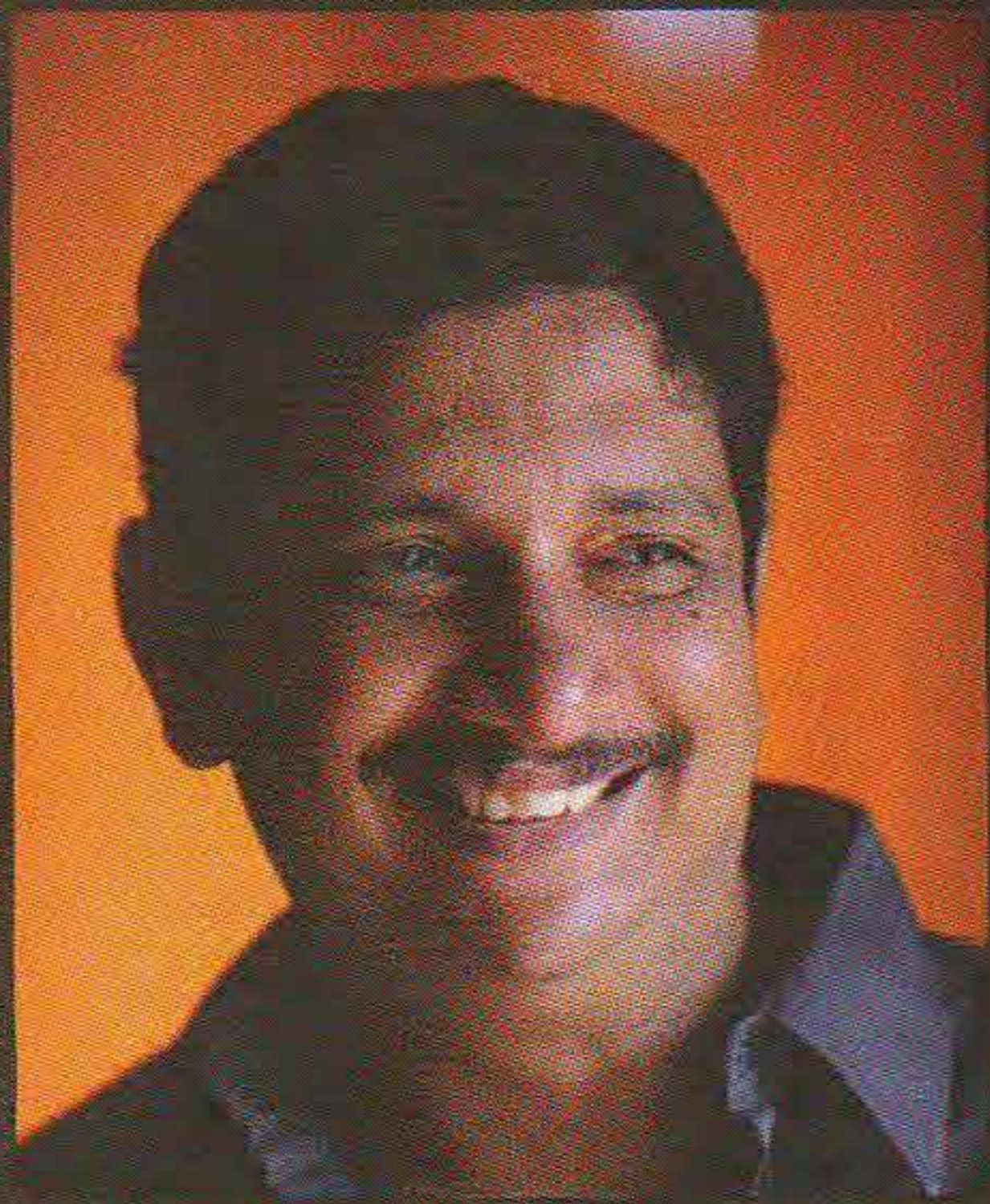


Conversation with God

Restoring the Cheraman Juma Masjid



Chennai based *Architect Benny Kuriyakose* believes in architecture that is appropriate to its environment. He uses a mix of traditional architectural elements and vernacular architecture in perfect harmony with simple construction techniques and cost-effective material. Among his latest projects, he is excited about starting work on the restoration of the Cheraman Juma Masjid in Kodungallur, Kerala. Benny speaks to Buildotech.

