

## Atash Behram - The Fire Temple

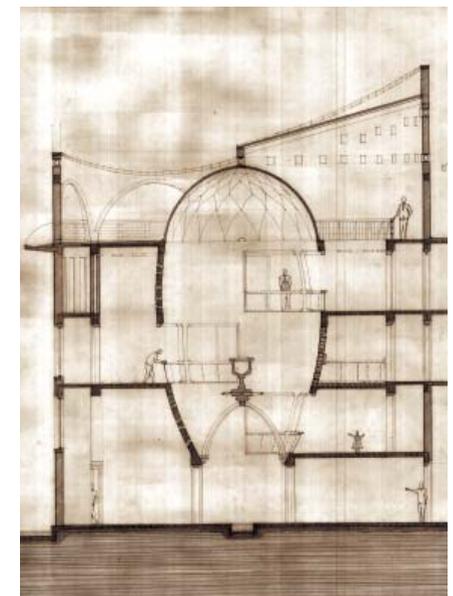
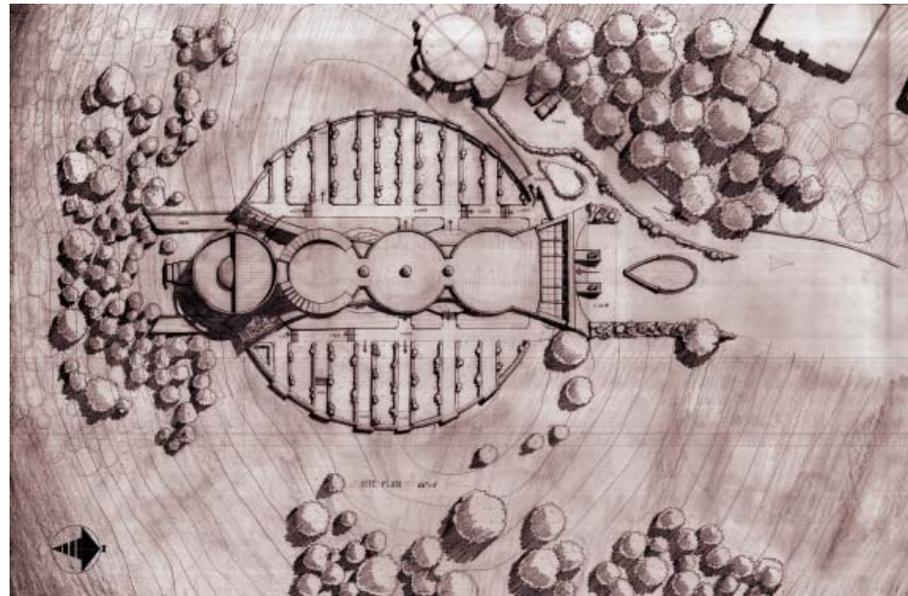
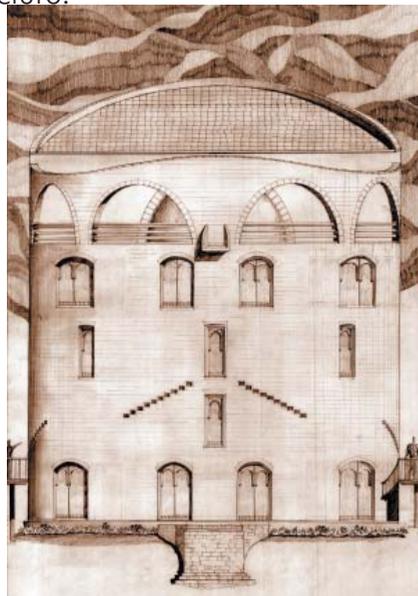
*"There is no doubt a temple that delights the mind wonderfully, captivates it with grace and admiration, will greatly encourage piety."*

Leon Batista Albertii 'De Re Aedificatoria' c. 1450  
for the Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, Italy

In Zoroastrianism the prayers are offered on a one-to-one basis i.e. an individual to God, as opposed to many other faiths and religions where group prayer is practiced. So, what are the basics of the fire temple and its effects intended on human beings? One has to understand the composition of its 'internal atmosphere' to feel the presence of spiritual entities and their functioning in each part of the structure. These areas are in connection with the individual's Urvaan (soul) and Kerdar (graphical collection of the lasting vibrations of the thoughts, words and deeds committed by the soul during its physical existence). When a Zarthushti enters an Atash Behram, he/she is crossing three to nine imaginary lines (Karsha), that maintain talismanic powers to separate 'sinful environment' and 'contaminated earth' from the consecrated land.

While building an Atash Behram the land selected for the sacred structure is consecrated by performing hundreds of Yazasne's and Vendidad's (liturgical ceremonies) to consecrate each type of the sixteen fires from various sources for 'crowning' a particular type of fire (Atash Behram, Atash Adaran and an Atash Dadgah). If one pair of priests were to perform these ceremonies, they would take 1,128 days i.e. about 37 to 38 months. The prayers are done with an even number of priests and generally more than one pair of priests are in the consecration ceremonies. Such consecration is done to separate the outside world and the sacred place where the fire is established. Thus before entering the karsh area, one has to leave behind all man-made gadgets generating magnetic or electronic vibrations that interfere with the Manthric vibrations formed by the prayers. In a Zoroastrian temple there is another area or channel, which is called the 'Paao-mahal', where only the priests who have undergone Bareshnoom (highest purification ritual) can enter.

In Khordad Yast (holy verse) a question is asked as to how the paths of the holy and wicked persons differ? Ahura Mazda replies that *"holy persons chant my mantras and draw Karshas and thereby protect their bodies"*. When a Zarthushti enters an Atash Behram the first thing he has to do is *Payab-Kusti* (washing the exposed parts of the body) prior to performing the Kusti ritual. Tying the Kusti around the waist signifies drawing three Karshas around the body as a protective field. By doing so a Zoroastrian attempts to clear his/her 'Aipi' (immediate field of energy) for receiving Manthric vibrations already existing inside the sacred structure.



