

# platform

CREATIVE LIFESTYLE

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# THE ARCHITECTURE

**Manit & Sonali Rastogi, *Morphogenesis*** Text Shruti Kapur Malhotra Photography Tanuj Ahuja

From the very beginning they chose not to be a particular design specialist. Be it hospitals, institutions, residences, cities or corporates they have covered the spectrum. They understand design as the methodology of understanding how one needs to respond to particular parameters and it is the process by which one thinks and produces an end result. Their projects vary from a low cost 500 acre township to a high-powered, high technology building. The firm started with just the two of them and today they have a team of 107 people and umpteen amounts of critical acclaim, appreciation and achievement.

For Sonali architecture was an obvious choice as it was more or less a family profession and she was always fascinated by it. Whereas Manit on the other hand did it to suffice his curiosity of how people live

Back in 1996 a young couple began with a mission and a very simple agenda to bring Indian architecture and design back into the foreground and the central discourse of the world. Manit and Sonali Rastogi conceptualized *Morphogenesis*, a complete design practice offering

specialized services in architecture, interior design, master planning, urban design, landscape design and environmental design consultancy.

OF ALMOST

SOMEWHERE

and dwell and what goes into that – hence the interest in art, design, architecture and urbanism. Their roles within the firm are defined and constantly variable. Sonali and Sanjay's (another senior partner) roles are very clear, they head the design direction of the company. '*Morphogenesis* is a ship and they are at the helm making sure the design direction is peered and I am at the rear making sure we don't sink and I have the rudder in my hand so our roles are very balanced', clarifies Manit. 'Design direction is one thing but where Manit keeps our heads straight is that he reminds us constantly of the larger picture and how we plan to move forward' adds Sonali. Together this very young, ever-evolving and futuristic firm has been responsible for creating some very thought out, sustainable and experiential buildings and projects.

**What was the idea behind *Morphogenesis*?** What we found back in the early 90s was that post-independence Indian architecture and design for various reasons had vanished from global discourse. No one ever thought of Indian architecture as radical or cutting edge and as a means or a way forward. We set up *Morphogenesis* here just to fulfil that simple idea that we will bring it back to the centre of the world. This is what we have tried to pursue and most of the work that we have done over the last 15 years has been centred on this. We will bridge boundaries of art, architecture, design and urbanism, we will try and find the methodology and globalization to define the new emergence of Indian architecture.

**What is your approach to creativity?** First principals – the hardest idea at the beginning of any project is to first get rid of all visual bias. There's

