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DOCUMENTING VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE

AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO ARCHITECTURE

The article while discussing various aspects of the process of documenting vernacular architecture, talks about how documentation can be used as a research tool.

The process of documentation has marked an important contribution in the field of 'learning'. Recording age-old knowledge has helped not only in conserving time-tested techniques and traditions but also in developing new ones that are contextually more appropriate. This is particularly applicable in the fields of folk or vernacular traditions, including architecture.

Emerged as a collective response to cultural, social, economic and ecological conditions, vernacular architecture is conceived as a legacy of indigenous wisdom. This legacy has often proved to be a valuable reference for new design developments; more so in the present context of climate change, uncontrolled resource consumption and challenges of cultural appropriation. Therefore, the documentation of vernacular architecture is ever more critical before it gets lost with time; nonetheless, to record the ethos of this architecture, it is essential that the documentation is carried out methodically.

As an architecture generated through indigenous knowledge, vernacular architecture cannot be studied only as a product but needs to be understood as a process, too. The 'organic' forms of vernacular dwellings do not make sense unless the dynamic processes of living in them and planning as well as building them are talked about. In other words, the story of the form is equally or sometimes more important than the form itself, and hence, needs to be documented accordingly. For instance, the Bhunga of Banni region in Kutchh, Gujarat demonstrate an introvert typology formed by independent units standing at a certain distance on a common plinth. Two neighbouring units don't always face each other, and each unit is fully enclosed with minimum openings. The central open space is sizable and sunny.
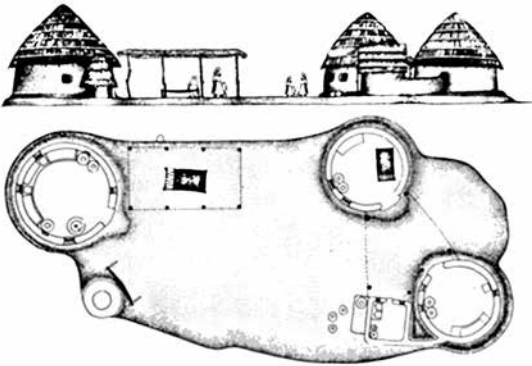
ABOVE|
BHUNGA OF BANNI
The Bhunga of Banni region in Kutchh, Gujarat demonstrate an introvert typology formed by independent units standing at a certain distance on a common plinth. Two neighbouring units don't always face each other, and each unit is fully enclosed with minimum openings.
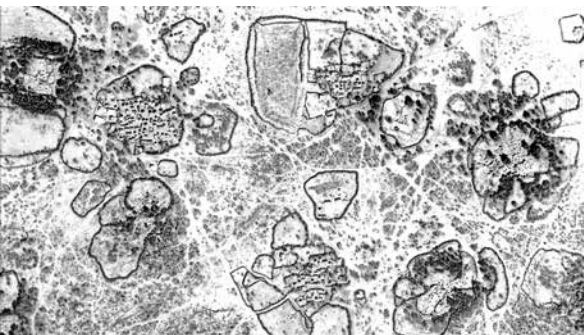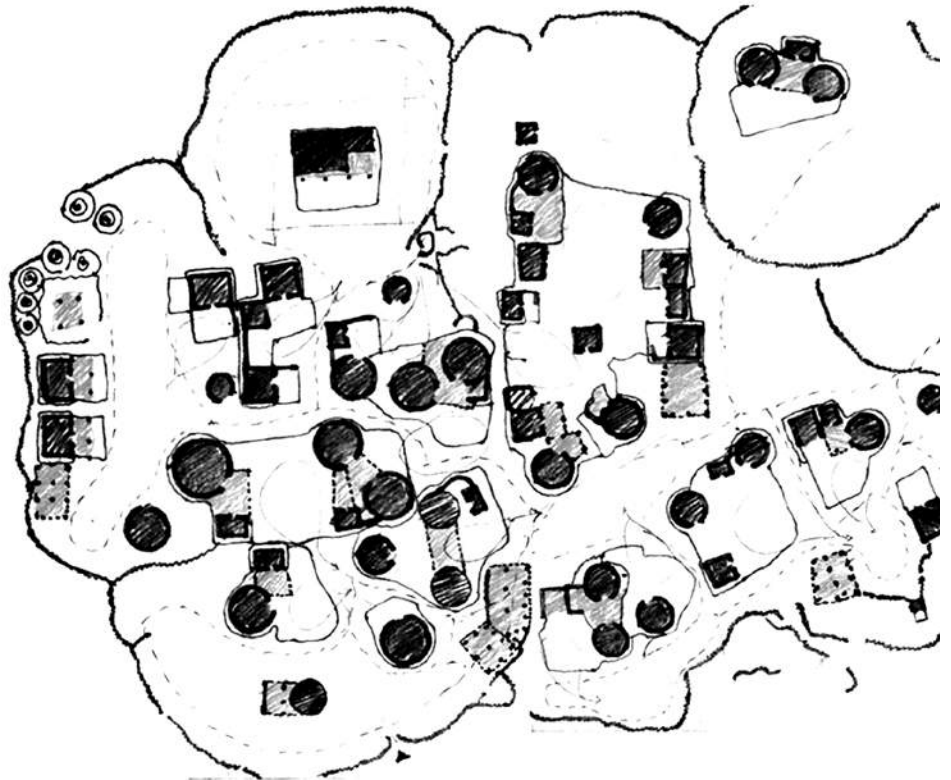
RIGHT|
PLINTH SHAPE
The shape of the plinth, which is independent of the placement of units, is worked out considering a future extension of the family.

