

Bricks of the spirit

As we spend so much of our lives inside built-up structures, it's time for South African architecture to re-establish itself as a science with soul. Ufrieda Ho reports

Welcoming back spirituality into architecture means we could restore some soul in our homes and offices.

Moves in some architectural circles now tend toward building with ecological sensitivity and spiritual coherence.

Chrisna du Plessis, who is a research architect with the CSIR, says once we achieve harmony with our environment we can also create harmony with the cosmos.

Du Plessis was one of the keynote speakers at the "Sustainability in Built Environments" conference held recently in Northgate.

She says the trend has shifted to building with natural materials and incorporating innovations such as natural ventilation and lighting. There has even been a return to ancient wisdoms, which include building houses in round or octagonal shapes.

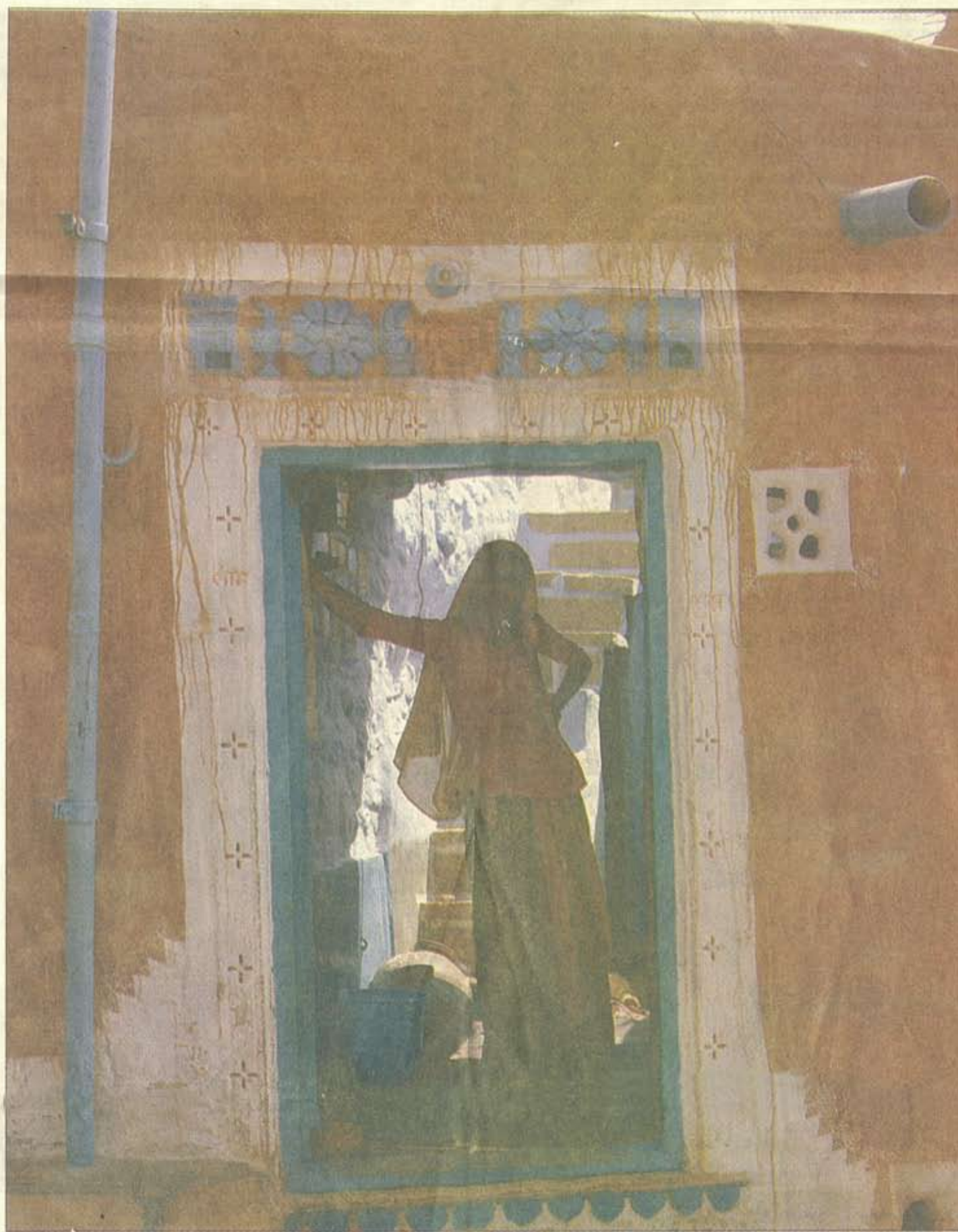
The belief is that energy moves in a spiral and corners trap negative energies.

"We know that matter is just the condensation of energy," Du Plessis says. She adds that all matter emits some kind of force field, this is Prana in Hindu beliefs and Ch'i in Chinese beliefs. These energy forces are like magnetic templates which are linked to healing in ancient practices such as shiatsu and acupuncture, she says. And just as the body has meridians of energy, so too does the Earth. Du Plessis says spiritually insensitive construction can block these energies. This energy also supports sacred sites which are usually found at a convergence of the Earth's energy meridians.

