

# DESIGNING THE VERNACULAR: AN INQUIRY IN THE PROCESSES OF MAKING IN KUTCH, INDIA

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## Abstract

As understood popularly, vernacular is not just a simplistic interaction between the climate, culture and craft, but rather a composite body of knowledge processes developed over generations of experience through trial and error in response to the needs of people occupying them and to the requirements of the changing physical environment around them.

With the hegemonic advent of present global monoculture, the evocation of sentimental vernacular seems quite a natural response in places with strong cultural traditions and their unique craft expressions. I am referring to that nostalgia for the vernacular which is being conceived as an overdue return to the ethos of popular culture. Rather than the critical perception of reality and creative synthesis, it rather evokes the sublimation of a desire for direct experience through imagery and rhetorical information. Its tactical aim is to attain, as economically as possible, a preconceived level of instant gratification in behavioristic terms.

The aim of this paper is to explore the issue of validating the vernacular and inherent contradictions within it through two recent projects in the Kutch region of Gujarat in India. First project, Khamir Crafts Park, is a nongovernmental institution working for the development of craft traditions of Kutch

region while the second one, Sham-e-Sarhad is an eco-resort built and run by local residents of Hodka village in the desert of Kutch. As the building craft and artisanal traditions of this region are intrinsic to making of both these projects, this paper will examine the process of interpretation and reinterpretation and the nature of the resultant architectural synthesis.

## Introduction

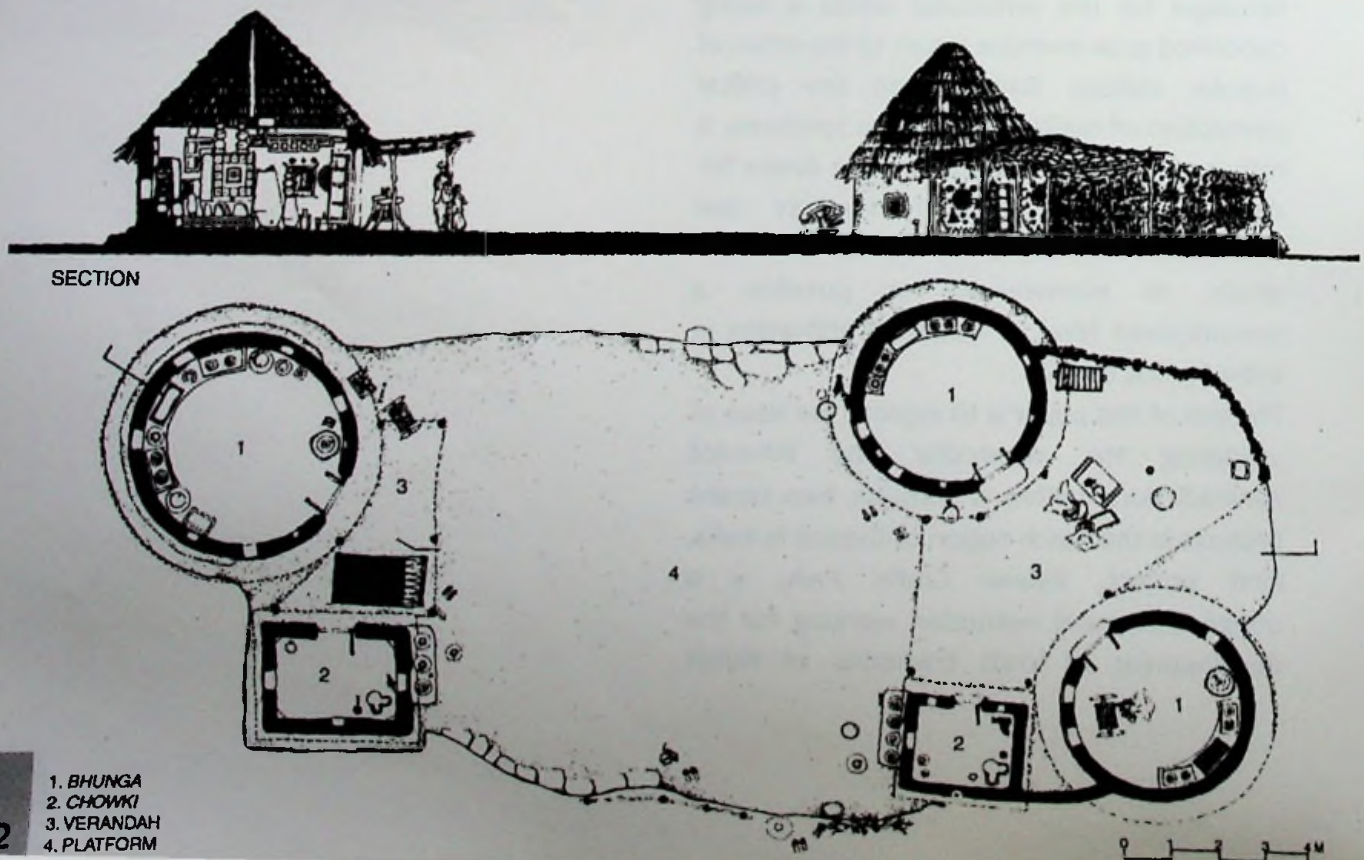
Both, architects and laymen alike, admire the unique qualities of vernacular architecture. These unpretentious built environments echo the characteristics of their geographical contexts, local materials and crafts; they seem to express the essence of their culture. Vernacular building traditions strengthen the experience of a place, the very source of our cultural awareness. These locales address all our senses at once and, speak pleasantly of the continuity of tradition and the passage of time. In this age of global monoculture, the evocation of sentimental vernacular seems quite natural response in places with strong cultural traditions. Rather than a meaningful engagement with the place, it evokes the sublimation of desire for a direct experience through instant information and preconceived imagery. In the midst of this air of nostalgia