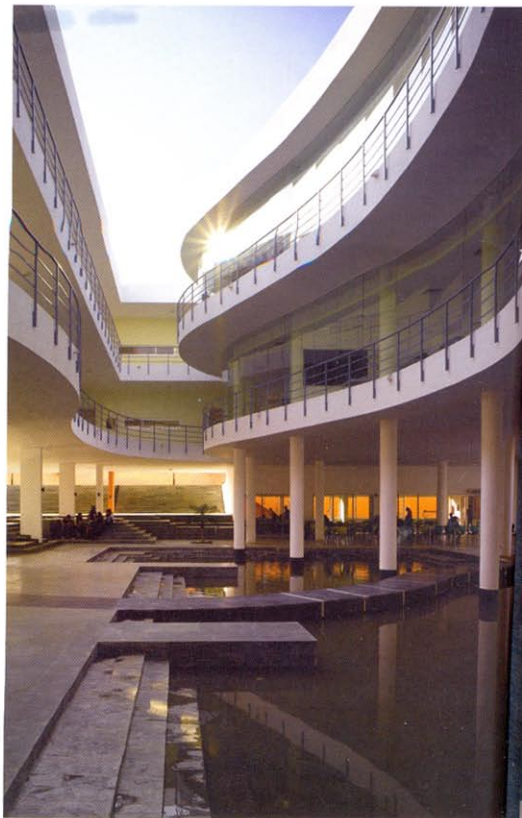


Making Maxcity, Mumbai

such a large amount of visual diarrhoea of oral and visual imagery that it becomes very hard to get down to first principal. We start with the fact that there are no resources; there is no electricity, no water. We get rid of visual and contextual imagery and we start from there. We do our research and we build it from there and figure out the least impactful solution to the problem pertaining to its financial, technological, environmental, cultural and social conditions and we begin to rethink it from there. The clients don't entirely think that way because for them architecture is largely about a product not the process. But what we find is that when we begin the process with the client they get involved. Infact it becomes a fantastic relationship as soon as the boundaries of who the architect is disappear. At end of the day architecture is not a formal technical profession it is about a way of life and a way of thinking about life and that catches on.

**What kind of evolution have you encountered in your work from your very first project to the most current one?** We have evolved organically without a business plan. I think one of the main attractions of architecture is that everyday is a learning experience. With every different project, city or environment we build in, there is new learning, whether it is about the nature of the client, project or what they actually do, you need to have the intrinsic understanding of your end user and/ or of the place you are building – socially, culturally and climatically. I think just the fact that you are aware of these parameters and look into it makes us evolve on a daily basis.

Architecture on one level is an extremely creative profession, on another level it's hugely linked to real estate, finance, and the new growth spurt in the country. You have to be abreast in some way with whatever the changing nature of the country is at the moment. One needs to adapt to the current dynamics of the country as well as specific environment of the project. In that sense the knowledge you gather over the years makes you feel in some sense very empowered and in another a little humbled as you realize that every day there is something to learn. I guess evolution within this profession happens constantly.



Pearl Academy of Fashion, Jaipur

**What are the projects you have done that you are most proud of and why?** There are five and all for various reasons. Each one has achieved something different from the other. One was this township we did in Silliguri called *Uttaran*, it's a 500 acre self-sustainable township that took seven years to complete. We managed to give someone a 200 sq yard plot of land in the township for 1 lakh, now it is much higher. The idea behind it was that it was small town India and it had to be done in a certain budget so accessibility to that kind of design was available to the local people. Then *The Pearl Academy of Fashion* in Jaipur just proved that when you are using passive strategies in design you can do away with air conditioning and you can build at price point. We have designed it in such a way that when the outside temperature is 47 degrees, the inside is 26 degrees! The academy was finished at Rs. 1200 per sq feet. So that project was a great challenge and achievement.

Third is a resort we are doing in Kerala, it is ongoing and extremely exciting as we are using local technology that has been captured by the local boat makers. So we are using that and adapting it to create this 40 acre resort and it is absolutely superb. These guys have a far better understanding of climate than any climatic scientist. So that is something that will be quite radical. The fourth one is a 2500 acre township that we have designed in Gujrat. It has three and half kilometre long beachfront.





“ You look at our forts and monuments it’s cool in the summer without air-conditioning and pleasant in the winters, it responds to the environment and is built out of that. You take that and you add to that modern technology of construction and you have the perfect model for the future. ”

Hotel Promenade, Backwaters

It is an extremely polluted land as there is a lot of industry there and we have now redesigned it to rehabilitate the land, stowed the beachfront, revived the marshes and brought a sufficient amount of development so that we begin to develop seaside cities as opposed to seaside resorts. This is a complete mix of entertainment, villas, living etc.

And lastly, this commercial development project we did in Bombay that is going to the other end of the spectrum. It is in Bandra and in India’s financial sector. It’s called the *Maker Maxcity* and this is with a developer from Bombay called *Makers*. The area we have designed used to be a drive-in theatre right in the heart of the city. The 22 acre theatre was converted into the financial district. We were designing for high-powered financial institutions and had to take a lot of things under consideration, as it was a completely different universe than what we are used to working with. Here we were working with people that were only global

and not local. For them the world’s their oyster and there is no locality to that oyster. We had to understand the high amounts of risk in terms of terrorism, electrical downtime, floods etc as they were running critical financial operations. This was like the *NASA* of real estate development! We have never done what we did there and don’t know if we will ever do it again. If India is under attack, war or disaster, that project will work and still stand. That construction will never flood, it’s earthquake proof, the entire power of Maharashtra can shut down but that will still operate. It has been a completely different method of approaching design.

