

# Architect of Independence



A few years after he had settled in newly independent India, American architect Joseph Allen Stein visited the hut in which Mohandas Gandhi had lived some 15 years earlier. Gandhi had established the Sevagram ashram in the center of the country to pursue a pure mode of village living, and Stein experienced what he called "a revealing intensity of beauty and rightness" there. He would go on to leave, with a notable flair for detail, a substantial architectural mark on Delhi, but Stein's commitment to the ideal of voluntary simplicity ran through his life and work.

Raised in Omaha, Nebraska, and trained at the University of Illinois and Cranbrook Academy of Art, Stein acknowledged his debt to the organic architecture of Eliel Saarinen, Louis ▶



Story by Christine Cipriani

The India International Centre (bottom), completed in 1962, is a showpiece for the careful craftsmanship and organic elements of Stein's work, including stone screens

called *jalis*. Stein raised part of the building (top) to draw the eye toward the neighboring Lodhi Garden, creating a breezy veranda with a signature coffered ceiling.

Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright. He launched his career in Los Angeles, working with Richard Neutra in the late Depression years, and he refined his goals in socially responsible planning in San Francisco, where he collaborated with John Funk and Garrett Eckbo throughout the 1940s. "If there's one word that would characterize what he was attempting to do," says his son David, "it was humane."

In 1952, Stein was invited to head the architecture and planning department at Bengal Engineering College, near Calcutta, and in 1955 he opened a practice in Delhi. Over the next four decades he designed some of the capital's most enduringly popular gathering places, forging a style that his former colleague Stephen White, author of the Stein monograph *Building in the Garden*, calls "perhaps the most subtle architecture of the 20th century." Suffused with the optimism of Indian independence, Stein explored Delhi's indigenous built heritage of medieval and Mughal monuments and set out to embody their grace and craft in contemporary form. His work was guided by a "search for an appropriate

modern regionalism," he told White, "because regional without modern is reactionary, and modern without regional is insensitive, inappropriate."

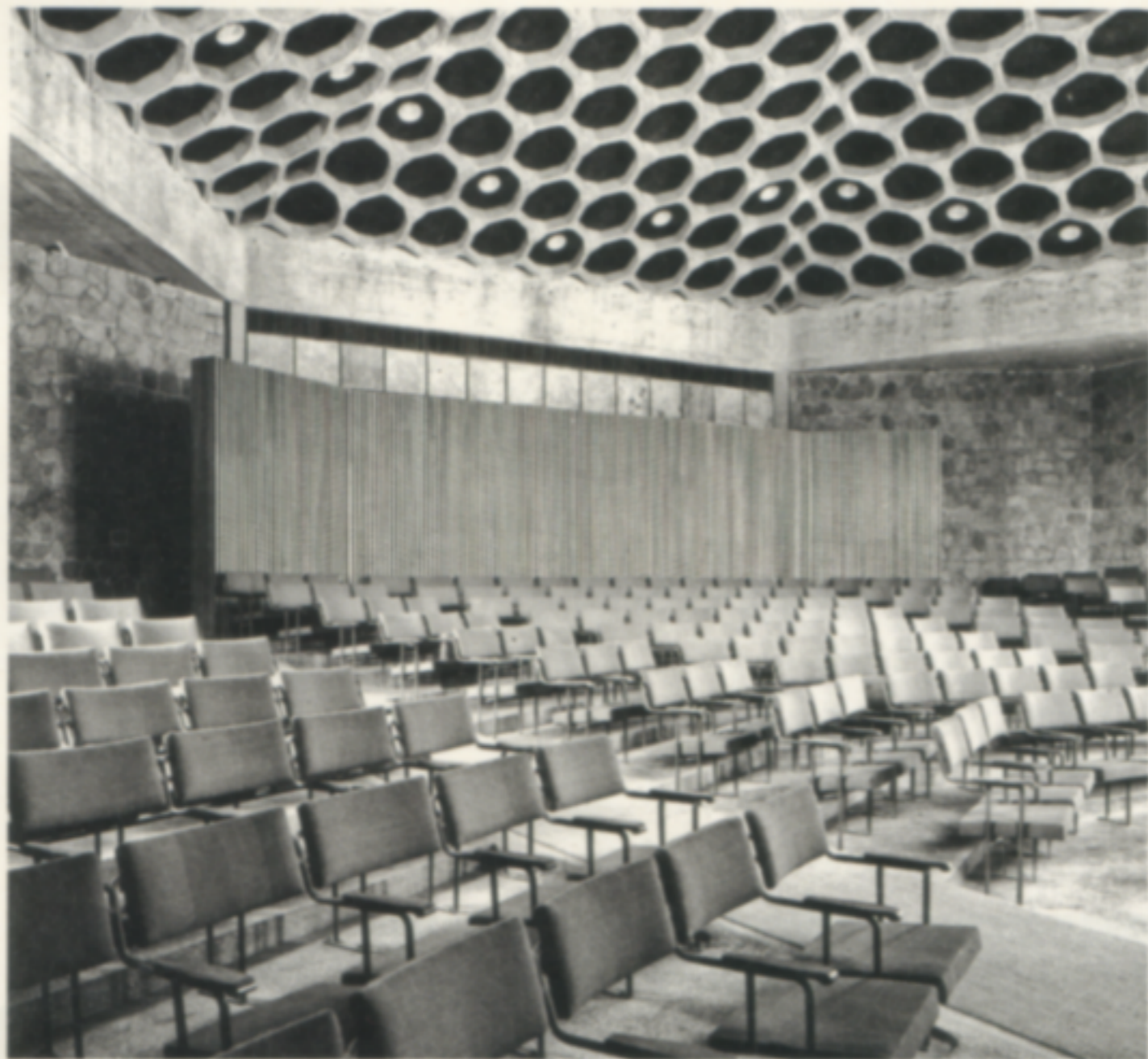
In the lush neighborhood of Lodhi Estate, next to a garden dotted with the tombs of 15th-century sultans, a series of modern masterworks gradually appeared: two cultural centers, the India International Centre (IIC) and India Habitat Centre, and headquarters for the Ford Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, and UNICEF. Elsewhere in Delhi, Stein designed an arts institute and the extraordinary American Embassy School, made in part with stone from its own rocky site. Committed to building in harmony with the land, both to minimize costs and to knit the building into its landscape, he created indoor-outdoor flow using roughly hewn walls, verandas, courtyards, coffered ceilings, vertical gardens, and traditional stone screens called *jalis*.

