

# Reimagining CEPT University

Dr. Bimal Patel, President

Convocation Address, January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024

Friends: We are gathered this morning for the 18th Convocation of CEPT University. The university will confer degrees on students who have completed their programs of study during the academic session 2022–23. It will also confer awards won during that period.

\*\*\*\*\*

On this occasion, I am very happy to welcome two special guests, Prof. Alain Bertaud and Prof. Christopher Charles Benninger. CEPT University has awarded them honorary doctorate degrees, and we are delighted that they are here in person to accept them. Many of you know them. Those who do not, please bear with me. I am going to tell you more about them later in this ceremony.

\*\*\*\*\*

At this point, I want to welcome Prof. Barjor Mehta and tell you a bit about him. For those of you who do not know, from today, Prof. Barjor Mehta, will take over as the President of CEPT University.

Prof. Mehta was born in Ahmedabad and grew up here. He is a CEPT alum. He received his Diploma in Architecture from the School of Architecture at CEPT and holds a Master's in Human Settlements Planning from the Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok.

Until recently he was the World Bank's Lead Urban Specialist for East Asia and the Pacific Region. He was based in Singapore. Prior to that, he was based in the World Bank's country offices in China, from 2016 to 2020, in India from 2012 to 2016, and in Tanzania from 2009 to 2012. Prior to that he was in Washington DC from where he worked on urban development initiatives in Eastern and Southern Africa, South Asia as well as the Middle East and North Africa.

In the early nineties, Prof. Mehta served as Associate Professor of Urban Planning and as Director of the School of Planning at CEPT. Prof. Mehta has also lived and worked as an urban planner in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Bhutan, and the United States. Many of you know him well and will agree with me wholeheartedly that, with him at the helm, CEPT is going to be in very good hands.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is also my pleasure to welcome our Chairman, Shri Sanjay Lalbhai. He is Chairman and Managing Director of Arvind Ltd., and in that capacity, a highly respected business leader.

Sanjaybhai is also the present-day torchbearer of a remarkable century old tradition of enlightened and farsighted civic leadership which, by supporting noble, strategic, and far-reaching causes, has allowed Ahmedabad to play a far bigger role in the life of our nation than Ahmedabad's size or economy warrants. Sanjaybhai is the President of Ahmedabad Education Society and in that capacity is at the helm of many other educational institutions.

Sanjaybhai, we are thankful for the keen interest you take in the development of CEPT University, and we are privileged to have you present at this convocation.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am also very happy to welcome members of CEPT University's Governing Body and its Board of Management, its provost, deans, faculty members, and alumni.

Last but not the least, I want to especially welcome all the students, and the parents and guests of the students, who are graduating and winning awards today. It is indeed a special occasion. Today, we honor the achievements of our students and all of us at CEPT University are very happy that you are with us to share in our joy and pride.

\*\*\*\*\*

It is customary on Convocation day for the President of the university to give an account of the preceding year and to list the many achievements of its students, faculty and staff. This year I am going to depart from this tradition, not because our achievements have been any less than in the years past, but because this will be my last address as CEPT's President. On this occasion I would like to present what all of us at the university have accomplished over the period during which I have had the privilege of serving the university as President.

Eleven and a half years ago, when I took over as CEPT's President, CEPT was a fifty-year-old institution that had been helmed by stellar leaders and served by many legendary teachers. During its first decade CEPT was led by Prof. B V Doshi. During the second decade it was led by Prof. Has Mukh Patel, my father. Then for almost three decades it was led by Dr. Rasvihari Vakil. Kasturbhai Lalbhai was the first Chairperson of CEPT and later CEPT was chaired by Shrenikbhai Lalbhai. Its list of exceptional teachers included the likes of Prof. Anant Raje, Prof. Kurula Varkey, Prof. Krishna Shastri, Prof. G N Tambe, Prof. R. J. Shah, and Prof. Piraji Sagara. CEPT's alumni were also well known, nationally and across the world. CEPT had maintained its liberal learning environment and remained connected with the world. All of this is to say that through its first fifty years CEPT had built a very strong reputation as an important

center of architecture, planning, design, and construction education in the country and abroad.

Unfortunately, it was also true that after a run of fifty years the world around CEPT had changed but CEPT had not adapted sufficiently. Consequently, it faced a number of challenges.

