

And it's not a coincidence.



Serenity that's set in stone

Highway 427 and Finch: Amid a dismal landscape, a marvel of architecture is rising

Highway 427 and Finch: Amid a dismal landscape, a marvel of architecture is rising , More than 24,000 pieces of Hindu temple were sculpted in India, then assembled here

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Welcome to the new Canada.

Now taking shape at Highway 427 and Finch Ave., it comes in the form of one of the most extraordinary buildings ever seen in this country. Though the name, Swaminarayan Mandir, won't mean much to most Canadians, no one, not even those speeding by in cars and trucks, could help but notice this remarkable structure.

It stands out, to say the least, especially in this dismal suburban/industrial landscape at the north end of the city. Indeed, one's first reaction is to the surreality of the whole thing – a full-blown Hindu temple complex on the side of a highway to nowhere.

Of course, that was part of the plan; the local Hindu community (there are 191,305 Hindus in Toronto, according to Statistics Canada), which paid for the \$40 million building without any public or foundation funding and provided 400 volunteer workers, wants the world to know it has arrived. By constructing such a building at such a site, there's no chance its presence will go unnoticed. Nor should it be; a project such as this happens once in a lifetime, in Canada, only once in many lifetimes.

To those of us raised on an architectural diet of steel, glass and brick, it will come a shock to discover that there are people in the world who still know how to build with a hammer and chisel. And not just build, but create structures of the most amazing beauty and complexity.

The Swaminarayan complex is a building that can be read almost like a book; it relates a narrative and speaks to users and visitors much as early cathedrals once spoke to Christians. The iconography here is not about heaven and hell, however, reward and retribution, but about peace and pleasure.

Walls and ceilings are embellished with carved figures, both human and animal – everything from dancing women to elephants and peacocks. These are images of welcome, sensual but also serene.

The fact that every element, big and small, is carved in stone, only makes the effect that much more astonishing. Indeed, the temple is a monument to skills largely lost in our mechanized age.

The materials – marble from India and Italy, limestone from Turkey – were shipped first to a series of villages in India where they were sculpted into their final form.

The pieces were then transported to Toronto to be assembled.

Given that there were more than 24,000 individual parts, this was no mean feat.

As project manager, engineer Naren Sachdev, one of many who have donated their time and expertise to the building of the temple, explains, each piece was marked with a bar code to facilitate construction.

This unique combination of ancient techniques and modern technology, which complement one another much more naturally than one might expect, allowed the complex to be finished in record time.

The project started in 2005 and opens officially in two weeks. Because work stopped during winter, actual construction time was only 18 months.

Despite the use of computers and high-tech equipment, the building itself could have been constructed several millennia ago.

The walls, for example, are all load-bearing; there's no steel skeleton here holding the whole thing up.

In fact, no steel was used at all, it's stone piled on stone. The columns, of which there are 340, are solid rock (and rock solid).

Even the delicately curved interiors of the domes are sculpted from marble and held in place with stone keys.

The building, Sachdev points out, will last a thousand years; but the mechanical systems, all as contemporary as can be, will need replacing within 25 years.

To enter the mandir, visitors climb a large stairwell that leads to an entrance balcony. Exterior flows effortlessly into interior; both have equal importance and are part of the same story.

Even the balustrades are made of carved stone.

What's interesting here is how decoration isn't *applied* to the building, but how it *becomes* the building.

The intention is to create an environment that refers to the world beyond, nature, but one that's set apart, a space of contemplation and spiritual awareness.

The visitor is engaged at every level, it is a total experience.

Even as workers hammer, grind and saw, the building manages to mesmerize.

In the midst of the chaos of construction, one can feel a sense of serenity.

Here is an encapsulation of the universe itself, as well as a microcosm of human

existence.

Beneath the mandir, at ground level, is the Indo-Canadian Museum of Cultural Heritage.

This will be the specifically Canadian addition to what is otherwise a traditional complex, a nod to multiculturalism.

"This is a place open to all," says community leader Suresh Thakrar. "That's especially appropriate considering that it's a global project. We also want people to be educated about Indo-Canadians."

"We believe this is a living building, so it has to be built in a certain way," adds Nitya Vivek Swami, a Hindu monk (and computer science grad) who has lived in Toronto since the project began.

He has worked on similar buildings in Houston, Chicago and London.

Though members will have to raise even more money than they already have, the land around the temple will eventually contain a large garden, something that will help root the temple in its site, however strange it may seem now.

"The cost has been kept down by a lot of in-kind labour offered by volunteers," says volunteer Roy Patel. "We had to bring as many as 100 stone artisans and sompura (architects) from India to work on the project. We would appreciate any government financing, but so far none has been forthcoming."

That's something he might want to raise with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty and Toronto Mayor David Miller when they attend the opening ceremonies on July 22.

Inevitably, the complex will exert a powerful influence on its surroundings, immediate and more far-flung.

Things won't change overnight, but don't forget, first we shape our buildings, and then they shape us.

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