One of Stein's first projects in Delhi was the Triveni Kala Sangam (1959), founded after independence to revive traditional Indian art, music, and dance. On a busy road lined with concert halls and galleries, Triveni joins a sleek

gallery wing to a taller classroom block, its walkways wrapped in concrete *jalis* and draped with planters. Out back, greenery softens the acoustics, benches of grass and concrete slope to an outdoor stage, and the cafe is cooled by a vined pergola.

Stein's keynote building in Lodhi Estate, and arguably his greatest work, is the IIC, built with support from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1962. Local elements modify the modern throughout: The exposed concrete frame is filled with aggregate, a first in Delhi; semicircular vaults trace the roofline, recalling traditional Indian arches; and sheaths of *jalis*, some trimmed with turquoise tiles like those on the nearby tombs, keep guest rooms comfortable. The rock garden, a romantic lair for evening receptions, is rimmed with native foliage, and the hotel wing is curved to avoid confronting the garden with a rectangle. The hexagonal auditorium is quietly spectacular, its stone walls and teak entryway setting off a honeycombed dome.

So devoted was Stein to the IIC and its plantings that he returned every week throughout his career to check ▶



The India International Centre auditorium (left) flatters musicians and lecturers with its arresting hexagonal blend of honeycombed concrete, rough stone, and vertical teak.



To minimize costs and highlight what he called "the beauty and natural quality of local resources," Stein built with indigenous materials whenever he could.

Thirty years later, at the India Habitat Centre (right), Stein shaded courtyards with adjustable webs of louvers, making these acre-wide spaces surprisingly cool and intimate.

Photo courtesy India Habitat Centre (courtyard)

on their condition. Next door, for the Ford Foundation office (1968), Stein worked much the same textural brew into rectilinear forms.

Bewitched by the massive mountains, Stein spent much of the 1970s and '80s on ambitious Himalayan planning schemes that he hoped would bring sustainable tourism to Kashmir and Bhutan. His idealism inevitably led to disappointments. When Stein and a prominent Indian architect picnicked with their families—in the shadow of a different historic landmark—the two men sometimes drove their kids crazy with companionable grousing about the state of the modern world.

Modest by nature, Stein did not seek out projects; every one of his Indian works was commissioned. He received the Padma Shri civilian honor from the Indian government in 1992 and died in 2001 while visiting family in the United States. Stein was forever enamored of his adopted homeland. On a grand scale, Joseph Allen Stein is little remembered, but his sensitive modernist gifts to Delhi have quickly taken their place in the epic sweep of Indian history. ▶