It had grown haphazardly, particularly after it became a university in 2005, and lacked an effective organizational structure. Its management was not sufficiently professionalized. Its many faculties and programs were operating in silos, preventing it from reaping synergistic benefits. Learning was fragmented, and students could not avail of all that CEPT had to offer. CEPT was dependent on modest government grants that hardly met expenses, came with onerous conditions, and were erratically disbursed. Because of this its finances had become unsustainable. To meet expenses CEPT was taking on high-risk consulting assignments. For many faculty members, their focus had shifted away to consulting projects, undermining its academic status, and vitiating the university's academic environment. Because CEPT was receiving Gujarat government grants, it had to admit 90% of its undergraduate students from Gujarat. CEPT was no longer a truly national institution. The university's facilities were in a poor state, with ad hoc shoddy additions, and since campus facilities had not been added to for decades, its facilities were highly stressed. On the pedagogic front, its focus had shifted from building students' abilities to molding their preferences and this had begun to reflect on the quality of student work. Engagement of practicing professionals in CEPT's management and teaching, which had been one of its greatest strengths, had also considerably decreased. As a result of this CEPT had become insular and complacent. Most of all, CEPT was no longer known for the excellence of its students' work.

My mandate from the Governing Body was to tackle all these challenges, to reimagine and reenergize CEPT and to equip it to be amongst the very best institutions capable of meeting challenges posed by a rapidly evolving India.

Change is never easy – whether it is at organizational, societal, or national level. In spite of this, I am very happy to report that over the last eleven and a half years, all of us at CEPT have been able to comprehensively transform CEPT and strengthen it, while remaining true to its foundational values. Please allow me to tell you a bit about how we have reimagined and reinvented CEPT.

\*\*\*\*\*

**1.** CEPT now has a well-articulated and nimble organizational structure. It comprises a number of well-defined units, ranging from Faculties (where teaching is done), to Administrative and Academic Offices (that manage and regulate the university), to University Resources (for example the CEPT Library or the CEPT

Workshop), to University Services (for example the Student Services Office or the Estate Management Office). All these units have clearly formulated roles and responsibilities and a high degree of autonomy. Many of these are run by specialist professionals. The university's structure was conceived early, through a collaborative process. It is relatively non-hierarchical and has proven to be robust yet amenable to change. It is continuously being added to and tweaked and will, no doubt, continue to evolve in the years to come.

2. CEPT is also now much better focused on the planning, design, construction, and management of the built environments. Difficult decisions had to be taken to bring about this focus. A few unaligned programs had to be discontinued. We also started a number of new programs, for example, in housing design, furniture design and building energy performance. Today, CEPT has five undergraduate, nineteen postgraduate and two doctoral programs. This array of programs will continue to evolve in the years to come.

3. The university is now fully unified. Earlier, the university's various programs and faculties used to operate independently, with different calendars, different timetables, different grading systems; different rules; separate administrations, and separate teachers. Though faculties and programs were all very proud and protective of their own systems, this fragmentation also meant that it was impossible for the university to realize synergies or to manage the whole of it well. There was much duplication. Students could not access all resources and it was difficult for faculty members to cooperate across Faculties. Today the university has a singular calendar, a common timetable, a unified course catalogue, a common undergraduate foundation program, one regime of rules and regulations and much more, that makes it possible for the university to function synergistically and for students to benefit from the whole university.

4. Over the last decade we have clarified and better articulated CEPT's pedagogic philosophy. While I can do a whole lecture on this alone, let me tell you a just a few of the many ways in which we have strengthened our pedagogy.

CEPT had a long tradition of studio-based learning. However, expanding class sizes, lack of accountability, insufficient scrutiny, and inadequate preparedness on part of teachers were eroding the quality of teaching and learning in CEPT's studios. Teaching was also suffering because of a shift of focus away from building students' abilities to shaping their aesthetic preferences. All of this was reflected in the quality of student work. To tackle this problem, we completely overhauled studios at CEPT.

Studios now have no more than 12 or 16 students, one or two tutors and a teaching assistant each. Tutors enjoy full autonomy within their studios and are able to give individual attention to each of their students. They are also held accountable for the

work that their students produce, and they are required to be well prepared. We have also extended studio-based learning to engineering education at CEPT. The result of this recasting and extension of the studio system is evident in the high quality of work that our students produce. People from across the country have started visiting CEPT's semester-end student work exhibitions and the numbers will only grow over the years to come.

The work of students has also much improved because of the Common Foundation Program that we put in place about six years ago. All 275 undergraduate students who join CEPT every year have to go through it. It is a sort of bootcamp that is aimed at building very specific foundational abilities that all architects, designers and engineers need – from being able to draw to understanding the basics of material and structural behavior. Functioning out of its own new building, the foundation program also helps to build a well-connected student community at CEPT.

We now also focus on building students' writing abilities, something that was not paid enough attention to earlier. Starting from the first year, students in all the programs have to spend a lot of effort on writing exercises.

Perhaps one of the deepest changes we have made is to shift away from a prescriptive curriculum to a choice-based curriculum. Let me explain what I mean by this. Traditional Indian curricula prescribe a fixed course of study over the duration of a program. Semester after semester, all the students in a batch study the same subjects at the same time. Traditional curricula are prescriptive and presume that the world needs identical, ideally balanced graduates, all equipped with the same knowledge and abilities. They also presume that all students are similar in that they all want to learn the same things at the same time and that teachers, because they all have the same strengths can be substituted for one another.