BELOW|
HAMLET
At the hamlet scale, locations of various clusters are dependent on water catchment areas that facilitate their indigenous groundwater collection system.

To understand these readings, one needs to understand the local living pattern and cultural behaviour, which explains how the organization pattern of a dwelling is a result of the social relationships among and within families. It also reveals how the notion of house persists in the open outside as much as it does in the built inside. The open space, in fact, is the most important part of the house where the majority activities of the family are carried out. Similarly, the distance between two units depends on the function planned in the in-between space; while, the shape of the plinth, which is independent of the placement of units, is worked out considering a future extension of the family. At the hamlet scale, locations of various clusters are dependent on water catchment areas that facilitate their indigenous groundwater collection system.
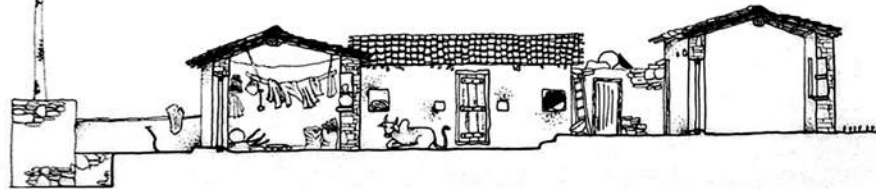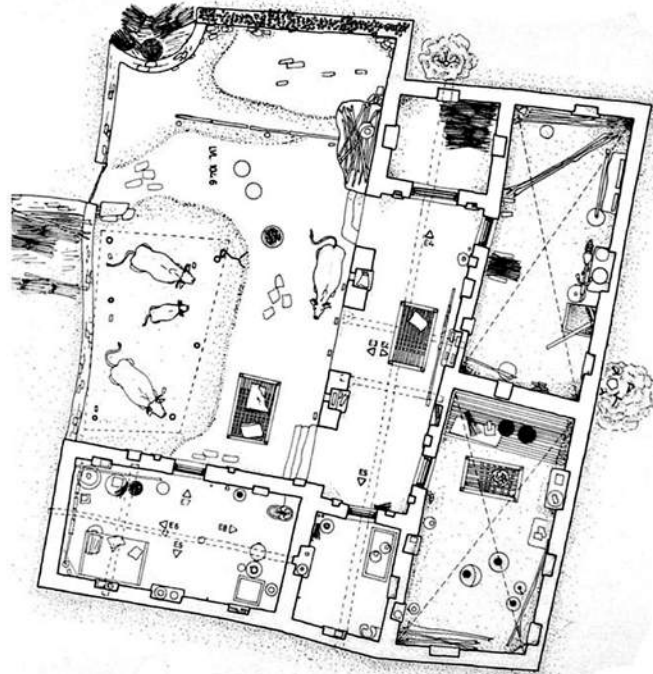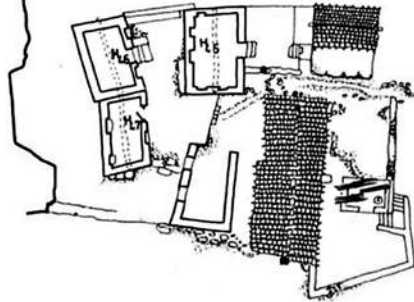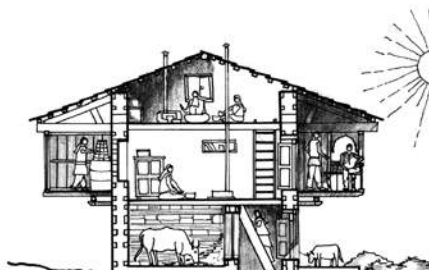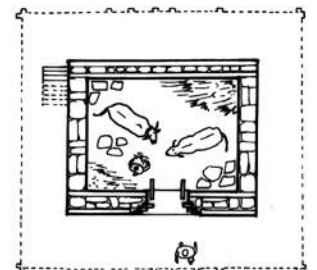
ADDING DETAILS

