CYRUS JHABVALA
1920-2014
TEACHER | PRACTITIONER | ARTIST
Professor Cyrus Jhabvala shaped generations of architects at the School of Planning and Architecture in its early Delhi years. An unconventional and inspiring teacher, he was there at its creation and the head of department of architecture for a memorable decade. He influenced his students not only for a semester, not only for five years, but perhaps for the rest of their lives.

His extensive practice informed his teaching and induced an excitement and a knowledge of ground realities among young students and teachers. Anand Aptay and Jhabvala belonged to the generation of architecture firms which rebuilt Delhi to suit a newly independent nation and to house the lakhs of refugees who poured in after Partition - an architecture meant to build communities and create functional spaces, with clean lines and explicit details. Their buildings were true to purpose and need, sensitive to cost and context, conscious of climate and local traditions.

Jhabvala’s fascination with Mughal architecture, was reflected in his pencil studies of the monuments of the period, and he drew on features and details from them for his buildings. His first book Delhi: Stones and Streets carried remarkable pencil drawings, while his later books had watercolours from Delhi and New York.

A fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, he was born in Bombay to parents steeped in the activism of the freedom movement. He married Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, who became a well-known author, winning the Booker prize and later two Oscars for her screenplays. The couple had three girls and they settled in Delhi, moving to New York in later years.
Cyrus Jhabvala was born in 1920, one of seven siblings in a Parsi family of Bombay. His parents, Shavaksha and Mehraben were an unorthodox couple. They were both involved in the turbulence of the 1920s. India was in the midst of an agitation to get rid of the British raj. In his early years, Shavaksha was fired up by Dadabhai Naoroji’s ideas about Swaraj and devoted his time and energy to working for the poor. He became an active trade union organizer, and was in jail for many years as one of the co-accused in the Meerut Conspiracy case.

Mehraben had to cope with rigors of a husband in jail, the demands of seven children, and continuous harassment by the police. She was a hardy and restless soul and once her husband was released from jail, she got involved in organizing the local community. Public activity became a way of life and she became a municipal councillor and went on to become the President of the All India Women’s Conference in 1964.

Both Shavaksha and Mehraben were a product of their times—experiencing with new ideas and organizing principles as a restless India searched for a new, equitable order.

Young Cyrus could not remain unaffected by the turmoil and excitement in the Jhabvala household. Very early in life he learnt not to be overawed by traditional conventions and courtliness. At the age of 15, he succumbed to the itinerant itch, left Bombay for Delhi, to seek excitement and creativity. He tried to pass himself off as an 18-year old in order to land a job. Cyrus liked to draw and when he finished school, he desired to become an artist, but his mother discouraged him, saying that all the artists she knew were without jobs and food, and his family was in a difficult situation. He started working as a draftsman in an architect’s office and contributed to putting food on the family table. At the same time, he did not give up on his artistic yearnings. He enrolled in the evening classes of the JJ School of Art. However, he was fired up by Dadabhai Naoroji’s ideas about Swaraj and devoted his time and energy to working for the poor. He became an active trade union organizer, and was in jail for many years as one of the co-accused in the Meerut Conspiracy case.

When he returned to India, the country was still reeling under the Partition woes and its dislocations. There was no work. The only job he could get was as a Lecturer in the Delhi Polytechnic, Department of Architecture. He moved to Delhi in 1949, and two years later, he went back to England—to get married—and returned to Delhi with Ruth.

He saved enough money for a voyage to England in 1946. In London, he studied for the RIBA examination but also worked for the British Ministry of Works and freelanced for private architecture firms, drawing perspectives. One of the main perspectives he drew was the City of Durham. He became an Associate of the RIBA in 1948 and immediately after that he returned to India.

Cyrus had already bought his ticket on a ship back to India when he met Ruth Prawer at a social gathering. They began seeing each other and decided to get married after he had found a job in India.

When he returned to India, the country was still reeling under the Partition woes and its dislocations. There was no work. The only job he could get was as a Lecturer in the Delhi Polytechnic, Department of Architecture. He moved to Delhi in 1949, and two years later, he went back to England—to get married—and returned to Delhi with Ruth.

