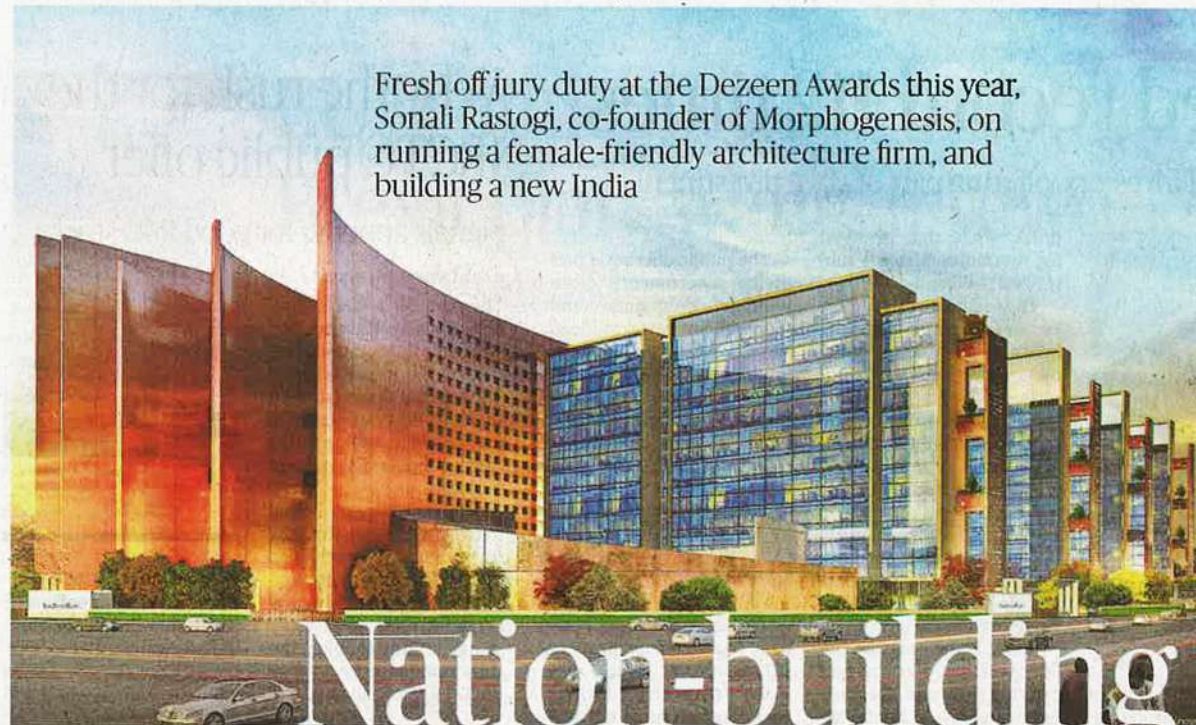


16 SHOWCASE

DELHI THE HINDU
 FRIDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2019

Fresh off jury duty at the Dezeen Awards this year, Sonali Rastogi, co-founder of Morphogenesis, on running a female-friendly architecture firm, and building a new India



Conscious design (Clockwise from left) An artistic representation of the upcoming Surat Diamond Bourse; The British School, Delhi; Sonali Rastogi • MORPHOGENESIS AND VIBHOR YADAV



You've used similar principles at The British School in Delhi. Is the model replicable in schools with smaller budgets too?

The first thing that [working like] this achieves is that it makes everything cheaper. Pearl Academy of Fashion in Jaipur is the cheapest project this firm has done. Similarly, The British School is simple *kota* stone and ceramic tiles, paint-plaster walls, and small panes of glass. Plus, simple things – like a central courtyard format design, where you get tempered air from the courtyard and air movement in the corridor – brought the air-conditioning load down to about one-fourth of what it would've been.

Given that you're a part of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission (DUAC), have you thought about pushing forward such a proposal for any municipal buildings?

The government itself came up with a good initiative some years ago, which said that for all government projects, a 4-5 star rating on the GRIHA (Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment), which is a very good green rating system in India, is mandatory. British School is the first 5-star rated on this.

Your upcoming Surat Diamond Bourse project has been billed as the largest single office space in the world. Can you talk about this project?

Firstly, it's amazing that the world's largest such project is getting made in India, and so silently. If it were being made anywhere else in the Western world, it'd have been on stamps by now. The project itself is a community-funded one. It's not the world's biggest developer making a mall and monetising it. This one big mammoth of a building is not just a place of work for 65,000 people – it's those many people and their families. All this is happening because of this one building, which also reflects the nuances and cohesiveness of a community, which has managed to control about 90% of the world's diamonds in some form. One of their first briefs was that they wanted trading efficiency, which comes from how quickly they can get from one place in the building to another.

