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Happy families

Architects have found that negotiations are key to designing a successful multi-generational home, writes Aparna Piramal

For architect Rajiv Saini, the art of mediation is as important to his practice as craftsmanship. Saini designs high-end Indian homes, usually for multi-generational business families, where grandparents, children and grandchildren share a roof, and work together in the family firm.

When planning a home, architecture and interior design often involve tricky negotiations between family members, reflecting aesthetic preferences and lifestyles, and the need to balance proximity with privacy. A new generation of cosmopolitan Indians wants its dwellings to reflect global aspirations, while its older counterpart prefers traditional representations of Indian luxury, resulting in the need for "mediation between two generations [with] two diverse and opposing viewpoints", Saini says.

Architect Sonali Rastogi drew on similar principles when designing a villa in Delhi for her husband and herself, their two adolescent children and her husband's semi-retired parents. It also accommodates their architectural practice, Morphogenesis. "Everyone has different lifestyles, different timings and different interests. When my in-laws need quiet, we're noisy and when we need quiet, they're waking up," she says.

"We discussed and actually sorted out some issues that had stopped us from being completely free to express ourselves in our previous home," she said. The plan of the new home respects differing generational needs by providing almost independent apartment units for parents and grandparents on separate floors, with their own kitchens and personal living and entertaining spaces.

Circulation between the units is maintained by design elements such as a single front door, common staircases and garden, semi-transparent internal doors, a shared top-floor gym, and a seamless, modern visual aesthetic. Inter-generational bonds are also aided by family rituals, "such as always eating Sunday lunch together and using the whole house for celebrations with extended family", Rastogi says.

The five-bedroom, two-storey villa for the Gupta family, owners of the Radisson hotel in Pune, a four-hour drive south-east of Mumbai, is another example. It is modern, with a spartan combination of exposed concrete ceilings, grey marble floors and glass walls, and was purpose-built for Rajiv and Rhea Gupta, their 12-year-old daughter Vanshika, and Rajiv's parents.

"My husband and I were very firm on having a modern home," says Rhea Gupta, acknowledging that "there was a difference of opinion" with her in-laws, who initially questioned the severe colour and material palette. Saini's persuasive hand-holding, however, led them to become "extremely supportive of our decisions", she explains.

Gupta and her husband sought "to be close to our in-laws, as well as have our own private space". So Saini split younger and older generations' personal spaces between first and ground floors, and devised a central, sky-lit courtyard on the ground floor, to serve as a common hub for daily family rendezvous. "Now all of us have a lot more space to ourselves, but the closeness is still there," Gupta testifies.

Another multi-generational homeowner, Babli Kukreja, echoes "the need to give everyone space" in a joint family residence.



Harmony Clockwise from top: the Kukrejas' staircase is integral to the design of their home; interior view looking out on the Rastogis' shared garden; exterior view of the Rastogi house and swimming pool; three generations of Rastogis at home **Roger Renburg**



DYNASTY DESIGN

Make living together work

The design of multi-generational homes is most effective when it respects and accommodates varied lifestyles and age-groups.

Distinct spaces to entertain individual guests in relative privacy, separate kitchens and adequate sound barriers between teenagers and senior citizens can be essential to maintaining inter-generational harmony.

Common elements such as courtyards, staircases, a shared entrance, one large living room for joint

entertaining and transparent internal walls are equally critical to establish connections between semi-autonomous units.

Differing definitions of style and lack of independence in decision-making hinder the design process. For example, older generations of Indians interpret luxury through opulent, palatial design, while younger members are more informed by metropolitan boutique hotels. Architect Rajiv Saini

complains that a common refrain from his younger clients is: "I'm happy to experiment with materials, but at the end, Dad and Mom live here too, they have their family and friends come over, so it's got to look plush and luxurious."

Morphogenesis
N-85B, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi, 110 017, India
tel: + 91 11 4182 8070
fax: + 91 11 2649 0351
tanya.kohli@morphogenesis.org
www.morphogenesis.org

Lotus Design Services
F-301 Lado Sarai, 2nd floor, Ch. Prem Singh House New Delhi, 110 030, India
tel: +91 11 4052 7979/4057 0808
Asha Sairam
asha@lotuslink.in

Rajiv Saini and Associates
9 Jer Mansion, Off Turner Road, Bandra (W), Mumbai, 400 050, India
mobile: + 91 98210 91561
tel: + 91 22 2645 1483
email: rajiv@rajivsaini.com

She lives with her husband Madan, a first-generation apparel exporter, and their grown-up daughter, son and daughter-in-law in a three-storey villa in Delhi, designed by architectural practice Lotus Design Services. Kukreja's other daughter, who is married and visits frequently with her two young children, also has a dedicated bedroom in her parental home.

"The best way is to live together but have your little space to yourselves," says Kukreja, highlighting that every bedroom has seating for guests, and stressing the binding role of her lounge area, "which is the family lounge for everyone, where we eat our breakfast and dinner".

All three owners emphasise the importance of enabling the youngest generation to co-exist peacefully with the household's most senior members. Ambrish Arora of Lotus Design Services recalls that "there was a constant discussion with Kukreja on how much privacy her son, Sidhartha, would want after his marriage". The solution was a suite of two bedrooms, a living room and a pantry – a semi-autonomous space for Sidhartha, his wife Nitya and their future children. This is integrated with the rest of the house by a central courtyard and a staircase.

Gupta was equally generous. "My daughter Vanshika is the youngest but has the largest space allocated to her – a suite with her own living area and TV – as she always has friends and teachers coming over," she says. She cautions, though, that the space "is visible from every corner of the house", facilitating close oversight.

Rastogi realised that "my house is filled with random guests and noisy children; I can't imagine how my in-laws would cope with their screaming, which is why the separation works very well". Independent-but-connected units foster harmony and prevent resentment between grandparents and grandchildren. The children are as comfortable upstairs as downstairs, and their preferred route to their top-floor den is via the spiral garden staircase near their grandparents' ground-floor veranda.

The multi-generational living trend is apparent in urban apartments too. Some developers provide two equal-sized master bedroom suites in a given flat, for senior citizens and working-age parents, and a large, shared living room. Saini says he is currently designing three townhouses in London's Mayfair and Belgravia districts for Indian families, and applying similar design considerations and principles.

Shobhit Sengupta, the founder of Shining Consulting, a Paris and Bangalore-based brand and strategy consultancy, classifies the phenomenon as "a neo-joint family; a unique family composition, distinct from traditional joint families, which is very liberal, where members live independently in the same home, and have very good community with other family members". He attributes its emergence to rising affluence, which encourages nuclear-style living, alongside age-old cultural values, which promote communal life.

Rastogi is unambiguous about the benefits: "A lot of people in my generation feel they're doing a favour for their parents by living with them, but if you're a working woman, you're being done the biggest favour," she affirms. Perhaps it's something from which the west could learn.