"It's why some places just feel better than others," she says. In old farming communities, settlement sites were chosen by watching where animals slept at night. The belief being that animals have an instinctive connection with the Earth's energy.

Du Plessis says the home is where much of the rebirth of spiritual architecture has taken place, as people crave more holistically healthy living spaces. The new-age revival of practices such as medieval geomancy and *Feng Shui* (which harmonises the energy in living spaces by working with natural elements and electromagnetic fields) has also fuelled this growth.

"When you take away the superstition surrounding these practices, they do really make



Lessons to learn ... a woman stands at the entrance to a house in India which is an example of a spiritual dwelling.

sense," Du Plessis says. *Feng Shui* for instance features the use of waterworks.

These are not just for aesthetics but because water has negative ions which neutralise our own positive ions and

boosts serotonin levels.

"It's why people love to be by the sea or near a waterfall."

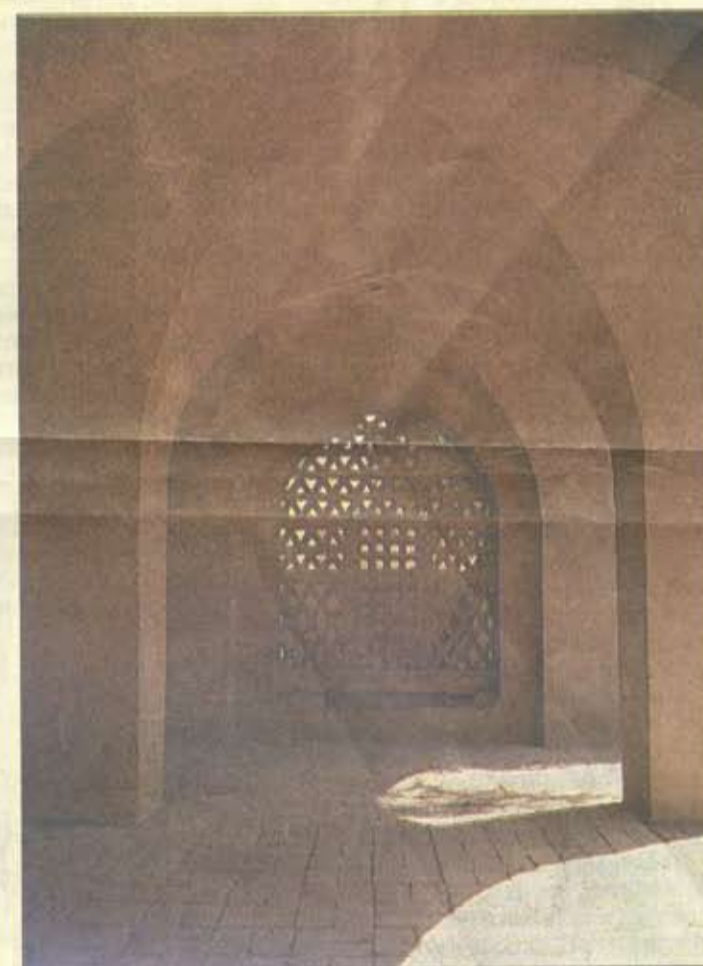
Even colours affect moods. Bubblegum pink is used in maximum security prisons to calm down inmates. Green aids

healing in hospitals and tannin-yellow is the ideal colour for enhanced concentration.

Though she says few local buildings follow the principles of spiritual architecture she is confident the thinking is an

emerging trend. "It's high time they do the same in offices."

She warns against the use of volatile paints, glues, and piping which give out noxious fumes which result in illness and lack of concentration



Sacred spaces ... architect Hassan Fathy's mosque in New Qournia, Luxor shows how to make the most of natural light and open space.

which leads to absenteeism and retarded productivity.

"If you have a 3% increase in productivity it justifies spending 25% of your construction budget on making your building a more conducive working space."

Etienne Bruwer of Greenhaus Architects in Cape Town says spiritual architecture is definitely on the rise. Over the past 18 months his client base has had a turnaround to 80% of people wanting more spiritual homes. "We still have a trickle of clients who want cloned houses and industrial sheds but people now don't just want a physically healthy building, they also want to do right by the environment and by the invisible energies," Bruwer says.

He works with a diviner on projects, who uses geomancy to identify optimally magnetised areas of the land on which to build the house. Reverse magnetism can also be practised to achieve this optimum. The best way to win people over to spiritual architecture is to allow them to experience the difference themselves he says.

Du Plessis says students should also have these experiences. She suggests exercises like dowsing, and building a

house using the scale of an individual's midday shadow.

She adds: "The creation of spiritual architecture does not depend on the architectural style or even the function of the building, but on some other undefinable quality." For Du Plessis a spiritual building is one that can create a positive emotional response from its users, promotes physical and psychological health and is in harmony with its social and environmental surroundings.

It is crucial that buildings and houses take into consideration the cultural preferences of the user and has the input of the people who will live there. Houses also have the fundamental purpose of providing shelter, protection and a sense of community.

Crime though, has caused people to put up higher walls and thicker razor wire. Du Plessis says this has to be addressed to prevent the collapse of social cohesion and the hiccup in energy flow.

Climate, proximity to resources, relationships to open space and other buildings also need to be knitted into the formula for a home with soul.