Actually, none of these presumptions are true. The world is complex and does not need identical graduates. All students and teachers are unique and should be allowed to work to their strengths. It is best to allow them to learn what they want to learn and when they want to learn it. This is why some of the world's best universities have choice-based curriculums. Choice-based curricula allow teachers to teach what they are good at and passionate about. They allow students to have vast amounts of choice in what they want to learn, who they want to learn from and when they want to learn. Every student's trajectory through a program is unique. CEPT had a traditional curriculum. It now has a liberal, choice-based curriculum well in place. This is one of the most important factors that has contributed to improving learning at CEPT.

I can go on and on about the many ways in which we have strengthened pedagogy at CEPT. But let me end this bit by saying that no individual, institution, or nation can flourish unless it is committed to the pursuit of excellence and CEPT's pedagogy is now

resolutely focused on the pursuit of excellence. Let me move on to the fifth dimension of CEPT's transformation.

5. CEPT now has a robust framework for engaging, developing, and rewarding its academic staff. It's Teaching and Learning Centre continually inducts new tutors and supports, both old and new tutors in developing their studio units. Every June, for example, it organizes a visit for a set of CEPT's tutors to visit London's finest architecture and design schools to see their student work exhibitions so that they can set international benchmarks for themselves. At the end of every semester, the work of all tutors is evaluated by a Board of Review comprising independent professionals and academics. They evaluate tutors based on the quality work that their students have produced. Tutors are also evaluated by students. Evaluations by both, the Boards of Review and the students, provide tutors with vital feedback to improve their teaching. Advancement at CEPT is also now entirely performance based. Building an academic system that continually draws in new talent, supports their development and rewards merit, has yielded rich dividends. Last semester, 188 tutors taught about 1500 students in 100 studio units. I am proud to say that now CEPT has a vast pool of tutors who are the finest set of teachers that any institution can boast of.

6. I mentioned earlier that CEPT's undergraduate student body had become one that consisted almost entirely of students from Gujarat. This was because its undergraduate programs were partly funded by Gujarat Government grants. This outcome was unfortunate. Higher education is much diminished if it does not provide an opportunity for students to be in a cosmopolitan environment. To address this problem, we gave up the grants and expanded intake in the undergraduate programs. By doing this we were not only able to admit students from across the country but do so without reducing the intake from Gujarat. We now have a very cosmopolitan body of undergraduates and CEPT is more like what it used to be in the 70s and 80s.

7. Traveling and living in unfamiliar places is also a very important component of higher education. While CEPT always had many exchange programs with institutions across the world, over the last decade we have been able to vastly expand the opportunities that students have for travel-based learning. Last year, over 650 students enrolled for international exchange programs and national and international travel-based summer and winter school courses. Exposure to well-functioning cities is particularly important for urban planning and urban design students and so, after their first semester, all 125 postgraduate students in the Faculty of Planning, as part of their curriculum, were taken to spend a week in Hong Kong to learn from its incredible urbanism.

8. CEPT's ambition is to be both a great teaching institution and a great research institution. We have been able to do many things to expand research at the university. We have built a framework for involving students in ongoing research projects in a

structured way; we have better focused our PhD programs; we have instituted a research symposium, and created an independent nonprofit organization, CRDF - CEPT Research and Development Foundation for undertaking contract research projects. CRDF has eight domain focused Centers that undertake important research assignments.

That said, the lack of sufficiently large, secure, long-term funding has always been a longstanding challenge at CEPT, on account of which, it has never been able to build a truly significant and autonomously directed research program. I am delighted that we have made significant headway in overcoming this challenge. The Government of India recently selected CEPT as a Center of Excellence for Urban Planning and Design. This means that CEPT will receive an endowment of Rs. 250 crores, the interest of which is to be used for research. This will now provide the means for CEPT to build a meaningful research program and to become a great research institution.

**9.** Besides being a great teaching and research institution, it is also CEPT's ambition to be a trusted advisor to government, bringing knowledge to bear on public policy and on improving public discourse. It is not just knowledge and experts from within CEPT that it wants to bring to bear on the formulation of public policies. Its ambition is to also be the trusted conduit through which government can access knowledge and expertise in society at large, that it cannot otherwise access. CEPT's being designated as a Center of Excellence for Urban Planning and Design indicates the high regard in which it is held by Government. Armed with this recognition and the resources to build a substantial research program, I am certain that CEPT and particularly CRDF will be able to make great strides in influencing public policy and public discourse for the better.

**10.** Over the last decade we have established four new institutions that in the future will grow into powerful branches of CEPT.