When all observed details such as activities with furniture, animals, humans, trees and other things are drawn in the plans and sections, they start revealing much more information such as space usage pattern, associated meanings, the scale of space etc.
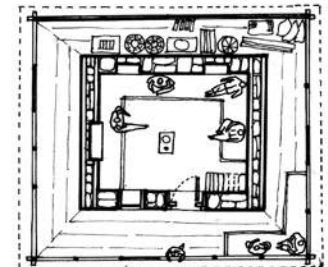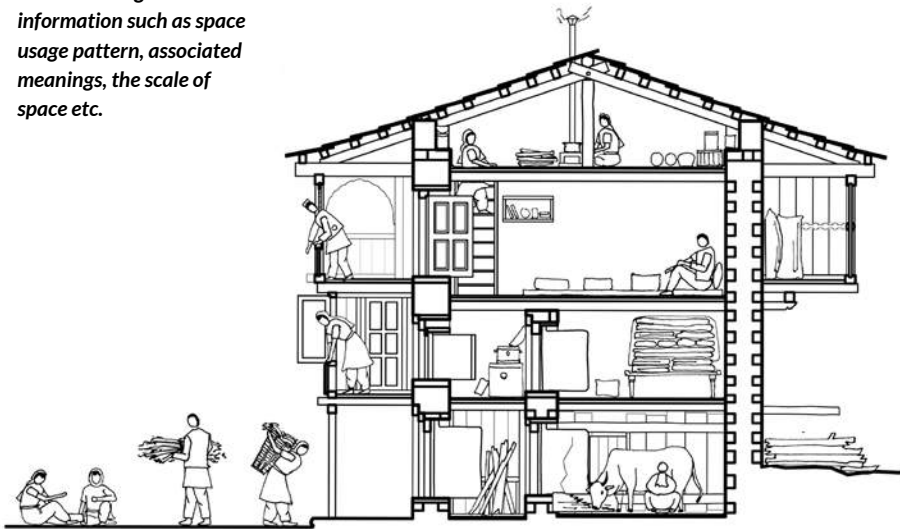
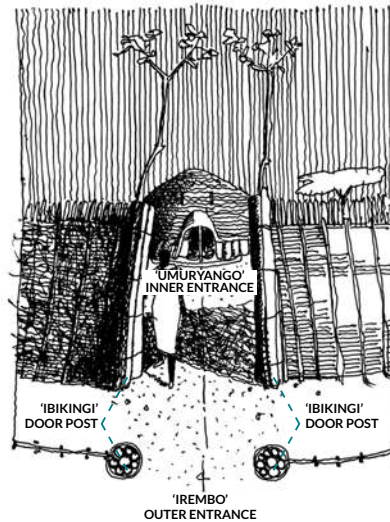**WINTER SCENARIO**

SUMMER SCENARIO

Thus, to record the ethos of this architecture, the built form needs to be documented in a manner that the indigenous patterns and solutions can be comprehended. The collective wisdom that shapes this architecture should be recorded on a simultaneous level with the architecture itself. This makes an anthropological inquiry essential in the process. Accordingly, along with the building typology, the documentation process should also span over the space usage pattern, specific cultural behaviour, associations, economic pattern, contextual settings and ecological relationships.

Two anthropological tools of observation [on-site] and interaction [with the locals] are considered vital for this along with the architectural tool of measured-drawing. When all observed details such as activities with furniture, animals, humans, trees and other things are drawn in the plan, it starts revealing much more information such as space usage pattern, associated meanings, the scale of space etc. Similarly, when such details are drawn in a section, the experiential quality of the space starts getting clearer. If such details, taking a step forward, are recorded for more dwellings in the settlement, a comparative reading can be made on the typical spatial planning and social-spatial relationships.

