

TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES INCLUDING COVER 82

MUMBAI

₹ 200

AUGUST 2017

VOL 30 (12)

# I A & B

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Manit Rastogi, Morphogenesis

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# ARCHITECTURE FOR AN EMERGENT LANDSCAPE

Architecture in India – an emerging nation still in a state of architectural flux – presents a world of exciting opportunities, as well as overwhelming challenges. Do we look to the future and modernize, or draw from the rich traditions of the past? Do we concentrate on affordability, or invest in high-end, futuristic building technologies? And where does that leave sustainability?

Working in this dramatically dynamic context, Manit and Sonali Rastogi have taken to nature's design-book for inspiration – for a design philosophy that shapes their firm Morphogenesis. In this interview, Manit Rastogi talks about everything architecture – right from the need to develop a 'Brand India' design identity, to how architecture is more of a state of being than merely a profession.



Manit Rastogi  
Founder Partner, Morphogenesis

Known as an architect who consistently pushes the boundaries of sustainable design, Manit Rastogi is the Founder Partner of Morphogenesis, one of India's leading award-winning Architecture and Urban Design practices which has won numerous international and national awards. Manit is known to create a sustainable architecture through the framework of an evolutionary practice inspired by nature, with an emphasis on passive design.

Morphogenesis is globally recognized for its diverse work that encompasses a range of typologies across Architecture, Interiors and Landscape Urbanism and has been ranked among the Top 100 Architectural Design Firms worldwide for sixth consecutive time.

**IA&B: Can you take us through your journey as an architect? How did the Architecture Association (AA) help in shaping your design outlook?**

**MR:** Sonali and I got our undergraduate degrees from School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. It has a pedagogy of very competent, technically oriented, contextually situated architecture and this in the late 80s made for very interesting education. However it did not benefit from a global exposure because that wasn't the way India was at that time. One of the reasons for going to the Architecture Association (AA), London for our Masters was this pressing need to understand what the architectural conversation was like around the globe, what were people thinking, what were the debates, what were the influences; and I think that was the biggest learning for us, at the AA. There were people from different nationalities carrying latent within them, knowledge from their own countries, however, part of a larger global discourse. In that way, our time there helped us develop our vision of taking Indian architecture global.

**IA&B: How much has Morphogenesis evolved since its inception? Is there an ideal, final form that you want Morphogenesis to take?**

**MR:** The Morphogenesis philosophy has not changed, but has evolved, as should everything. The vision stays the same yet the tools keep progressing, where experience adds to thought and the canvases grow larger. 'Learning' is Morphogenesis' strongest value, and each Morphogenesis member learns and contributes to learning in equal measure. We strongly believe that practice must solve 'real' problems that can feed back into academia rather than purely the other way round. That is how we position our practice and our work as the bridge between academia and research. An ideal final form would be to see Morphogenesis as an institution in perpetuity – a living, thriving ecosystem, a repository of data, information, knowledge and wisdom.

**IA&B: What factors influence and inspire your design process/design philosophy?**



↑ Apollo Headquarters © Jatinder Marwaha

**MR:** We are inspired by nature's evolutionary processes. The rule of nature is that form follows function with very clear causes and effects; when something is out of step with its environment, it does not survive. We never started from a movement standpoint or a style; being inspired by nature is about being inspired by simplicity – not complexity.

While Morphogenesis takes its cues from the natural world, the firm's architectural principles are based on four distinct pillars: Sustainability, Affordability, Identity and Livability. These parameters define the enquiry process that shapes the architecture of Morphogenesis.

The main question that continues to pervade our design philosophy is the notion of how do we redefine sustainability by thinking systemically? How do we celebrate identity and diversity versus homogeneity, how do we think of our buildings and cities as bazaars (places of human interaction) rather than only as machines (places of human habitation), how do we redefine our urbanism as an emergence of interwoven networks?

**IA&B: Morphogenesis has consistently won awards and accolades. But which of your projects are you most proud of, and why?**

**MR:** As an architect, it's very hard to look at the entire career of over 20 years and pick a favourite project. Every project, at the time it was built, had certain learning, had a certain newness and freshness that challenged your abilities then. Having said that, there are some projects that have truly been milestones in either our success or in helping shape our firm's philosophy, or both. Apollo Headquarters (1999) is memorable for being our first significant commission. It won us our first Indian Institute of Architect's award and gave us conviction in our chosen path. Pearl Academy (2008) won us India's first WAF Award, as it caught the global imagination. Having to stretch resource optimization to its limits due to budgetary constraints, through the use of using of regional ideas, it defined the direction of every project since – where we look at each from the perspective of having no energy, no water and no material. How then, do we approach design? Ever since Pearl,



↑ Pearl Academy of Fashion © Andre J Fanthome



↑ Delhi Nullah © Morphogenesis

we have also been able to rejuvenate and use traditional crafts in a contemporary format in almost all our work.

**IA&B: You are actively involved in academia. Do you see a disconnect between the theory and practice of architecture? How can we bridge this gap? Also, how does being an academician inform and influence your work?**

**MR:** The Indian architectural educational system comprises of 350 schools of architecture; but the curriculum of schools, the methodology, the pedagogy of teaching is not suitable to the idea of sustainability being at the core of India's modernity. It creates architects who are in some sense divorced from the process of how a building is put together, because the nature of our buildings has completely changed in the last 20 years. Morphogenesis has worked as a consultant to a school of architecture where we have contributed to rewriting the curriculum, to bring sustainability to the heart of the programme and not as a separate subject. It is integral to all the subjects being taught; the underlying glue that connects structure and MEP, lighting and landscape, etc. It must be ingrained in the consciousness of the students. And that is the biggest challenge right now because a whole bunch of kids coming out of schools of architecture still see sustainability as something external to their project which they have to layer on. That needs to change.

