

**ARCHITECT MEHDI ALI MIRZA –  
PIONEER OF ARCHITECTURE IN PAKISTAN 1910-1962**

by

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A Review by  
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*‘The interpretation of life is the true function of the architect  
because we know that buildings are made of life, to be  
lived and to be lived in happily, designed to contribute to  
that living joy and living beauty.’*

Quote by Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah, interpreted by Mehdi  
Ali Mirza as

*‘...let us find the out the ‘form and function’ of our  
ancestral legacies, so that we may interpret them to the  
best effect in the vocabulary of today. In doing so, let us  
avoid the danger of falling into the pit of superficial  
imitation and illiterate jargon.’*

The above quotes from an article written in the book summarize the essence of what the book is all about. This book on Architect Mehdi Ali Mirza is an invaluable contribution to the architectural record and history of post independence Pakistani Architecture. Architect Mehdi Ali Mirza was a modernist architect belonging to the immediate post independence time period which is hardly covered in history, philosophical thought and practice of architecture in Pakistan. Few books, if not none are available on architecture during this time period. It marks an important phase for architectural history and practice in which a Pakistani identity is sought by architects like Mehdi Ali Mirza that was evolving from a combination of Islamic Architecture and Modernist Architecture. Apart from this, the architect’s major contribution has been in laying the foundations for architecture as a profession, through the establishment of the first architecture school and the Institute of Architects, Pakistan.



The book is a simple read and is divided into sections such that it covers three major aspects including an introduction to the design philosophy, life and background of the architect; Mehdi Ali Mirza in the words of his peers; and the works of Mehdi Ali Mirza.

The main aim of the book has been to document the history of Pakistani Architecture for students and young architects and to fill the gap in knowledge of our architectural heritage. The book includes an article by Mehdi Ali Mirza himself, titled ‘Islamic Architecture in Contemporary Idiom’, which explains much about the philosophical thought behind the architect’s work and its subsequent development. His work took inspiration from Islamic Architecture, from the use of structure as an integral part of space and form. It explores

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the acquired characteristic of architecture where the aesthetic forms are derived from its structural elements. His article talks about the development of the intersecting-binding arch, a feature of Islamic Architecture that led to the solution of problems in dome construction as well as having an intrinsic quality of representing a structural system that can be explored and interpreted in the contemporary idiom. His own work, presented in the latter half of the book is witness to this exploration.

He quotes the profound advice of Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah that with the end of the colonial rule, '*...the servile attitude of the mind must go. Mental servility is witnessed when everything that bears the stamp of the West is accepted and imitated. The ideas, values and modes have to be tested and assessed in the light of knowledge and fundamentals of one's own faith.*' These quotes show the deep rooted quest for a Pakistani identity for architecture.

A comparison between the Taj Mahal and its imitation, the Tomb of Rabia Durrani, Aurangabad is made to show the difference between conceiving 'architecture' and superficial imitation. He defines architecture as an comprehensive unit whole embracing a creative concept of space, structure and materials, growing organically out of the physical and spiritual needs of man and his economic resources.

Mirza was born in Hyderabad Deccan in 1910. He received his early education here, then joined JJ School of Arts, Mumbai in 1933 when he was 22. He later went to England and received his diploma in 1940 from Regent Street Polytechnic. He moved to Pakistan after partition and joined

the Public Works Department, becoming the Chief Architect to the Government of Pakistan. He campaigned vigorously to give an effective voice to the profession of architecture in Pakistan, along with other architects like M.A.Ahed, Zaheeruddin Khwaja and Minoo Mistry.

He was clearly influenced by Modernists in particular Frank Lloyd Wright. His work, like Wright, carries the characteristic of balanced juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical volumes, cantilevered canopies and sunshades. With an excellent understanding of structural design, he designed buildings with beautiful proportions and structurally unique. His friends and colleagues, architects and engineers, speak about him with great respect and honour for having set up the foundations of the profession and take inspiration from his values as an artist and a professional.

In short the book is a must read for those interested to know about the beginnings of architecture in an independent Pakistan. An understanding of the starting point of the profession, the vision and the issues faced then can provide good reference for the future of it. The book will be an insightful read for students and architects. Given the limitations faced by the compilers / editors of the book including demolition of important pieces of architecture, including Mirza's own house and the building for the school that he established, and others found in dilapidated condition like the Printing Corporation of Pakistan. With all that, the book remains a comprehensive compilation of important references for an architect who was a pioneer of architecture in Pakistan.