

# Inside Outside

THE INDIAN DESIGN MAGAZINE

[www.insideoutside.in](http://www.insideoutside.in)

ISSUE 409

SEPTEMBER 2019

₹100



Morphogenesis redefines  
Indian Architecture

# 'Architecture sets the ground for evolution and innovation'

**For over the past two decades, Morphogenesis has helped redefine the Indian architecture landscape with contemporary projects with soul**

TEXT: SUMAN TARAFDAR



Over the last two and half decades, **Manit and Sonali Rastogi** have made Morphogenesis into a powerhouse shaping built aesthetics in India

**Manit & Sonali Rastogi**

**I**t's a firm that has come to be known for thinking big, with sustainability at the core of its projects. Or simply, putting SOUL into their work – Sustainability, Optimisation, Uniqueness and Liveability – principles in which all its design solutions are rooted in. Since its inception in 1996, Morphogenesis has come to be a firm whose records have got embellished with each successive year. Just a look at some of their better known projects –the ambitious Namami Gange

Project, The British School, Delhi, Infosys campus, Nagpur, The Woodside, Kasauli, Amarnath Rock Cut temple redevelopment, India Glycols headquarters, Noida, not to mention the ambitious under construction Surat Diamond Bourse, which with a built-up area of 70 lakh square feet is set to be the world's single largest office building.

Indeed, Morphogenesis is among the many entrepreneurial names that began in the post liberalisation era of the 1990s and has gone to

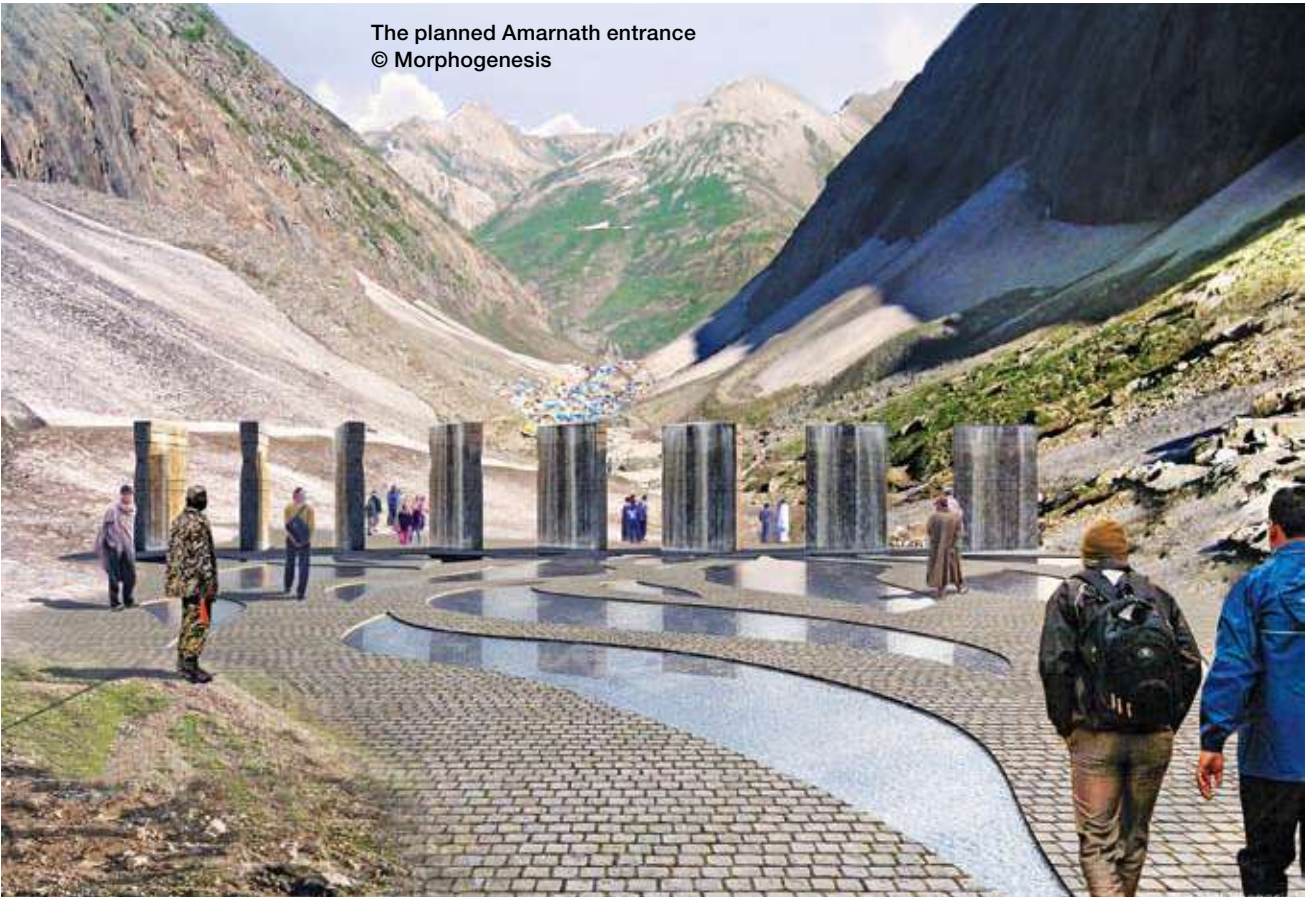
carve a name for itself in the period since. With its work encompassing a range of typologies across architecture, interiors and landscape urbanism, it already has offices in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Delhi. Rooted in India, the firm is present in eight countries and expanding rapidly. Projects, recognition and accolades have poured in from clients and peers alike, including the Singapore Institute of Architects Getz Award for their vision and commitment in making a significant



