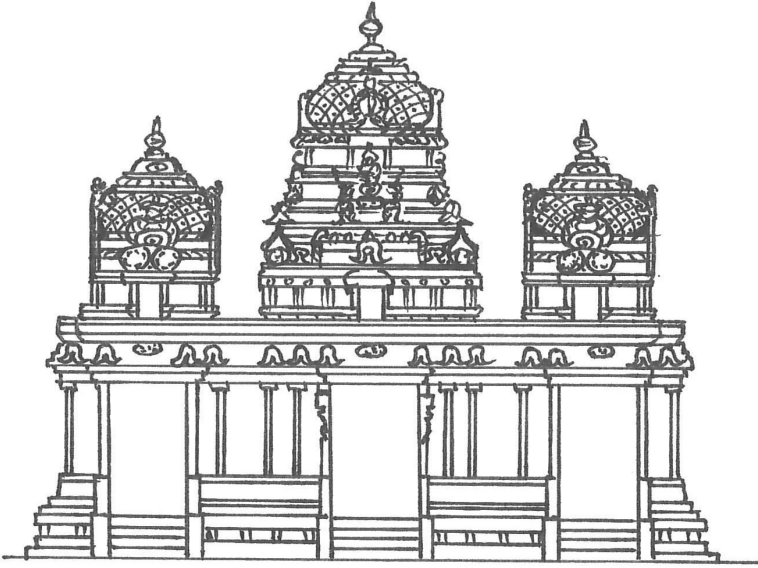


fig. 4.16: The grand *vimana* of Sri Venkateswara Temple, Helensburgh, Australia

also known as Godadevi) or Bhudevi (goddess born of earth) who is Vishnu's terrestrial companion.

On the outer and upper side of *vimana*, atop *garbhagrīhas*, stand dome-shaped towers (*shikharas*). A *shikhara* also denotes a shape curvilinear in the vertical section, but more specifically in the case of south Indian 'high' temples, it designates only the cupola that is placed on top of the superstructure. A large two-tier *shikhara* protrudes above the Vishnu sanctum, known as Vishnugantha, and is crowned on its pinnacle by a golden *kalasha*, which symbolises the absolute and timeless principle beyond repetition and relativity. One either side, are mounted single tier *shikharas*, projecting over *garbhagrīhas* of the two feminine divinities. These are also tipped by finials. Together, the trio of domes form the grand *vimana* of the superstructure (fig. 4.16).

A worshipper standing in the main assembly hall, facing the vestibule, is able to have a glimpse of the domes through a glass aperture formed like a canopy on the roof. This vision (*darshan*) of *shikharas* with their finials is itself of significance, in terms of reminding one of the transcendental goals to be achieved. Just as it is important for a Hindu to have the auspicious sight (*darshan*) of the gods in the shrines, and a fortiori be 'seen' or beheld by the gods, so is it important to have a *darshan* of the temple.

The Mandala Expanded: Mt. Meru, the Mythic Universe

The temple also represents the mythic universe of Mt. Meru (or Mt. Kailasa), which forms the *axis mundi*. As a cosmic map, the temple has four corners and four doorways representing eight directions, presided over by creatures and theriomorphic figures (*valhanas*) that embody certain mythic-psychic powers, as well as serving as conveyances for gods and goddesses (Smith 1981: 12-29, 153, n. 70).

Just as the centre of Mt. Meru symbolises the ‘navel’ of the universe, standing as the reference point for the surrounding concentrically arranged continents, oceans and heavenly bodies, from which also emanate world-making energies, the symbolic centre or ‘womb’ of the sanctuary is its most dynamic part, from which sacred energy is radiated outward in four directions (Mabbett 1983: 64-83). The lines of energy pass through secondary icons and images (*valhanas*, *apasmara*, *dvarapalas*, celestial damsels, doorkeepers and so on) and are positioned strategically in all eight quoins of the temple. The temple is the architectural facsimile of the sacred places of gods, providing for the worshipper the merit that would be his or hers through an actual visit to the sacred mountains, such as Mt Kailasa in the Himalayas (ibid.: 69). All temporal forces, desires and drives have to be neutralised before one enters the sacred chambers or ‘womb’ (*garbha*) of the eternal. This occurs as one crosses the lines of energy and becomes absorbed in its radiation, moving gradually towards the centre. Older style temples are fortified by a series of outward enclosures that have to be traversed before one penetrates the increasingly sacred inner enclosures, eventually reaching the *sanctum sanctorum*. The chief axial line runs from east to west since the deities face one of these directions (usually east), although, as we noted, this is reversed in the case of Sri Venkateshvara Temple. A processional circumambulatory path (*pradakshinapatha*) is built around the temple.