Jhabvala’s ideas did not harmonize with Nehru’s. Whereas Nehru wanted buildings which echoed the designs of an older Indian tradition, Jhabvala contended: “One does not build to make something look like something else. You build what is functionally required without trying to copy any style.” Nobody could win an argument with Nehru and as long as the great man lived, AAJ was not invited to design any of the grander buildings. In the post-Nehru years however, AAJ constructed many Government buildings, among which the shopping complex at Chanakyapuri and the Telecom building in Janpath are dear to the firm’s singularly distinct imprint.

There was, however, plenty of work for the new firm. Given the housing shortage, it is not surprising that, in their first decade of practice, of the 142 projects they undertook, 92 were for new residences. Their residencies became well-known for their new styles. They were perhaps the first in Delhi to make their buildings with exposed brickwork with white cement pointing. Their brick jaalis, too were a new method of providing privacy and yet retaining light and air in an aesthetic style.

Anand Apyat and Jhabvala (AAJ)

While he was teaching in Delhi Polytechnic, Cyrus Jhabvala met R.G. Anand, an architect from Lahore and a fellow-lecturer. Anand also had a JJ connection. In Lahore, Anand had set up, in 1939, an architectural practice with a fellow student U.M. Apyat.

Came the Partition and the Anand family packed all that it could in a car and drove to Delhi. To pick up the pieces, he began working with the newly set up DLF. At the Polytechnic, he had met Cyrus; the two hit it off and decided to set up a practice of their own. Anand was keen on having his Lahore partner, Apyat, in the firm. But by that time, Apyat had settled down in Pune, nevertheless his name was added to the masthead. In 1951 Anand Apyat and Jhabvala (AAJ) was registered as a partnership firm with two partners.

AAJ was among the first post-Independence Indian architectural firms of Delhi, modern architects, bridging the colonial legacy and the imperatives and exigencies of a new democratic state. And the first decade after Independence was a busy time for architects and builders. Lакh of refugees who had come in from Pakistan needed to be relocated, housed; new post-Independence projects had to be put in place. Jawaharlal Nehru was keen to build a modern India and encouraged architects and ambitious plans. However, Jhabvala’s ideas did not harmonize with Nehru’s. Whereas Nehru wanted buildings which echoed the designs of an older Indian tradition, Jhabvala contended: “One does not build to make something look like something else. You build what is functionally required without trying to copy any style.” Nobody could win an argument with Nehru and as long as the great man lived, AAJ was not invited to design any of the grander buildings. In the post-Nehru years however, AAJ constructed many Government buildings, among which the shopping complex at Chanakyapuri and the Telecom building in Janpath are dear to the firm’s singularly distinct imprint.

PRactice

“One does not build to make something look like something else. You build what is functionally required without trying to copy any style.”
AAJ’s style was unselfconscious, self-confident and efficient, appropriate for a fledgling democracy seeking to define and assert its position in the world. Their buildings were true to purpose and need, sensitive to cost and context, conscious of climate and local traditions. They were characterised by the framed concrete construction of the time, exposed and patterned brickwork, brick arches, brick tile jaalis, rubble masonry and stone flooring.

The Punjabi refugees were entrepreneurs and soon industrial and commercial buildings were needed. AAJ became one of the main architects for the Indian Co-operative Union (with Kamladevi Chattopadhyay and Laxmi Chand Jain) which spearheaded housing and industrial projects for refugees. Kirorimal College was the first big AAJ institutional project. A new relationship got forged with the college Principal, Choudhary Hardwari Lal. When he became Vice-Chancellor of the new Kurukshetra University, he tapped AAJ. This was perhaps their biggest project and gradually came up over a period of ten years.

The sixties saw AAJ becoming one of the established firms in Delhi. They continued to build residences, commercial and industrial institutions, including well-known ones like Cottage Industries, Handloom House shops in many parts of the country and Super Bazaars, their industrial buildings including factory complexes for Kelvinator and Godrej, ice factories, sugar mills and textile units.