A River in Need - Namami Gange by Morphogenesis © Morphogenesis



The planned Amarnath entrance  
© Morphogenesis







The campus for Infosys at Mihan, Nagpur, a remarkable envelope design developed that considered sustainability in its broadest sense © Morphogenesis



Delhi Nullahs Exhibition © andré j fanthome

Above right: Gran Carmen Club © Shimroth J Thomas

contribution in shaping the changing landscape of Asia, making it the first Indian firm to be awarded.

The nineties were perhaps a propitious time for Manit and Sonali Rastogi, founders of Morphogenesis. They met at the School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, and after completing their B Arch in 1991, they went for post graduation to the Architectural Association, School of Architecture, London. On returning, they started their venture in 1996, 'with

a clear mandate for looking to expand the boundaries of architecture and environmental design with sustainability at the core,' says Manit Rastogi. 'This was a poignant decision which was supported with the paradigm change in the nascent liberalized economy of the nineties in India. Morphogenesis' terms of engagement with architecture has always been interdisciplinary in nature, ranging from science, technology, finance, globalization and other forces of urbanization.'

For the Rastogis, this was during the period when the Indian economy was experiencing a paradigm change. 'Correspondingly, we saw an opportunity for a fundamental shift in Indian design thinking,' recalls Rastogi. 'Within this environment of socio-culturally, and economically emergent India, we saw the possibility of creating a practice that would define Indian contemporary architecture. The desire was to bring Indian design to the forefront of global discourse. We believed that architecture, design and urbanism as processes needed to be in step with this radical shift. In this context we saw architecture as a strategic weapon to bridge boundaries and through discourse, set the ground for evolution and innovation.'

### Philosophy first

'Morphogenesis' signature style has been to keep addressing from first principles, the need of an emergent and evolving economy



**Above:**  
IILM Campus  
(2) © Jatinder  
Marwaha

**Left:**  
Prius Towers  
© Client

and the resultant requirements, explains Rastogi. 'Though visually disparate, the architecture of Morphogenesis carries a sustainable backbone and is constantly striving to achieve an architecture which is global as well as Indian at the same time. Our approach to creativity is inspired by the evolutionary processes in nature, to create built form that is both optimized for the built environment and the community. At Morphogenesis, sustainability is a core creative value and is practiced in the evolution of the design.'