A devotee, after worship, leaves by the northern doorway and circumambulates the temple (*pradakshina*) in a clockwise direction, paying respect to images and icons that introduce further aspects of the divine. Again, a gaze (*padarshan*) at *shikhara* and *kalasha* is intended to remind the pilgrim of the ultimate goal of the journey that they have been on over many lives. *Pradakshina* finishes at the Garuda *vigraha* by the western entrance. In this way, the devotee has worshipped the gods as well as the

temple and participated in the 'sacred threading' of the entire 'universe', symbolised by the temple.

Clearly, the temple is not just a place of worship, but is itself an object of worship, for the whole temple precinct is, as it were, transubstantiated, through the dynamic ritual and ceremonies, into a divine cosmos, which the worshipper enters as would a *bhakta* the Body of God. The temple superstructure, very much as the deities it houses, in the course of the pilgrimage and worship gradually achieves a deeper meaning that transforms the temple from a mere symbol to a dynamic repository of numinous power to which the pilgrims find themselves transported. The inner elevation brings about the realisation of the inherent connection between 'this world' and the 'other world', or rather of their 'non-difference'. The symbol and the symbolised become one.

The Helensburgh temple stood complete, except for the gods, who, still in their pristine dormant state, slept in the crates nearby in which they had travelled the long distance from Tamil Nadu, and unwittingly crossed the 'dark waters'. However, that could not be interpreted as their 'fall', for they had not been 'ensouled' yet, for which preparations were underway. Plans went according to schedule and on 30 June 1985, the great day arrived for the ritual consecration of the temple and 'dedication' (*mahakumbhabhisheka*) which is itself a highly symbolic event.⁵ It is symbolic because it is the first day of *darshan*, the revelation or sight of the body of *Purusha* and its worship. Its *raison d'être* is symbolic but at a higher level it is also metaphysical.

Mahakumbhabhisheka: The Dedication Ceremony

The dedication of a temple (*mahakumbhabhisheka*) proceeds in two stages, and the rituals involved are rather complicated. There are some twenty-five rites to this ceremony, but here we shall discuss these in the most condensed terms. The first stage of the ceremony is called *pratishtha* (sometimes *yajna*) or the installation and consecration of the hitherto inanimate idols or images symbolising the presiding deities. The second stage involves the actual dedication or sanctification (*mahakumbhabhisheka*) of the temple superstructure. This is a profoundly symbolic moment in

⁵ SVTA newsletters. On the ritual, see Clothey (1983: 186); see also note 6.

Hindu orthopraxy. In practice, the deities are first installed and then ritually consecrated, after which the whole temple is dedicated.

PRATISHTHA

Pratishtha literally means embodying 'images with the fullness of the divine'. This particular ceremony comprises a very important and significant set of ritual procedures aimed at sanctifying, consecrating, or blessing a building, image, or liturgical implement, thereby 'establishing' it for purposes of effective worship.

The cluster of rites observed during the *pratishtha* ceremony represents, as it were, a juncture, a transitional moment, at which a 'structure of stone or wood becomes a sacred shrine; when a piece of granite or bronze or plaster becomes the palpable presence of the divine plenum manifested before our very eyes; when the ordinary becomes extraordinary, the profane becomes venerable' (Smith 1981: 52). The process then is one of sacralising or making the ordinary sacred.