Jhabvala was a brilliant interior designer – his iconic Cottage Industries store (Delhi) took store design to new heights. He was one of the first designers to create narrative-based thematic designs, working in partnership with script writers, lighting & sound designers, artists and artisans.

The firm was pre-eminent in exhibition pavilion design. Its pavilions were structural innovations and famous for their interiors and lighting. Each year they designed an exhibition pavilion at Pragati Maidan for the Trade Fair and inevitably bagged the first prize. Their pavilions attracted the largest crowds and won awards and laurels, year after year. Jhabvala conjured up a whole new world of visual wonder in a matter of weeks – once it was a Vishnu reclining amidst a splendid display of mine and mineral products; another time it was spacecraft and robots. Visitors thronged again, and again, drawn by the familiar, but discovering something new with each visit. They consolidated their relationship with State-owned MMTC and STC and designed their pavilions in exhibitions in many countries over the years.
In later decades, the firm specialized in building institutions. It was invited to build the upcoming Maharshi Dayanand University in Rohtak. The firm designed and constructed Springdales School, Guru Harkrishan Public School and Roopnagar Public School, Bhatiya Kala Kendra, part of the Max Mueller Bhavan as well as the open air theatre for Sahitya Kala Parishad. The firm’s design for institutions was popular because it lowered costs by using whatever space and material was available, maintaining the aesthetics of the building. The Communist party building, Ajoy Bhavan, for example, was built with stone jaali on the facade facing the street, serving both an aesthetic as well as a protective function.

In 1982, R.G. Anand passed away and Jhabvala reduced his commitments preferring to focus on his drawing and sketching. In the mid-eighties, he shifted base to New York, visiting India three times a year. However, he continued to design the MMTC pavilions, working with his team to bring in latest technology and trends in art and design. Again his exhibitions attracted the largest crowds.

In their thirty-five years of practice, AAJ designed over four hundred structures spanning the gamut of residential, institutional, commercial, industrial, and exhibition structures. They believed that architecture is a useful art, meant to build communities and create functional spaces. AAJ’s buildings are unique for their uncluttered, clean lines and functional details. Jhabvala, especially, was fascinated by medieval architecture and, in the context of Delhi, Mughal architecture, specifically its engineering innovations, materials, and method of construction. He made pencil studies of a great many of the monuments of the period, and drew on features and details from them for his buildings.

The offices were typical of the times — plain, functional, austere. The partners had separate rooms with a small window in the partition for communication. How they managed to produce so much work with a staff of six architects and draftsmen, two or three services back-up staff, and three or four administration staff, all managed by the capable Heera Guglani, would be a matter of wonder today. And they were not just prodigiously productive as architects; they were part of the cultural scene of Delhi. Mr. Anand loved the theatre and produced — and wrote — a number of successful plays, including Ham Hindustani, Chitralekha and many more, for which Jhabvala designed the sets.
The School of Planning and Architecture

Cyrus Jhabvala started his life in Delhi as a teacher and many terrified generations of architects passed through his classes. He joined the Delhi Polytechnic in 1949 as a lecturer in the Department of Architecture, and in 1951 the first B.Arch course was established in the Polytechnic. The Department was later affiliated to the University of Delhi and integrated with the School of Town and Country Planning. In 1959, it became the School of Planning and Architecture, affiliated with the University.

Once Jhabvala’s practice got going, it became more and more difficult for him to teach full time. Also, when the School was affiliated to the University, the rules did not permit teachers to have their own practices. Teaching was a vocation for Jhabvala, but for him it could not be separated from practice. He taught what he learned as he built. So in 1959, he left the school, although he continued to teach occasional courses as a guest faculty.

In 1967, the School was going through a rough patch. Jhabvala was invited to become the Head of the Department by the Education Ministry. The Ministry agreed to all his conditions – that he could continue his practice while working in the School, and that he run the Department in the way he saw fit.

Jhabvala made a demanding teacher, both inspiring and daunting. He had an innate sense of fairness and kindness but an unpredictable temper came with it. He was a hard taskmaster, intolerant of slacking and indiscipline. But in those he perceived a spark, he opened up worlds. He stoked the spark to make a fire. He expected a high level of interest in a subject and the desire to learn and to explore. Anything less attracted his ire and sarcasm.

