

# FUTURARC

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## WOMEN IN ARCHITECTURE

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**Yasmeen  
Lari**

**Ganga  
Rathnayake**



**Serina  
Hijjas**



**Kotchakorn  
Voraakhom**



**Sonali  
Rastogi**



**Ching-Hwa  
Chang**



**Maria Warner  
Wong**



# The FuturArc Interviews

The FuturArc Interview in this issue has taken on a different flavour and format: we present each architect's story in their own words before their accomplishments and enterprise. Additionally, the writers, who are also professionals in this field, have their personal perspectives to share.



# S

## SONALI RASTOGI

by Bhawna Jaimini



**BJ: Did you face any systemic hurdles or what we would call microaggressions while you were setting up Morphogenesis 30 years ago? Especially since you started the firm with your partner Mani Rastogi and there is a tendency in the society to take the man more seriously than the woman—even if both are putting equal amount of effort.**

**SR:** I can't say if there were systemic issues but there were definitely very defined roles of women and men, not just in the society, but also in an architecture practice like ours where the general perception was that I have my husband to do the heavy lifting. In those days, it was extremely acceptable for a woman to start her interior design practice, but not so much when it came to architecture and construction. That is why we have consciously made efforts since the beginning to have more than 50 per cent women in Morphogenesis. And I feel since Morphogenesis is one of the very few firms in India working across typologies, it has helped increase acceptability of women in architecture where we make sure all teams—whether they are working on a commercial building, a boutique hotel or an industrial project—have more than 50 per cent women.

**BJ: In India right now, more women are joining architecture schools than ever before. Most of the architecture schools have more female students than male students. However, that is not reflecting in women led-practices. When and how do you think this will change?**

**SR:** I strongly believe that women in architecture and women in leadership in architecture are two very different matters. However, many former female employees of Morphogenesis have gone out and set up their women-only practices, but I understand that it is not easy, and it takes a lot of grey hair to get there.

The reason I believe that there are fewer women in leadership positions is because our work protocols are entirely designed around a man—they are just not flexible or sensitive to the life cycle of a woman. As a society we have made strides in bringing equality to the workplace, but there is no equality at the household level where a woman is still expected to do most of the work. And this really hampers leadership prospects of mid-career architects who are faced with the difficult choices between managing a family and a career, because it's humanly not possible to do both without help.

**BJ: What kind of policies have you set up in Morphogenesis to support mid-career or senior women in architecture?**

**SR:** We have a policy called FLEX under which women choosing to have children get almost a year of paid maternity leave and have the option to gradually ease back into work—starting with lesser number of office hours and then slowly returning to full-time work. All women, and even men, can take one work-from-home day every month when they have to be with their families. And these policies are not just for women, but for everyone who has other responsibilities or passions to follow outside of architecture. For example, if someone in the office wants to be a marathon runner, we will make sure they have the flexibility to train. We highly encourage our employees to have work-life balance. And I am very proud to say that we hardly ever lose our senior female architects. We see women with familial responsibilities as a strength and not as a liability.



# ITC Campus

The ITC Campus is a project located in Rajarhat, an upcoming suburb of Kolkata. Rajarhat is being developed to handle the pressures of high-density urbanisation. The campus has a mixed land-use brief with IT and corporate offices, hotel, convention centre and residential towers. Being conscious of the tradition of cultural pride and the philosophical inclination of the people of the region, Morphogenesis aimed to create an identity for the entire project where buildings become the physical manifestation of the region's rich artisanal culture. The thread that weaves the mixed-use development together is the culture of Bengal, as reflected in its literary heritage, music, fine arts, drama and cinema.

The massing of buildings is planned along a central spine aligned with the prevalent wind direction. The urban frontage of the tall, soaring stone façades on the east and the west have been manifested as vertical canvasses showcasing art and craft from the Bengal School tradition. These intricately carved murals that translate artisanal qualities to a project of this scale enrich the project. The exquisite Bengali script and Tagore's writings on the environment are the inspiration for the crafted stone façade of the lower scale convention centre in the foreground.

The urban space is used as a placemaking tool to host and celebrate the Bengali socio-cultural ethos, which is one of discourse, deliberation and communal festivity. East-west courts traverse the main spine to create a highly permeable site that channels air movement to counter the high humidity levels. Taking inspiration from the pandals (temporary pavilions) that are set up in public spaces to host large gatherings of people, the partially sheltered central spine and these courts are articulated as open-air museums, with sculpture and art installations adding to the sense of 'place'.

In this project, Morphogenesis has involved a large crafts community and emerging artists from the Bengal tradition right from the process of conception to giving final shape, to fulfil the aim of bringing back craft to the public realm and address migrant labour issues in the post-pandemic world.