For the purposes of the *pratishtha* ritual, a special *yagashala* (Tamil, *yakacalai*), or temporary shrine, is prepared outside the temple building (near one of its side entrances, usually facing north) and this serves as a 'surrogate' *garbhagriha* or *sanctum* and a ritual universe. The *yagashala* is, what I would like to call, the chosen 'space for ritual dreaming' or, if I may be allowed to coin a neologism, a 'dreamspace' (not too far off from the ideogram of 'the Dreamtime'). In other words, the boundaries of the symbolised space to be occupied by *garbhagriha* is demarcated, purified and sacralised, so that the spirits can be invoked to empower and, through another ritual process, confer sacredness onto the icons and the supporting items to be installed in the temple proper (including the dais or pedestals on which the icons are stood). While it is reminiscent of the biblical tabernacle, it is actually closer to the Buddhist meditational praxis of concentration on *mandala* (or its Hindu equivalent of the geometric *yantra*) for the purification and enlightenment of the mind. But *mandala* itself has to be purified, sacralised and homologised before it is, as it were, absorbed into the mind, or vice versa.

Once consecrated and empowered, this whole 'sacred dreamspace' is literally transferred to the *sanctum sanctorum*, so that the designated *oikos* (home), truly becomes the sacred 'womb', patterned, as we noted earlier,

on the 'navel' (Mt. Meru) of the mythic (macrocosmic) universe, and as the centremost square in the (microcosmic) *vastupurusha-mandala*.

Since the temple symbolises a human body and a universe, the *yagashala* is prepared so as to represent both of these, from their 'navels' outward. *Yagashala* is a miniature symbol but it is also a metaphor, for it inscribes all the essential signs that stand for most of the more fundamental elements of the cosmos (fig. 4.17). First, a large square space is demarcated to form a *mandapa*. In the centre the main raised cubical altar (*vedika*) is inscribed and set up, to represent the triune towers and to symbolise the 'navel' of the universe. Around this altar, six fire-pits (*kundas*) are prepared, each dug into the ground and set in concrete in front of a pedestal or dais for each of the major images to be symbolically seated. Given that the 'dreamspace' is a minuscule form of the larger temple complex, surrogate representations, rather than the actual images, are placed in the determined spots, along with the more manageable images (*utsavamurtis*) used during processions and celebrations. There are pedestals for Sri Venkateshvara, Mahalakshmi, Andal, Ganesha and one also for Garuda. There are smaller altars for *ankurarpana* (rites of the seeds and their germination) and *dvarapalas*.