Figs.2.9/3.0/3.1



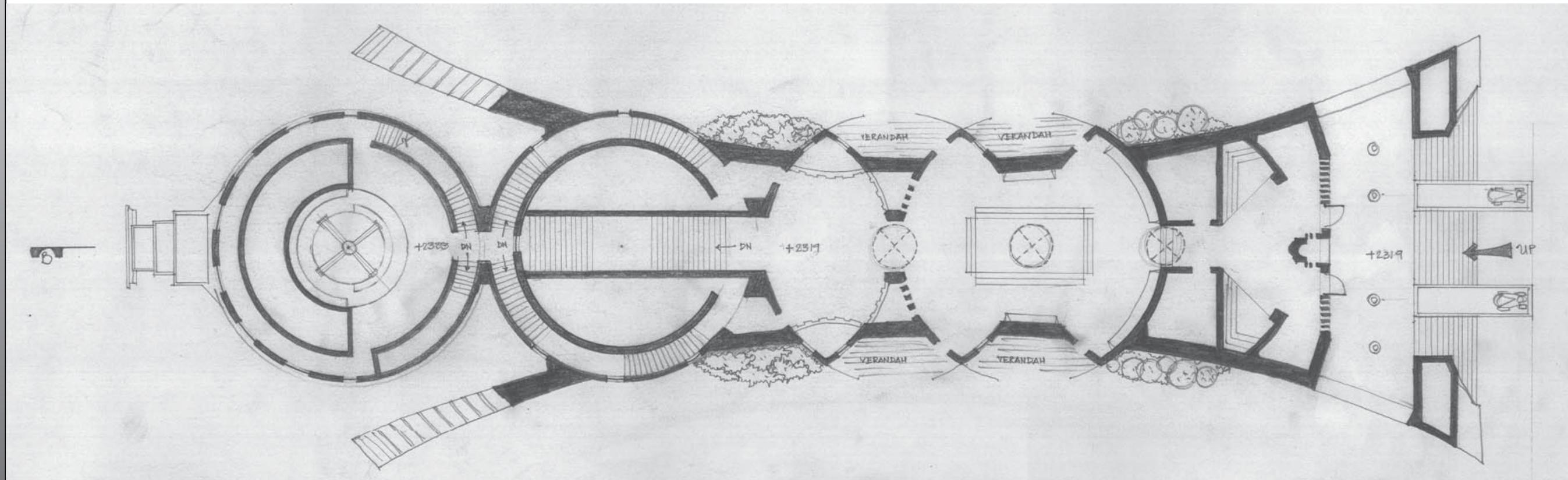


Fig.3.2: Building Plan through third level and rest of structure



## The Entrance

Being an initiation into the temple, the entrance serves the purpose of setting the mood of the worshipper and puts one into the frame of mind that he is here for a purpose. A wide set of stairs flanked by two high walls with immense thickness frame the entrance portico and are intended to give a sense of humility as one enters. Emerging from the stairs, two winged bulls thirteen feet in height, stand as guardians to the faith of Zoroastrianism and signify the fertility and strength of prayer and discipline. An arch that spans the entire staircase from wall to wall reinforces the belief that everything is connected through intellectual duality and that itself is an intrinsic characteristic of the philosophies of Zoroaster. The two walls are symbolic of the duality that Zoroaster put forth in his teachings and so they flank the entire temple building symmetrically on both sides.

The portico that one sets foot on after climbing the stairs contains four columns in the style of the Persian city of Persepolis that would remind us of the richest city under the sun that embraced all other faiths and religions and marked the pinnacle of the Zoroastrian religion and beliefs. These columns appear to be free standing as they do not have an opaque roof above them. Above the columns and portico the roof is glass to let light in and cover the area while reducing its presence and opening the space to the sky. This sequence acts as the transition for devotees who now find themselves within the temple building yet outside, giving them a moment to savor the transition before they physically find themselves within the walls of the temple.

Two doors symmetrically placed on either side of the entrance portico lead one inside the building and into the first area, the place for ablution. These doors along with the walls are symbolic of the Zoroastrian philosophy of duality and make one deviate from the path or axis on which the fire is kept. Between the two doors and facing the outside i.e. toward the portico is a small flowing water trough. It adds splendor to the thoughts of one who knows that the entrance is marked with water and the journey to the other side of the temple ends in Fire. Within itself, that is a paradox and a completion that gives a glimpse to the devotee of the next ritual of ablution. As soon as one enters the lobby that houses the ablution area, two initial smaller rooms before the cascades of water on either side serve as coat rooms where people can remove any additional garments or shoes that are a result of the inclement conditions on the outside.

