Temples and Texts

In contrast to Europe, from where there are no theoretical writings on architecture between Vitruvius and the 15th century, architectural practice in South Asia has been accompanied by a plethora of ‘canonical’ treatises since the early medieval period. A branch of the śāstric tradition of Sanskrit texts, these comprise principally works categorised as vāstuśāstras and śilpaśāstras. Temples loom large in this literature, in terms of their architectural designs and typologies, their sculpted iconography, and the rituals associated with them.

This talk will explore the relationship between such texts and architectural practice, focusing on the Samarāṅgaṇasūtradhāra (Malwa, 11th century) and Aparājitapṛcchā (western India, 12th century), and illustrating, with drawings and built examples, the various sequences of temple forms that these texts describe. I shall argue that the same ways of thinking about and designing temples permeate both the texts and the architectural traditions. Both evolve in dialogue: designs in the texts keep track of developments in practice, and can extrapolate further forms, sometimes subsequently built. A text provides a framework for creating a design, but demands interpretation and improvisation, never slavish adherence. Drawings are the necessary intermediary between texts and buildings, and this whole discussion is only possible if we first draw what the texts are inviting us to draw. I shall present worked examples of how this can be done.

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