Your practice focuses on transplantation of old buildings to sites juxtaposing new ones...

The transplantation of buildings has happened mostly in Dakshinachitra and in some resort projects. The timber roofed traditional buildings in South India are suitable for this. Also it is much economical to transplant buildings and the final cost also will be much less when compared with a building of the same area as long as the original building is in good condition.

How do you explain "learning" as a delearning experience?

Many of the things that you learn while working with old buildings are not in any of the text books. This knowledge is something which

has taught me many lessons. Studying about these buildings helps one to learn more about the use of traditional materials and techniques. I think that any architect who wants to design a building in South India must see and learn from the Padmanabhapuram Palace in Kanyakumari District, and the Big Temple in Tanjore.

You still practice using the method of construction using various cost-effective techniques

I have learnt the basic lessons from Laurie Baker. One of the lessons that I learnt from him is to avoid waste in building construction. Nowadays, there are many elevation architects for whom only the front elevation is important. The clients also demand this.

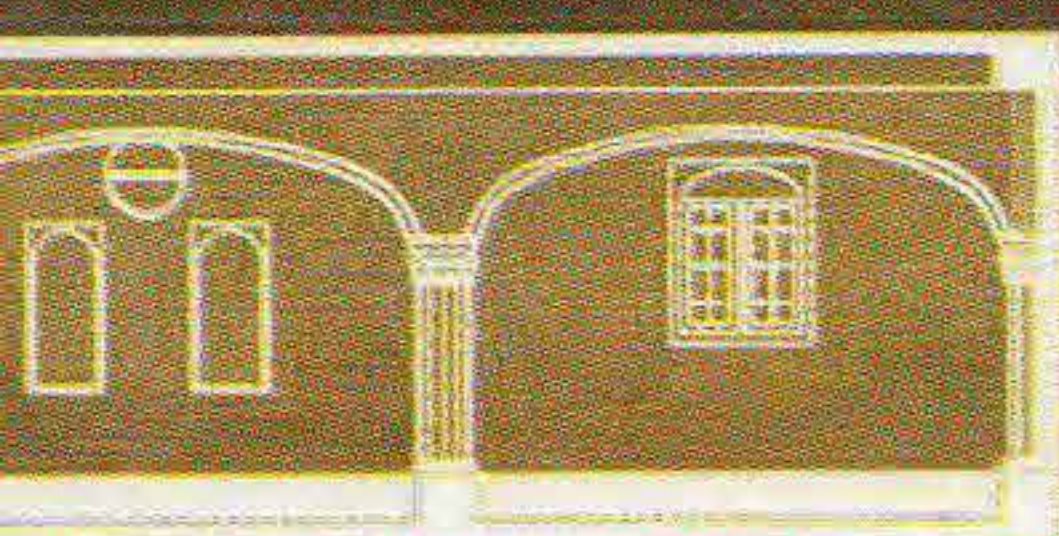


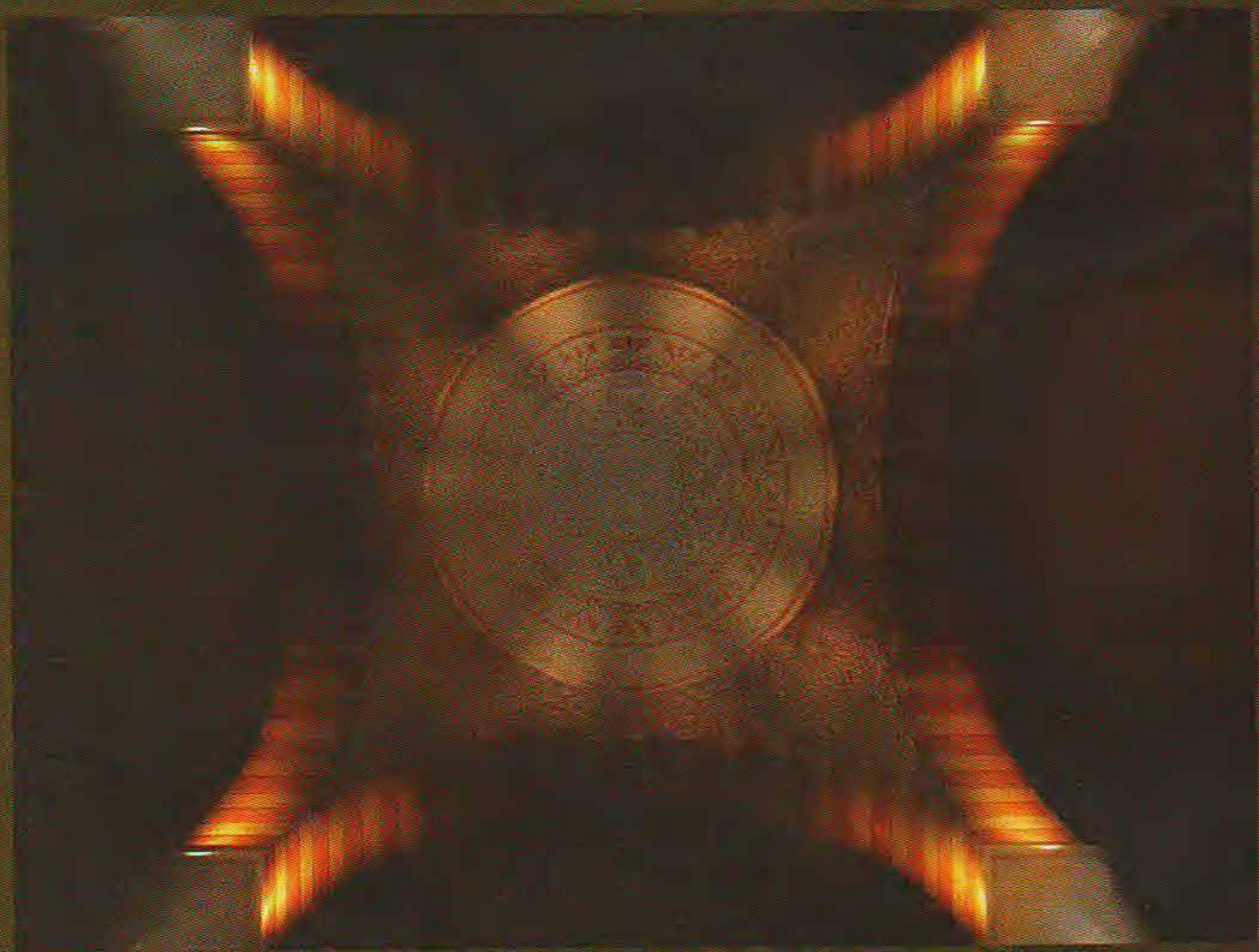


The cost effective techniques are very region and location specific. What was done 40 years ago might not be relevant now. Labour has become very expensive now. During the last 40 years, cement price has increased 25 times, while the labour rates have multiplied 80 times.

The equation has changed. If we repeat what we have said 20 years ago, then we will not progress anywhere. Sustainability will undergo changes over a period of time.

Society has undergone changes. Aspirations have changed. The concept about a house has changed. This is a big challenge that we are facing. We have been talking about mud and cost effective buildings for the last 30 years. Then we talked about conservation and about sustainable architecture. Tomorrow we might talk about something else. Can we come out of the architectural style? The biggest challenge is to come out of the style syndrome. ➔