His critiques were sharp and quick-witted. He enjoyed and encouraged repartee – to engage in conversational threat and parry. He appreciated honesty, integrity, diligence and hated clichés and pretentiousness of any kind. He had a wicked sense of humor – full of wit and was an incorrigible prankster. He was that rare person – completely his own. Completely non-conformist, he had no time or patience for conventions but all the time for originality.

Most of his students recall his teaching methods both inside and outside the classroom. He would organize trips to ruins and buildings that he had discovered in his rambles through Delhi and share with students his understanding of the architecture. His favorite outing was to take the students to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, spending a weekend with them sketching and teaching.

“My earliest memory of him is at the outhouses of Fatehpur Sikri where we students, more than twenty of us, along with him, chatting most of the night about what we felt about the complex. For us it was the first visit to Fatehpur Sikri and he made us think as we were building it stone by stone. He was more interested in the details of construction and during the three days we spent there, he got us to sketch and then discuss it during the evenings and late at night. As a professor he had this marvelous ability to make students think for themselves rather than accept any preconceived notions of any architectural theory of design.

I do remember that for a house design set in Daryaganj, a student had drawn Californian foliage as part of the surroundings in the manner of Richard Neutra who was fashionable at the time. Jhabvala’s comment in his dry sardonic manner was to imagine the house in its realistic surroundings – perhaps a bull sitting around a heap of garbage and dangling wires from electric poles as part of the perspective.”

—Raj Rewal

“My first change he brought about was to change the door of his own office. The old solid wood gave way to a fully glazed shutter. The change was symbolic of a new openness. So, decades before administrative ‘transparency’ acquired a fashionable buzz, Jhabvala had innovatively put it in practice. It was a game-changing masterstroke: instantly the entire school community could feel his empowering involvement, everyone could experience his cheerful curiosity and stern watchfulness, uplifting and frightening at the same time. Even as students we knew how well he looked after the Department, earning the loyalty and trust of virtually anyone who had the good fortune to cross his path in the three decades.

To be other than attentive in his presence was never an option. But what’s fascinating is that he didn’t just hold your attention only or the duration of the class—that is, just long enough to enable the transfer of information about a technique or the rudiments of an observational skill. No, in some way your attention was captured for longer, much longer than that; for the semester, for the whole five years, perhaps for the rest of your life.”


TEACHING
The subject he was most known for was building construction. The projects given were like real-life ones, interesting and challenging, making the study highly stimulating. The intensity, quantum of work and time that it took to depict the subject initiated students into understanding building construction as a cornerstone of the professional education. He tried to train his students to function competently on real ground by making them familiar with all practical aspects of building. He himself guided every student to achieve what he or she set out to do. Someone could even accuse him of casting a life-long spell on his students.

His impact was felt way beyond his classroom and his students. Independent India needed a post-colonial fundamental change in the way architects thought about their craft and profession and how and what they taught their students.

He designed a new syllabus. He introduced a paradigm shift by developing an approach and method for an Indian architectural education in the sixties with the introduction of then new syllabus. His insistent accent was on students studying the environment in which they would be building rather than accept designs from environments very different from their own.

Many students would gladly acknowledge that his teaching and his personality deeply affected their lives.

"My earliest recollection of Jhab is that of a perplexing persona - clearly outside the comprehension of my 1st year B.Arch student intellect. How could, for example, a docile, friendly, sarcastically jovial, cigarettes in a plastic soap box carrying, deeply caring (stories of how open-fisted / large-hearted he was towards treating his students to impromptu meals) and generally soft spoken person be talked about in hushed tone by some of the ‘tough’ seniors portraying him as a cold-blooded terror? I once witnessed his demolishing supremacy when he went into the group of slogan shouting rowdy striking students to calm them down in a matter of minutes. He would not be intimidated."
— Kavas Kapadia

"For me, he instilled the love for historic Delhi. He was the inspiration for me to pursue Conservation Studies in my later years. When I began teaching History of Architecture, it was the least sought after subject. Since that time, today, this has transgressed into a very popular teaching subject Professor Jhabvala, in this sense, not only gave knowledge but inspired both students and teachers. His ability to effortlessly traverse History, Building Construction and Contemporary Architecture is still rare today."