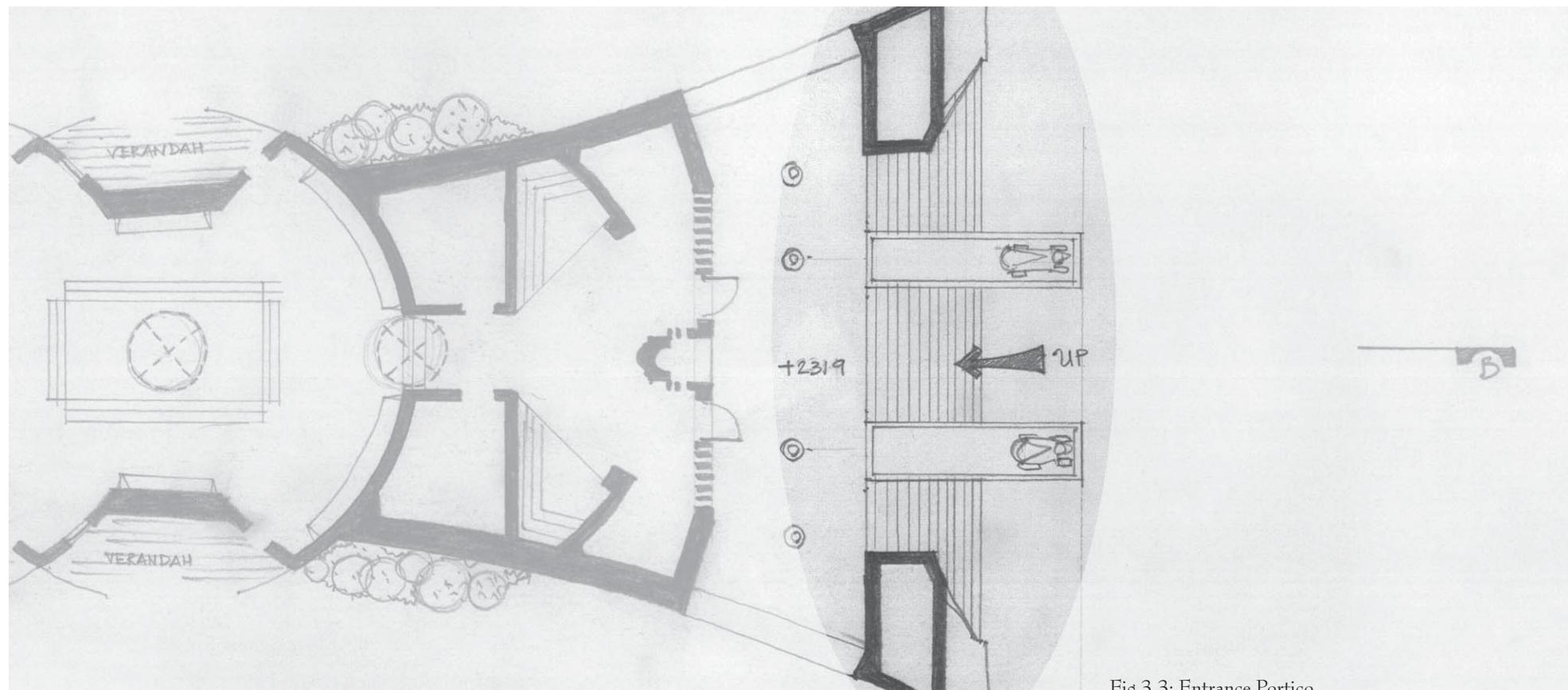


Fig.3.3: Entrance Portico

### *The Ablution area and Kusti enclosures*

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the ritual of washing the exposed parts of the body and then continuing onto the ritual of tying the Kusti around the waist follow once the devotee has entered within the walls of the temple. For ablution, two beautiful cascades of water in three steps greet the visitor and offer themselves to be used for cleaning of the exposed parts of the body. The three steps of water are in accordance with the tenets of Zoroastrianism i.e. Humata, Hukhta and Huvarshta (Good thoughts, Good words and Good deeds); a constant reminder to the follower that the thoughts need to be projected only in one direction. Following those are two rooms on either side, one for ladies and the other for gents where the kusti ritual can be carried out. The entrance to these rooms is through a short corridor that further on leads to the main prayer hall. As one needs to undo the garments and unwrap the kusti, so that the initial prayers can be recited and the kusti wrapped again, ladies and gents need to be separated. These rooms are the simplest of all where the white stuccoed walls and ceiling with the terrazzo flooring leave no room for distraction to the devotees. The Kusti ritual however, needs to be carried out while facing a light source; during the day the direction of the sun and during the night any artificial light source. At no time must this prayer be carried out facing the north direction. For this, the two walls that pierce these rooms on the exterior are perforated with openings that allow the rooms to be washed with rays of light. These openings and therefore the wall, face the east and west directions exactly and that automatically prevents the devotees from facing north as now they face only the entering light i.e. east or west.

A skylight is placed over the end of this short corridor to mark the end of the initial rituals into the temple and the start of the prayer hall. The dome shaped skylight allows light to enter into the space below making the point of transition into another space visually pleasing. In comparison to the rest of the rooms these points where such other skylights are placed mark the path to the fire as well as the end of one section of movement and the start of another. On a cloudy day, north light will always wash the insides of the hall and when the sun is shining bright, direct rays will bathe the walls that are covered in fired and glazed clay ceramic tiles.

