



# a hindu temple in america

a place for the faithful in the california desert » by cyrus subawalla

Aerial view of  
temple complex.

**t**he Hindu philosophy and religion are followed by the majority of people in India. The faith is so ancient, complex, and profound that it has laid foundations for and provided precepts to numerous other faiths including, ironically, even those that broke away from the Hindu tradition, such as Buddhism and Jainism. Any explanation of the Hindu faith in a short essay such as this would do injustice to it and its followers. Rather, this article presents our design for a Hindu temple through which we explore certain questions about the form of a Hindu temple, and about the ritual that contributes to it.

Indian immigrant communities in the United States are vibrant, albeit small as compared to others, and they practice their faith with vigor and purpose. The Hindu population of the Antelope Valley, a suburban region near the City of Los Angeles, consists of roughly a half-dozen immigrant groups who are devout practitioners of their faith. For years, these congregants have been worshiping out of temporarily rented spaces, a situation inadequate and inappropriate for the physical needs of the community and the sanctity of their worship. Fortunately, a visionary cardiologist approached our firm with a proposal to create a permanent sanctuary, and a core group of other philanthropic doctors and community leaders in the area have come together to transform this collective vision into reality.

The clients requested a temple dedicated primarily to Lord Vishnu, one of the prime deities of the Hindu tradition and the Supreme God of the Vaishnavite sect. They also requested additional shrines (chapels)

for six to eight other deities of the Hindu pantheon as decided upon by the community. The end result will be a traditionalist temple of northern and southern Indian confluence, placed behind modernist support facilities designed to inspire younger generations to fervent worship. As with other non-Christian immigrant groups, the smaller Hindu communities attempt to instruct their young in Hinduism, without necessarily having the support of the social, linguistic, and cultural context and environment of India. Hence, our approach had to envision a place that would encourage future generations to explore the faith via the medium of design.

Having reviewed numerous prototypes, our office chose to design the main temple Shikhara (spire from the stepped entablature to the finial) after the pattern of one found in the Kangra district of the state of Himachal Pradesh, in northern India. The reason we begin our discussion with a temple spire is because it is perhaps the singular most iconic feature of a Hindu temple. The selection pays homage to the cultural attribution of Kangra as a birthplace of Hinduism, noting that the Shikhara of the Temple at Kangra is also one of the few Indian temples that successfully conjoin the traditions of Vishnu and Shiva worship. (For readers completely alien to the Hindu tradition, the trilogy is based around three manifestations of the same God, namely Vishnu the Preserver, Shiva the Destroyer, and Brahma the Creator. These deities are then said to have manifested themselves in numerous other gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and are known by different



*View of entrance doorway  
and portico, from east.*



names in different parts of India.) This style of temple is also appropriate as a geographically synthetic typology, given that similar examples can be found in various regions of India.

Similar to a Christian church's composition, the Hindu temple is comprised of a few key elements. More often than not, in Hindu temples, the prime deity faces east, even though facing other directions may be acceptable. Thus, our journey begins in the east and progresses toward the deity in the west, with the pilgrim facing the sanctum sanctorum at all times (see page 16).

The first architectural feature is the *dwara* (entrance doorway) which is often surmounted by either a raised, stepped entablature with or without a *Shikhara* (as seen in northern India) or by *Gopurams* (stepped trapezoidal spires seen in Hindu temples in southern India). These entrances are either crowned by gods or with devotees bowed in admiration of the gods. These embody a narrative from the Hindu liturgy, similar to the sculptured doorways in Gothic cathedrals. As in numerous other religions, the doorways herald the transition from *fanum* (profane) to the *sacros* (sacred). In Hindu temples, devotees leave their footwear on one side or immediately outside the main entry and vestibule; in our design we have created a semi-remote room, away from the main temple, for the specific purpose of ritual washing and shoe drop-off.

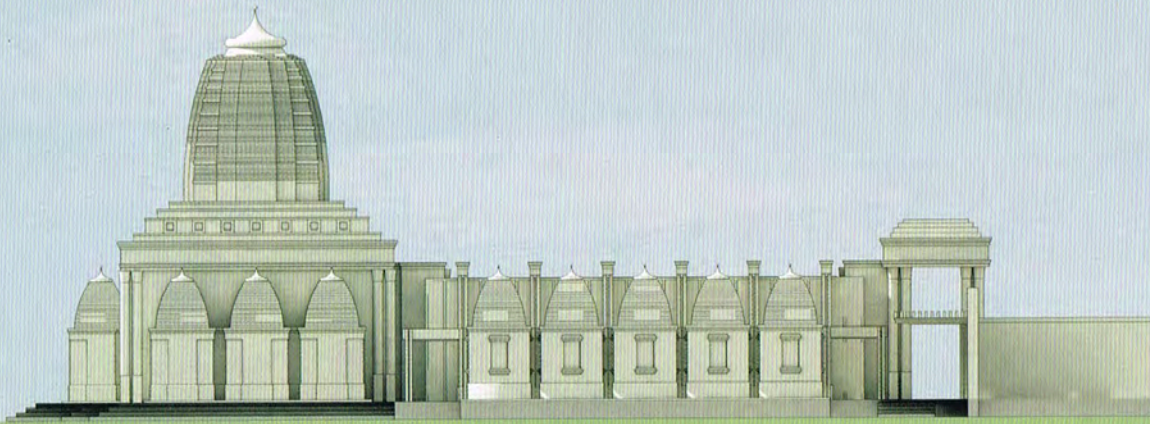
From here a pilgrim moves into a pillared *Maha Mandapa* (great assembly space), a multipurpose hallway that could serve as a place for