Ankurarpana, which obviously has agrarian or fertility overtones, is

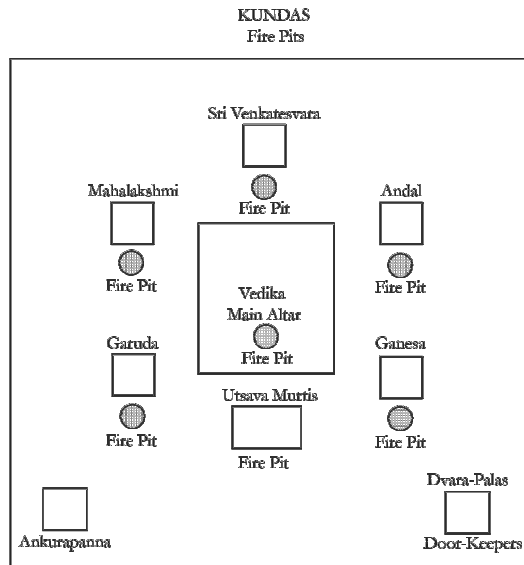


fig. 4.17: Yagashala Plan of the Helensburgh Temple

the very first step. The rite of auspicious germination is symbolic in another way in the sacerdotal arts, inasmuch as the structure of the temple that grows from the 'seed' absorbs the essence' of the earth (*bhu*) and transmutes it. Next, utensils are assembled, and the *yagashala* space is consecrated. Festooned arches (*taranas*) and flags decorate the entrances to the symbolic *mandapa*. Conical vessels, with coconuts placed over their mouths, and containing items such as germinating grains, rice, scented water (from sacred rivers), gems and jewels, betel nuts, sandalwood, and decorated with leaves, cotton threads, saffron cloth, and a special *darbha* grass, are placed on the altar and in strategic positions around the other altars in the decorated *mandapa*. The placing of the stoup-like conical vessels is called *kalashasthapana*. The significance of the vessel or pot is that it represents the body (*sharira*) of the deity: the outer casing as flesh, the water as blood, the coconut as head, the thread as veins, the gems as bones, and the grains as food. The *mantras* recited while pouring the water is thought of as giving *prana* (life-breath) to the deity. In the process, the presiding deity or spirit of the land (*vastudevata*) is also pacified and venerated in a ritual called *vastushanti*. (One informant ventured to suggest that the spirit invoked in this ceremony had to be 'native to the land', which he took to mean a spirit from the Aboriginal Dreamtime.)

After this, the (surrogate) images are cleansed and their eyes are ritually opened in a ceremony known as *akshimocana*, and the sacrificial fires are lit, into which oblations are offered. By pouring libations into the fire-altar during a sacrifice, contact is supposed to be established between earth and heaven. Heaven is, as it were, brought down to earth, so that the bounded space can be sacralised, and a whole new 'universe' is founded. By the latent potency generated by this performance, and by the speech-acts or performatives that accompany these rites, the divine presence is 'established' in *mandapa*. Again, as Fred Clothey suggests, 'according to the textual formulation known as the *vastupurusha-mandala*, this mini-cosmos is equated with the human body' (1983: 186). He explains:

That is, the symbolism of the body as utilised in such techniques as Tantra and Yoga are homologised to the temple. The temple, the sacrifice room (*yagashala*), the human body — all are seen as microcosms in which life-changing rituals can be performed. The consecration process follows closely these symbolic manoeuvres.

And so the 'universe' and its elements (represented in the items in the conical vessels) are sacralised and homologised, as is the ambit surrounding them, and there the gods would take their respective seats on the anointed sacred pedestals. The public is invited to witness this spectacle.

An officiating priest, Sri T.V. Anantharamaseshan, who had come from India, presided as *acharya* at the Helensburgh dedication. An *acharya* serves as the chief functionary at an official gathering (*sangha*) who invites, salutes and receives guests and co-ordinates or conducts the day's performances, but he also does more than that. He plays a ritual function as well. By entering into a state of meditation (*dhyana*), and by reciting *mantras*, *acharya* consecrates and sacralises himself. In this role he is *yajamana*, the sacralised sacrificer in a Vedic rite. Then by the power of his *bhakti*, he conducts the recitation of *mantras*, ritual offerings and symbolic sacrifices which take place over four days (or longer in more orthodox traditions). The ceremony is concluded on the last day when the temple dedication has been completed and the deities have ritually assumed their respective seats or thrones in the temple's *garbhagriha*.

As the ceremony proceeds, *acharya*, clad in surplice-like silk *dhoti*, after seeking protection from Vishnu, summons in his thought the 'all-sustaining, eternal, immeasurable, inconceivable, featureless, formless essence of all things' to become present or manifest in the water in the vessel. Vishnu is then honoured with flowers, water and other items. The other deities are treated similarly. The vessels are now fully empowered.

Meanwhile, the larger images are removed from their resting crates and set up by the *shilpis* in their proper seats in their *garbhagrihas* or *sancta*. These have also to be purified, and their eyes gradually 'opened' through appropriate *mantras*, and they too are ensouled or given 'life'. This is the next important phase of the *pratishttha* ritual and is known as *abhisheka*, literally, 'bathing with water'.⁶ (The water in the vessels and for other rituals was said to have been brought from five sacred rivers in India.)

Amidst chanting, singing and *mantra* recitation, the festooned and water-filled vessels that had been sacralised and homologised and the *yagashala-mandapa*, are solemnly carried by a charged procession, headed by *acharya*, into the temple, into *garbhagriha* and placed beside the images.