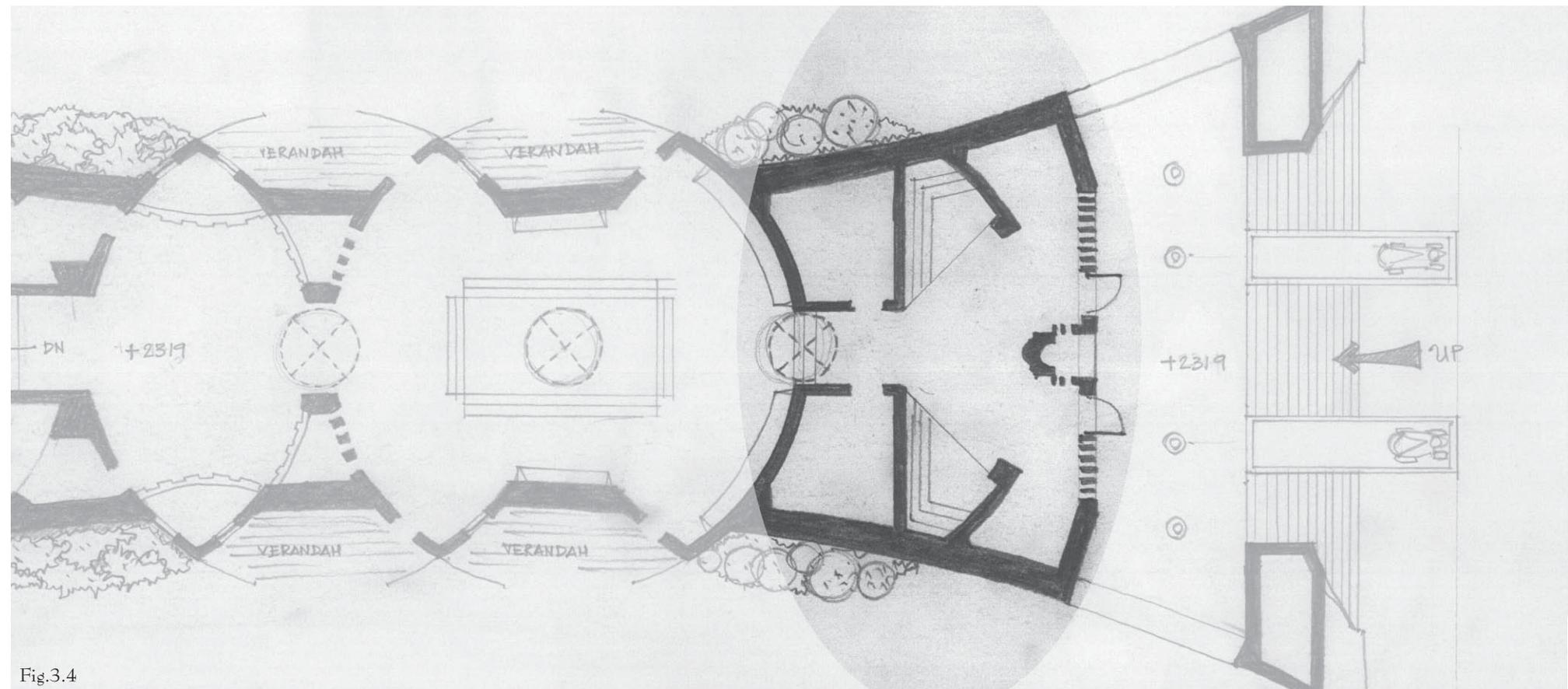


Fig.3.4



## Prayer Hall

The Zoroastrian faith like many other religions carries out ceremonies for the fulfillment of prayers, wishes, health, wealth, happiness and children of the family. Many other types of prayer ceremonies with regards to the world, friends, nature, animals, plant life, earth, mankind, water and sky require a place to be carried out in an Atash Behram. This prayer hall serves this very purpose and acts like a place where devotees might carry requests such as particular prayers to be performed by the priests. The fact that these prayers can be done anywhere makes it flexible but if they can be carried out in the presence of a holy fire on the very same premises, it touches the hearts of the devotees and makes them more aware of the religion and its practices. If such a prayer session is in process, the hall isn't closed off but left open to other devotees to see the proceedings. This makes the community unite in common practices and beliefs. Even the *Navjote* (ceremony to initiate a young boy or girl into the faith of Zoroastrianism), can be carried out in a fire temple. Many a time, these ceremonies are done in the compound area of fire temples but not inside the building to allow for more space. The ceremonies held outside are accompanied by great pomp and ceremony. Of course, inside a temple the ambience is much more mellow and sublime.

Here, the place or the very ground on which such ceremonies can be performed is lowered from the rest of the floor level. Here a small fire is burned, the embers for which are taken from the Holy fire. Placed in the middle of the lowered floor, the priests sit around the fire reciting prayers till they complete the required text. Above this area is another domed skylight that sheds light on the area that is as important to the common man as the faith itself. Here again the light entering illuminates the prayer hall reflecting off the polished terrazzo flooring. As the diameter of the skylight is about four feet, the light coming in is controlled and mainly focused on the center where the ceremony is carried out. Thus all the spectators in the hall are automatically focused toward the center of the room. Moreover the fire that burns at that point can be large due to the raised roof over it i.e. the domed skylight and therefore due to thermal buoyancy fumes and heat will tend to rise and move out through the openings in the skylight when the louvres are opened.