communal worship, banqueting, and for sessions of religious study. This *Maha-Mandapa* is designed as a series of gateways/portals in lieu of a hypostyle hall. This permits an unhindered view of the main sanctum sanctorum. Also, the portals serve as metaphorical thresholds of increasing sanctity as one approaches the main temple. A modernist glass cube with a suspended roof under these portals is inserted to create a year-round structure that is both transparent and weatherproof. The transparency of the *Maha-Mandapa* thereby inspires the devotee to pass through each portal as part of a journey from the profane to the sacred, with a view of the main shrine and the Lord Vishnu residing within, all elevated on an additional plinth.

From this main hall, the devotee climbs a few more steps and enters the sanctum sanctorum where the statue of Lord Vishnu facing east is raised on a pedestal within a walled room called a *garb griha* (womb house). Around this *garb griha* is a *parikrama* (walkway), which allows devotees to ambulate around the statue. During this journey, they also pay their respects to other gods who reside within this sanctum in smaller conjoined shrines/templums of their own. (Examples similar to this are seen in cathedrals such as Chartres that have ambulatories with chapels for the saints.) The interiors of this main shrine have been designed as a series of inverted transverse beams, supporting the *chatri* (sacred umbrella often placed above where the gods reside). This is quite unlike the traditional load-bearing structure of a Hindu temple. After circumambulating the sacred shrines, devotees will back out of the




South elevation, showing view through the arcaded courtyard.



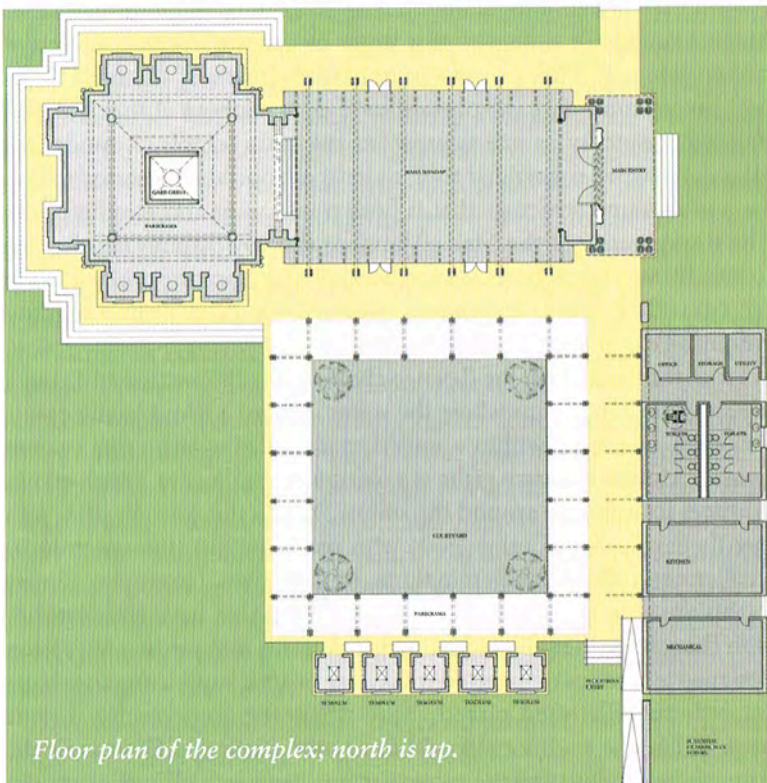
sanctum in bowed reverence to the gods. In this design, the congregants can exit through a side door to carry out a larger ambulation, visiting the shrines/chapels on the far side of a semi-internalized courtyard. As in numerous religions, a sense of pilgrimage is quintessential to the completion of the ritual and ceremony.

As mentioned earlier, the large exterior courtyard serves as a place for both sacred and secular function. Certain Hindu yagnias (ritual of sacrifice often associated with fire) are intentionally conducted outdoors where a larger congregation can worship as one. The courtyard is bound by a raised pergola-covered walkway, with independent chapels, offices, and main temple, accessible from the walkway on three sides. The fourth side is bound by a natural mound that existed in the landscape and that serves to seclude this courtyard from external view.

The design of this Hindu temple aims to achieve a harmonious balance between “the One” and “the Other,” which is essential to an

all-embracing faith such as Hinduism. Modern elements are delicately woven into the traditional, and provide space that encourages a conscientious re-enactment of ritual, yet gives congregants latitude to the use of these spaces for secular occasions. Most important, there is a place of repose, something fundamental to the journey of the Hindu faithful. 

CYRUS SUBAWALLA IS A PRINCIPAL OF CSA PARTNERS LTD., BASED IN CHICAGO AND MUMBAI.



Floor plan of the complex; north is up.

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