and hyper reality, how do you listen to the sounds of those locales and be true to the time and the place? Instead of looking for a final answer, this paper examines different approaches of interpretation and translation of the vernacular architecture by two recent projects, *Sham-e-sarhad* and *Khamir Craft Park*, in the arid region of Kutch in India. To broaden up the framework of observation, the paper eludes conventional ideas associated with vernacular and uses the phenomenological concepts of 'place' and 'sense of place' for a deeper understanding of the vernacular.

## Kutch and its vernacular built environment

Situated in the northwest part of Gujarat, India,

Figure 1: Typical house unit of Banni (Jain 2000:80)





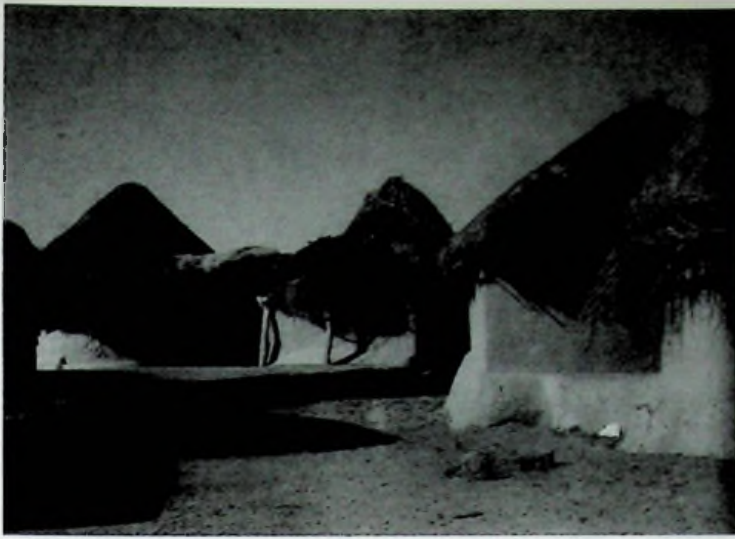


Figure 2: Street view through a cluster in Banni (Jain 2000:80)

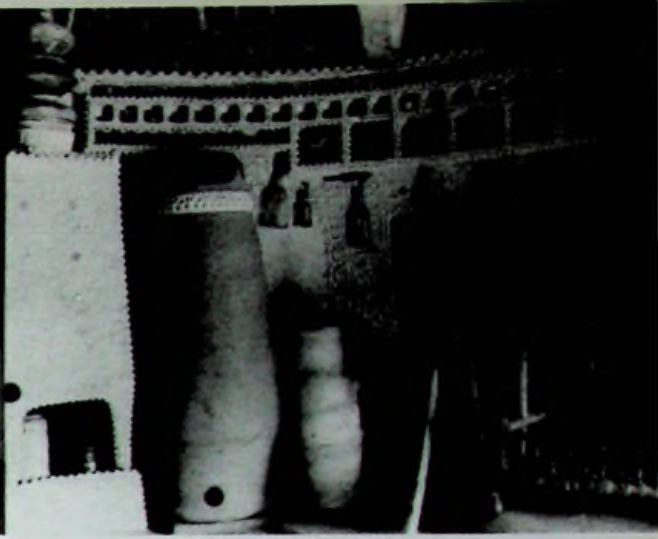


Figure 3: Interior space of Bhunga with mud murals and storage units (Jain 2000:81)

