

SAYING GOODBYE

This fall, I attended the University of California at Berkeley's annual memorial service for the first time. Surprisingly, I was unaware of this solemn ritual until I came across its announcement as a campus event. Ideas concerning human mortality seldom wafted through the vibrant spaces of International House, where I lived as a graduate student in the late 1990's. Perhaps, I had yet to experience the loss of someone from our campus community and the memorial service as it unfolded for me.

That person was Norma Evenson, Professor Emeritus who taught architectural history at the College of Environmental Design for three decades, from 1963 to 1993. Her seminal book, "Chandigarh", infused me with the incredible story and design of India's first modern city, attributed to the noted French Architect Le Corbusier and his team of Indian and European Architects, including, Pierre Jeanneret, Jane Drew and Maxwell Fry. Taking on the subject of an alien city, Norma had showed immense courage, sharing its symbolism and urban experimentation with the world. As a student of architecture in Chandigarh, her book inspired me to write my undergraduate thesis on the distinctive housing designed for a tropical climate, and its impact on a cultural way of life. Fortunately, it also led me to pursue a graduate program in Architecture at the College of Environmental Design (CED) at UC Berkeley, where Norma had commenced writing "Chandigarh". I had many questions for her but we lived oceans apart and I could only hope for our paths to cross one day. They came closer, but perhaps, it was not meant to be. Norma retired and left Berkeley a few years before I commenced the Masters in Architecture program in 1997. Unbeknownst to me, when I tried to look for her again this fall, the news of her passing came up on CED's website. The kinetic energy reserved for my potential conversation with her was then mobilized towards feeling an immediate and heavy sense of loss. Paying my respects at the memorial service, I thought, could be a way to reconcile with the knowledge that she was forever gone.

Shortly before noon on September 15, I walked across campus to the lawn in front of California Hall. An expanse of people cloaked in black led me to a sit amongst them, our face masks holding words we wished we could have said to the departed. The afternoon commenced with the presentation of the colors as two flags, of country and state were escorted ceremoniously and placed at half mast. The Campanile Concert was followed by notes of a bagpipe that floated above the lush lawn, gently settling on the hushed audience. Chancellor Carol Christ addressed our small gathering with touching and momentous words. She reflected on the terrible losses of the year that included students, staff, faculty and Emeriti, all part of the Cal family. Paying homage to the young lives that were lost before being lived, she acknowledged the academic contributions made by Emeriti that had built Berkeley into the University that it is today. Evoking Queen Victoria, Carol suggested that we mourn as an act of memory, to "carry those we lost in spirit". Poignant music and haunting voices were interspersed with hymn, poem and songs that arose around us, giving a sacred aura to the reading of the names of the deceased. They left the page and dispersed like pollen, sprinkled over feathers and wings, carried to the deep blue sky. Tears brimmed my eyes when I heard Candace Johnson's powerful voice in the song "You'll never

walk alone”, arching to reach our hearts with” don’t be afraid of the dark, the end of the storm is the golden sky”. After the service ended, some of us wrote our thoughts on white hand-made paper and hung them on a string like folded doves poised to take flight.

Chancellor Christ’s message of eliciting a compassionate response to our loss had rung true. Walking back, my feet were cushioned by the soft grass and my mind filled with campus memories, reminding me that lives are to be lived so that they may have meaning for those that mourn its loss. Several weeks later, I finished reading “Chandigarh” once again and Norma’s words swirled around me, decades after I had first read them. Coupled with the beautiful memorial service, I had found the most honorable way of saying Goodbye.

Sandhya Sood, Principal at Accent Architecture+Design graduated with a Master’s in Architecture from CED at UC Berkeley in 1999.