
INTERVIEW

SANDEEP KHOSLA TALKS ABOUT HIS SCHOOL OF THOUGHT – ONE WHICH IS FIRMLY ROOTED IN ITS ENVIRONMENT

You often describe yourself as an architect who has stumbled into the world of interior design. Why so?

I never had any formal training in interior design. My training was as an architect. Very early in my career I got the opportunity to work on some hospitality interior design projects and this led to further interior work, which I really started to enjoy. My partner Amaresh Anand is also an architect and our approach to interiors has always been primarily that of spatial planning and the application of texture, surface material and colour has always been secondary. And this is when we picked up and learned the skill and practice of interior designing and the nuances of interior detailing, furniture and accessory design as well as lighting. You see at that point, there was no formal training available for interior design or even furniture or product design by extension. So, we think very architecturally actually, even in our interior projects and that is always been our first step. This is what we have been trained to do. The process of working on both disciplines simultaneously has been exciting

because architecture and interior design feed off each other. And we now look at all projects very holistically as we believe that the boundaries between architecture and interior design are quite blurred.

There is often a disconnect between the architecture and interior design of a project. Why does this happen and what can be done to rectify it?

I think the designer and client have to be in sync with one another and share a common vision for the project. What happens often is that a client will hire one architect and a different interior designer and neither interact with one another or they might even have completely differing sensibilities. Our approach to design has always been that that architecture, interior design and the landscape are inextricably linked. In our practice, we have established the fact that when we do a piece of architecture, we must also design its interiors. So, I think it is very important to establish a mood in every project, to establish a vision with one's client. And this will only happen if things are looked at from the very beginning in a holistic way.



One significant aspect of your work is the engagement between architecture + interiors + landscape for a structure. How important and strong do you believe the connection should be?

I think of it this way - whatever our eyes see within a project, a piece of furniture, light fitting, accessory, or even a tree are crucial to the synergy and flow of the space. If even one element hurts the eye, it will ruin the overall experience, and enjoyment of the space. So when we approach design, every element of design is looked at very minutely and carefully.

For example, for Loft 38, which is a lounge bar in Bangalore, we were given a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) of how we wanted to approach the space. So after initial discussions with the client about what kind of look we wanted to achieve and what purpose it would serve, we went about architecturally designing the space from scratch. Designed as a loft with various levels - the ceiling reached a height of 38 ft. We even looked into the potential cuisine that was to be served at the venue, and Amaresh even suggested the genres of music to be played. Then there was some courtyard space that was available and we gave our input for the landscape of the area. Eventually, we ended up custom designing the furniture and even the light fixtures.

You often stress on the importance of open spaces. Is that true?

Over the past 20 years, we have done a large percentage of our projects in Bangalore which has a wonderful climate most of the year, so it would be a pity not to use open or semi-open space well. In most of our homes, we try and promote the idea of outdoor living and dining via concepts like verandas and courtyards.

I studied in New York and started practicing architecture in India. I think it was that early realisation that architecture in a tropical environment should address different concerns from architecture in the West and one needs to obviously, work within our context, our climate and our environment. Spaces that are closed from the roof and open from the sides, or those that are open to sky have been a very important part of even traditional Indian architecture. Our approach has been to use these ideas in new ways.

Open spaces, light and cross ventilation add to the sustainability of buildings as they reduce energy load for cooling as well as lighting.

Your designs are often bifurcated traditional architecture merged with contemporary approach and thought or tropical architecture. Is that apt description and how did it come about?

Let's put it this way. From the time we started our practice, I think one aspect that we stressed on was that the spaces we design have to be experiential. There is a kind of narrative in the way we like to modulate space, to make them unfold in an



Old Yacht Club

DPS Kindergarten School,
Whitefield, Bangalore



Interior view of Loft 38,
Bangalore



The Library House, Bangalore



Exterior view of the Library House, Bangalore

exciting way. And I think that the dialogue between the built form and the natural environment is very important to us. How does the architecture speak to the natural environment? And how does the environment speak to the architecture? That is an interesting question that occupies us. And in doing so there are many kinds of nuanced and exciting spaces, which come about because you know – it is not like designing in the West where there are rigid barriers between the inside and outside. It is the in-between spaces that can create magic when you are dealing with the outdoors. A lot of our projects do deal with that aspect. I think one has to go beyond the notion of just contemporarising traditional architecture. After working 20 years these are thoughts that are already embedded in our senses. If we were to do a project in Greece or Japan, we would do a project, which would be rooted in those environments.

What according to you should a structure achieve?

Apart from meeting the practical needs of its inhabitants and meeting the requirements of a programme, above all any piece of good architecture should be poetic. It should speak to your soul and I think that is what architecture is all about because otherwise we would all be making benign buildings.

Your portfolio is vast showcase of both hospitality and retail spaces and residential spaces? Is there a preference for either?

If yes, how is it different when it comes to designing?