the region of Kutch has got unique combination of geographical features nowhere found in the world: *Rann*, a large saline desert in north, the arid grasslands of *Banni* and *Pachcham* in centre and a long coastline with a string of ports along the Arabian Sea in south. Due to its strategic geographical location, Kutch is home to diverse communities and groups of people. This rich cultural variety is reflected in the living environments of this region, right from the semi-nomadic settlements of grasslands to the urban mercantile towns of central and coastal Kutch. The flat landscape of *Banni* is thinly dotted with

the network of semi-nomadic hamlets of cattle herders. Each hamlet is a sparsely organized cluster of houses formed according to a particular community and a kin group. A single dwelling unit consists of *bhunga*, the circular mud hut with conical thatched roofs which is used as indoor living space and the rectangular cooking space *choki*, connected by an open mud platform. As family increases, another *bhunga* is constructed and connected to the house by extending the same platform. Sometimes, thorn bush fencing is erected to define a cluster and for the protection of cattle. Neatly mud plastered surfaces of walls

Figure 4: Street pattern & Chowks of Town Anjar in Kutch (Nanavati 1998:54)

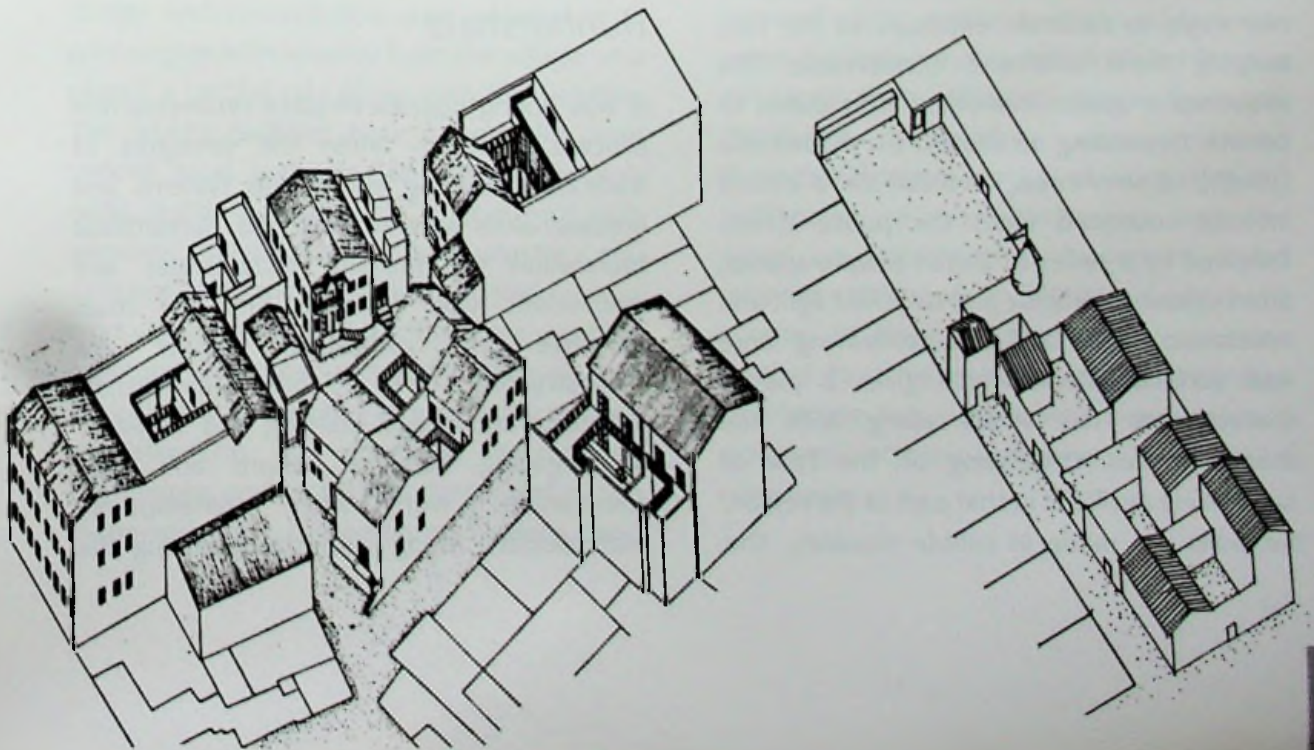






Figure 5: Dense weave of town fabric with land marks (Author 2005)