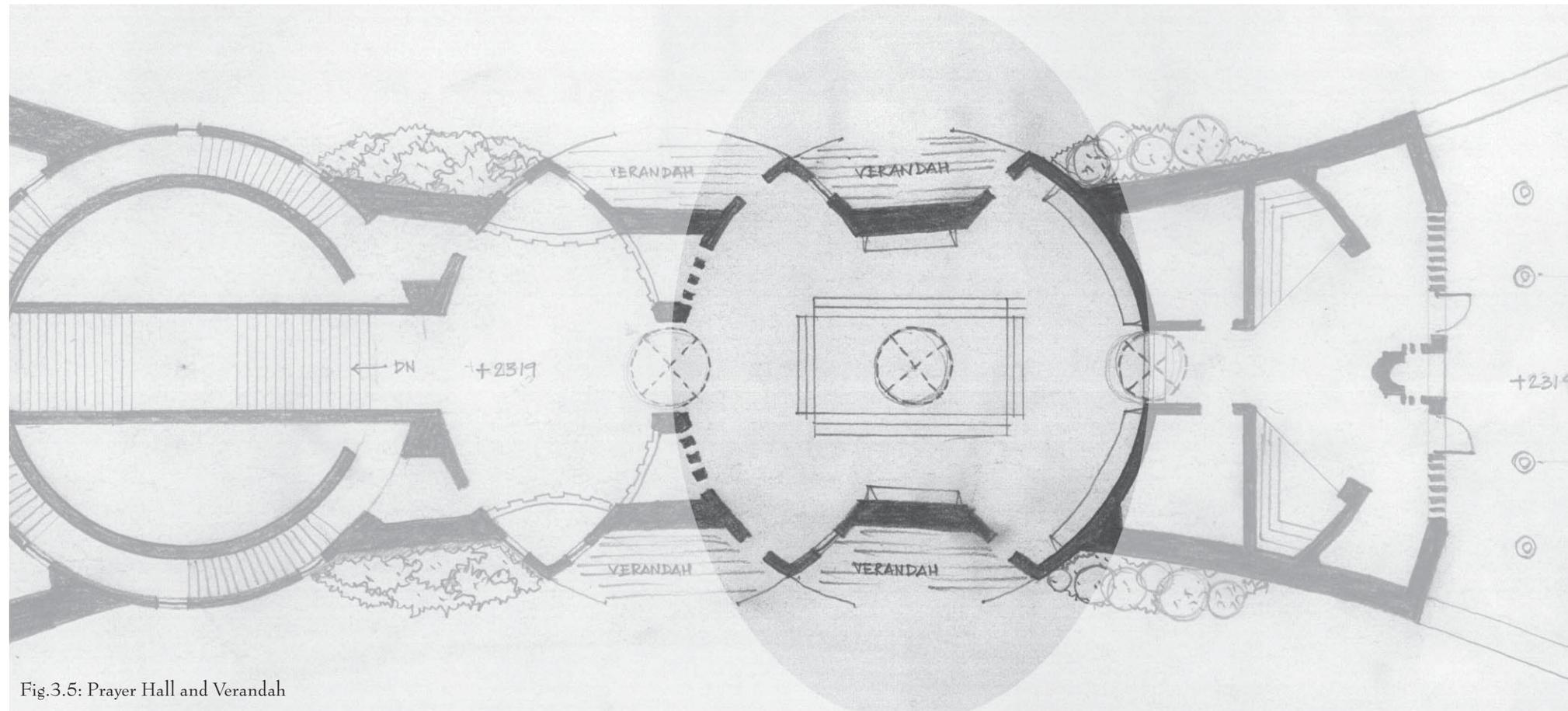


Fig.3.5: Prayer Hall and Verandah



## Hall of light

Beyond the prayer hall is a smaller hall that serves two purposes; it acts as a point where the journey to the Main Fire starts and ends as well as where the devotees light a small oil lamp and make a wish after they have been through the cella of Fire and have returned to the end of the path. Between this space and the prayer hall there is another domed skylight that marks the path toward the fire cella.

The lit oil lamps that stand in the carousels at the corners of the rooms create a glow that can be seen from the outside through the windows provided in the corners as well as from the inside of the prayer hall. The wall that separates the prayer hall from the hall of light is perforated with small openings that allow the light from the lamps to spill through the openings and create a glow on the other side of the prayer hall. The design of this hall prevents the devotee from entering into the exit doorways from the Fire cella and guides them toward the grand staircase that leads into the cella at the lower level. From this point the priests' room and the storage for the wood and oil for the Fire and lamps respectively can be reached. Therefore the priests have easy access to the prayer hall and the rest of the temple building and the wood can then be easily moved to the Fire for use as they are at the same level. For initial transportation, the wood needs to be carried into the storage area inside the building from the outside. The priests' room at this point is level with the bridge leading to the fire over the first level.