"His expeditions produced a record of the fast disappearing monuments constructed 600 years earlier as wave after wave of Muslim invaders poured into Delhi from Central Asia. Jhabvala’s record is highly personal and subjective and at time, very precise - as precise as the 19th century photographs taken of the same are before and after the Indian Mutiny of 1857."

THE ARTIST

“His expeditions produced a record of the fast disappearing monuments constructed 600 years earlier as wave after wave of Muslim invaders poured into Delhi from Central Asia. Jhabvala’s record is highly personal and subjective and at time, very precise - as precise as the 19th century photographs taken of the same are before and after the Indian Mutiny of 1857.”
In India it used to be considered that when a man has completed his worldly duties as a householder he could retire to the forest to seek his spiritual salvation... But now city life is sterner and salvation comes later. He has to wait till the last child leaves home and the dog dies; then he can travel where he pleases, slamming the door behind him without a care. So it was with me. My interest in architecture and urbanization took me to many parts of the world with a sketch book and a portable stool in a portfolio case."


Cyrus Jhabvala had been drawing, sketching and painting since he moved to Delhi in 1949, and was drawn to the buildings and ruins nestled in the growing metropolis. His sketches were incredibly detailed and "as precise as the 19th century photographs taken in the same area ... there is a tradition of Indian miniature that Jhabvala has tapped; it is one of meticulous detail. Some of these paintings remind me of the Mewar School at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th." (James Ivory, 'Old Delhi–New York: Personal Views', Lustre/Roli Books, 2008).

As his architectural practice waned, he spent more and more of his time visiting sites in Delhi, setting up a stool and sketchpad early in the morning, taking photographs and completing the drawing in his office where he once drew architectural plans.

Ravi Dayal, encouraged him to put together a book of his sketches and in 1999, fifty of his pencil sketches were published as Delhi: Stones and Streets. Each drawing was accompanied by a commentary instructive about the architectural details of the building and yet, at the same time, he discovered and discerned the human dimension. He also began experimenting with watercolors. His painting of the back of Red Fort with a vibrant Sunday kabadi market is full of life and colors with old clothes, wooden doors and many, many, many more jostling for space with the vendors and their customers. He used the watercolors to spectacular effect, painting skies atop the buildings, he has depicted fine detail, sometimes with lowering clouds and sometimes with blue skies set off by little fluffy white clouds.

Once he began spending more and more time in New York, he took to walking the streets, looking for a site that caught his eye. Some of his drawings were the view from his own window, whereas others were drawn setting up a stool and an easel at a corner of a street. He usually went out early in the morning, when the New York crowds had not yet poured out on the streets and he was able to document the still sleeping homeless and the uncleared garbage bags.

Although, he spent most of his time in New York City, Cyrus and Ruth, often visited James Ivory's stately country house in upstate New York near the Hudson river, filled with objects d'art collected by Ivory and Merchant, and set in 30 acres of grass and trees at the edge of a lake. Here, Ruth wrote on her laptop under the shade of a tree while Cyrus drew the house, its grounds and barns.

In 2008, he published yet another book, combining watercolors and pencil drawings of his two favorite cities. The book was entitled Delhi, New York: Personal Views with the cover showing a window which opens one side to New York and the other to Old Delhi.

For his last book, he returned to Delhi and went back to his pencil drawings. Delhi: Phoenix City (Ravi Dayal and Penguin Studio, 2012), has 73 drawings, taking us on an urban journey starting north in the walled city and ending in Tuglaquabad. He documented the various ways Delhi is built by multiple dynasties and then the largest expansion of all when the refugees poured into Delhi after 1947 and the continued expansion—horizontal and vertical—since then.

Jhabvala remained fascinated with Delhi, its mysterious yet glorious past. "In my quite desultory amblings around Delhi, I have not so much discovered as stumbled upon the remains of all our known kingdoms, some remarkably intact, others a pile of stones and masonry... I have tried to record and hopefully transmit some of the pleasure these ineradicable Delhiis have given me, and the surprise of seeing their ancient and not-so-ancient roots still alive and living within the technologies of our modern metropolis."