Figure 6: Semi-open verandah with activities facing the street (Jain 2000:24)

and platforms along with the natural ground give a stark and seamless character to the cluster from outside. In contrast, the internal space of *bhunga* is comfortably dim with the soft light through small openings and, elaborately decorated with white clay murals forming niches and storage units.

The villages and towns in the central and coastal region of Kutch, on the other hand are largely nucleated but compact and accretive built forms. Row of individual houses are densely packed together to form network of shaded narrow streets, occasionally punctuated with open *chowks* which are the community spaces for the settlement. Individual units share walls, either side-ways or rear-ways, to minimize exposure to the sun, keeping them cool and comfortable. The sequence of spaces in a unit is from public to private. Depending on situation, a shaded *otla* (plinth), a semi-open verandah or a closed internal courtyard faces the public street, followed by a series of closed private spaces. Small openings provide just sufficient light and ventilation in the arid climate, leaving large wall surfaces blank which gives a playful character to the street along with the shaded spaces. Depending on the type of sand-stone available in that part of the region, the walls are made in rubble masonry. The

roofs are usually sloping with the timber structure and terracotta tiles as cover. Terraces are constructed with flat sand-stone slabs or joisted timber structure and covered by thick layer of lime concrete for the insulation.

But even with the diversity, vernacular architecture of Kutch show many similarities due to its location in an extreme arid climate, severe heat and intense sunlight.

## Architectural projects and the role of Hunnarshala

### *Hunnarshala*

It was during post-earthquake reconstruction process in Kutch when the strengths of traditional building knowledge systems and artisanal skills were realized and, *Hunnarshala* foundation for building technologies and innovations was formed. With the main objective to capacitate people for reconstructing their habits, *Hunnarshala* initiated "knowledge building and transfer" by engaging building artisans and their communities with other contemporary professionals. Along with strengthening the

local building crafts, the foundation has been actively involved with the issues of environment, sustainability and disaster safety. By developing and validating the traditional knowledge base in its environmental and cultural context, *Hunnarshala* has been investigating in the indigenous architectural expressions of Kutch.

### *Sham-e-Sarhad, Hodka*

Located near *Rann* of Kutch, *Sham-e-Sarhad* is a unique experiment of endogenous tourism, built and operated by the people of Hodka village in *Banni*. This project was envisaged with a view where local community not only becomes a partner and derives fair benefits but also gets empowered to interpret their own culture. Literally meaning "an evening at border", *Sham-e-Sarhad* is an organic cluster of *bhungas*, the traditional huts and tents which are used as individual tourist accommodations. *Bhungas* and other facilities connected by a central open space used for activities like music performances, gatherings, etc. The process of design and construction was undertaken in partnership with artisans from the village who played a central role along with *Hunnarshala*. The tourist facilities have been built using various local technologies like adobe, cob walls, wattle & daub walls, thatch roof with wooden understructure, mud plaster, etc. Artisanal skills such as wood carving, lacquer work, mud murals and paintings are used for furniture and other elements. Through this project, *Hunnarshala* has attempted to explore the strengths of vernacular architectural expressions and establish them within the framework of contemporary needs and

enterprise.

### *Khamir Craft Park, Kukma*

After earthquake in 2001, *Khamir* (meaning 'pride' in local dialect) was instituted at Kukma village in central part of Kutch by nongovernmental organizations and Government of Gujarat for the development and promotion of local crafts of Kutch. Since the intention of this institution is to innovate and up-gradate the processes of design and marketing of the crafts, programme consists of varied activities like workshops, design studios, exhibition spaces and temporary residences. In synch with the nature of institution, the process of design and construction also became an opportunity to innovate and develop the building crafts of Kutch. The design team lead by Architect Neelkanth Chhaya and Structural Engineer Himanshu Parikh carried out various experiments using both traditional and new materials- technologies together with *Hunnarshala* and local craftsmen. Working with rammed-earth, wattle & daub, adobe-walls, metal & steel work, bamboo & timber frames, etc. lead to a different design approach. Typologies of buildings were developed through a rigorous process of integrating the earthquake resistant techniques and the actual use-patterns of crafts-persons. Using rammed-earth boxes and light-insulated roofs, a series of open and semi-open spaces are created to achieve scales and environment appropriate for a place where artisans and designers come together to form a community.