⁶ On *abhisheka* ritual details, see *Padmasanhlita*, H. Daniel Smith (1978: 229).

The water, by-now charged with *shakti*, is taken from the vessels with strokes of a tuft of grass and sprinkled over the principal image to the accompaniment of *mantras* that praise and invite the god such as, 'This is Vishnu . . . I praise Him . . . May he come.' *Acharya* next requests the god to emerge from the vessel and infuse himself into the image, so that the image may be 'ensouled' and become a living icon of the deity (*parivaradevata*). Then and only then does the granite-image become deserving of the epithet god (*deva*), not before that. From here on the image becomes a sacred sign that, as a signifier, achieves a complete harmony and identity with the signified. The 'image' is not a symbol standing for or pointing to something else: it is what is supposed to be signified. The integral co-union of the signifier and the signified, *shakti* and *deva*, the image and the god, is accomplished, affirmed even, by the stroke of this water-soaked tuft.

More water is poured over the icon as the bathing continues and appropriate *mantras*, hymns and eulogies are recited. This procedure is repeated with each of subsidiary images in the adjacent cellas. When the bathing ceremony is completed, the water is dried off and the gods are anointed with sandal paste, oil and other sacral substances, and then dressed in resplendent garments. The gods have to be pacified and honoured with food offerings, gifts, and other delights; they are also invited or entreated to be present in their new abode thereafter. An unwritten 'covenant' (*pratijna-patra*) is made, whereby the devotees pledge unstinted allegiance (*prasanvoida*) to their newly-arrived Lord and his consorts in return for their compassion and care.

The ceremony described above concludes the stage that fully empowers the granite image with divine presence; it is now no longer a granite sculpture, but a living sign that has become a fit embodiment through which the deity may manifest its transcendental, or rather earthly form. The signifier as it were appropriates the signified within its own space: the text has now been divinised, and the deity textualised. The deity is considered to be very much alive in the image, but only as long as the appropriate rituals continue to be performed and the universe it occupies is not desecrated in any way. All these various images are, in their turn, similarly consecrated on the gala day for the gods. This concludes the *pratishtha* part of the ceremony.

Bathing the Temple Vimana and the Gods

The second stage of the dedication ceremony and the consummating ritual is *mahakumbhabhisheka* in the form of the temple *vimana* itself. Large vessels containing the *shakti*-empowered water, collected from the five sacred rivers in India, are raised on a giant crane, accompanied by *acharya* and his assisting priest. The crane is positioned facing the upper end of the largest dome. The *acharya* raises the tuft of grass in his hand, and gracefully waves it towards the sky, in ritually measured movements, as though it were a magic wand. The act is intended to summon the spirits to descend on and engulf the temple *vimana*, which *acharya* then also sprinkles with water and anoints with other substances. We mentioned earlier that *vimana* with its tapering off, cockpit-like *shikhara* and antenna-like finials is compared to a vehicle that transports the gods from their heavenly abode to a safe and sacred spot on the earth. A kind of yogic-power rather than the force of mechanical propulsion is imagined as lifting the vehicle and flying it. Here, the temple superstructure, and particularly its *vimana*, is being transformed into an ethereal capsule which the gods might use for traversing from one dimension of space into another. It should be noted that the 'distance' between the boundaries of the spatial locations is merely symbolic, for the whole purpose of the homologisation ritual is to cut asunder the boundaries and, in a manner of speaking, collapse the disparate planes into a singular spatial frame. Since time, in this cosmological frame of reference, is not conceived as a dimension distinct from space, the 'traversing' or, indeed, the 'inversion' of the space can happen instantaneously (or, as someone explaining this imagery to me put it, faster than the speed of sound and light!).

From *kalasha* down to the images placed around each dome, every item is systematically consecrated in this process. It is only then that the *vigraha* (Lord's icons) are said to have been firmly 'established' and empowered. Each dome and the various images in the smaller pavilions, and *vahanas*, doorkeepers and so on, are consecrated. By this symbolic gesture, the entire temple superstructure, or the universe encompassed by the temple, is 'bathed', and thus purified and rendered sacred. In Clothey's words: 'The highlight of the ritual is the settling of golden domes (*kalashas*) on top of the temple's major towers and anointing them, an act which signifies that the temple itself is set aside as sacred space'.

