

# MANIT AND SONALI RASTOGI

THEY DESIGN AVANT-GARDE BUILDINGS AND INJECT A NEWNESS IN INTERIOR SPACES. HELLO! MEETS AN ARCHITECT COUPLE WHOSE PASSION FOR DESIGN CEMENTS THEIR BOND



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**- Sonali Rastogi**

**F**rom the villages of Khujuraho where earthen pots were used to circulate cool air during summers to the streets of Milan where a small incognito bar extends out on the streets at night, architects Manit and Sonali Rastogi find a design story. They derive inspiration from the banal to the exotic. The couple met at Delhi's premier School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) and fell in love. They share a love for architecture and their personal and professional lives are so intertwined that it's

difficult to separate the two. Says Sonali, "I don't know any other way of working, I've always had Manit around - whether it was a college project or later on working together in our company, I've always had him by my side. I really wouldn't know how to function without him."

Their college romance, which took off in the fourth year of academia, was so strong that soon after they decided to marry and left for England to pursue a double masters in architecture. "It all started on a college

trip to Goa. We talked on the beach and we just never stopped talking," explains Manit who grew up in Africa, went to school in England and eventually chose to settle down in India because he wanted to bond with his freedom fighter grandfather Virender Vir Rastogi. "After school in England I wanted to spend some time with my grandfather. Hence, I decided to enroll at the SPA. I didn't know I would stay on for that long and complete the course here. But I guess one thing led to another and I ▶



The fun and outdoorsy Manit and Sonali Rastogi with their son Aryan and daughter Ananiya at their Delhi home. Ananiya, 12, plays the guitar while Sonali collects Didgeridoos, the native Australian wind instruments.



A hard-to-miss house on the block! The Rastogis' Morphogenesis office and hi-tech abode uses eco-friendly techniques and great energy flow (above). There is a lap pool on the terrace. Sonali stands outside their striking home in Issey Miyake while Mani looks on in Canali (right)



stayed back."

Today Mani and Sonali are among the noted architects of the country and their firm Morphogenesis, launched in 1996, has been lauded for its unique design sensibilities, its tenets of green design and focused sustainability. One of their first ventures, the Apollo Tyres office in Delhi was appreciated for its green impact and won the 'Excellence in Public Architecture Award' by the Indian Institute of Architecture. "It was really satisfying for us to have been recognised. We managed to create an eco-friendly office that remains cool even in peak Delhi summers. The original office was built in such a way that the structure lent itself to a hierarchy. We broke all that down and created spaces where people could interact, move around and chat so that there is more scope for interaction among employees. The entire idea of design is to create a synergy between the external and the internal space.

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The other aspect of this office is its technological advancement - if a person leaves the room the electrical fittings automatically switch off. "This makes it energy efficient," elaborates Mani.

The couple also won an award for the 'Best in Master Planning' for their Uttarayan project in Siliguri

for Ambuja cement conferred by Cityscape. The project has been conferred the 'Best Learning Building' (Worldwide) by the World Architecture Festival held in Barcelona.

Over the years Sonali and Mani have taken small steps into building their own professional careers, taking architecture beyond the realm of just brick and mortar. "When we started, failure was just not an option. In fact, we really cherish a comment made by a client. He said he loved the reception of our office. The client told us it resonates with a 'Can Do' attitude. It's pretty much how both of us are as people," explains Sonali, who comes from a family of architects.

The couple started at a time when almost everyone would pretend to be an architect and little glamour was associated with the profession. Gradually they found opportunities with the economy opening up and the advent of privatisation allowed corporate projects to come up in



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a big way. What also worked for the couple was their unique design ethos. "One of the things that helped is the faith that people put in us. When we were given the Siliguri project by Ambuja Cement's Harsh Neogia, very few people knew about us. We were barely four people at our company at the time. If I were in his shoes, I would have been hesitant to give the contract to a company like ours. But thanks to people like him, we were able to make a mark — that project was hugely appreciated," says Manit.

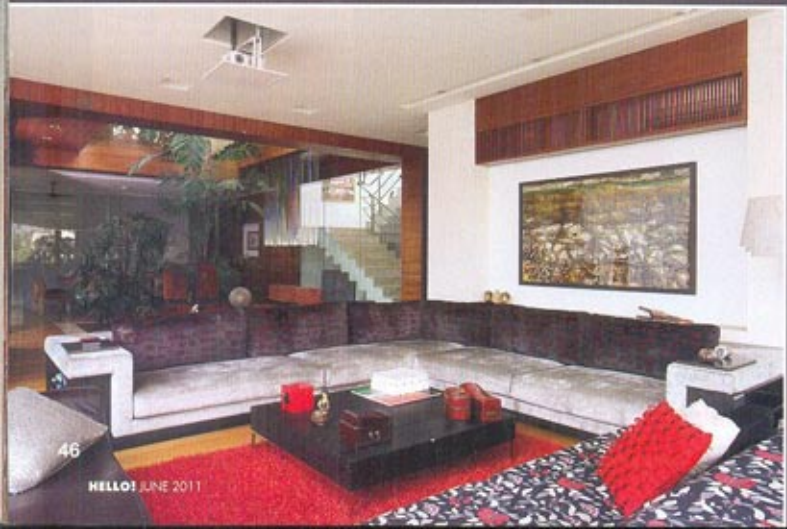
The Rastogis' company now takes care of most aspects of design, architecture and urbanism. From designing a chair to a township, they have their hand in all conceivable pies. "When I look back I often wonder if we achieved all this — we started with a small garage in Sarvapriya Vihar. In fact, after finishing our masters in England and returning to India, we didn't know how it was going to turn out. However, we were both enthusiastic. Despite having achieved what we have managed to, we still feel like students. From rejuvenation centres and hospitals to asylums, the nature of our projects keep changing, and with each new project you feel there is something new to learn," says Sonali.

Sitting in their plush home in Delhi's Pandisheel Marg area, one realises that their home is such a haven of natural light that there is no need for artificial lighting. It's also cool with a three-tonne air-conditioner cooling the entire 4,500 square feet floor while the doors are all kept ajar. "That's the secret of design. You don't build for the sake of building. People have this notion about glass that it heats up a building, but if used the right way it allows maximum natural light while keeping it cool," elaborates Manit. He adds, "We do not like using curtains. We allow a lot of natural lighting while guarding our privacy."

The couple takes inspiration from ancient cultures and



An almost tropical courtyard occupies pride of place in the middle of the Rastogis' Delhi home (above). The formal sitting area adjacent to the courtyard (below)



civilisations, for instance the concept of the *baoli* (water reserve) from Rajasthan. They juxtapose joints with contemporary design spaces, a concept they used while designing the Pearl Academy of Fashion in Jaipur, which maintains a temperature of 28 degrees Celsius despite the overwhelming heat outside.

The Rastogis may belong to a clan of professionals that are known to sit with complicated maps and complex design layouts, but meeting them will reveal that architecture is a philosophy that is



carefully connected with human habitats. It's all about bringing nature and people together successfully. From deriving inspirations from ant-hills and bird nests to seeking out living spaces where people can find a natural and cultural connect, the couple has made a powerful impact on architecture in India. **H**

TEXT: SANGHITA SINGH  
PHOTOS: ANIL CHAWLA  
MAKE-UP & HAIR: PRIYANKA KAPOOR  
STYLING: AMBER TIKAR

Sonal wears a dress by her designer sister Rupali Singh while Mani looks cool in Rajesh Pratap Singh