## Understanding the processes of making and experiencing architecture

A genuine experience of a place and its architecture is closely tied to the process of *making*, which connotes the combined processes of conception, design and construction. *Making* also refers to construction of an architectural experience through both, physical and ideated sensations. In order to position the given projects in the vernacular milieu, their process of *making* has to be seen through a set of experiential values.

### *Familiarization: direct and indirect*

From a distance, like any other cluster in a hamlet of *Banni*, *Sham-e-Sarhad* establishes itself in the vast arid landscape by the low spread of thorn-bush and mud fence walls and, the thatched conical roofs of huts set against the stark sky. With reception and dining facilities near the entrance, the circular huts and tents accommodations are organized on edges of the site forming a sparse cluster. Except the dining facility with a space-frame roof structure and the tents, all other buildings follow the local building typologies of circular *bhungas* or rectangular huts. Though strikingly similar in every aspect, the *bhunga* accommodation in *Sham-e-Sarhad* has a sophisticated semi-open shelter in front of its entrance, facing out towards the landscape unlike the rough hay shelter of local *bhungas* which opens on to the common mud platform. The attached toilet and shower unit along with every hut accommodation is also like *chokis*

and storages which are clustered around *bhungas* in this region. Similar to the local clusters in *Banni*, it is the mud platform which acts as a central open space connecting all the facilities together. Platform negotiates the local topography with different levels forming various seating arrangements, performance space and accommodates existing trees on the site. A close material and spatial semblance of *Sham-e-Sarhad* with the local vernacular creates an undifferentiated experience of familiarity.

In contrast to the overall familiarity of *Sham-e-Sarhad* with the architecture of *Banni*, *Khamir Craft Park* also seems familiar; but in a strange way. Similar to the villages and towns in arid regions like *Kutch*, it stands out as a dense 'clump' of buildings and trees; a sign of habitation in the flat endless plains. Though the building units themselves do not follow any existing typologies found in this region, they are intelligent combinations of the traditional spatial elements – a closed space and a semi-open space. The rammed-earth closed boxes and light steel structures are woven tightly to form a series of semi-open verandahs and leaving open courtyards of various scales. The shaded verandahs and blank rammed earth walls enclosing the courtyards at *Khamir* creates a collage of shadows of varying depths, evoking experiences which are similar to that of moving through the *chowks* and the streets of the local villages and towns. The soft light through sculpted lightweight panels or traditional carved louvered windows reminds of dark and dim inside spaces of this region. Elements like open staircases and bridges, which are quite unfamiliar in this region, acts as transitional spaces and markers like traditional gates or local shrines and gives a habitable

texture to the open spaces.

### *Narrative: continuous and disjunct*

The process of assembly is analogous to the narrative of experience for both, the maker (a designer or an artisan) during the course of construction, and for the users thereafter. Strong affinity of *Sham-e-Sarhad* to the local typology of *bhungas* gives direct clues at various stages of making and experiencing it. Starting with the mud platform on the ground to the adobe mud walls and the conical thatch roof with timber understructure, there is a predetermined step to what comes after. The use of local mud-plaster finish, wall murals and subsequent details triggers a sequence of anticipation in the overall experience. Though sophisticated and refined, elements like doors, windows and furniture uses local idioms of timber and lacquer works. This string of local elements coming together in a predestined way renders the experience of *Sham-e-Sarhad* as a continuous narrative.

The strange familiarity of *Khamir* Craft Park precisely comes from the fragmentation of the above mentioned linear progression of assemblage and thus the experience. As there is no affinity to any typology, the process is open for alternative interpretations at any point of making. It is contextual and responsive. The artisanal skills are integrated with highly engineered superstructure of rammed-earth and steel portals by constant improvisations like framing the wattle-daub panels with timber, using the traditional carved timber panels as adjustable louvered windows or just leaving wattle-daub panels unplastered

to form screens. Use of non conventional elements like sculpted light-weight panels as gable-ends or reusing metal scrap strips to make the fascia of roofs, gives a collage like quality to the whole process of making. Instead of a continuous sequence of assembly, diverse materials and techniques are juxtaposed together in disjunctive episodes to invigorate the experience at *Khamir*.