**IA&B: The work Morphogenesis produces is almost always sustainable architecture. Is this a conscious effort? How difficult is it to design and build sustainably in a price-sensitive market like India?**

**MR:** Indian architects of the past, to a large extent, have always built sustainably. Almost all our traditional buildings were a response to the local climate and materials, and a lack of resources. Unlike other nations, local resources and methods of construction are still easily available to us. As architects sensitive to our environment, addressing the need for optimization in deployment of limited resources of various types has been a constant, in the two decades of practice at Morphogenesis.

The firm takes inspiration from the processes in nature, in how nature has no waste, uses and consumes everything, using the least amount of material for maximum impact. As a rapidly developing nation with the urbanized population set to grow

from 30% to 50% over the next two decades, this approach becomes even more critical in future urban and public projects in India. Sustainable architecture and urbanism is imperative, but can only mitigate environmental impacts so long as it is conceived with economic adequacy. Affordability derived from resource optimization is as crucial to sustainable urbanism as environmental protection and socio-cultural sustainability. Through each successive project, the firm refines its design approach such that there is no energy and resource mismanagement, to be able to add maximum value to a project for its intended capital cost. The approach to reducing resource consumption extends into the project's operational lifecycle as well.

**IA&B: Do you work with craftsmen and/or local techniques? How can architects attain an ideal mix of technology and tradition to design more efficiently?**

**MR:** India has a wealth of master craftsmen, who are the knowledge bearers of the tradition of building with limited and local resource, and it is that architecture that has caught people's imagination worldwide and has been India's 'Identity'. We look at rooting our design solutions in the local, physical, and geographical character, ensuring to further strengthen the urban fabric of the region. With the projects that we undertake at the firm we consciously invest efforts in using traditional methods and materials while working closely with many crafts-based industries in India that are at risk of dying out. In the last 20 years we have locally engaged with traditional craftsmen and artisans to re-energize and re-interpret local materials in several projects. What we see as commonplace is an ultimate luxury that we must continue to sustain and use to our competitive advantage.

**IA&B: The book Morphogenesis: The Indian Perspective. The Global Context was recently launched. What prompted the decision to publish the book? Why do you think a lot of architects are actively documenting their work these days?**

**MR:** 2014 was an interesting year for us, particularly when we were named Laureates of the Singapore Institute of Architects SIA Getz Award for Emergent Architecture. It was quite the honour and set us reflecting on what we had learned and how we had evolved as a practice over that time. Coincidentally, it was also the time that Images Publishing got in touch about having us pen down a monograph to include in their Master Architect Series.



↑ GYS Vision © Jatinder Marwaha



↑ Surat Diamond Bourse © Morphogenesis

It seemed like an interesting way to formalize our reflections post SIA Getz and a nice way to commemorate our two decades of practice by the time the book would be out in 2016. The deconstruction of our methodology, approach and learning from each project we included, gave us far greater insight and understanding of our own personality, character and purpose than ever before. An analysis of the past 20 years has made our vision for the next 20 so much clearer.

**IA&B: What do you think of architecture in India today? Is there a practice/architect - it could also be a global one - that inspires you?**

**MR:** I would pick a country that I am inspired by, rather than a specific architect, and that is Japan. It's difficult to think of another place where the culture, philosophy, religion and lifestyle of the people permeates through and finds such deep expression in design and architecture. The design fundamentals of simplicity and minimalism, integrated with cutting-edge technology and material innovation is manifested in the works of architects like Toyo Ito, Shigeru Ban, Tadao Ando and others, who use empty space and material to represent the essence of simplicity, yet their work is embedded with great complexity of thought. Crucially, this high-design sensibility is not limited to an elite set of product portfolios; it's all pervasive. A common vein in all the design that emerges from Japan an unmistakable 'Brand Japan', something we crucially need to develop collectively here – 'Brand India' for design.

**IA&B: What are your views on the state of urban planning and development in contemporary India? How can we improve the situation? What, accordingly to you, is the future of our cities?**

**MR:** An assortment of problems of migration, traffic, pollution, water, electricity, sewage, governance and global warming are prevalent in most of our cities. The idea of sustainability should now move on from buildings to our cities as well. What is crucial is finding the correct sustainable urbanism, industrial and rural models for the Indian subcontinent –

not something imported from industrialized nations, not exclusively dependent on globalization, but one that renders itself appropriate to our condition. Our master plans for our cities have to be master plans for the environment, with all our material requirements as a subset of the larger environmental vision.

**IA&B: What kind of architectural future do you foresee for India, considering the dynamic changes and global influences? What challenges does this bring, and how do you think architects should address them?**

**MR:** I see plenty of architectural opportunities in future, given that we still have to shape our built fabric to the extent that other global economies have done. We have multiple typologies to explore – a lot of public architecture is yet to be built, institutions to address the educational needs of our youth which is the youngest demographic in the world today, building catering to public health, and of course, housing. Due to rapid urbanization, we are also seeing the evolution of many townships and we have completely taken on board the Smart City mantra. As much as India is in a phase of forging its identity on the global stage, this is equally an opportunity to collectively define Brand India for Architecture. The challenges and corresponding opportunities are to do this in a highly qualitative and sustainable manner. These are exciting times we live in!

**IA&B: Lastly, what message would you like to give to students pursuing architecture and young architects in practice?**

**MR:** I love what I do and I'm glad to have chosen this profession. It is also a profession where it is impossible to separate oneself from one's work... you live and breathe architecture in every waking moment. So my only message is that if you can embrace it fully with passion, and be a lifelong learner, you will have a fulfilling career as an architect! ■