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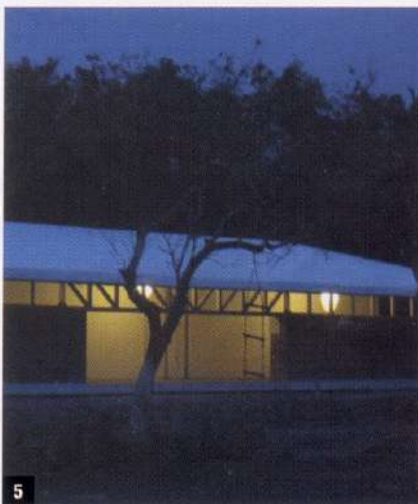
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SHANTANU POREDI & MANISHA AGARWAL CREATING INTERACTIVE SPACES



1&8. A-Maz-ing show, Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai.

2. Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya (MGAHV), Wardha, Staff Housing.

3. MGAHV, Wardha, Health Centre.

4. Nariman Point re-development plan, in collaboration with Ar PK Das.

5. Shadow House, Kashid.

6&7. TBWA Office, Mumbai.

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY MO-OF

AT MO-OF, ART BLURS INTO ARCHITECTURE. **SAPNA KULSHRESTHA** DELVES INTO THE DESIGNS OF ARCHITECTS WHO OFFER INTEGRATED SOLUTIONS THAT ENCOMPASS URBAN DESIGN, LANDSCAPE, INTERIORS, ARCHITECTURE, ART AND MORE



“Change is the only constant” is the design philosophy of MO-OF, or Mobile Offices, the architectural firm founded by Shantanu Poredi and Manisha Agarwal in 2000. Manisha Agarwal says, “The meaning of collaboration, for us, is to bring together people from different disciplines and ideas.”

Today MO-OF offers integrated solutions encompassing urban design, architecture, landscape, interiors, exhibition design, art as well as academic research. In fact, they consider research the starting point of design. “It is not limited to logistical information but also conceptual thought,” says Poredi. For an art exhibition A-maz-

ing at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai, they converted the gallery space into a virtual and phantasmagorical Wonderland fit for Alice. Through the framework of a maze and the specially created sections, the viewer could look at the art on the walls, panels, floor, within boxes, suspended from above, thus unfolding the experience by virtue of engagement with space rather than surface.

It is this interaction that leaves its mark on much of MO-OF’s work. Sustainability becomes a design concern. At C House built in Kashid, the spatial interrelations between landform and the built envelope typify it. The house, fragmented and situated amongst mango trees, utilises the difference

in levels to subvert the idea of sleeping spaces that are carved into the land rather than building a multi-storeyed structure. “We view materials and technology as available resources, with the site as the centre and the climate as its function. This allows us to reduce redundancy by appropriate reuse,” they say.

The duo spent their formative years at the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT), Ahmedabad, where they studied architecture. Poredi earned his Masters of Arts in Architecture and Urbanism from Architectural Association, London in 1999, where he was awarded the JN Tata scholarship, RD Sethna and Rajan



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SHADOW HOUSE, KASHID



The contoured site with the shadows cast by its four mango trees and a coconut grove is from where the name, the Shadow House, is drawn. Several portions of the house have been fragmented into smaller parts and are located amidst mango trees. Many areas of the house frame the view and the foliage. The formally fragmented pavilions are bound landscaped areas. The difference in levels has been used to subvert the idea of sleeping spaces, which are carved into the land rather than building a multi-storeyed structure.

Raheja Scholarships. Agarwal acquired Masters in Architecture (Urban Design) from Cornell University, New York in 1997 and received the Helen Fagan Tyler award, James M Kittleman award, Mary Lyons Fellowship, RD Sethna and the Ratan Tata Travel Grant at Cornell.

Poredi says, "At the late Professor Anant Raje's office in Ahmedabad, I learnt the discipline of drawing a building. At Architects' Combine in Mumbai, I was involved with the construction process based on available resources and technology. At Terry Farrell's in London, I worked on international competitions as a visualiser. Large-scale projects and technological advancement made it possible to cross over from the physical to the virtual medium," he says.

Agarwal, who worked in India and New York, says, "My work trajectory involved exposure to both small and large-scale practices in varying contexts. I learnt the craft of building with personal involvement at Reinhold Pingel in Auroville. While working with Kiran Kapadia, I understood all about the diversity of an urban practice. At Rafael Vinoly Architects, a New York-based firm where I worked on various competitions and projects, I was exposed to their design methodology in a professional work environment."

But even so, coming back to India meant understanding and addressing issues that are pertinent to the Indian subcontinent.

They won the first prize at an all-India open competition of the Mahatma Gandhi Antarrashtriya Hindi Vishwavidyalaya in Wardha (2002). As the winning team, it offered them the opportunity to not only build the project but also design it on the concept of 'New Culture' in which faculty, students and visitors participate in a non-hierarchical structure. Elements such as enclosed structures are integrated with open spaces to provide variation, non-linearity, change and flexibility.

Besides emphasising creation of socio-cultural communities and integrated physical infrastructure systems, MO-OF works towards reinterpreting client briefs to subvert existing typologies and evolve new types. Interior Urbanism for them concerns the integration of internal and external environments, also reflected in their design of international advertising agency The TBWA office, Mumbai. The industrial nature of the space is enhanced by suspended spaces and objects like stairs and bridges; the circulation space is rendered as an event street that culminates into an amphitheatre to initiate interaction. Poredi says, "An investigation into the identity of the company and their work patterns allowed us to evolve a concept of thematic spaces, choreographed to express a vibrant workspace."

Apart from their current projects including housing, commercial, office and an

entertainment club, they are also involved in public architectural projects such as the Elephanta Island Redevelopment with INTACH, the Nariman Point Redevelopment Plan in collaboration with architect PK Das, and parks around Juhu beach with Juhu Citizens Welfare Group.

Expressing their disappointment on public architecture in India today, they say that the fraternity of architects has not worked to earn the respect of either civil society or the government agencies. Inadequate public interest, government intent and political will have only added to the problem as obvious in the Elephanta Island project where no particular agency has overall ownership for coordinated efforts to ensure development. They advocate creating hybrids by mixing functions, to integrate communities and develop interdependence of programmes.

Participation in the Conference on Slum Renewal organised by the Netherlands Institute of Architecture and their exhibition, 'What makes India Urban?' at Aedes Gallery in Berlin, Germany, has made them realise that the country can offer unique solutions to solve problems of other developing countries as well. "Cities can be revived if we find a link between the planner and the architects via the urbanist. At a larger level architects demonstrate a political ideology," says Poredi.

In addition to a number of articles to their credit in known architectural journals, the duo has been awarded the first prize in a competition for REL Housing at Powai and New Haven, Mumbai 2007 and a commendation prize in a national competition for the redevelopment of Minto Hall, Bhopal by EPCO 2003. They also teach at Kamla Raheja Vidyavidyalaya Institute, Mumbai and various architectural institutes.

Ask them about their design style and they consider it a restraint because of transience. Poredi says, "Post Independence, a whole generation of architects responded to the larger issues that arose with the building of the nation: what is Indian? The architects of our generation have the freedom to script a new architectural manifesto. However, this whole discussion seems to be missing."

The duo says that until the last decade the government was the biggest client, with architects working towards one vision. However, with liberalisation, large-scale private developments have created a fragmented vision in the Indian subcontinent. They recommend scripting a new code of conduct to compete in global markets and a master plan for each region to guide new developments that form a collective identity. **88**