Our office follows a very cross-disciplinary approach and we enjoy the variety in our palette of projects. I think it is the variety that keeps us excited everyday, the shift in scale from small to big, from architectural masterplanning to designing a piece of furniture that keeps our practice quite alive and healthy. We often have to don different hats while shifting scales as the project requirements are vastly different. A residence may need to be timeless, calm and contemplative, a school cost effective and efficient, and a bar may need a high impact 'wow' factor.

What prompted you to start working on institutional projects?

That is an interesting question. We have been doing so much of luxury spaces for so long and working with a high square feet rate for clients who can afford things. I think what prompted us was the challenge to reach out to more people through institutional work. The challenge for us in institutional work is how to execute a project at a lower cost, but maintaining the same kind of architectural qualities I have spoken about earlier. The same power of the architecture without relying on expensive materials. I think that really kind of propels you to strive for an architecture that is inventively. Our first two institutional buildings were very well received – DPS Kindergarten School and

the Arts and Media Centre for Doon School and that prompted us to do more work in this area.

You cite Charles Correa and Geoffery Bawa as your early influences? What did you imbibe from them?

In my formative years when I returned to India from the US, I had worked with Correa and I had viewed Bawa's work in Sri Lanka. Their work is strongly rooted in the environment they worked in. I learnt the importance of open to sky spaces and semi permeable spaces in our environment, the crucial relationship of our built form with nature. These were contemporary practices, which had intelligently taken cues from the past and developed a wholly contemporary expression. All those aspects became very important for me during my early years as an architect because it charted a way forward for the kind of architecture that I wanted to practice. Quite by contrast early influences in the world of interior design were the likes of Philippe Stark and Karim Rashid.

What are your views on modern Indian architecture?

I am quite optimistic about Indian architecture. I cannot make a sweeping statement about Indian architecture in general, but there are plenty of exciting practices in India that are doing very relevant work. And I think that the work, which excites me is the work that is socially and culturally relevant, which is contextual and most importantly there for a reason. There is a lot of self-indulgent signature architecture out there, which is impressed me less and less with each passing year.

I think a number of developers are thinking quite positively about doing things, which are relevant for the cities their projects are based in and are approaching capable architects for the same. I think there is hope from that standpoint. But then a lot of architects don't have a say in the buildings that go up and 90% of them are built without thought. I know for them its about selling a lifestyle and there is no problem with that. Sell a lifestyle but as long as you are doing relevant architecture that has a sense of context. I feel concerned that a lot of our architecture is just aping the West, which may or may not be relevant.

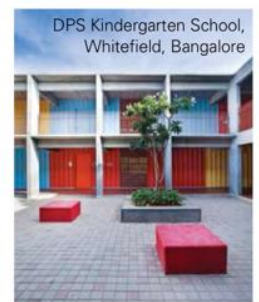
Was there a turning point in your career?

I established the firm in 1995 and one of our earliest projects was a hospitality space called 180 Proof. The project was located in a prominent 100 year old tudor style Colonial building and we decided to recycle it into a bar and restaurant. The city at the time was dotted with traditional



The exterior of the Arts and Media Centre Building of The Doon School

English Pubs, and this was a refreshing change of an American Style bar and lounge. It was one of the first examples of adaptive re-use of a heritage building in 1996-97 and was a big success. This spiraled our firm into getting several hospitality commissions. This space is currently functioning in a new avatar as Bangalore's Hard Rock Café, also designed by our firm. A second turning point would be the Manwaring House. It was designed for a couple residing in England but who had roots in Bangalore. They wanted a contemporary home with an Indian soul and we shared a similar empathy towards local materials and a climate sensitive architecture. So if you look at that project, I would say it defined a certain vocabulary and aesthetic in the way we approach residential design. Then there are projects, which got us a lot of international recognition – the Cliff House in Kerala, and more recently The DPS Kindergarten School in Bangalore. We won our first important international award for this project.



DPS Kindergarten School, Whitefield, Bangalore

An architectural work that excites you?

In India, the Shiv Temple, Wadeshwar, Maharashtra by Sameep Padora and Associates and Raas Jodhpur by the Lotus Praxis Initiative are two projects that come to mind. The work of Bijoy Jain and Studio Mumbai in Alibaug also resonates with me. Internationally, the Serpentine Pavillion, London by Sou Fujimoto, the House of Trees, Vietnam by Vo Trong Nghia Architects, Therme Vals, Switzerland by Peter Zumthor and Jianamani Visitors Centre, and Tibet by Teamminus Atelier, Beijing are some recent projects that are socially and culturally relevant and have captured my imagination.

- In conversation with Moshita Prajapati

Sandeep Khosla established Khosla Associates, an architecture and interior design firm, in Bangalore India in 1995. The firm headed by principals Sandeep Khosla and Amaresh Anand create a versatile body of work ranging from architecture and interiors of residences and corporate offices to retail and hospitality spaces. Their clients range from individual home owners to companies such as Biocon, the Park hotels, Nike, MTV and Hard Rock Café to educational institutions like Delhi Public School and The Doon School. Recently they were the 'Education' Category winner at the INSIDE World Festival of Interiors 2013 in Singapore.

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