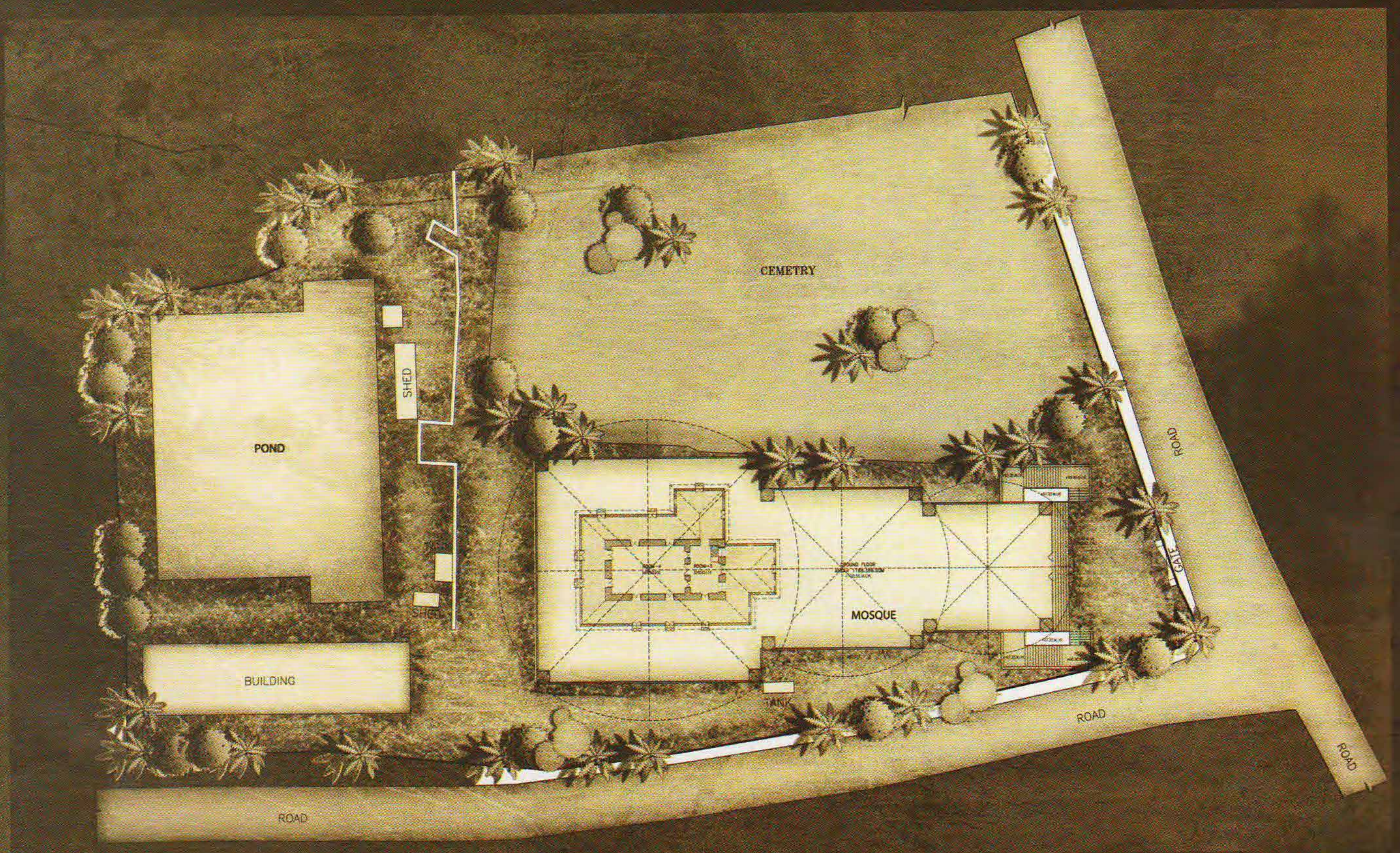


Your projects are compact. How much of the brief by the client is implemented while giving liberty to your creativity? Especially in the Cheraman Mosque project.

The projects come to me as ordinary projects. One has to think differently and also convince the clients about this. Once it is done, the clients will support you.

The mosque is very historic. You can visit the website of the mosque <http://www.cheramanmosque.com/>. Some of the facts may not be proven historically, or not agreed by the historians.

There were lot of additions made over a period of time. These were additions which were not in tune with the historic character, but were made to increase the capacity of the mosque. But at the same time, the members of the mosque realized that the additions were not suitable



for the mosque. They decided to remove the ugly additions and then the challenge was to increase the capacity by retaining the historic character.

There are two options - one is to restore the mosque to its original state and then give a basement which will increase the capacity or to give a high light roof on top of the historic building. The mosque committee has opted for the first.

What are your plans for the restoration?

The basement will look like a car park. How to change the look has been the challenge. Most of the Indian mosques have a Persian character and we decided that we would make the look a bit different. We are using elements of architecture which were prevalent before the renaissance and these elements were used in many churches and mosques in Italy, Spain and North Africa.