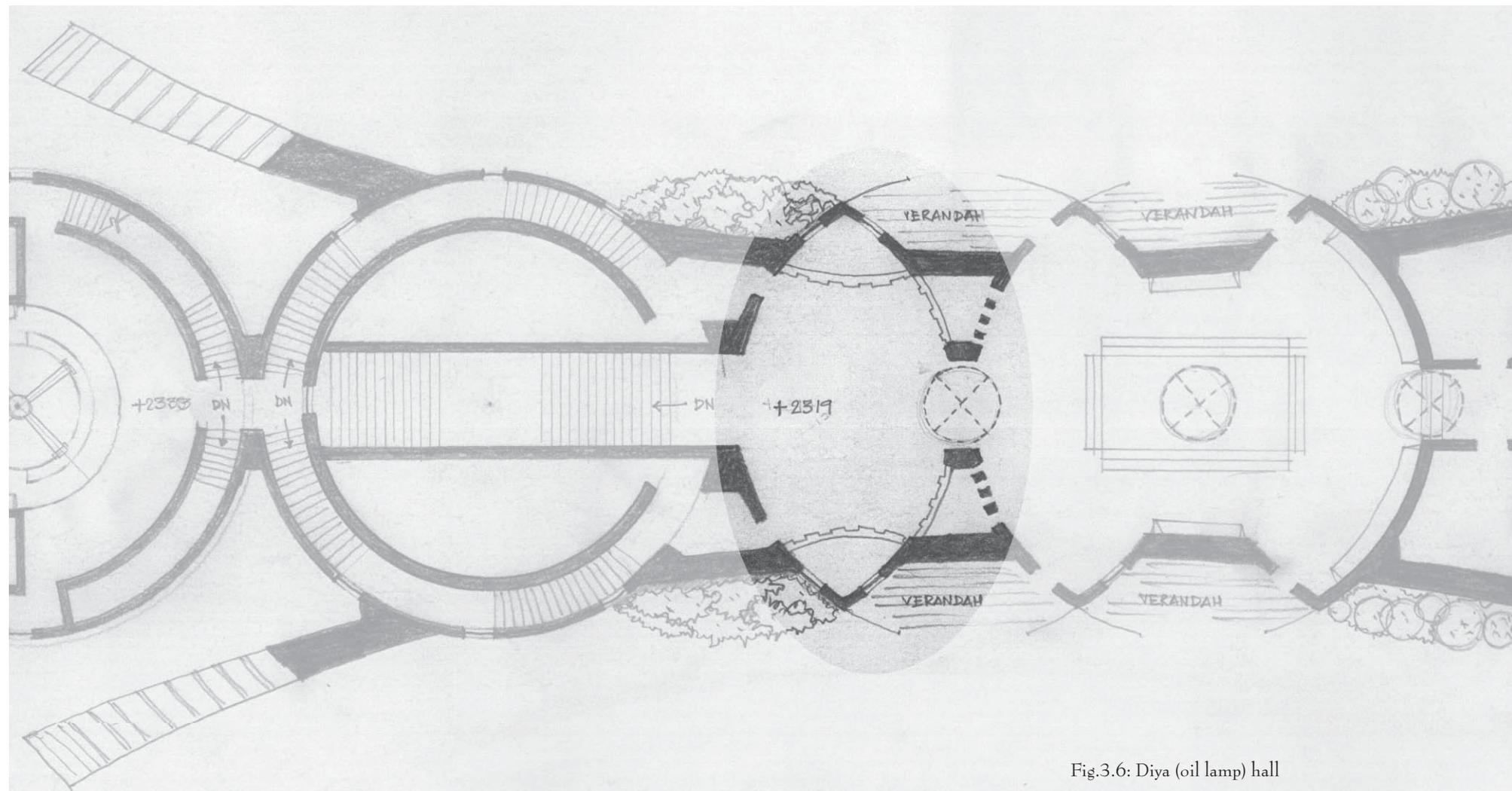


Fig.3.6: Diya (oil lamp) hall

## Grand Staircase

If the word grand had another sense in its meaning, it would be in this case where the staircase, a single flight in all, leads the devotee toward the lowermost level of the Fire cella. Lined with polished granite walls and floored with a fine Italian marble, the staircase has a roof that increases in height as one moves further downward. This cast in place concrete roof has clear glass bricks inserted in it. The glass bricks let diffused light into the staircase illuminating the path toward the Fire. The ambience created is of a starry sky. These sparkles of light act as the main source of light in the space. For the night, lights are bracketed into the side walls of the staircase that mark the descent. This staircase is flanked by the priests' room and storage room on either side.

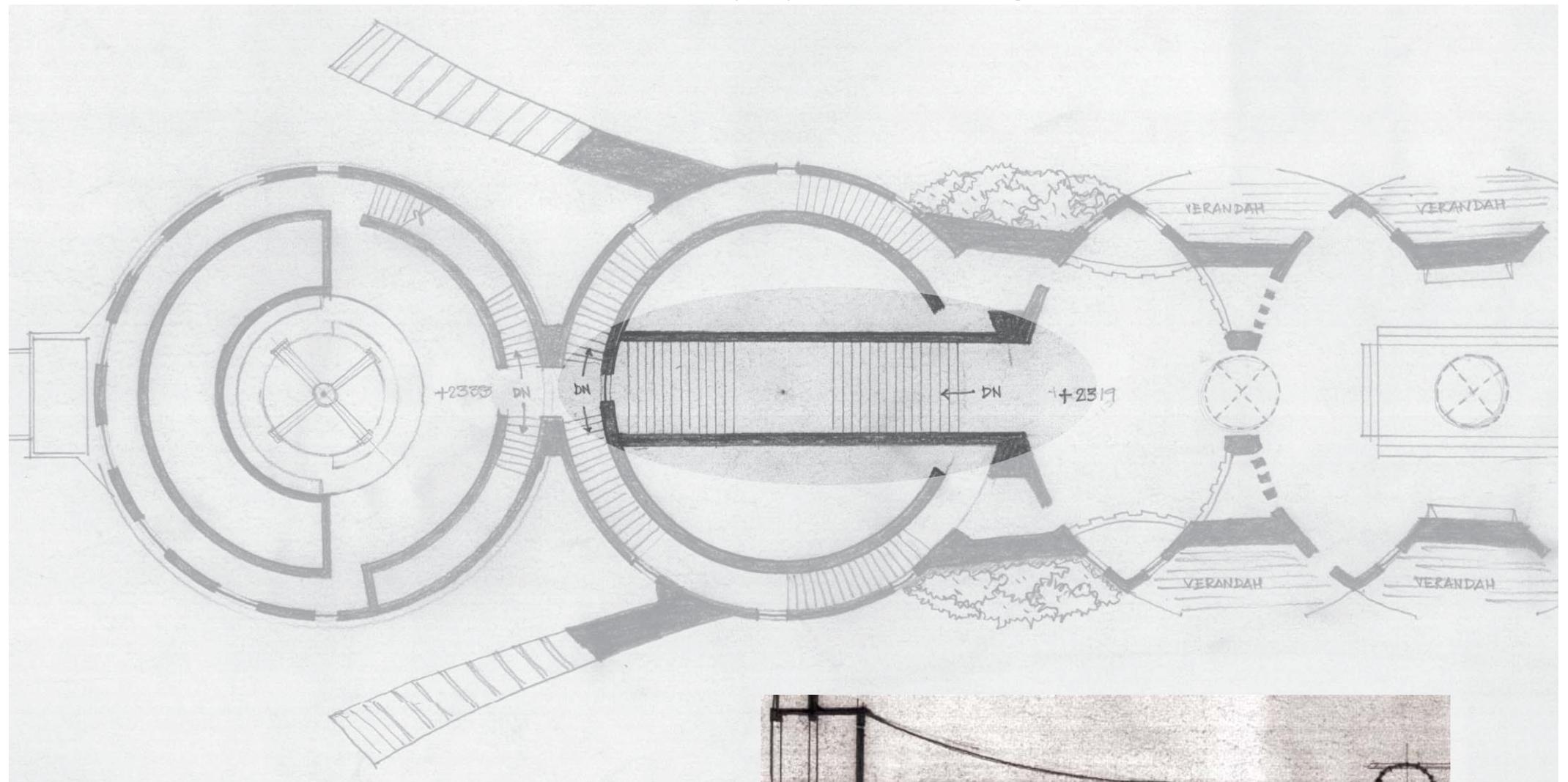


Fig.3.7: Grand Staircase flanked by the Priests room and storage. Exit staircases complete the structure on both sides.