### *Image: strong and weak*

While experiencing any architectural work, we imagine a genuine physical encounter through ideated imagery. Due to the unconscious element of hapticity which is concealed in our vision, we can touch that object as we are seeing its image. Due to the continuity of narrative in the processes of making and experience at *Sham-e-Sarhad*, there is a consistency in architectural articulation right down to the last detail. The overall familiarity with the vernacular of *Banni* and the reference of a powerful architectural language strengthens a singular image of a final architectural artifact. Every single experience, from intimate touch of mud surface to a distant depth of desert sky becomes an idealized image. The strong image has minimal tolerance to any modification; even a single addition stands out alienated. This unavoidable presence of a particular architectural form leads to a formal imagination.

Images arising from the materials project much deeper and profound experiences than images of form. The nonconformity in use of materials and techniques at *Khamir* Craft Park suppresses the dominance of a singular image. Instead, it creates an associative field of





Figure 7: Roofline of Shaam-e-Sarhad with the mud platform and central open space (Hunnarshala 2007)

clustered images which are familiar but in parts. The architectural experience grows through separate qualitative images of texture, light, density, weight, etc. and their detail elaborations instead of a single architectural reference. A weak gestalt allows additions and alterations; a tolerance and a margin of change which is what any vernacular possess. Disjunctions in the narrative generate a field of weak images which incite a prolonged empathetic experience and a multi-sensory engagement. As a result, instead of being an external spectator of the narrative, any participant accepts the responsibility for the progression of the experience.

### Scenographic foreground and supportive background

Authentic architectural experiences originate from real or ideated bodily confrontations rather than just visually observed entities. With a strong syntax of images, *Sham-e-Sarhad* unfolds into a single system of experiences. Composition of architectural elements is aimed at a specific ambience which adheres to the character of vernacular built environment of *Banni*. Carefully framed and focused fragments create an anticipated vision which always precedes any experience. As a consequence of this, before any genuine architectural encounter, architecture becomes foreground imagery enfolded by the eye and the touch. This creates an architectural setting which is



Figure 8: Bhunga accommodation with other facilities (Hunnarshala 2007)





Figure 9, Figure 10: Mud murals near the entrance and internal space of bhunga (Hunnarshala 2007)

static in a single moment of time and evokes an experience of flattened temporality.

Conceived as a community place of artisans of Kutch, the architectural experience of Khamir Craft Park is formed by sequences of human situations and encounters. Rather than condensing the diversity of activities as single architectural imagery, it is spread throughout verandahs and courtyards to form multiple episodes of images. Further events are generated and accommodated by adding and attaching semi-open shelters and pavilions to what exists. This creates a layered flux of actions where architecture recedes and becomes a background for human activities. Fragmentary vision of these events produces an impressive experience of

architectural discoveries and of a temporal continuum.

## Crafting a place and a 'sense' of place

As observed above, both the projects present different approaches of interpreting the vernacular architecture of Kutch and translate them into a range of architectural experiences. *Sham-e-Sarhad* establishes itself in Banni through an overall familiarity with the local vernacular. It confirms your location in that region with a continuous architectural experience of recognizable

Figure 11: Kitchen facility the plinths behind the mud plinths (Hunnarshala 2007)



Figure 12: Skyline of Khamir Craft Park in the flat landscape of central Kutch (Author 2007)





Figure 13: Shaded courtyards and streets at Khamir (Author 2007)



Figure 14: Weaving shed overlooking the courtyards (Author 2007)

materials, techniques and configurations. Designed as a retreat on the border of desert, it creates a place which is effortlessly identifiable with the surroundings. Contrasting but equally unique, Khamir Craft Park creates a setting by selecting regional elements with a qualitative potential to support human activities physically or conceptually and incorporate them in familiar but distant way. Rather than directing an experience of specific architectural language, it integrates different experiential qualities like light and shadow, scale and proportion, materials and surfaces. By forming a tight and dense weave of these sensorial elements, Khamir invoke a sense of place in the flat and arid landscape of Kutch.

Figure 16: Collage of light, shadows & materials (Author 2007)



Figure 15: Controlled light through sculpted panels (Author 2007)





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