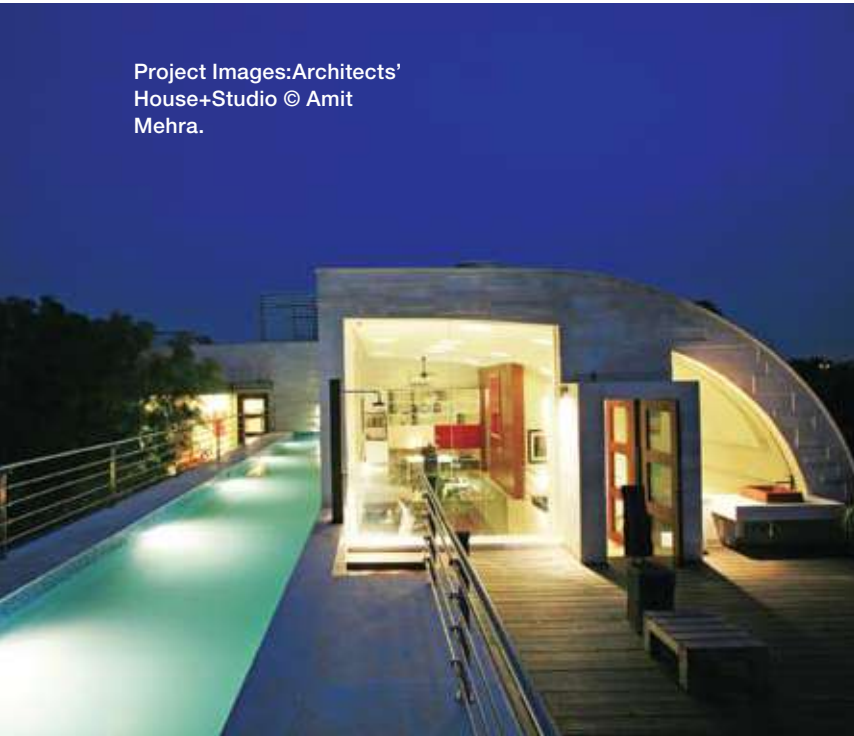
Rastogi says the practice considers the widening scope of sustainability to be all-inclusive; to include social, cultural, financial, technological, and environmental sustainability. It is this inclusive nature of design that, Morphogenesis believes, will define the new emergent Indian architecture.

At the time the Rastogis





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Sushant School  
of Design and  
Architecture ©  
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Aerial view of  
Surat Diamond  
Bourse ©  
Morphogenesis

returned to India, the reawakening of the Indian economy began demanding turnover at a faster rate, and there was a discernible trend of mass production architecture and design – often veering away from the landmark work done by independent India's first generation of leading archi-

tects. Manit Rastogi remembers the dominant schools of thought at the time were to 'ape the hermetically sealed coloured glass buildings of the West. The image superseded everything – context, culture, sustainability, resulting in imitation buildings that were unsuitable to the climate

and the context'.

Rastogi says that post-liberalization of the Indian economy, there has been a fundamental shift in Indian design thinking. 'Within this milieu of an emergent India, social, cultural, and economic values are changing at an unprecedented pace. Architecture, design and urbanism as processes need to be in step with this radical shift, if not two steps ahead of it. In this context, architecture is a strategic weapon to bridge boundaries and through discourse, it sets the ground for evolution and innovation. It is within this milieu that the practice of Morphogenesis was set up.'

Building on past success, the practice is currently involved in a number of exciting projects, which include the upcoming smart cities of Aligarh and Port Blair. 'We are also creating an opportunity in Port Blair where the linking of seven historic sites with



The British School,  
Delhi ©  
Randhir Singh

is not limited to nation building, it plays a significant role in building a nation of inspired and empowered citizens who take pride in the art, culture and heritage of their region.'

As India undertakes to improve its current urban centres and embark on new ones, Rastogi reiterates that 'architecture and urban design form the backbone of the planning and design of 'smart cities'. The challenge however lies in expediting the process. Too much time has past since the mission was announced. The designs are still at a conceptual stage and must be actuated to understand how to grow the pro-

the smart city experience will add to the imageability and increase tourism in the area. We are thrilled to be part of a project where we can make an impact on the community as well.'

Another such project is the Surat Diamond Bourse. Spread over 70 lakh square feet, SDB will form the heart of the central business district in DREAM City and will act as an incubator by attracting regional development. Once completed, the bourse is estimated to provide employment opportunities to lakhs of people and generate tourism in the area, thus boosting the economy of the region.

