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DIVINE ARCHITECTURE

Secrets of a Hindu Temple

Every facet of a traditional Agamic temple is rich in mystical significance

Early in the morning on February 15, 1975, at his Hindu monastery on Hawaii's Garden Island of Kauai, Hinduism Today's founder, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927-2001), had a vision of God Siva. This profound experience inspired a project unparalleled on Earth today: to build a traditional, Agamic Siva temple, all carved by hand out of white granite in India, then shipped to and assembled on Kauai. Carving began in Bangalore in December 1990, and seven stone craftsmen from India began assembling the stones on Kauai in May 2001. Hundreds of pilgrims and visitors from around the world come each week to view the steady progress made manifest by generous donations from 8,000 devotees in 55 countries. Here we will give you a glimpse of some of the mystical qualities of Iraivan Temple and other Hindu temples being built around the world following Agamic principles.

It is not widely known that a traditional Hindu temple is a secret mystical marvel. Its ornate architecture, dimensions, stones, the carved images and motifs, surrounding halls, even the gardens and the lay of the land are all full of metaphysical meaning and purpose, so much so that the temple itself is revered as a form of God. Dr. V. Ganapati Sthapati, the traditional architect who designed Iraivan Temple, noted, "The parts of the temple are so integrated that they become a living organism worthy of worship." The Upanishads say, "Look upon the temple building as embodied energy and worship Him with Vedic mantras."

The Agamas and the Vastu Shastras, Hinduism's scriptural authorities on temple architecture, give precise details and formulas prescribing how to design, carve and assemble a temple. The resulting structure and its relationship with its surroundings create a subtle, sublime atmosphere in which ceremonies performed by priests

easily lift the veil between this world and the world of the Gods and devas so their blessings can pour forth to gathered devotees.

Every step has been taken to ensure that Iraivan Temple in Hawaii is built according to exacting scriptural standards, which is not common in modern times when finances and fast-track schedules govern the outcome of most activities.

One thing that makes Iraivan Temple so special is that it was inspired by a God-Realized satguru's personal vision of God. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, affectionately known as Gurudeva, also added insights from his own mystical experiences to the many shastric rules and reasons behind the temple design and construction methods. One example is the fact that there are no depictions of other Deities in the temple, only Siva, a return to an ancient temple tradition not seen today.

Another example is that Gurudeva ordered that Iraivan Temple be completely free of electricity. Why no watts? Through his well-developed clairvoyant and clairaudient abilities, Gurudeva sometimes saw and communicated with inner-world beings. In one exchange, the devas conveyed that the presence of electrical energy fields makes it more difficult for the Gods and devas to see into and send blessings to those in the physical world, much like static on a telephone line makes it difficult to converse with the person on the other end. The Deity's power and blessings projected through the veil between this world and that world are stronger, clearer and more sublime if not affected by electromagnetic fields.

Another of Gurudeva's accomplishments was finding such an idyllic, mystically serene location for the Temple. Visitors are awed by the view of the temple on the banks of the sacred Wailua River near the foot of Mount Waialeale in one of the most lush areas of this tropical island of Kauai.

From the proportions of the inner sanctum to the motifs carved into the pillars, the traditional temple takes its first form on the master sthapati's drawing board. The architect initially determines the fundamental unit of measurement using a formula called ayadhi. This formula, which comes from jyotisha, or Vedic astrology, uses the nakshatra (birth star) of the founder, the nakshatra of the village in which the temple is being erected matching the first syllable of the name of the village with

the seed sounds mystically associated with each nakshatra and the nakshatra of the main Deity of the temple. In the case of Iraivan Temple, the unit is 11' 7". This measurement, called danda, is the dimension of the inside of the sanctum and the distance between the pillars. The whole space of the temple is defined in multiples and fractions of this basic unit.

Western science has brought many good things to the world, but traditional temple architects like Ganapati Sthapati assert that there is much to be learned from the sciences of the East, which have been around far longer. Sthapati had to judge whether or not such modern methods as using dynamite to break granite out of the earth and using pneumatic tools to quickly sculpt stone are in tune with vastu principles. According to vastu, there are good reasons why stone is quarried and sculpted by hand.

