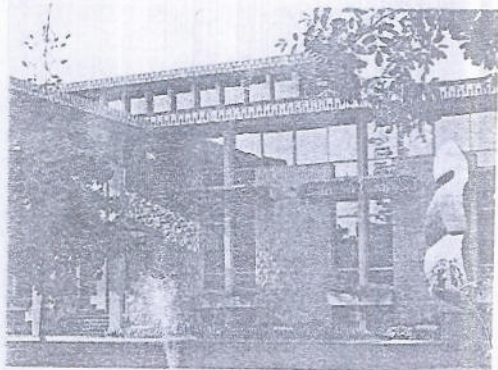


The Indomitable Spirit

Sudhir Vohra



North entry court and fountains, The Ford Foundation Headquarters, New Delhi

Most of my friends and colleagues in the profession probably do not know that I never had the opportunity, nor the good luck to ever work or apprentice with Joe Stein—even though he interviewed me after my graduation, and very kindly offered me a job in his office. Our relationship goes back more than twenty five years. To put in Joe's words, we were both Eartheans—

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forget: Talking of corruption, which was rampant in the Kashmir valley during the time he was working with the J&K government, I once asked him how he managed to get his (government) clients to agree to proposals put up by the project team. XYZ, he said, "is not really known for taking all decisions based on facts placed on top of the table, but we do manage", was his wry remark!!

Talking of his perpetual worry—the damage which we as Eartheans are doing to the Earth's environment—Joe would often say: "the possibilities are tremendous, but the probabilities are terrible"—an anguished appeal for all of us to look beyond our noses and to ensure that we do nothing which can deteriorate the environment. "The architectural profession has more responsibilities than any other—we deal with the built environment, and our work changes the Earth's face in manners which are irreversible under normal circumstances. Our work is permanent—mistakes which we may make (and we do), effect whole generations of human beings—we shape their lives...Either make them or ruin them."

In many ways, Joe was an outdoor person—happiest in the garden, or if he was in a room, looking out towards the greenery. His office room at Sunder Nagar, New Delhi, had a large glass window looking out towards the Purana Qila, and in the last few years after he slowed down in professional work, he could be found in the little garden of the front yard of the rented house he was living in—gazing at the sky, the

residents not of this country, but of the Earth. We shared views, ideas and thoughts which usually went far beyond the boundaries of mere architecture and planning. While I was getting a formal education in Architecture, I was actively involved in running an agricultural farm, and our interaction moved around issues of landuse, cropping patterns, how to get farmers to grow the right crops, etc. We shared common thoughts—thoughts of Mother Earth; of how one must give to the Earth more than one takes from her. And many other matters concerning the human race.

Joseph Stein was an intensely human person—concerned with the future of the world and of the environment more than anything else. No wonder, then, that at the age of 44, he wound up a successful practice in the San Francisco Bay area, and moved to a freshly independent and fledgling India—to work on public housing, and with the developing economy. "I got sick of kitchens, toilets and fussy housewives straining to compete with

their neighbours, and India offered whole new world to work in"—he told me in one of our twilight talks. Though he never knew how long he would live in India, it soon became clear to him that this country gave him the spiritual satisfaction his soul craved for—and thus Margaret and he became—for practical purposes—Indians.

An intensely private person, and normally lost in his own thoughts and sketches, Joe's intense human nature and his care for his fellow human beings, could only be known to those who were close to him—either through a working relationship, or through other contact. His abilities to build a team around him were fantastic—so of his best admirers are his contractors, site supervisors, or engineers who worked with him. I believe most of his architect colleagues held him in an odd sort of awe—striving secretly, to reach his level of intellect and thought. His sense of humour, as well as his ways of expressing the most difficult things in the most simple and wry ways is something I can never

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trees around him and the plants he loved. All his work reflects the lovely understanding he had of landscape, and how to merge buildings with nature. His last job, the India Habitat Centre, was an experiment of—as he wrote in 1999—sustainable development. "In this regard, I would like to mention here that I very much believe that the concept of the IHC, reflecting the ideals of 'sustainable ecology' in an urban context and microclimate modification as a means to save energy and promote the use of exterior spaces, is significant and merits development and duplication."

During the last three years, when Joe's health started deteriorating, and Parkinsons disease slowly crept up its hold over him, our relationship became more intense, and moved more towards the spiritual than ever before. Joe was bitter, yet brave, about the unfortunate differences with his former associates. "In my time, Sudhir," he said once, "a man's word was his contract." It hurt—I must confess it hurt. As it still does.

In May 2001, one week before he left for his last journey back to the USA—the journey he would never come back from after spending nearly fifty years in the country of my birth, I had the privilege of chauffeuring him around the Ford Foundation and the IIC area, where I had recently helped in cleaning up and preserving the Ford Foundation buildings. His memory was sharp and clear. He reminded me about an unfinished job at the Lodi Gardens—the construction of a greenhouse he had designed to house what he called was the most beautiful Indian flowering

tree (the *Amherstia Nobilis*), and we drove through the area in the dry heat of the Indian summer. Joe left for the USA a week later.

Now, when I rummage through the drawings, papers, and memories, his last words of advice come back again and again: "Sudhir," he said in his typical careful style—his soft eyes thinking far beyond the present, "the worse that good men can do, is to let evil flourish."

I had been in touch on the phone with the family during the last few weeks, and every evening during the first week of October—talking to David Einar and Manjula, and praying that his end would be peaceful. I thought of Father, whom I had lost only four years ago, again after a long battle with disease. And I thought of Joe.

I knew from my conversations with Manjula, how positive a person Joe was till the very end. "It's the indomitable spirit", she had said the night before "of this generation which is unbelievable."

The words stuck. And thoughts flew. Flew and floated gently into the garden of Friends Colony in Delhi. And the autumn leaves lingered and twisted gently on the branches before spiralling to the earth.

So when Suneet Paul asked me to write a few words for A+D, I didn't know where to begin. And how to begin. But Joe's thoughts floated gently through the even gentler autumn breeze: "We are Eartheans first, Sudhir—our duty lies towards Mother Earth first. The nationalities and boundaries are secondary. Eartheans first. Eartheans." ☺