Again, Clothey tells us that *mahakumbhabhisheka* incorporates (and extends) 'the symbolism of the *pratishttha* rituals so that . . . the temple itself, and especially the temple tower, is 'set up' or installed as an embodiment of the divine presence' (ibid.: 184-85).

The procedures that we have described above culminate in the sacralisation of the entire temple space. The building of a temple becomes like the founding of a cosmos by homologising parts of the sacrificial room and eventually the temple itself to various parts of the universe. Building a temple is also likened to the implantation of a crop through such rituals as the germinating of grains, the use of paddy on the pedestal of the deities and other devices which homologize deities or temple parts and vegetation. Further, building a temple becomes the inauguration of a king in his domain by means of various rituals, some of them directly borrowed from ceremonies associated with kingship; the deity is treated like a king, the temple becomes his palace, the landscape it surveys becomes the 'king's' domain and the worshippers are his subjects (ibid.).

These are indeed powerful and profound symbols, which the devotee remembers as he or she enters the temple precinct.

UTSAVA: CELEBRATION OF REJOICING

The concluding part of the dedication ceremony includes various *utsavas* (celebrations of rejoicing and remembrance) which come close to the idea of thanksgiving. *Utsava* begins with *pradakshina* of the surrogate images (usually miniature bronze replicas of the major images in the temple), elaborately decorated with colourful garments, garlands and ornaments often carried in a palanquin or a large wooden chariot, accompanied with music, singing and a fitting finale (*aarati*). This kind of processional *utsava* may be repeated annually during major festive and auspicious days and is a regular feature of south Indian temple life.

The ceremony is concluded with the 'divine marriage' of the gods (*kalyana utsava*); here the gods and goddesses are given all the compliments, honour, festivity and respect of a human wedding. There then follows feasting, merry-making and much mirth, as the subjects celebrate the arrival and presence among them of the 'royal' gods. For the first Hindu gathering of its kind and size in Australia, a crowd of 2,000 assembled to witness the spectacular event and to partake of its



fig. 4.18: Frontal, Gopurum, Helensburg Temple, N.S.W.

‘sacraments’. The event, which was carried out with much pomp and ceremony, was described as an ‘electrifying’ culmination of years of yearning for a concrete symbol of the Hindu presence in Australia. So there it was, a structure and the first of its kind in Oceania-Australasia, fast becoming a pilgrim centre for Hindus from these and other regions. An important tourist attraction, it commands attention not only from the lay person, but also from students of religion and culture, embodying as it does the diasporic experience of a ‘people in transit’.

What we have described was the first successful phase of the temple complex construction. The second phase, as noted above in Chapter 3, involved the installation of images of the *avatars* of Vishnu (traditionally numbering ten), to fill the inside walls of the main hall. These comprise Matsya (Fish), Kurma (Tortoise), Varaha (Boar), Narasimha (Man-Lion), Vamana (Dwarf), Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna and Kalki, the horse-riding, spear-wielding destroyer-prophet yet to come. (The Buddha sometimes appears in place of Balarama, usually in northern practice; in the south the Buddha’s function is generally considered to have been a neutral one.) The customary *stupa* or *dvajastambha*, the symbol of royalty and kingship over the sacred domain, the main entrance tower (*gopura*), as well as a large hall for cultural and educational purposes — incorporating an interfaith meditation centre — and quarters for priests,

have also been added, as well as the separate shrines for Shiva and his consort, Parvati, and one for Subramaniam, also known as Murugan (the second son of Shiva). These, with the Ganesha shrine, constitute the second shrine complex, which have pleased the large number of Shaivas who have supported the temple project.

can we insert two reduced photos here? Or just have #1.

1. Murugan Temple Sydney, N.S.W
2. Vishnu Temple, Malibu, California.