## PROJECT DATA

### Project Name

ITC Campus

### Location

Rajarhat, Kolkata

### Status

Under construction

### Client

ITC

### Built-up Area

Total BUA: 246,000 square metres

Commercial development:

119,000 square metres

### Site area

17 acres

### Consultants

Structure: Sterling Engineering

Consultancy Services Pvt. Ltd.

MEP: AECOM

HVAC: AECOM

Plumbing: AECOM

Electrical: AECOM

Fire Fighting: AECOM

Green consultant: AECOM

Lighting: Design Matrix

Hospitality: HPG Consulting

Traffic: Traffic & Transportation

Engineering Consultants

Quantity surveyor: IM Cost

Management

Security: Mahindra SSG

PMC: ITC (Client)

Façade: Meinhardt Façade

Technology

Sustainability: Morphogenesis

Landscape Design:

Morphogenesis

Interior design: Morphogenesis

Master planning: Morphogenesis

### Contractor

Piling: Geo Piling Solutions

1 Bengali script and Tagore's writings carved on the façade

2 Courtyards as open-air museums for art installations

3 Intricately carved murals add the region's rich artisanal culture to the project



# There were definitely very defined roles of women and men, not just in the society, but also in an architecture practice.

**BJ:** Do the rules of having a work-life balance also apply to you? Do you extend the same kind of flexibility towards yourself because sometimes as leaders we do forget to take that time out for ourselves?

**SR:** Absolutely. We started Morphogenesis 10 days before delivering my child and I started bringing them to work 30 days later. And even till today, if I have to tend to my children—though they are adults now—I end up telling my clients that “look, I have to speak with my daughter because she is repeatedly calling from abroad where she lives alone”. I don't think anyone should have a problem with the fact that apart from being committed to my work, I am also committed to my children.

**BJ:** I often feel that conversations about women in architecture is not intersectional enough. We are still only talking about women from comparatively privileged backgrounds because architectural education is expensive and a lot of women from marginalised communities are not joining the profession. Have you had enough people working for Morphogenesis from diverse backgrounds?

**SR:** Yes, we have. In fact, one of our star performers is a woman who comes from a very small town in Jharkhand, a state in eastern India. We have had an employee who suffered domestic abuse at home while none of us knew. She was a draughtsperson who became an architect through a distance learning programme, all while working here and travelling back to her abusive home, which was almost two hours outside of Delhi. And not just women—we have men from diverse socio-economic backgrounds who have stayed in the profession even though architecture as a profession is only now beginning to be well paid.

**BJ:** I know it's easy—and self-perpetuating—to ‘see’ women's role in any area as nurturing, ‘soft’, compassionate, and so on; but is it necessarily so, especially in this field? Is there a real difference—notwithstanding glass ceilings and power politics—between a male or female architect's designs? What is the difference—if any—between a male or female architect's designs?

**SR:** Honestly, I fail to see any difference between how the two genders design. This used to be a hot topic of discussion during my time at the AA (Architectural Association School of Architecture, London) and neither was I able to see the difference then, nor do I see it today.

**BJ:** Is there a difference between how you and Manit Rastogi approach architecture?

**SR:** We both like to enquire and ideate on a project based on the first principles of design. We both have our interests and suites that we like to be closely involved with in each project. Manit works more on the sustainability aspect while I am very passionate about materials and construction. However, each project begins with our trademarked design process called SOUL: Sustainable, Optimised, Unique and Liveable.

**BJ:** Morphogenesis is now one of the largest architectural firms in India. Have you found it difficult to maintain quality as you expand your footprint?