#### What roles do sustainability and ecology play in your work?

Sustainability today is a word that is widely abused by many. There is a method of being sustainable. A country like India can actually set the model for the remaining world as to what sustainability really is, just by looking into our own architecture from the last 5000 years.



200 sq mt overall composition, Kerala



Forest Villas, Backwaters, Kerala

Our architecture evolved in this region as a fundamental response to the climate and a lack of resources. You look at our forts and monuments it's cool in the summer without air-conditioning and pleasant in the winters, it responds to the environment and is built out of that. You take that and you add to that modern technology of construction and you have the perfect model for the future. So that's what we do. We are not inventing technology we are just adapting technology that has been around for the last 5000 years. And that makes it financially possible for anyone to achieve sustainability right from the bottom to the top.

The Western way of sustainability requires a lot of expenditure that is not something that this country can afford right now. Their methodology of sustainability or green design is that when they first begin the design they create their problem and then begin to add efficient methods of dealing with the problem. Our method of sustainability is to remove the problem to begin with so that there is nothing left to deal with. Take equipment out of the building; create a building that does not require air conditioning. We basically deal with adaptive comfort and not absolute comfort. For us it's also a method of aspiration so the cooler we make your place the wealthier we are. We are being sustainable as it's the only way we can be. Our power costs are out of control, we still don't get water, our sewage system sucks. In terms of governance we get very little infrastructure from the state so the only way out of it is to be sustainable.

**What are some of your other initiatives?** *Morphogenesis* has two parts to it – there is *Morphogenesis Architecture* and then we have *Morphogenesis Education*. The latter being in charge of all the discourse. For example, we have a management consultancy division that works with educational institutes. *Manthan* is also run by *Morphogenesis Education* the idea behind it being to merge the arts by connecting different genres of the arts. We also do pro bono projects that will help build the city for example we are working on the *nullah* projects and are working on restoring the *nullah* in the city. We have done a scheme with the *Shahjhanabad Cooperation* and *Art of Living* for restoring the

Yamuna along the *Chhath Puja Ghat* the Dal lake. So we do a lot of these things through the *Morphogenesis Education* department and it serves as our CSR department as well. That branch is entirely funded by *Morphogenesis*.

**What are your current projects?** I think we have a couple of interesting projects that are complete – we have done this very green project that is a campus in Greater Noida. It's very unusual and we have another university coming up in the same area. We are doing an eco tourism resort in Kerala in the backwaters in a land that is a meter below sea level. That's a challenging project. We are doing a hotel resort project in Dehradun. We are also doing a presidential development in Coimbatore where we are doing this very large housing society. Coimbatore is textbook climate better than even Bangalore. So, that's quite exciting as well.

**How do you plan to move forward?** The vision has never been one of scale but scale is inevitable because without growth it is impossible to do all the things you want to do. Over the last 15 years we have achieved a lot of it organically. Be it international acclaim or appreciation within the community. Our vision for moving forward is to begin to think about the fact that all design practices tend to only deal with the top 1% of the population in terms of wealth. Quality of design and architecture does not usually percolate to the rest of the pyramid and everyone seems to be working to suffice that real apex. What we want to do is bring design to the embodiment of the whole pyramid. It's not that it wasn't there, it was there as that's where craft came from and that's why each region had its own craft but given all the advantages that globalization brought with it, the biggest threat that it brings is that craft begins to disappear, you start going into assembly line and how do you then begin to create places that belong somewhere as opposed to no where. We call the architecture of *Morphogenesis* 'of almost somewhere' as opposed to the generic architecture 'of almost nowhere'. The solution lies in the fact that we have to find a way of being able to work in the tier 2 and 3 cities of India and go beyond the metros. The future of India lies in the smaller cities...