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# H O H A P O R E U B R S I A E N

by MAD Architects

DESIGN TALES  
**Morphogenesis**

WINDOW SHOP  
**URA Studio**



# pioneers **of** sustainable design

Architect duo, Sonali and Mani Rastogi, of the leading Indian architectural firm, Morphogenesis, stress on the need to evoke and make traditional wisdom and passive design approach an integral part of contemporary architecture in an interview with Nisha Shukla

**M**orphogenesis is one of the India's leading and award-winning Architecture and Urban Design practice with offices in New Delhi and Bengaluru, India. Founded by architect duo Mani Rastogi and Sonali Rastogi in 1996, this architectural practice views design as a result of different stimuli, ranging from climatic conditions, urban fabric, local and global traditions and human activity. The firm provides design solutions in varied sectors including residential, commercial, hospitality, corporate offices, institutional and public spaces which have won them recognition and accolades both in India and abroad. The architectural firm specialises in deploying passive strategies which respond to the local climate and ecology and addresses sustainability, affordability, issues of identity and liveability parameters, and are also mindful that projects remain economically viable and globally pertinent. In the following interview, the architect duo talks about their design journey, philosophy and their recently launched book.

## What inspired you both to take up architecture as a profession?

**SR:** I come from a family of architects. It's what I saw ever since I was a child and as my

parents worked from home for the early part of my childhood, I literally grew up among architects. That itself was my inspiration. Other than that, I have always had a serious interest in reading, model making as well as observing buildings when I travelled, so these things put together supported my interest. Essentially that is the starting point of why I chose to be an architect.

**MR:** I have always lived in various parts of the world due to the nature of my father's profession. My entire family consists of engineers, so I always found myself in construction sites right from childhood and was intrigued by the profession of architecture / engineering.

## How has your journey been in the field of architecture?

**MR:** We started Morphogenesis in 1996 as a two-person practice working out of a tiny garage. In the midst of a paradigm change in the nascent liberalized economy of the nineties, this decision to set up Architectural practice was a poignant one. Today, we are a collaborative of 130 people with our work spread across South Asia and Africa, the global recognition of our work cementing our faith in our vision. It has been a fruitful, rewarding 20 years.



Photo Courtesy: Jatinder Marwaha

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Today, Morphogenesis sees itself as an institution in perpetuity – a living, thriving ecosystem, a repository of data, information, knowledge and wisdom.

**Who have been your mentors?**

**SR:** After completing our architecture studies at The School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, we spent a long stint at The Architectural Association, London where Manit pursued his interest in the study of nature, evolution and design processes in association with John Frazer. He also acquired a degree in Energy and Environment Studies with Simos Yannas. I studied Housing and Urbanism with George Fiori as well as studied at “The Design Research Lab” with Jeff Kipnis. Bringing together our bouquet of interests we started Morphogenesis in 1996 with a vision of contributing to the definition of a sustainable architecture for contemporary India, for a generation that we termed as a “people of almost somewhere”.

**What has been your biggest source of inspiration?**

**MR+SR:** Our design approach has often been inspired by the vast repository of historical wealth of building knowledge and the strong arts and crafts traditions of the region. Sustainability beyond purely energy consciousness- to encompass environmental, social, cultural and financial, has elicited varied architectural responses from us, which sit within our investigation into architecture through three pillars- passive design, resource optimization and contextual identity.

**Tell us about your design philosophy?**

**MR+SR:** 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



Architect's Residence

Photo Courtesy: Jatinder Marwaha

only as Machines (places of human habitation), how do we redefine our urbanism as an emergence of interwoven networks?

### Describe your style of designing.

**MR+SR:** At Morphogenesis, we understand that we are working in an environment with limited resources. We believe that climate or ecological or environmentally sensitive architecture is no more an option, or a “layer” that can be applied to the design of a building; it is inherent and integral to the process of design, from concept to completion and to the full life cycle of the building. Our approach, simply put, is to think “NO IS MORE” – we begin any design process by saying NO: We have no energy, no water, no waste disposal etc. and then begin to evaluate from first principles how to passively provide the basic fundamentals of comfort, safety, liveability and sustainability.

### According to you, what is the most interesting/fascinating thing about architecture in India?

**MR+SR:** What we are (or were) good at for a very long time is creating architecture that is not only highly sustainable but is also adaptive, affordable, imageable, liveable, socially



Harley Davidson Corporate Office, Gurgaon

Photo Courtesy: Amit Pasricha

## DESIGN TALES

and culturally responsive, and above all, built with very limited resources. In a world on the brink of environmental collapse, this is a highly valuable skill, and this is where we must focus all our issues related to the profession and education. The real question is how can we take what we were really good at and create a model for the future based on the present; where finance, globalisation and pre-conceived imageability currently take centre stage.

### One thing that your clients really appreciate about you?

**MR+SR:** We have often been told by clients and people who walk in to the office that there is sense of great energy and a reflection of a can-do attitude that one imbibes by just standing there.