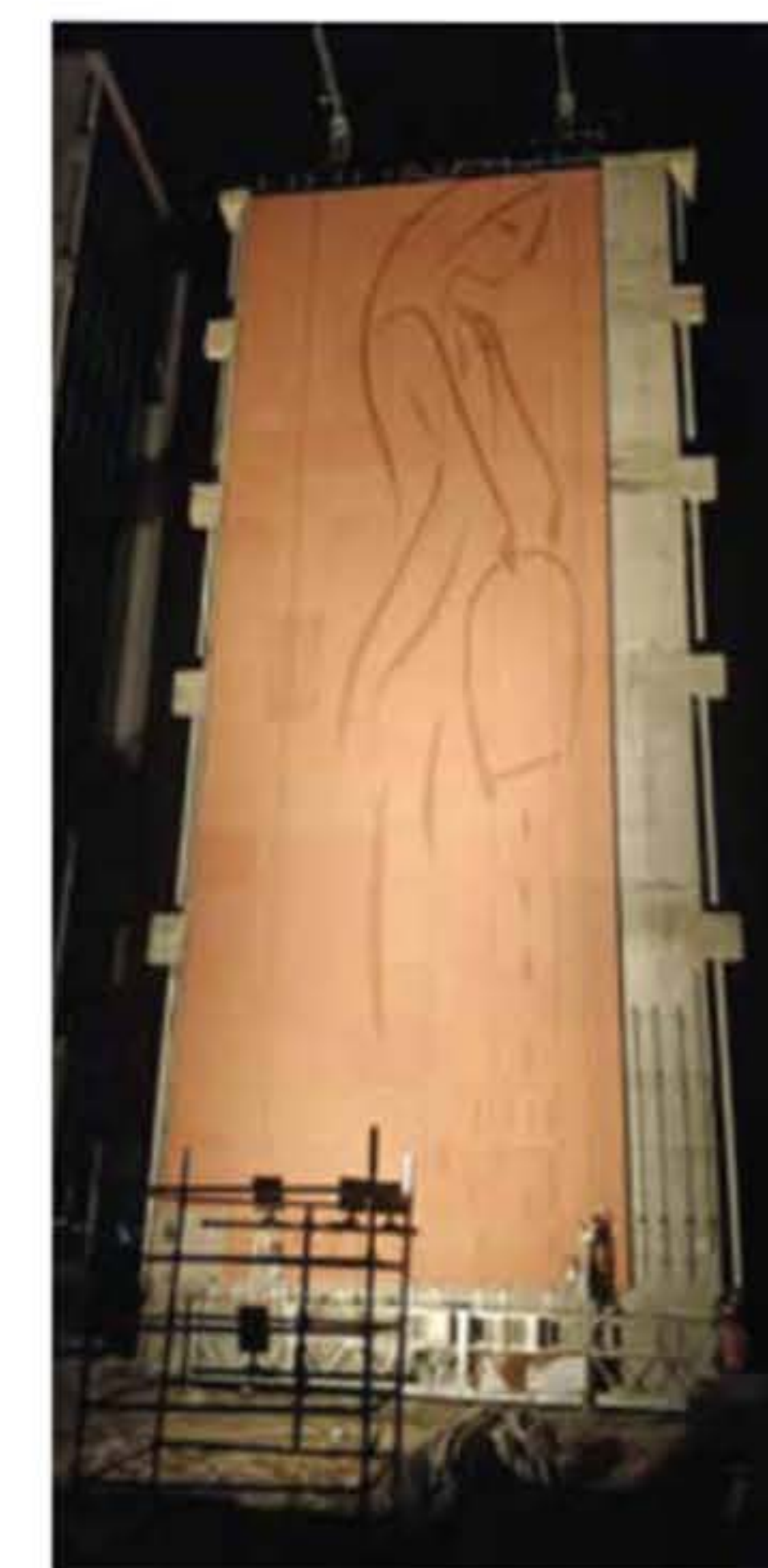
**SR:** We were very aware of the challenges that come up after a practice grows beyond a certain size. That is why Morphogenesis functions like a conglomeration of multiple studios—not more than 25 people—instead of being one monolithic entity. Each of these studios handles six to eight projects. Essentially, we have been able to offer and maintain the rigor of a small studio with the experience of a large firm.



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have more than  
50 per cent women.**



3 ITC Campus: Drawings by Bengali artists translated into murals on the stone façades





## Campus for Wipro

This corporate office for Wipro, one of India's largest IT firms, is located in Hyderabad. With 101 acres of land, the project embodies the historical and cultural references of the region whilst being contextually relevant to these modern times. The plan for this office campus is evolved from understanding the carrying capacity of the site; a capacity determined by functions like energy, water, geology of the land, along with essential rules of urban design pertaining to light, ventilation and shading. With an estimated EPI of 30, this development sets out to be net-zero on energy, water, and waste to landfill. To offset the water needs, the site has been analysed for water catchment zones, with all surface run-off intended to be used to create a water reservoir.

The morphology adopted for the project is that of multiple courtyards and cascading terraces. Building masses are stacked around a central courtyard. About 10 per cent (100,000 square feet) of the primary functions (gym; open cafeteria; library spill-out; outdoor meeting spaces) have been moved outdoors into the shaded courtyards, thereby optimising space and cost. All buildings are north-south orientated, and the east-west edges are kept open to enhance wind movement and natural ventilation. Low wall-to-window ratios and narrow floor plates enable optimum daylight while ensuring low thermal absorption. The project is executed in earthy hues of clay bricks that also have low U-values and make the façade energy efficient. Taking inspiration from the traditional waterfront structures such as *baolis* and *ghats*, a strategy to temper the microclimate was developed. Water is introduced as an experimental layer throughout the stepped landscape to bring down temperatures, much like the working principles of a desert cooler.

### PROJECT DATA

#### Project Name

Campus for Wipro

#### Location

Hyderabad

#### Status

In progress

#### Client

Wipro Ltd.

#### Built-up Area

16,35,725 square feet

#### Site Area

37.91 acres

#### Consultants

Structure: TATA Consulting Engineers Ltd.

