Plans

The three levels correspond to the tenets of Zoroastrianism and are located in the southern and northern hemispheres. Each level has a double height and can be seen from the other. They are concentric around the egg that hold the eternal flame and step back to allow for better visibility to the onlooker from the lower and upper level. Each level has one entrance door and two exit doors to the staircase on either side. Those doors are marked by the natural light entering through the windows at those points.
Fig. 6.0: First Level Floor Plan
Fig. 6.2: Third Level Floor Plan
Fire for the Senses

“When Michelangelo saw the (Ghiberti’s) panels, shining upon the Church in Gilded bronze, he stood amazed; and after long wonder, he broke the solemn silence in this way: “Oh Divine work! Oh door worthy of heaven!”

Georgio Vasari, The lives of the Artists, 1568,
-for the doors by Lorenzo Ghiberti (1380-1455); North-East doors - Baptistry of San Giovanni, Florence

There are many external stimuli that trigger the human senses and many manifest themselves in the form of an element in nature. Fire triggers the sense of warmth, smell, sound, vision and ambience. The crystal glass pieces embedded into the insitu concrete egg at random intervals and distances refract the light from the fire, in directions that can not be predicted. This creates a very dynamic setting in which the rainbow of colors from the glass crystals shines on the inner walls of the egg and prayer levels. This in turn is further reflected by the glazed ceramic tiles on the walls; producing light shades of white and cream for the walls of the egg and shades of off-white and brown for the walls of the ambulatory paths. The colors generate a sense of earthiness that is synonymous with the elements and gives a feeling of simplicity, not glamor to the devotee while at the same time explains the role of fire in our lives with all its grandeur. This presence of reflected light makes the fire appear omnipresent and eternal as it should be.

The fuel used for the burning process is generally sandalwood that leaves a divine fragrance in the temple air. It seems to be emitted from the fire and delights the senses as one enters the building. In Gita (holy book of the Hindus) 10-36 Krishna tells Arjuna that he is tejas tejasvinam aham “the glory of the glorious”. In Hormazd Yasht (Zoroastrian prayer verse) we come across similar appellation for Ahura Mazda rayomand khorehmand. The Koran (holy book of Islam) 27-8 and 28-30 states that Moses sees Jehovah as a fire in the bush; not the physical fire, but the glory of the Angels, a reflection of the glory of God.
In the Bible (holy book of the Christians), Leviticus 6-12 states: And the Fire upon the alter shall be burning in it; it shall not be put out: and the priest shall burn wood on it every morning.

Leviticus 6-13 states: The Fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out. This compares to our rites of ever burning Fire and praying with an offering of sandalwood in Fire temples, and the boi ceremony (performed five times a day to keep the consecrated fire fed with fuel). To add to the sense of smell, sandalwood oil is sometimes sprinkled on the wood further heightens the smell. One does not feel claustrophobic in any way but instead the smell of sandalwood makes the devotee feel pious and spiritually closer to God.
Fig. 6.6: Light Study of Interior of Egg and Cella
Architecture for fire

As fire is the intrinsic reason for the design of this temple, it is very important to mention how the temple is generated from it and where the idea of an eternal fire is carried through in its foundations. The structure itself being load bearing, is put together with fired hollow clay masonry blocks of different sizes. These act as pillars that hold the temple up. The walls are lined with glazed ceramic tiles of different colors. A process that uses fire as an essential stage of development. The roof is laid with clay masonry tiles that are fired till a point that they resist all weathering effects. Firing for these clay products is done to a point where the clay literally turns as hard as stone and can then only be chiselled away like stone. This adds to the strength of the building and makes it resilient and durable. Additionally, extreme temperatures outside do not effect the interior ambient temperature as the materials are all saturated to a point of extreme solidarity and negligible porosity. The use of clay itself is intrinsic to the temple building as it is a gift from nature; in Persia the forehead was touched to the ground - to Clay - to show respect to God.

In fact clay has one of the best ratings when it comes to transmittance values and absorption values towards temperature and heat, but only when it has reached saturation and become rock hard. The bringing together of earth, water, air and fire forms clay; exposing the perpetual relationship between matter and spirit; like magic.