The interaction with locals, likewise, can throw light on the perception of spaces, privacy levels, gender-specific tendencies, changes made with time etc. Therefore, recording oral histories is considered equally important in the case of vernacular documentation.

Another such supplementary documenting tool that can overcome some limitations of graphical representation is nomenclature. Apparently, the intangible features of vernacular such as social or symbolic associations are not easy to map as the tangible ones. Some such intangible information can be communicated by noting the local nomenclature for specific spaces in the drawing which represents their meaning and associations.

'UMURYANGO'
INNER ENTRANCE

'IBIKINGI'
DOOR POST

'IBIKINGI'
DOOR POST
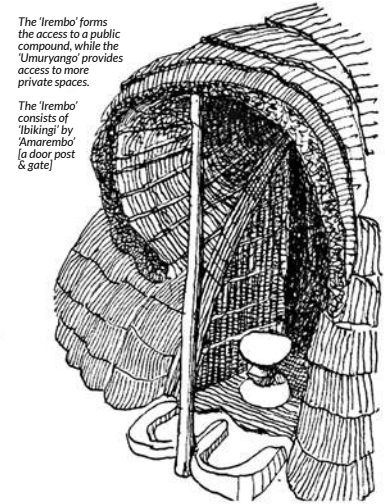
'IREMBO'
OUTER ENTRANCE

'IREMBO'
THE OUTER ENTRANCE

The 'Irembo' forms the access to a public compound, while the 'Umuryango' provides access to more private spaces.

The 'Irembo' consists of 'Ibikingi' by 'Amarembo' [a door post & gate]