We convinced the clients that the corridors don't need to be air conditioned, it just needs a tempered environment, which we've done through sustainable methods, like shading and radiant cooling, which is simply about using water to create cooling in these 22-km long corridors.

Nation-building aesthetics

Surat Diamond Bourse in numbers

2018
start date

2021
expected completion

\$310,000,000
total cost

35.5
acres

620,000 sqm
built area

15 acres
of resort-style landscape

22 kms
of circulation space

65,000
people

10,000
cars

~4,500
offices



VANGMAYI PARAKALA

This is the eighth consecutive year that Morphogenesis, a Delhi-based architecture firm, has made it to the World Architecture 100. The annual list is a compilation of the largest architecture practices in the world, by Building Design Magazine in the U.K.

2019 marks 10 years since Morphogenesis, which is headed by Sonali and Manik Rastogi and is now 23 years old, became the first Indian firm to win at the World Architecture Festival, held that year in Barcelona. "WA is like the Oscars for the architecture and design industry," says Sonali, who was on the jury at the second annual Dezeen Awards this year, the winners for which will be announced online by mid-October.

Back in India, Sonali spoke about her firm's philosophies and how they align with their upcoming big-ticket projects. Edited excerpts.

Being on WA 100 for eight consecutive years. What does that mean?

Why WA 100 gives me pride is that Indian firms would earlier never feature. Because firms here would never get to be of a certain [size], which is a condition to even be considered. Also, earlier, smaller boutique firms were the call of the day. But scale becomes important for a nation-building

exercise. For a first-generation firm, achieving this scale is a big source of pride.

It's emerged that your pay gap is skewed marginally in favour of women...

We were surprised to have pay parity such that it is 2% more on the side of women. That's unheard of! Even we were surprised. When we looked through the data, we realised it's because women stay here (in the company) longer here, and naturally they accrue better benefits.

Why do women stay on longer with your firm?

It's the small reasons – and all of [these practices] are very easy to absorb in other architectural firms or informal work environments. For instance, an extended maternity leave. It's crazy to think how on the one hand we are [advocating] breast milk for the baby's wellness, but you still insist on thinking that just three months later, the child will be weaned off. It's illiterate to think that women can come back to work like this. It's more likely to make her leave. And then there's a soft grooving back into work. Because you can't be breast-feeding one day, and then disappear on your baby for 10 hours the next. We allow for a comfortable groove back into work the way they're comfortable

Does the WA100 ranking give you access that's difficult otherwise?

Absolutely. It puts you on a global playing field. It makes you a [firm] of choice when discussing the future of architecture. It puts you on a judging platform, where you decide, with other equals from around the world, about the next steps for the community. Our choices would then give cues and icons for the next generation to pick up on. It makes you a change-maker; that's the vision with which this firm was set up.

How are you aligning your philosophy of using local design practices with your SMART City projects for Aligarh and Port Blair?

In Aligarh, an old town, you have to fix what is broken, to bring back accepted norms of urban design and town planning. In Port Blair whatever was developed was very little, so it is a great place for intervention, and allows us to set a new framework for how the island should develop from hereon in a way that keeps environment sensitivity, cultural continuity.

In Aligarh for example, we revitalised an abandoned lake, where people used to keep throwing junk, into a lake with a community centre that people want to go to. We are dealing with overcrowded roads, hawkers, and un-

organised car parking. So we work with ideas of digital parking meters, backed with timing-specific data, and provide liveable alternatives for today's vendors and their customers.

Morphogenesis takes inspiration from ancient architecture. How do you bring elements of that into modern design?

About 10 or so years ago, an image from the studio, of using *matkas* for insulation in one of our projects, became popular. Everyone got caught in the romantic notion of traditional methods. The finished building, which is the Pearl Academy of Fashion in Jaipur, won various awards, including World Architecture Festival Award (Learning), in Barcelona, 2009.

Basically when we studied the region, we learnt that double *chhats* were built with *kulhar* in between for insulation – because they didn't have an insulating foam like today. The finished building has a completely contemporary look, just a different style of insulation, which worked better than much more expensive synthetic insulation. It gave work to potters, too.

I'd like to separate aspirational aesthetics from whether the same can be achieved in an environmentally sustainable way. Most things can be.