

A WALK THROUGH THE WORLD OF IIID AND BEYOND

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# Designing differently



INDIA'S LEADING B2B MAGAZINE ON INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

# Long Way to GO



Mujib Ahmed and Lalita Tharani

Mujib Ahmed and Lalita Tharani came together by chance. They joined hands for a presentation named Collaborative Architecture, and the name stuck! Nine years since the inception of the design studio, their practice has grown from strength to strength: to their credit are a host of projects for which they have won 14 national awards and two international awards.

At Mumbai-based Collaborative Architecture, architecture is not a forced result of a brief, but a compulsive urge of the creative mind. The designs, say Ahmed and Tharani, are not really the result of a rational process, but, intuitive, often layered palimpsests of logical, irrational, bizarre, poetic yet impossible thoughts.

Architecture at Collaborative goes beyond the generally prevailing notions of functional contingencies and simplistic approach to problem solving. Projects fall in a larger scheme of things, and are seen as critical explorations of ideas and visions for future.

The principals, Lalita Tharani and Mujib Ahmed, come with solid credentials. Tharani got her diploma in interior architecture (with a gold medal) from Sophia Polytechnic, Mumbai, in 1993 and in 2001 set up her own firm, Lalita Tharani Associates.

Ahmed, who got his degree in architectural engineering from REC, Calicut, in 1993, served as visiting faculty at Kamala Raheja Vidhyanidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies, Mumbai, from 1996-98. In 1998, he established Mujib Arkitekture Engineering in Calicut.

In 2002, a year after they joined hands for their "collaborative" presentation, the duo came together and set up Collaborative Architecture. Since then, there's been no looking back. The firm dabbles in all sectors, be it hospitality, corporate, residential, institutional or interiors.

Speaking about design influences, the duo states that there is no single predominant influence. "It is more of an assimilation of what we have encountered, experienced, learnt and unlearnt. We do not confine ourselves within the conventional tenets of architecture for our direction of design," Ahmed says for both of them.

On present-day inspirational role models, they say the inspiration comes not from the design per se, but from the designer's process and restraint. "Peter Zumtor never ceases to inspire us by his deliberately unassuming, under-rated, but truly magnificent architecture. Also David Chipperfield for his restrained spaces, Alvaro Siza for his mastery of volumes and white walls, Tadao Ando for his material poetics and Frank Gehry for re-inventing his architecture at the age of 60."

At Collaborative, there is no linear, rigid trajectory when it comes to design concepts. "We get really bored and restless if we were to look at architecture and design through a pre-defined tunnel vision," Tharani says. Concurring, Ahmed adds: "Concepts are born out of the project programme or at times even from a thread-of-design of an earlier project."

Listing favourite projects by other designers, Ahmed names Louis Kahn's Salk Institute and Le Corbusier's Ronchamp. Tharani professes a fondness for Tadao Ando's Awaji Yumebutai and Chichu Art Museum, and Thomas Heatherwick's UK pavilion. From their own projects, the choice is clear. "Wrap-3, Wrap-4, Urban Totem (a vertical sustainable tower) and Wedge-1," they say.

Today, they believe that Indian design has truly emerged as a force to be reckoned with internationally. "In the coming years, we will see a lot of Indian designers getting international commissions — something that was a dream when we started out," Ahmed says.

*Insite* takes a look at three of Collaborative Architecture's projects to learn more about the architectural language the firm has perfected and the approach taken to solve design dilemmas. We look at Wedge-1, a 3,000 sq. ft. prototype designed for a standalone showroom for a furniture manufacturer in Mumbai; Wrap-4, a 12,000 sq. ft. showroom for Hyundai cars in Calicut; and an extremely tiny bedroom prototype with all amenities (the entire area including the bathroom is 220 sq. ft.).



### Wedge-1

Wedge-1 is the latest of architectonic explorations by the firm in creating projects that are highly refined in architectural morphology and yet fulfil the programmatic agenda of the brief.