'UMURYANGO'
THE OUTER ENTRANCE

TRADITIONAL HUT

'UMURYANGO'
INNER ENTRANCE

COMPOUND

'IREMBO'
OUTER ENTRANCE

COMPOUND
PLAN

'IREMBO'
THE OUTER ENTRANCE

'UMURYANGO'
THE OUTER ENTRANCE

LOCAL NOMENCLATURE
Some intangible information can be communicated by noting the local nomenclature for specific spaces in the drawing which represents their meaning and associations.
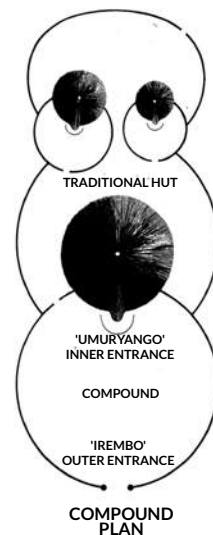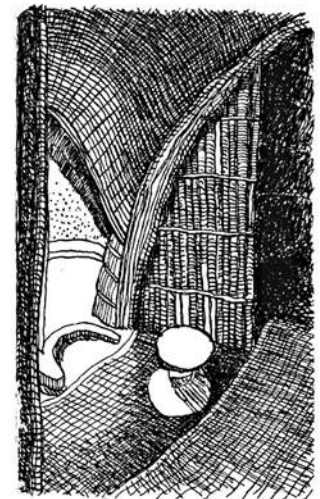
Gathering such interdisciplinary information has become faster and easier with the introduction of more advanced tools such as photography, videography and laser techniques. These tools have also allowed capturing details at various scales. The scale, in fact, is one of the most important factors in the documentation of vernacular architecture as each scale presents a different set of information. While the documentation on a larger scale demonstrates the basis for organizational principles, the small scale highlights the details of material selection, joineries, craftsmanship, economic decisions and symbolism. Hence, to gain a holistic understanding, it is important to document the built environment at all scales.
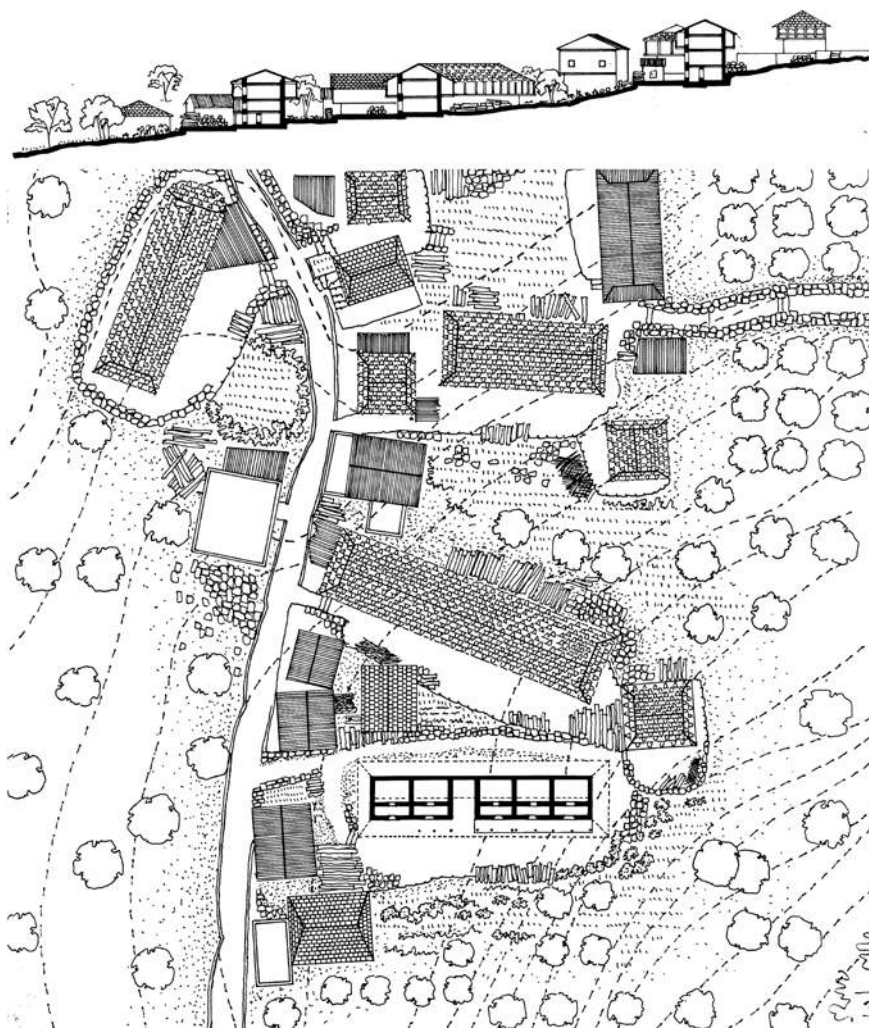
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AT ALL SCALES
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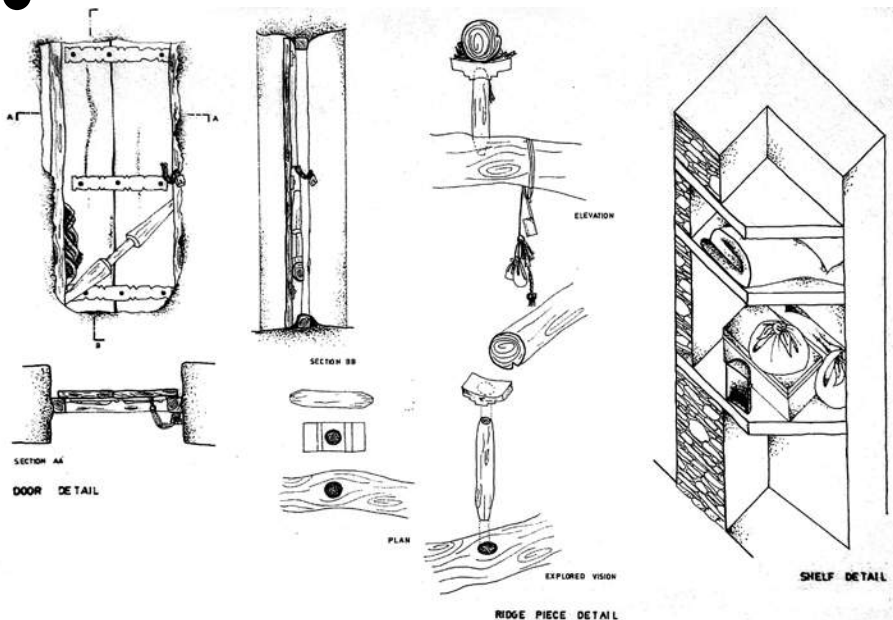