### Architecture in 'new' India

As India urbanises, and simultaneously seeks to move millions out of poverty, provide housing for the emerging middle classes, and improve the quality of life, the significance of architecture and

urban planning can hardly be overstated. 'The role of architecture has traditionally been that of nation building,' points out Rastogi. 'It becomes even more critical now as the world looks towards an emerging urban India. We are currently dealing with unequal development – cities today have a dearth of space due to unchecked migration. There are MSMEs (Micro, Small & Medium Enterprises) coming up all over the country at a rapid pace. Are there enough human resources to support them? Will they wait for adequate infrastructural reforms to take place? In order to provide sound physical infrastructure, we need technologically advanced and efficient prototypes that address the needs of the present. On the other hand, we have stopped celebrating our history and culture. We must have museums of culture, modern and tribal art, etc. The role of architecture



An exterior view of the  
British School, Delhi



## MAJOR MORPHOGENESIS PROJECTS

### Infosys Campus Mihan, Nagpur, 2018

With the challenge of creating the world's most sustainable office building, a remarkable envelope design developed that considered sustainability in its broadest sense.

### Delhi Art Gallery, Mumbai, 2013

A century old building in Kala Ghoda – abused and defaced beyond recognition – was treated as a heritage restoration project. Adaptive Reuse ensured it could be the example for rejuvenating other derelict historic districts.

### The British School, Delhi, 2016

To provide 'an international education with an Indian soul', wherein the school's capacity had to be doubled, the principal challenge was to construct the new building on the existing site without disrupting the existing school that would become redundant eventually.

### India Glycols Headquarters, Noida, 2009

The office design for the corporate office for India Glycols embodies the issues concerning the workplace today, and explores the paradigm of the office space as a social activity.

### The Uttorayon Township, Siliguri, 2008

A 400-acre development on a non-productive tea estate in

Siliguri, the guiding objective of the project was to create a model for low cost development in India which enhances community while respecting the environment.

### The Pearl Academy of Fashion, Jaipur, 2008

The institute creates interactive spaces for a highly creative student body to work in multifunctional zones which blend the indoors with the outdoors seamlessly.

### Amarnath Caves, Amarnath, ongoing(

Re-designing the pilgrimage by way of developing residential accommodation for the pilgrims and allied infrastructure facilities.

### Surat Diamond Bourse, Surat, under construction

Set to be the world's single largest office building, the Surat Diamond Bourse aims to be an exemplar for integrating high-density commercial architecture along with efficient climate-responsive design.

### ITC Campus, Kolkata, (in progress)

The upcoming campus has a mixed land-use brief with IT and corporate offices, hotel, convention centre and residential towers.

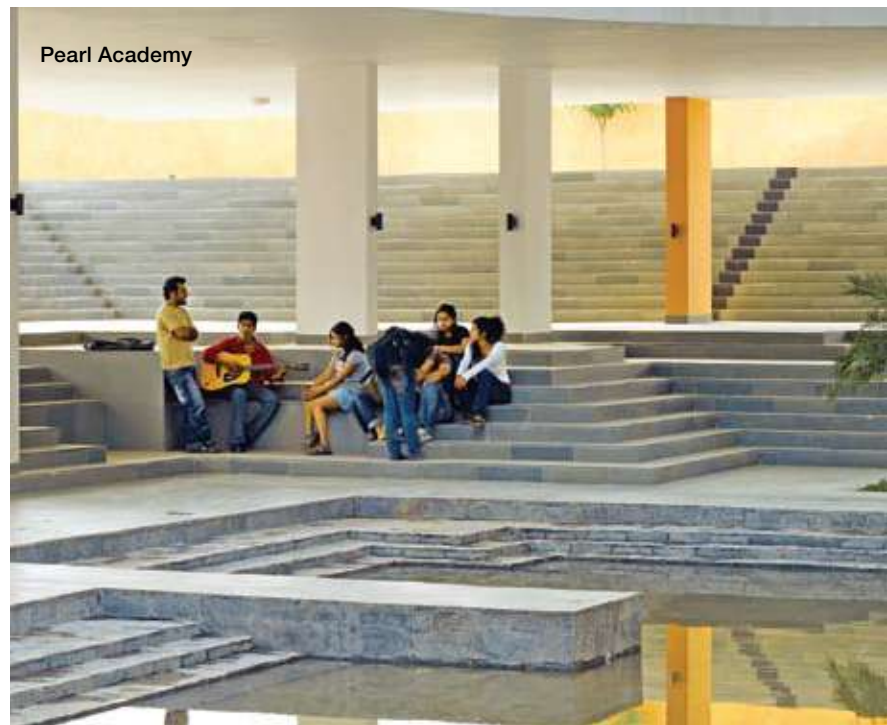
gramme both intellectually and financially.'