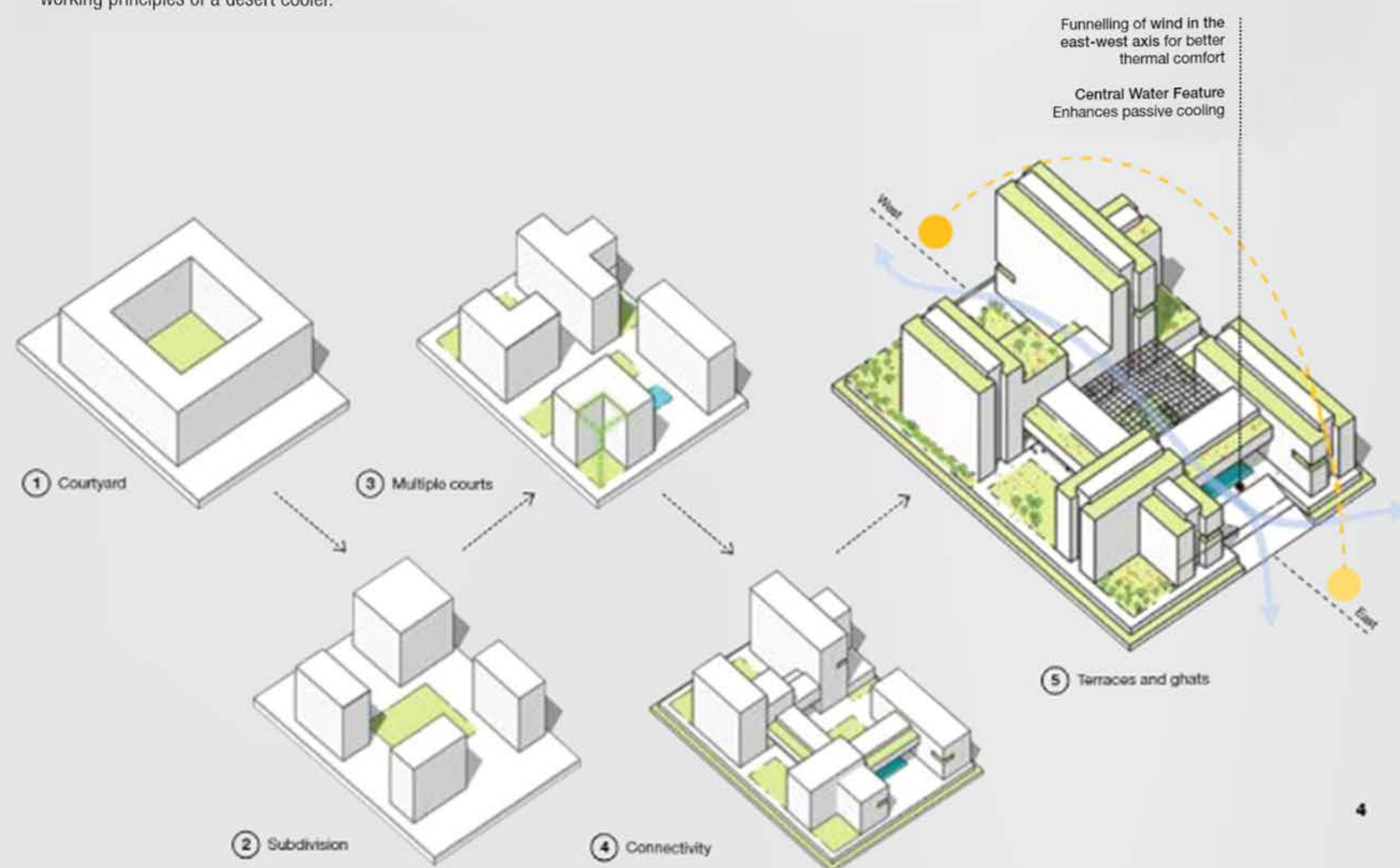
MEP & FF: TATA Consulting Engineers Ltd.

Traffic: GMD Consultants

VT: L'Avenir Consultancy Pvt. Ltd.

Façade: Meinhardt Façade Technology (India) Pvt Ltd  
Landscape: Integral Designs  
International Studio Pvt. Ltd.  
Environmental Design: Transolar  
Green Certification: Ecofirst  
Interiors (Common Areas): Gensler  
Hospitality: HPG Consulting  
Lighting Design: KSA Lighting  
BIM: Morphogenesis  
3D Visuals: Morphogenesis  
QS: AECOM  
PMC: TATA Consulting Engineers Ltd.  
Art Curator: ODD Works  
**Contractors**  
Civil & Structure: L & T  
Façade: MERO and Alufit

#### 4 Diagram of massing and passive strategies



**There are fewer women in leadership positions because our work protocols are entirely designed around a man—they are just not flexible or sensitive to the life cycle of a woman.**



5 Perspective of the grand staircase