Having said that, it is also important to note that the method of documentation grossly influences our interpretation and understanding. Hence, drawing selectively is also another key method of documentation that can unlock different directions of inquiry. For example, drawing specific architectural details provide a lens to examine architectural solutions, whereas, drawing light and shadow patterns provide a different lens through which specific spatial qualities are studied. Documenting in a particular way, accordingly, can convey a specific set of information about that built environment leading to newer discoveries and diverse interpretations.
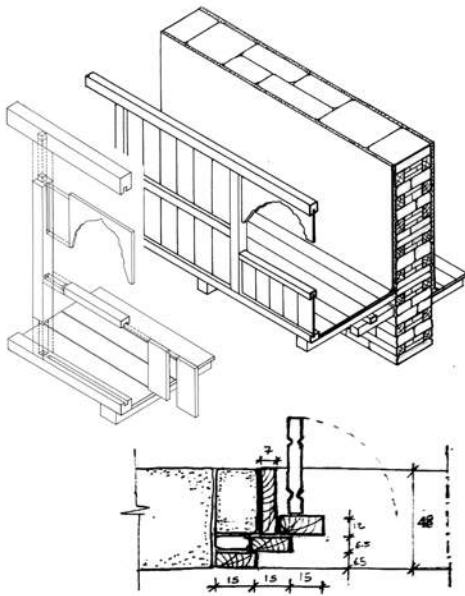
Furthermore, by documenting more than one dwellings in the settlement, similarities and differences can be noticed and a record of collective expression vs variation achieved through personalization can be created. It helps identifying a generic DNA of a typology and elucidates two major principles: how the DNA repeats to form a pattern of incremental growth, and how it incorporates changes and produces variations of a typology. In a similar manner, documentation of vernacular settlements across different geographic locations offers a possibility of carrying out a comparative analysis of cultural and climatic manifestations across borders. It can further provide a platform to study more complex phenomena such as hybridization and transformation.