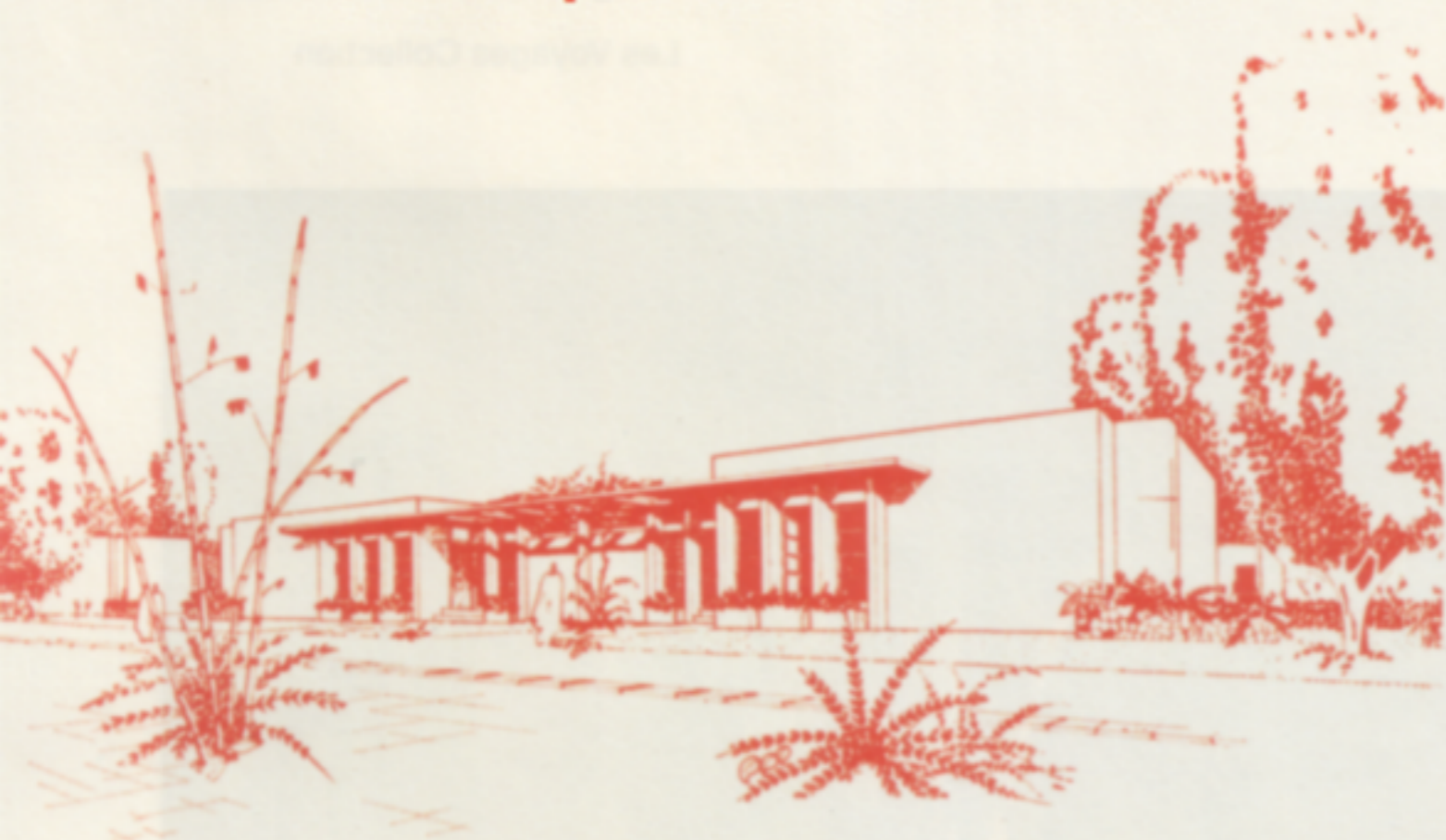


At the Ford Foundation headquarters (bottom left), hanging gardens soften rectilinear lines, and turquoise tiles allude to the tombs in the distance. Inside, Stein

used the confines of an office setting to play with texture (bottom right). The American Embassy School (top) was the first major Delhi building to occupy an unlevelled site.

Photo courtesy David Stein (American School)

# 10 things you should know about Joseph Allen Stein



**1.** Stein's talented wife, Margaret, furnished the interiors in several of his buildings.

**2.** As an undergraduate, Stein won a Whitney Warren Scholarship for summer study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Fontainebleau, narrowly besting Eero Saarinen in the competition.

**3.** In 1947, Stein and landscape architect Robert Royston built small houses next door to each other in Mill Valley, California. Stein simply reversed his own plan for Royston, who in turn designed both gardens.

**4.** Stein, Funk, Eckbo, and Royston planned a postwar cooperative housing community called Ladera near Palo Alto, California. The project died as the financiers balked at the community being racially integrated.

**5.** He found it thrilling to be in India after independence, when Jawaharlal Nehru was prime minister. Stein found it akin to "coming to the United States when Thomas Jefferson was alive."

**6.** Stein loved classical music and turned to Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* or a late Beethoven string quartet when absorbed in a particularly mighty design problem.

**7.** One project of which he was proudest was an Indian motor-scooter factory. Construction was so affordable that some visiting engineers playfully accused him of cooking the books.

**8.** Stein had a sly sense of humor and was fond of quipping, "The possibilities are tremendous. The probabilities are terrible."

**9.** In a 1989 lecture, Stein called the International Style "flawed...without the depth of traditional forms and without their endearing charms. And what was worse, it was boring."

**10.** Stein adored his time in India, and though his wife and sons learned Hindi, he never fully adopted the culture. "His religion, his profession, his nationality," his son David explains, "were all architecture." ■

At work in San Francisco in the late 1940s (top right), Stein built a small house for his family in nearby Mill Valley (middle). One of his first Indian projects was a housing

community for steel workers in West Bengal (top left). For the 1964 Escorts scooter factory (bottom), he designed a roof shell system that moderated heat, light, and noise. ❶