

Architecture and Construction of the Hindu Temple

Temples are a central aspect of life in the Hindu community and are sacred places for worship. The Hindu temple is a revered structure where the boundaries between humans and the divine are dissolved, allowing one to release themselves from illusion, or *maya*, and move towards knowledge and truth (Michell 61). In order for a temple to function properly and achieve its intended symbolic representation, the architect must consider the shape and materials of the temple as well as many complex mathematical and astrological principles. The Vastu-sastras are the general manuals on Hindu architecture and they, along with many other manuals, are consulted to help properly create the sacred temple. According to Volwahren, “each step which the architect takes is regarded from the angle of ritual purity and magic effect, only rarely from the angle of structural expediency” (173). The temple creator is responsible for properly constructing the structure so that it correctly functions as a link between a person and their God. This is important not only for an individual worshipper, but for the whole community, as “the welfare of the community and the happiness of its members depend upon the correctly proportioned temple” (Michell 73).

The Underlying Grid

All Hindu temples begin with a ground plan, a sacred geometric diagram called the *mandala* that is representative of the universe. The *mandala* is a grid, a large square that is divided into smaller squares by intersecting lines. It is considered to be “a symbolic pantheon of the gods” (Michell 71), with the smaller squares representing or housing a particular deity and the central and largest square representing Brahma. Volwahren explains that the “important gods cover the innermost ring, and in the outer rings there follow the gods of lower rank in the

celestial hierarchy” (44). The *mandala* may also contain the image of the cosmic man, who is arranged diagonally and “is identified with the processes of the creation of the universe and its underlying structure” (Michell 71). This arrangement is known as the *vastu-purusha mandala* (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Vastu-purusha mandala, http://www.lokvani.com/lokvani/article.php?article_id=4149

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

There are numerous and varying *mandalas* used in temples throughout the world. One that is typical in South India differs in that instead of the cosmic man, the architect draws a magic sign, and is referred to as the *sthandila mandala*. According to Volwahren, this *mandala* “visualizes the cosmic order” (56) differently than those previously mentioned. The center is occupied by Brahma, surrounded by the world of gods, who are then encircled by human beings (the terrestrial phenomena), and finally at the bottom are the goblins and demons (Volwahren 56).

There are specific rules regarding the laying out of the temple *mandala*. Michell discusses the influence of astronomy and astrology and states that they “provide the basis for determining the appropriate moments when all important activities are undertaken” (72). Observing the cosmos and the heavenly bodies influences the temple building process, determines when the temple plan is to be laid out, and through astronomical calculations, also regulates the *mandala*. Within texts such as the *Brhatsamhita*, the Sastras and the Agamas, astrological information is given in reference to temple layout and construction. The importance of astrology expressed in these texts shows “a conscious desire to identify the physical forms of the temple with the laws that govern the movements of heavenly bodies” (Michell 73).

Temple Materials

As important as the layout and grid of a Hindu temple are the materials used to build it. There are many Sastras and ancient texts on temple building such as the *Mayamata*, that discuss and recommend what materials should or should not be used when constructing a temple. Some of these writings suggest that “the materials of the temple are directly related to the classes of Hindu society” (Michell 78). White materials indicate the first, or Brahmin class, red represents the Kshatriya, or warrior class, yellow indicates the Vaishya, or merchant class, and finally black is said to indicate the fourth class, the Sudras (Volwahren 173). Volwahren states that “materials are not only co-ordinated with caste but also with sex” (174). A temple that is constructed of stone and brick signifies the male, one built out of brick and wood is deemed female, and if a temple was to be constructed of all three materials would be considered neutral (Volwahren 174).

Much like the grid choice and layout, astrology and astronomy play a role regarding the materials and construction. For example, Volwahren states that “the manufacture of bricks was carried out only under certain astrological conditions, which varied according to the purpose for which the bricks were to be used” (174). Rituals were also performed at many stages throughout the construction of the temple to ensure purity and sanctity. By ensuring specific actions are taken at specific auspicious times, the architect is creating a properly functioning and sacred temple.

Bibliography

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Related Readings

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Related Websites

<http://www.indiasite.com/architecture/hindu.html>

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