“His hand mostly describes the encroachment of the city’s multiplying business and residential towers pushing along Lexington and Third Avenues towards his own smaller scaled neighborhood on the East River.”

Cyrus Jhabvala
Born in Bombay on September 27, 1920.

Studied Architecture at Bombay and London.

Elected as an Associate Member of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in 1948, and later as its Fellow.

Joined Delhi Polytechnic in 1949.

Set up practice in India, (Delhi) in 1951, as partner in the firm ‘Anand, Aptay and Jhabvala’.

Taught at the Department of Architecture, Delhi Polytechnic from 1949 to 1959.

Married Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, an eminent writer, winner of the Bodmer Prize and twice- Oscar Award winner.

Joined the Department of Architecture at School of Planning & Architecture, New Delhi, as Head of the Department in 1967.

Retired as the Director of the Institute in 1978.

Biodata & Chronology

PROJECTS

Total numbers of projects
Over 400

Institutional: 42
Commercial: 37
Industrial: 32
Layout Plans of Colonies: 12
Exhibition Pavilions: 34
Residential: 206
Others: 60

Selected Works

Institutional
The National Sports Club of India Quarters, 1951
Delhi Parsi Anjuman – Bhiwandi Hall, 1952
Delhi State Co-Operative Bank, 1955
Kirorimal College, 1955
Eros Cinema Building, 1955
Buddhist Pilgrims Guest House, 1958
Kurukshetra University, Haryana, 1960-69
Vidya Bhawan Mahavidyalaya, 1962

Max Mueller Bhawan Library Building, 1967
Ajay Bhawan - Communist Party of India Building, 1969
Guru Harkrishan Public School, 1972
Indian Council for Child Welfare Quarters, 1974
Springdales School, 1976
Haryana Prakritik Chitralaya, 1977
Open Air Theatre for Sahitya Kala Parishad, 1979
PrabhuDyal Public School, 1984

Commercial
Telecom Building, Janpath, 1962-65
Yashwant Place, Chanakyapuri, 1965-72
Cottage Industries Emporium, Janpath, 1966
INA Super Bazaar (Pusa Road), 1966
Handloom House Office Building, Connaught Place, 1967
Super Bazaar, Secunderabad, 1968

Industrial
Basheshwaranath Textiles, 1954
Factory for Electronics Ltd, 1956
Hindustan Air Conditioning Corporation Ltd, 1956
National Small Industries Corporation, 1957
Associated Instruments Factory, 1960
Crystal Ice Factory, 1962

Simshahar Sugar Mills Ltd., 1969
Kishinator of India Ltd., 1970
Sawhney Rubber Industries, 1974
People’s Publishing House (Warehouse & Godown), 1976

Layout Plans of Colonies & Housing
Lok Sewal Co Operative House Building Society Ltd (later called Geetanjali)
Rajouri Garden Extension on Najafgarh Road
South Extension Part 1 and 2
Greater Kailash Part 1 and 2
Hauz Khas Enclave on Qutub Road
Kailash Colony
Punjabi Bagh
Model Town

Exhibition Pavilions & Stalls
Pavilion of Handloom Industry, 1955
HSPI Exhibition Stall, 1958
Indian Central Sugarcane Committees, Exhibit Stall, World Agricultural Fair, 1959
ICMA, Industrial Fair, 1961
STC Pavilion, Moscow, 1963
Handloom Stall in Expo ’70 Japan
German STC Pavilion, ASIAD’72, 1972
IDBI Pavilion at 3rd International Trade Fair, 1972

Jhabvala family would like to thank Prof. Chetan Vaidya, Ritikar M. Chisti, Mihir Bhatt, Late Mohammed Shalwani, Prof. Nalin Thakur, Neelam Kshetrapal, Ramesh Singh and Usha Ramaswamy for their kind support for this publication. Jhabvala family would also like to thank Navaneeth Krishnan for photography of selected projects.