The process of documentation, thus, should be conceived as more than a mere recording tool, and should be developed as a research tool. It should be employed as a device with great potential and should be planned methodically to unlock broader inquiries such as the impact of various cultures on architecture, transfer of traditions among places, impacts of forces like climate change and globalization, the transformation of architectural typologies and alike.

On the other hand, while this research tool can help in decoding the built responses to the social and natural environment, it can also help in reinterpreting them for contemporary and future designs. New experiments and imaginations can be constructed on the blueprint of indigenous knowledge. Exercises of creatively working with the documented drawings and thoughtfully editing them can be used for design as well as regeneration.
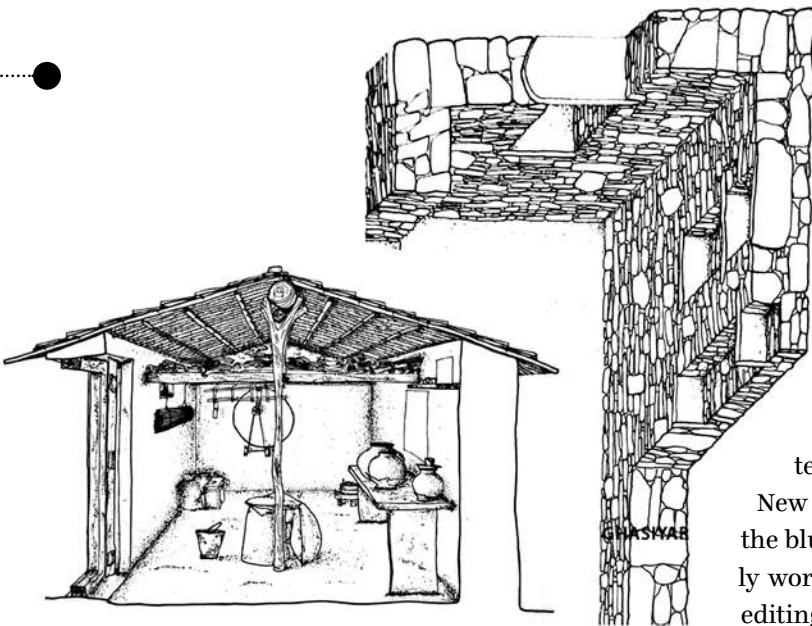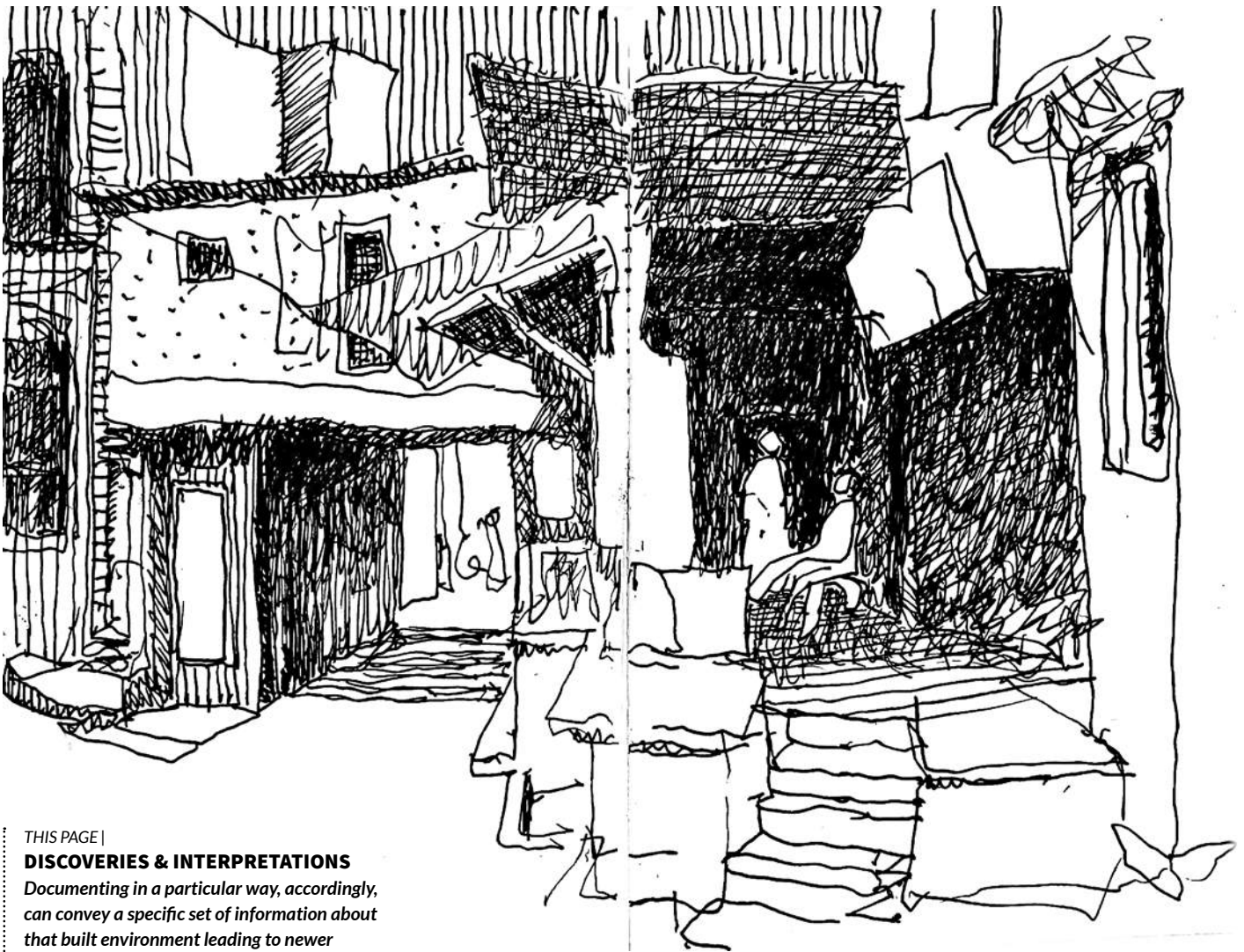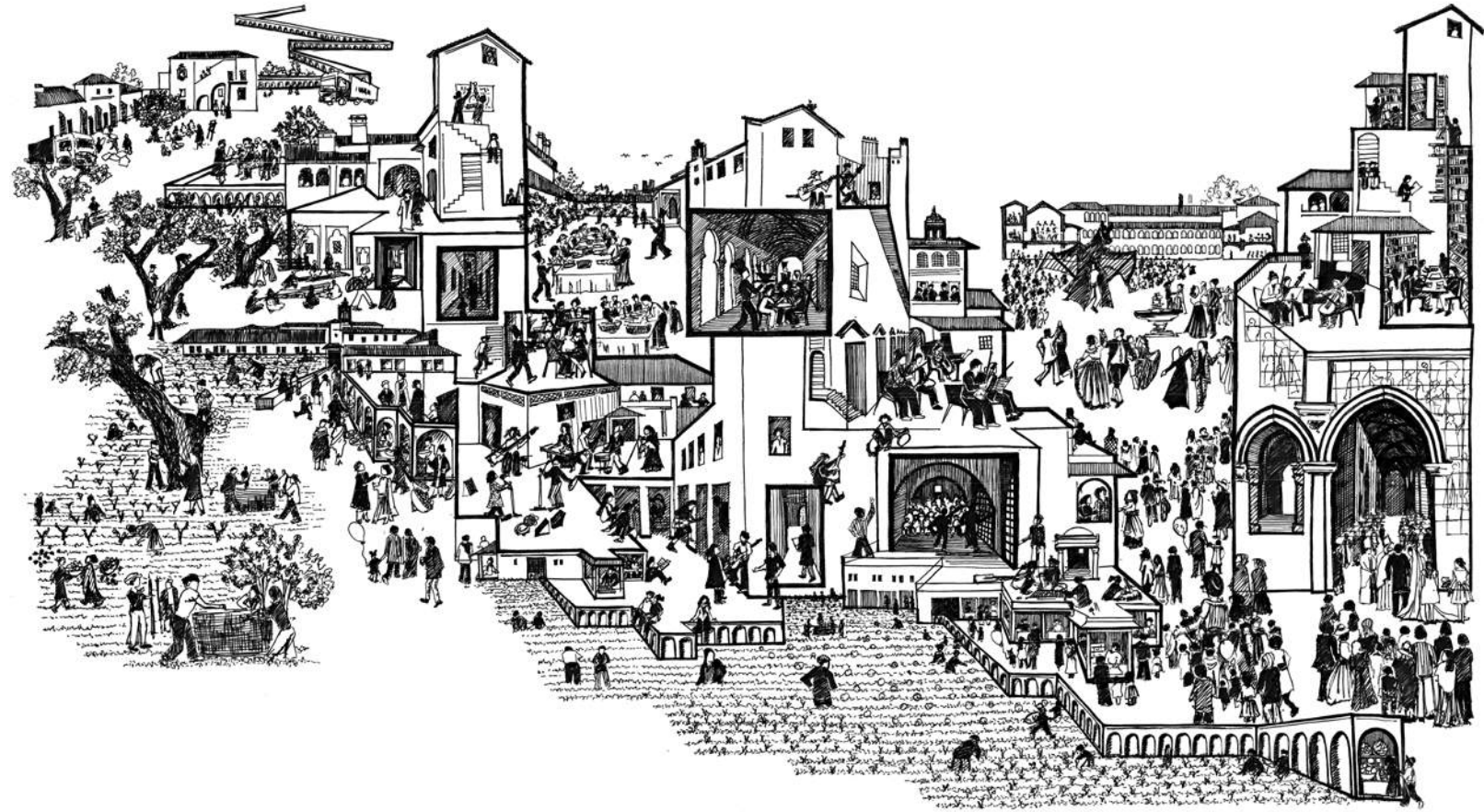
DISCOVERIES & INTERPRETATIONS

Documenting in a particular way, accordingly, can convey a specific set of information about that built environment leading to newer discoveries and diverse interpretations

In conclusion, documentation of vernacular architecture can be principally conceived as a medium to learn about the indigenous knowledge of various places. This medium can be further developed as an analytical research tool to open up the scope for important inquiries; inquiries that can interpret the cultural embodiment of architecture at all scales and in diverse contexts. Herein, the anthropological approach to architectural documentation helps in particular to guide more sensitive and holistic interpretations. These interpretations, in turn, can lay foundations for valuable design solutions that can potentially address the ever-evolving need for culturally sensitive and context-specific solutions. In this manner, the study of vernacular architecture can be extended beyond the academic field to explore how the indigenous know-how can guide contemporary and future design developments.

SKETCHES CREDITS
Kshama Prajapati, Manalee Nanavati, Peter Rich, and
Related Study Programme [RSP] drawings of Batch 2005 [UA].
RSP drawings are available at CEPT Archives.

DESIGN & REGENERATION
Exercises of creatively working with the documented drawings and thoughtfully editing them can be used for design as well as regeneration

References

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