Gurudeva and Ganapati Sthapati felt that building in the most traditional way would result in a temple that has the same potency as India's most renowned edifices built in ancient times. The silpi who quarries the stone must be sensitive to the nature of the stone and get a feeling for how it will break in order to determine how to place his chisels. Likewise, the sculptors must strive to understand the stone's nature and blend their mind with it to bring out the best image, be it a wall embellishment or a Deity icon. The involvement of machines gets brutally in the way of this sensitive attunement. The quality of the carvings is representative of the silpi and his state of mind. This is why the workers at the Iraivan Temple stone carving site in Bangalore and the monastery where the temple is being built are required to live a pure and disciplined life.

The Shastras are strict about the use of metals in the temple structure. You won't find any iron rebar in Iraivan Temple's 4-foot-thick foundation, or anywhere else in the temple compound, not only because it would rust away in a few decades (Subramuniaswami ordained that Iraivan Temple would last a thousand years), but because iron is mystically the crudest, most impure of metals. The presence of iron, the sthapatins explain, could attract lower, impure forces. Only gold the purest metal of all, and of the highest vibration silver and copper are used in the structure, so that only the most sublime forces are invoked during the pujas. At especially significant stages in the temple construction (such as ground-breaking and placement of the sanctum door frame), pieces of gold, silver and copper, as well as precious gems, are ceremoniously embedded in small interstices between the stones, adding to the temple's inner-world magnetism. These elements are said to glow in the inner worlds and, like holy ash, are prominently visible to the Gods and devas.

For millennia, Hindu temples built according to the instructions in the Agamas have channeled the darshan of the Deities in a powerful way and captured the hearts of devotees who have come to worship in them. Such temples are truly the embodiment of religion, and there is much more to tell of the myriad mystical and metaphysical qualities that make them so special.

For more information e-mail iraivan@hindu.org to request a copy of the 2004 edition of "Island Temple ", a 38-page publication all about iraivan temple.

Vastu Creates Harmonious Spaces to Unify Man and God

Gurudeva often said that an Agamic temple like Iraivan is God Siva. He would sometimes say you hardly have to do pujas to invoke Him because "He's already there."

The Vastu Shastras describe the inner sanctum and main tower as a human form, structurally conceived in human proportions based on the mystical number eight. Dr. V. Ganapati Sthapati explains: "The vibration of the space-consciousness which is called time is the creative element, since it is this vibratory force that causes the energetic space to turn into spatial forms. Therefore, time is said to be the primordial element for the creation of the entire universe and all its material forms. When these vibrations occur rhythmically, the resultant product will be an orderly spatial form. This rhythm of the time unit is traditionally called talam or layam.

"Since every unit of time vibration produces a corresponding unit of space measure, vastu science derives that time is equal to space. This rhythm of time and space vibrations is quantified as eight and multiples of eight, the fundamental and universal unit of measure in the vastu silpa tradition." This theory carries over to the fundamental adi talam (eight beats) of classical Indian music and dance. Sthapati continues, "Applying this in the creation of a human form, it is found that a human form is also composed of rhythmic spatial units. According to the Vastu Shastras, at the subtle level the human form is a structure of eight spatial units devoid of the minor parts like the hair, neck, kneecap and feet, each of which measures one-quarter of the basic measure of the body and, when added on to the body's eight units, increases the height of the total form to nine units. Traditionally these nine units are applied in making sculptures of Gods.

"Since the subtle space within our body is part of universal space, it is logical to say that the talam of our inner space should be the same as that of the universe. But in reality, it is very rare to find this consonance between an individual's and the universal rhythm. When this consonance occurs, the person is in harmony with the Universal Being and enjoys spiritual strength, peace and bliss. Therefore, when designing a building according to vastu, the architect aims at creating a space that will elevate the vibration of the individual to resonate with the vibration of the built space, which in turn is in tune with universal space. Vastu architecture transmutes the individual rhythm of the indweller to the rhythm of the Universal Being."