“Our design approach has often been inspired by the vast repository of historical wealth of building knowledge and the strong arts and crafts traditions of the region”

### Tell us in detail about your recently launched book?

**MR+SR:** The firm achieved a significant milestone in 2016, of having completed two decades of sustainability led design, and of having contributed to the understanding of sustainable design of the region. In recognition of this, Images Publishing Australia has published a monograph of the firm's works, under their Master Architect Series, named 'Morphogenesis: The Indian Perspective, The Global Context'. Today, forces of globalisation and technology have an increasingly marked effect, leading to an

ITC Park Boulevard (Fortune), New Delhi



Chettinad Health City Auditorium, Chennai



Soaltee Crowne Plaza, Kathmandu, Nepal



Photo Courtesy: Chinia Kaji Tamrakar

“Today, developments across India are designed with a layer of sustainability or ‘green’ superimposed on. However, there should be a conscious attempt to step away from this and incorporate passive approaches to design, right from conceptual and planning stages”

emergence of global aspirations and resultant expectations from Architecture. We believe that Architecture, Design and Urbanism as processes need to be in step with this radical shift. It is this bridge, between tradition and modernity, where the work of the practice is positioned. Thus, we like to think of our work as the Indian Perspective, in the Global Context, whence the name.

We feel most strongly about sustainability, and sustainability not understood as purely energy, but environmental, social, cultural and financial sustainability. Through the last two decades, we have had the opportunity of engaging with the incredible diversity of people, culture, wealth and climate that these regions have had to offer. This has elicited varied architectural responses from us, which sit within an on-going dialogue and investigation into Sustainability through Passive Design, Resource Optimisation and Contextual Identity. These form the three chapters of the

book, explained through 26 diverse projects that sit within them.

**Tell us about your upcoming projects?**

**MR+ SR:** We currently have a number of projects going on in the studio, of great diversity across typology, scale, climate and cost. The conscious choice of the firm to explore projects across this broad range allows for cross-pollination of ideas and propagates high levels of design innovation. Particularly exciting are the ones exploring new geographies, hence new local contexts that push our understanding of sustainability-including a college in Bhutan and a residential township in Johannesburg. There is a public project under the umbrella of the Namami Gange Yojana where we have been commissioned to redesign the ghats and ancillary facilities along a significant stretch of the Ganga between Allahabad and Varanasi. We are also designing what is likely to be the world’s largest office





part of sustainable building design. Despite the tight site, climate and cost constraints, the building has turned out to be a landmark low-energy, self-sufficient institute. It is also special because of the global recognition it gave us, and consequently furthered the global discourse on contemporary Indian architecture.

**Any historical monument/ building that has impressed you and inspired you?**

**MR+SR:** Mehrangarh fort would definitely top the list for us when it comes to landmark structures. This stunning, fortified structure sits on a perpendicular cliff, four hundred feet above the sky line of Jodhpur. This red sandstone structure is planned with multilevel courtyards that are liberally scattered across the form. While most fortified structures are introverted in nature, the Mehrangarh fort looks at bringing in the stunning external views. These collection spaces form vantage points, which frame the haunting beauty of the city below, whilst being environmentally sensitive to the region and contextually contribute to the region's identity. The fort truly celebrates the hierarchy of movement within space, by being able to smoothly

spaces for the Surat Diamond Bourse in Dream City, Surat.

**Which project has been most memorable and has taught you an important lesson in practice?**

**MR+SR:** Every project has been a learning experience, but we would say that designing the Pearl Academy, Jaipur, was a milestone in our understanding of passive strategies towards implementing sustainable design. Budgetary constraints required us to critically re-evaluate our approach, forcing us to rigorously apply a "No is More" philosophy. Assuming we have no resources of energy or water, how then does one approach design? The project successfully dispels the myth of high cost being an intrinsic





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choreograph movement at such a large scale.


### Any notable change you would like to bring in Indian architecture?

**MR+SR:** Traditional Indian Architecture has always been green, as interventions have always been built within a localized context – usually in response to not having access to abundant resources of water and energy. Today, developments across India are designed with a layer of sustainability or ‘green’ superimposed on. However, there should be a conscious attempt to step away from this system and incorporate passive approaches to design, right from conceptual and planning stages. Optimization of all services is a prerequisite to responsible architecture today.

### What interests you outside work?

**MR+SR:** Architecture is very much our hobby. Having said that, reading is a hobby, wine is a hobby, food is hobby. So, we both really enjoy eating and cooking. It helps that food and wine make an excellent setting for an intellectual engagement amongst peers, and in that way, it goes hand in hand beautifully with architecture as a hobby.

### What advice would you give to design aspirants?

**MR+SR:** As work and profession is concerned, Architecture & Design is a way of life and it calls for a lifetime of commitment and conviction. Be ready to immerse yourself fully! 

Jindal Pipes Corporate Office, Gurgaon



Photo Courtesy: Amit Pasricha

India Glycols Corporate Office, Noida



Photo Courtesy: Edmund Sumner