“Seed of Asha” is the cosmic energy which is the origin and sustenance of life. In Rig-Veda 10-121-001, we find a similar statement: Hiranayagarbha samavartatagre Bhutasya jata: patirekaset; “In the beginning the golden egg (fire), He was the Lord of all the worlds, as soon as He came to be.” Compare “golden egg” and “seed of asha” for similarity of the two quotes. In Ardibehesht Yash-1, Ahura Mazda instructing Zarathushtra that for the worship and invocation of Him and the Ameshaspand, Zarathushtra must appoint Ardibehesht (the Fire) as the praiser, the invoker, the extoller, the glorifier of all good shining lights and brilliant works. The egg here in the design of this Atash Behram is the one within which the Eternal Fire rests. A symbol of the presence of Ahura Mazda as the omnipresent one in our lives. Endowed with the glazed tiles and crystal glass, make it worthy of carrying the light of the fire and spreading it.

The egg is capped with a bronze dome to complete its existence. Bronze, a metal that was also used for centuries, has its symbolic presence in our lives. As a building material, it is strong and durable and weathers better than steel. There is no fear of rust as there is in steel as it contains copper. The intricate patterns on the inside of the dome come from the formwork used to cast it. Bronze has the sublime essence of expanding just a slight bit before it actually sets and that makes it fill in the smallest of niches to bring out a beautiful finish. The weight of the dome, if a concern, is carried through the cast-in-place concrete egg and slab to the load bearing walls and to the ground. Gilded like one worthy of resting atop the fire, the dome is a presence that completes the fire in all aspects of spirituality and materiality.
Fig. 6.7: Fired Clay Hollow Masonry Block

Fig. 6.8: Bloodwood for floor inlays

Fig. 6.9: ‘Statuario Venato’ Marble

Fig. 7.0: Black Granite ‘Galaxy’

Fig. 7.1: Glazed Ceramic Tiles - Creme, Natural Red, Brown Glazed
The terrazzo flooring in the prayer halls is of these types where the shades fall between the samples above. Brick dust is mixed with the cement to achieve the earthy finish and the floor is finished off with a clean waxed polish. The star like flooring pattern radiating from the center is made up of slightly contrasting shades of red, brown and light gray so that the rays depicted within the floor stand out.

This type of flooring is carried throughout the building but in the case of the rest of the floor it is of even tone and without a break line in order to bind the floor space as a whole and make the path to the fire look as one.
Fig. 7.7: East Side Elevation
The Architecture and the Hill

Resting atop one of the highest points in Blacksburg, Virginia, this Atash Behram stands by itself close to a few new settlements and housing complexes. Its immediate surroundings are a sea of grass along a rolling hillside and a carpet of trees. This location allows the building, especially the Fire cella (cylinder), to have an uninterrupted path for sunlight to enter though the windows that mark the direction from within the structure. Its proximity to the town and its amenities make it accessible and at the same time its distance from nearby buildings with only one accessible roadway and a forest of trees on the north-east side, maintain the serenity and peace in the complex.

The temple building stands within the seven gardens that envelope it on both the east and west sides. These gardens are reminiscent of the seven stages of evolution of the world that correspond to the design theory of the Atash Behram. The seven stages are based on Zoroastrian philosophies where the Wise One (Ahura Mazda) assigned a protector for each of his creations starting from the earth, water, sky, plants, animals, humans and finally Fire, within which all his creations came together as one. The gardens are designed with the contours of the hill in mind and therefore follow a stepped pattern depending on the slope. A conglomeration of ramps and stairs make every point accessible to the visitor and allow for free movement. At the end of every garden there is a seating point that faces in toward the temple building and all these spots can be reached without entering the building itself. The seats mark the end of the circle within which the building rests.

As one passes through the landscape and moves toward the cylinder where the Main Fire is kept, an opening within the two symbolic walls that express duality, guides the visitor into a space that is between the walls and the building. That intermediate space connects to a walkway that extends past the cylinder into the trees. Here the site levels are used such that one feels as though he or she is walking out onto a carpet of trees. For that, some trees were cleared and the clearing made way for the walkway that gives the effect of walking onto the treetops. Once the end of the path has been reached i.e. the other side of the cylinder, one can see the water pool that cascades down in front of the cylinder on the south side. A spout above on the terrace of the building empties water from the rains into the pool in a thin stream and adds to the spiritual content of the temple. Overflow of the pool is drained into the hillside and at other times the pool is fed with water from underground plumbing keeping it full at all times.