The first is CEPT Archives. Speaking in general, we Indians lack the culture of carefully preserving records of our thoughts, deliberations, and activities and those of generations past. On account of this it is impossible for us to build rich factual histories and understand India's past in a meaningful way. This is a civilizational problem and so it also plagues Indian architecture and planning. In fact, it is also a problem at CEPT. Despite being only a sixty-year-old institution, it is difficult for us to build a rich factual history of how CEPT was conceptualized, functioned or evolved over its first fifty years. CEPT Archives is meant to address this problem, by preserving works and records of CEPT's activities. It also has a more ambitious mission of preserving the works of notable Indian architects, planners, and designers. CEPT Archives is the only archive for architecture in the country. Now a decade old, and the repository of the works of 24 of India's modern architects, it is well on its way to fulfilling its mission.

The second new institution at CEPT is CEPT Press. It too is the only university press in the country and well on its way to fulfilling its mission of enriching academic discourse pertaining to the built environment. It has published 60 publications including books, monographs, catalogs, and conference proceedings in a short 7 years.

The mission of the third new institution, CEPT Professional Programs, is to deliver continuing education programs for practicing professionals. That of the fourth, CEPT Conferences, is to enrich discourse and promote peer-to-peer learning withing the professional community by organizing academic conferences. Both initiatives are also in place and well on their way to fulfilling their missions.

**11.** CEPT's campus and infrastructure is the eleventh dimension along which CEPT has been transformed. Over the last decade, all of CEPT's existing facilities were refurbished and much upgraded. Its grounds have been developed and are now more useable. Three wonderful new buildings, one of which is the library in front of you, have been added. Its iconic first building designed by Prof. B V Doshi has been sensitively restored and has become an exemplar for the restoration of India's modern architectural heritage. We have spent a total of Rs. 72 crores on all these additions and improvements and works worth Rs. 33 crores are underway. This money has almost all come from generous donations from the Ahmedabad Education Society and various other private donors and for this we are most thankful.

**12.** Yet another dimension along which we have strengthened CEPT is its finances. A decade ago, CEPT's finances were in very poor shape. This situation has been completely reversed. We are now not dependent on grants from any source for meeting our operational or academic expenses. This has strengthened CEPT's autonomy. While this has meant raising the level of student fees, we have striven hard to make our operations efficient to keep fees as low as possible. It is a matter of great pride to us that our total expenditure per student is lower than that of the three SPAs, which are government funded colleges for architecture and planning, but we are able to impart a far richer education to our students. We are even more proud of the fact that we use 11 per cent of all our revenues to support needy students through scholarships, student assistantships, teaching assistantships and research assistantships. This has kept CEPT accessible to a wide range of students.

\*\*\*\*\*

As you can see, CEPT has undergone a comprehensive transformation in the last decade. The most important thing, however, is that we have done this while staying true to CEPT's cherished governance and management traditions.

CEPT is now more than ever before, a collaborative of practicing professionals, academics, and philanthropists. That is to say that CEPT is widely owned. It is because no one thinks of it in a proprietary manner that everyone generously contributes to it.



Second, while CEPT is actively overseen and accountable to an enlightened Board it enjoys full autonomy in its functioning. For this, we have to credit our Chairman Sanjaybhai and our Board Members for their vision of how academic institutions should be stewarded.

Governance within CEPT is widely shared and policies are formulated through deliberative, evidence-based processes that are firmly focused on ensuring the best interests of students. This is what allows everyone at CEPT to work as a team. CEPT could never have reinvented itself without teamwork.

Lastly, CEPT has retained its non-hierarchical, informal, liberal culture. Its traditions of critical deliberations in juries, classes, public lectures and in management meetings are alive and well. Hence, life at CEPT is, by itself, an education in liberal values, and CEPT is a lively and highly creative institution.

\*\*\*\*\*

I want to end by thanking our Chairman Sanjaybhai and other Board Members (amongst whom I would like to specially mention Sudhirbhai Mehta and Prafull Anubhai) for giving me the opportunity of leading the reimagination and rejuvenation of this wonderful institution and for steadfastly supporting me throughout.

I also want to thank all the absolutely terrific staff, faculty members and students. (If I started individually mentioning all the people that I am deeply indebted to, it will take another thirty minutes!) All the improvements that I have listed were possible only because all of us worked together and because of your very hard work.

Last of all I would like to thank my wife Ismet, my daughter Aara and my son Shaan. They were my sounding board and my truest critics and, most importantly, they believed in me when the going was the toughest.

Thank you all very much.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now, returning to the task at hand, this afternoon a total of **572** students will receive their degrees. Many awards will be conferred. On behalf of my colleagues, Deans, faculty members, staff, and myself, I congratulate all those receiving degrees and awards. All of us wish you all the very best in life and hope that you will make the most of the opportunities it presents. In doing so you will make us proud. We also hope that you will stay in touch and keep coming back to your alma mater.