



A GRAND DESIGN

Sonali and Manit Rastogi, the power couple of Indian architecture, are taking their firm, Morphogenesis, to dizzying heights

BY SAMITA BHATIA

**BUILDING BLOCKS**

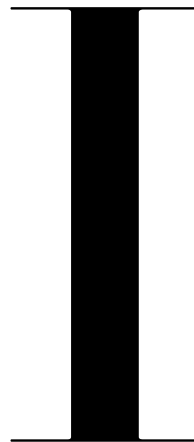
(CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT) SONALI AND MANIT RASTOGI IN THEIR HOME; THE PEARL ACADEMY OF FASHION IN JAIPUR IS THE LATEST MORPHO-GENESIS SHOWPIECE AND HAS BEEN BUILT ON SUSTAINABLE LINES; THE GYS VISION, A THREE-TOWER OFFICE COMPLEX, IS GOING TO COME UP IN GURGAON



PIC COURTESY: MORPHOGENESIS

T'S BEEN A BUSY MORNING

for Sonali Rastogi, co-founder and senior partner of Morphogenesis, one of India's leading architecture and urban design firms. She has been racing against the clock to prepare a talk she has to deliver later in the day. She's looking forward to the afternoon because she'll be sharing the stage with Pritzker prize-winning



Japanese architect Fumihiko Maki, who she has admired all her life.

Meanwhile Mani, Sonali's husband and managing partner, Morphogenesis, is on his way to Bangalore to meet Infosys chief, N.R. Narayana Murthy to get a green signal for an Infosys project that's poised to take off in Mihan, Nagpur.

For Sonali and Mani Rastogi, the power couple of Indian architecture, this is all in a day's work. Morphogenesis is now 18 years old but they tasted success very early in the game. The firm has, over the years, built a formidable reputation for itself as one of the leaders in the sphere. "We don't believe in a flashbulb idea or anything whimsical. Our inspiration, our knowledge bank and environment is global," says Sonali.

The Rastogis shot to architectural fame in their 20s when they won a contest to build the Apollo Tyres building in Gurgaon. The high-precision and environment-friendly corporate hub was unveiled in 2000 and turned the Rastogis into youthful stars.

From a two-member team (that was just



ANDRE J. FANTHOM

it and Sonali) that operated out of a garage lay when they have 70 architects on-board, astogis have gone from strength-to-gth. In a year they have around 80 to 100 cts in different stages of completion. “It ’t very hard to grow as there was easy stability of new ideas in the ’90s. Though s a small start, ours wasn’t a heroic or big gle. We were perhaps at the right place at ght time,” says Sonali. day, Brand Morphogenesis has more than ch of high-profile projects to its credit: aon’s MGF Metropolitan Mall, The British ol and the Harley Davidson office (its or design and detailing have been inspired e famed bikes) in Delhi and Maker Maxity, in Mumbai. They’ve done buildings for A (they are currently designing a YWCA in

Dwarka, Delhi), Ernst&Young and PVR Cinemas. Morphogenesis played a key role in introducing Indian moviegoers to luxury in multiplexes.

Their latest poster-child, the Pearl Academy of Fashion in Jaipur has been much talked about since 2008. Sustainability — the basis of all their work — shows up romantically in its curvilinear geometry that has been created by analysing the precise movement of the sun through the day and across seasons.

Their Bengal projects — for Ambuja Realty and the Siliguri township project (2006) have been extremely successful too.

Currently, there’s so much more that’s keeping the Morphogenesis team at the drawing board. It’s creating a 40-acre luxury eco-resort in the Kerala backwater for the Nira Lahiri Group and a masterplan for a 1,000-acre

EYE APPEAL

THE RASTOGIS SHIFT SEAMLESSLY BETWEEN DESIGNING HIGH-END HOMES — LIKE THIS PROJECT THEY CALL HOME 2 — AND MALLS AND ALSO HOUSING PROJECTS

Beachfront Township in Suvali, Gujarat. “Each project is a challenge,” she shrugs.

The duo is also busy with housing projects for the Mahindras and is working with them on three locations around the country — Mumbai, Bangalore and Delhi. Across borders, they are giving the Crowne Plaza Kathmandu-Soaltee, Nepal, a complete makeover and have projects in hand in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

They’ve survived two or three bad recessions, says Sonali, primarily due to the diversity of what they do. “When one thing crashed, something else took over,” she says. That’s



PIC COURTESY: MORPHOGENESIS



SPACE CIRCLE
(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP)
THE INTERIOR DESIGNS AND
DETAILING OF THE HARLEY
DAVIDSON OFFICE IN DELHI
HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY
THE BRAND'S FAMED SU-
PERBIKES; THE UTTORAYON
CITY CENTRE, SILIGURI IS
A PRIME MORPHOGENESIS
PROJECT IN THE EAST; THE
RASTOGIS ARE GIVING THE
CROWNE PLAZA KATHMAN-
DU-SOALTEE A COMPLETE
MAKEOVER, BEGINNING
WITH AN ALL-DAY DINING
RESTAURANT

when their stable businesses like educational institutions — which are never seriously hit by recession — saw them through.

Ask Mani how Indian architecture has evolved over the decades and he says: “Whatever little Indian architecture existed between 1947 and 1991 disappeared completely into what we at Morphogenesis define as ‘An Architecture of Nowhere’. But today we’re beginning to see a reversal where contemporary Indian architecture seems to be defining itself for the first time. It will be an interesting decade to come.”

Their growth trajectory is being closely monitored in the world of architecture. Shelves in the Morphogenesis conference room are crammed with international and domestic awards gathered over the years.

They’ve won the prestigious IIA Award, conferred by The Indian Institute of Architects (IIA) but Sonali is happiest about the World Architecture Festival (WAF) award, which they received five years ago, becoming the first Indians to do so. “We see awards as taking Indian design to a global recognition,” she says.

Mani and Sonali, both in their 40s, work together on each building that Morphogenesis designs. “We never ever take on projects individually,” says Sonali. Mani’s strengths lie in conceptualisation, strategising and sustainability, while Sonali is a construction-detail oriented person. “At different stages our involvement varies,” she says.

Mani is a thinker and he captivates audiences, says Sonali, which is why he’s invited to lecture on architecture, worldwide.

They say that design is in their DNA. Mani’s father — a highways and roads design engineer — had a transferable job and Mani’s childhood was spent in different parts of the world. Sonali’s

parents were both architects — but since she lost her father early she says she didn’t have a legacy to take over.

Mani and she met when they were studying at the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) in Delhi after which they headed to London’s Architectural Association. They married and returned to India in end-1995. They didn’t have a business plan and began by helping friends with “tiny, tiny things”.

In 1997, they won the Apollo Tyres Design Competition to build the company’s Gurgaon corporate office — after which their business snowballed.

Ask Sonali if it’s possible to build a cutting-edge

home, on sustainably and she says: “Good to the amount of money to the Academy of Fashion the Bengal Ambuja” both were built on a

Their corporate work is all done free initiative that exploits the *nallahs*. “It’s not process. I would do us in how it enriches

Yes, their job is challenging by anytl