On being queried on the quality (or lack thereof) of mass housing in India, he agrees that 'mass housing is stuck in some old norms. In order to meet our require-

ments for housing and to meet them quickly, we need to come up with a solution that is disruptive and sets newer benchmarks in sustainability. Whilst there is movement in that direction, and we have seen the advent

of precast and prefabricated materials, a lot is still required. We need building solutions that are more holistic and sustainable in nature and not look for resolutions once the damage to the environment has been done.'

The British School







**The Woodside**  
© Suryan & Dang

### Why architects matter

However, as Rastogi points out, the awareness and importance of architecture has dwindled over the years and this is primarily because of the way architectural practice is carried out. 'Architects use their intellectual prowess, scientific knowledge and artistic skill to create things that will remain in the public domain for years. However, the "Form Follows Finance" norm has become one of the most difficult predicaments for Indian architects today. In the public sector, procuring

an architect through an L1 method has resulted in mass scale construction that is function based. Somewhere, the voices of the architects have drowned. They are no longer the master controller that the world once looked up to for intellect, science and art.'

Indeed, Morphogenesis has worked to make their projects sustainable, especially when working with that precious resource – water. 'Ranging from Pearl Academy in Jaipur, where we fashioned a localised *baoli* to Namami Gange

where a plethora of public and urban issues have been dealt with in the rejuvenation of the River Ganga and the ghats; or the Infosys Campus in Nagpur where the site itself becomes the source of reducing energy consumption; or even the Amarnath dwar created for the act of cleansing with water – in an area that is covered in snow for the better part of the year,' which he describes as major learnings.

As Rastogi puts it, climate or environmentally sensitive architecture is no longer a choice, 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. 'We have to re-en-

## profile

gaged by being responsive to nature. That said, sustainable design must first reduce the need for energy consumption and dependence on mechanical forms of heating and cooling; and then evaluate how to passively provide the basic fundamentals of comfort, safety, liveability and sustainability.'

### Architect impact

Of course, in rapidly changing times, architecture has been impacted in myriad ways as it helps lead humans to improved environs. According to Rastogi, technology has been a major game changer and 'impacts our work on all fronts. Ranging from shaping the projects and producing drawings to construction, all stages of a project are impacted by technology. We as a nation have a unique way of putting a spin on things by using the infamous Indian *jugaad* to do things in a much more efficient manner. Now of course, there is newer technology and software such as BIM and 3D Mapping to improve the construction and development process, smart parking systems, connected homes, waste management systems, etc. We are, however, quite far away from a technology that will enable us to conceive entirely. There is immense opportunity here. I am most interested in watching out for materials that can help clean the air – tiles, building surfaces, breathable skins, etc.'


### Future paths

'We live in a world that is constantly evolving; however, the construction processes are time consuming,' says Rastogi. 'Therefore, the dominant



trends in the next decade must be disruptive and swift. The trends must have high impact with sustainability at their core. It is imperative that we realise that climate change and sustainable development are global challenges and initiatives must be introduced to not only combat and reverse climate change, but to also create awareness amongst the community. I believe there is immense opportunity for India to step forward and lead a new low-carbon approach

to development – and in the process, demonstrate that India can be a global environmental leader.'

The nature of our buildings has completely changed in the last 20 years and the schools of architecture still see sustainability as something external to projects. That needs to change. The opportunity is immense, the opportunity to define a new emergent architecture – an architecture of almost somewhere, for a people of almost somewhere. 

YWCA Campus