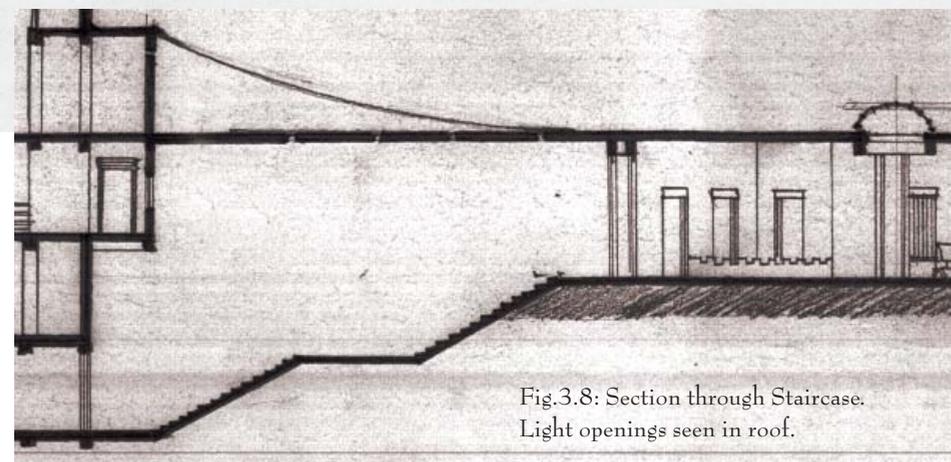


Fig.3.8: Section through Staircase. Light openings seen in roof.



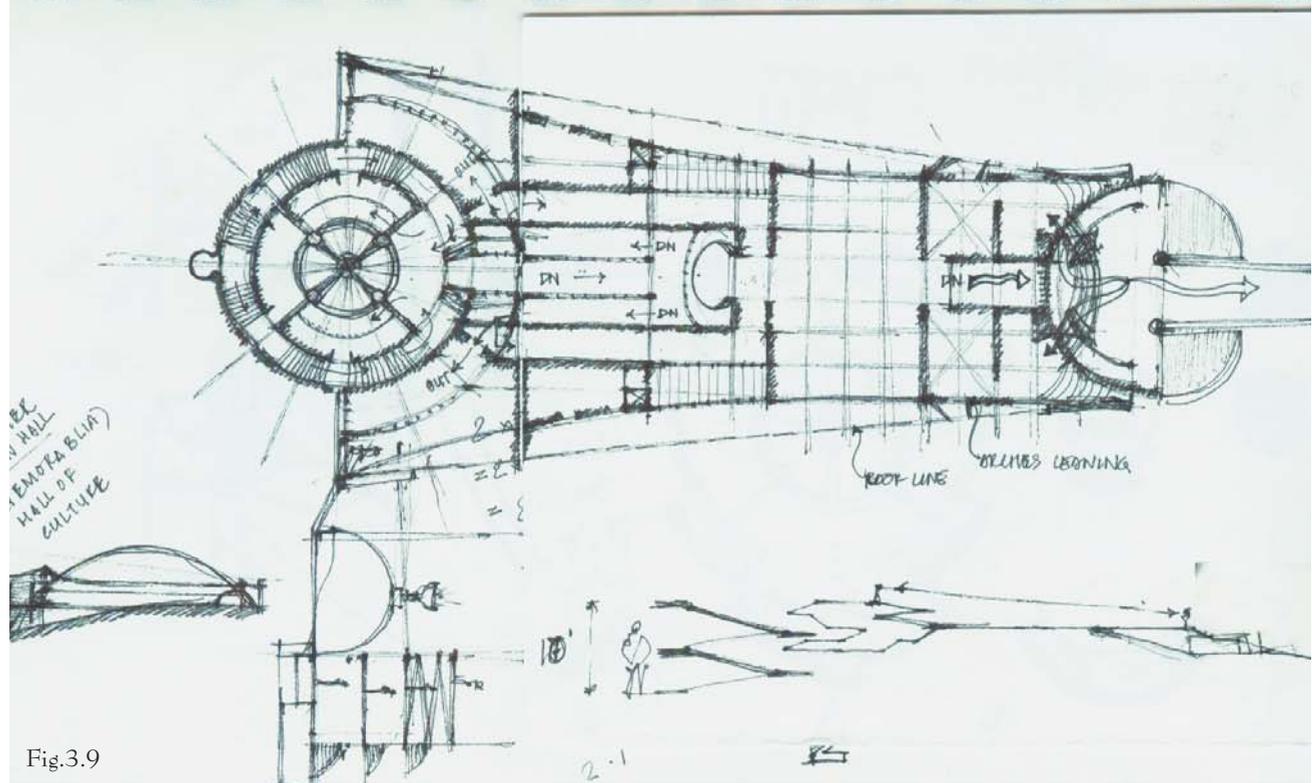
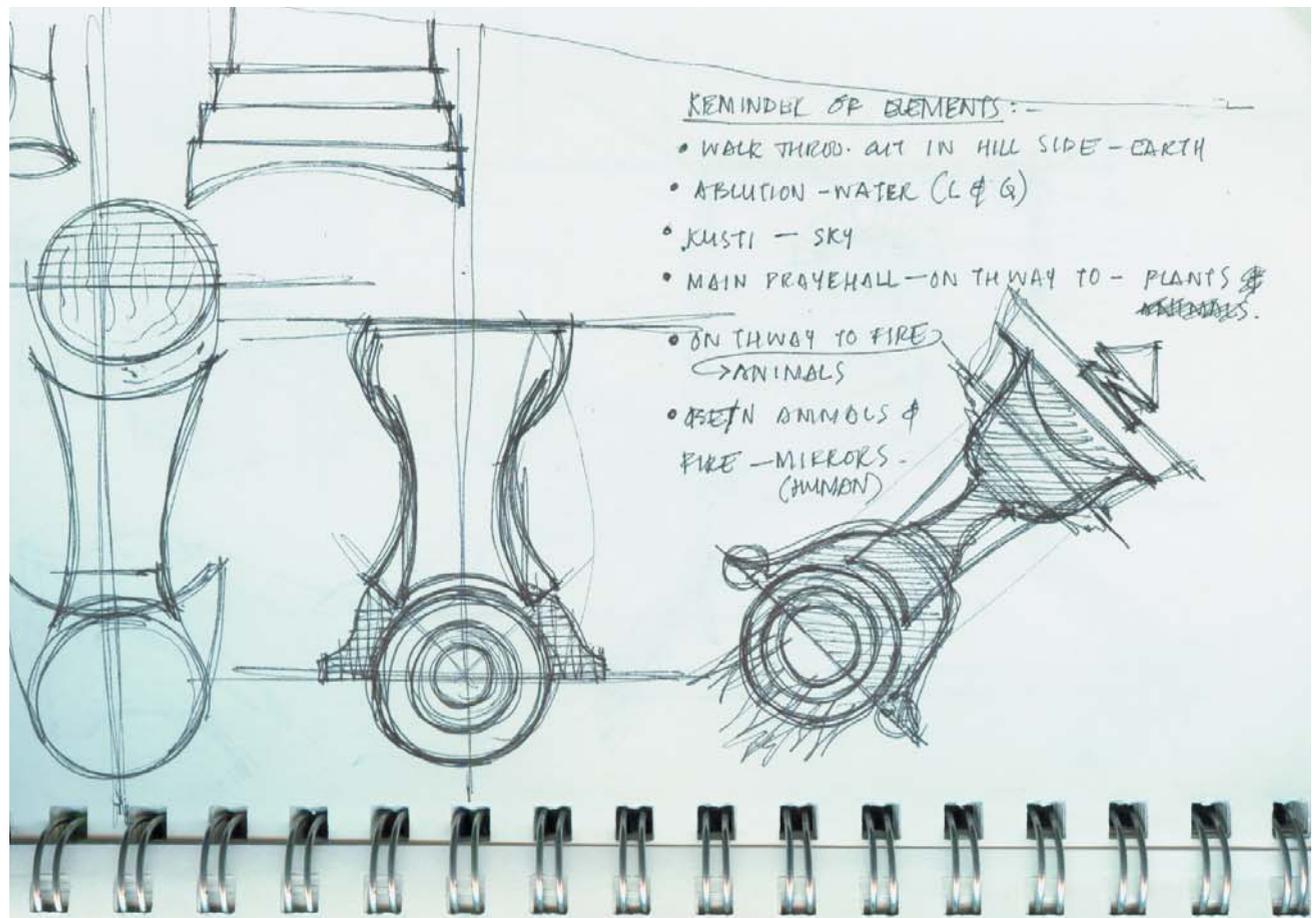