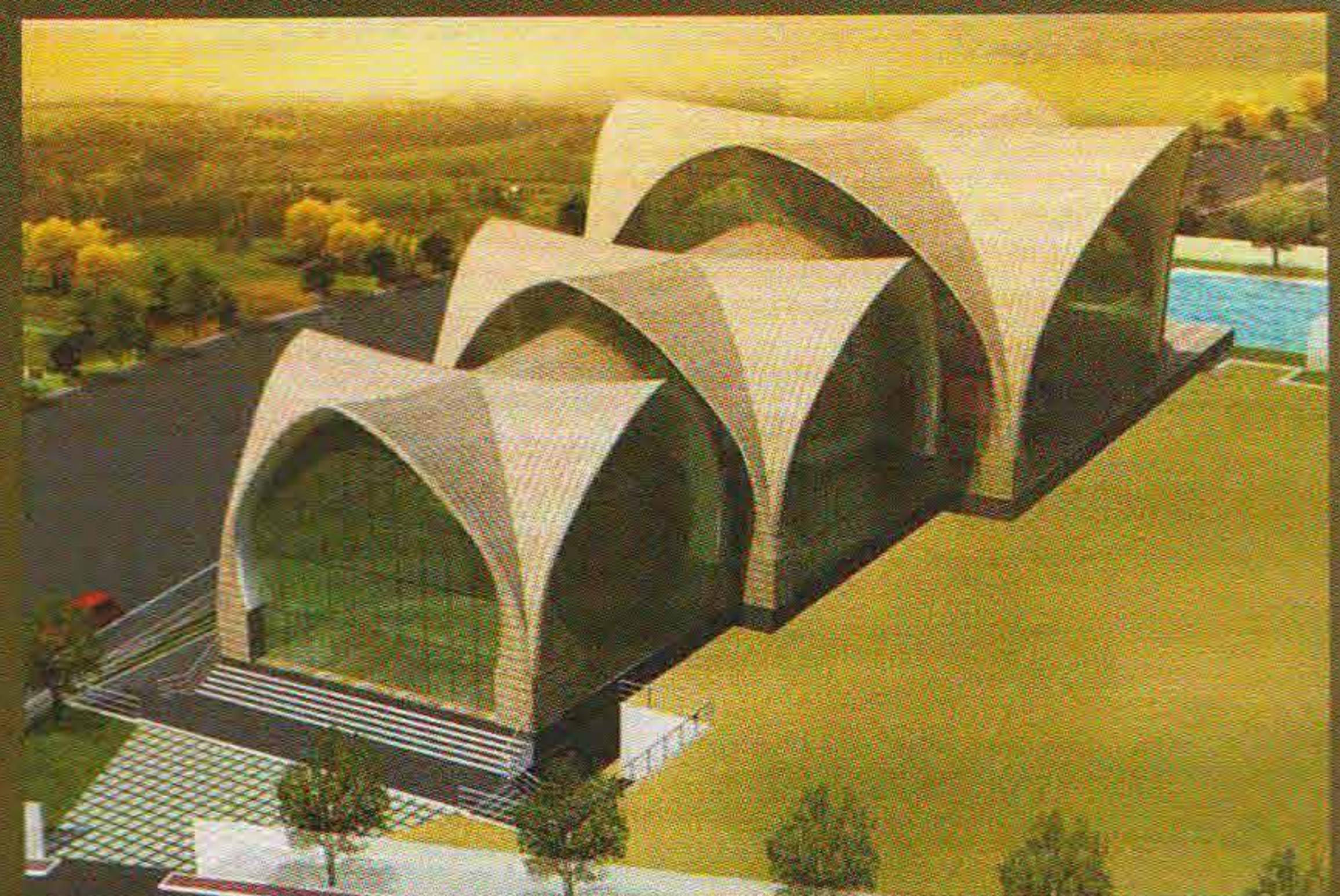
The basement does not have a great height and the challenge is to create the feeling of a mosque inside. It should create a different feeling. The idea is to use tiles of a different character and also to use the lighting in a different way.

The members of the Juma Masjid have great attachment to the place and the location of the mosque. That is the reason for not going for a new construction. The mosque will continue to be used as a mosque. The construction of the basement will increase the capacity also. A new museum depicting the history of the mosque is being set up in one of the buildings in the nearby compound.



The Masjid through the ages

The Masjid is believed to be the oldest mosque in India and the second oldest mosque in the world. The mosque was first reconstructed sometime in the 11th Century A.D. Three hundred years later, it was renovated again. A renovation was done in 1974 and further changes were made to the mosque. This was done to accommodate the increasing population of believers. The changes included the demolition of the front part of the mosque but the ancient part of the mosque was fortunately left untouched. Another extension was made in 1994. Now the decision to restore the mosque to its original form has been made. The initial proposal proposed a covering, as the ones seen in the picture, to ensure



that the old mosque is protected from the elements and to provide more space for devotees. However, it has now been decided that only the basement will be built.