Fig.3.9



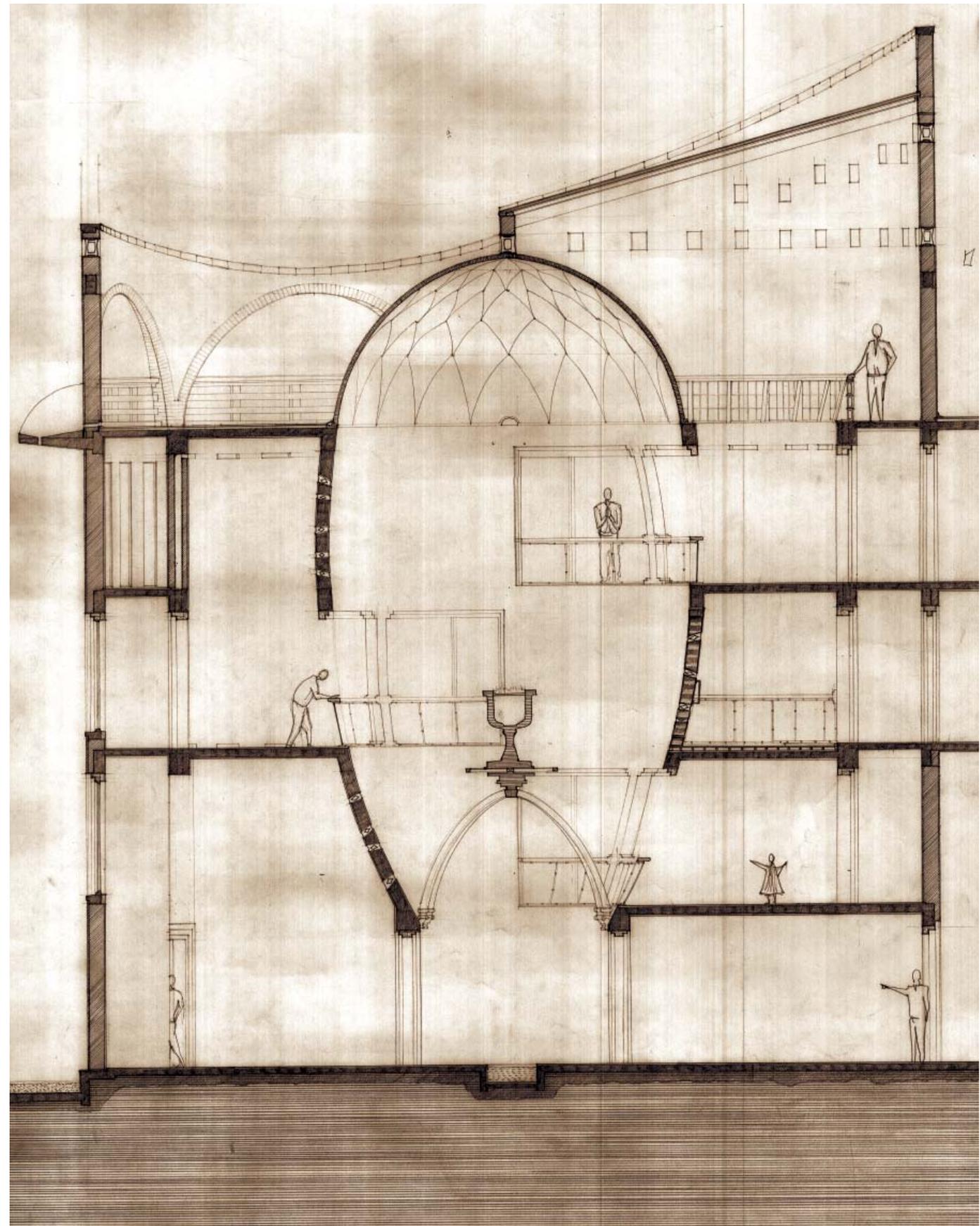


Fig.4.0: Section through Inner Sanctum/Cella