The showroom, done up in ply, mild steel framework, MDF and finished in acrylic emulsion paint, was installed at the 2009 Index fair in Mumbai. The architectural intent was to dissect the simple "shoe box" and manipulate the architectonic character of the box in the most economical way (there were stringent limits on the budget and delivery schedule). The name Wedge comes from the character of the spaces within the dissected box, which largely are trapezoidal. The space has been organised as a centripetal, pinwheel form as the central gathering space holds the different wedges around its periphery with its undulating volumes and roofline.

The peripheral wall sets the tone of the encounter with the exhibits with its unique cutouts, which reveal and mask the displays simultaneously to lure the public in. The two-dimensional cutouts on the skin transform the project from a simple container of products to an architectural ensemble of multiple meanings and unparallel perceptual values.

Wedge-1 is painted white, including the exhibit floor, to heighten the perception of encounter with the products. The central gathering space has a series of light “vectors” (1,200-mm long T5 lamps), which form an enclosing canopy and fuse the space to complete the box.





#### Wrap-4

The project forms part of Collaborative Architecture's continuing explorations in spatial syntax by altering the classical space defining co-ordinates/tools through non-hierarchical tectonics and even combing the users/products to that end.

An unusual brief — "Car displays inevitably are 'parking lots'! Give us a nice backdrop for the product display" and a strategic urban location, the main street of the city — lent the architectural direction and determined the design parameters.

The brief was to insert the whole gamut for a middle-segment brand in a 12,000 sq. ft. old warehouse. The showroom abuts the main street with no setback, having a 60m-long uninterrupted façade. Forbo, Corian, ply frame work, ACP and silestone flooring were used.

The ensuing architectural response did exactly the opposite of brief, by positioning the "parking lot" (vehicular display) as the "raison d'être" and the anchoring element of the showroom.

The disposition of the showroom posed a unique architectural challenge to create a 360-degree viewing, as the façade abuts the road and the customers enter from the back. Unlike most stores, which are designed for front viewing, here the design had to address the changing experiential views of the spectator.

The wrap, which merges the floor, wall, ceiling and the products into a single, unified entity, establishes a vital link between the showroom, the display and the people in the showroom on one hand and the speeding traffic and the passer-bys on the street — a 60m "billboard" mimicking the flux of movement on the street.

The "hanging counters" are the customer interfaces in the showroom, which are hung from the ceiling as the name indicates. These can be slid and rotated to a new position to maneuver the vehicles in the space. A sinusoidal curve separates the private domains from the public area.

The spiral stair is also equally "engineered" with custom-fabricated, three-dimensionally profiled cantilevered steps. Wrap-4 has won three national awards, including IIID 2007 and an International award- Biennale Miami 2007.





### Bedroom Prototype

Some of the best Collaborative Architecture designs stem from debilitating limitations thrown at Tharani and Ahmed. This project, one of the tiniest the firm has designed recently, showcases the poetic design sensibilities of the architects.

“Yusuf is one of our oldest clients. We couldn’t say no to him even though the project was too small,” Tharani says.

The duo treated the project as a case study design, exploring new directions in residential design. The client offered full freedom to innovate as long as it fitted in with his budget.

“At times you are lucky to have projects where you can bring in innovation in design, and details. These are projects where you push yourself to the limit,” Ahmed says.

Completely designed with Corian, the design combines sophistication and fluidity. An all-white palette was chosen in the bedroom owing to the tiny size; in the bathroom, a reverse palette (all black, except for the vanity counter in white Corian) was adopted.

The seamless furniture appears to be like undifferentiated entities in the room. The wardrobe, bed and the TV unit choreograph the space around them in wonderful unison to create a stunningly poetic space.

Lighting was also an important consideration during the design process. “Lighting design is never an afterthought in our design process, but is integral to the concept design. It always overlaps with spatial and furniture design, lending them a unique character,” Tharani says. 

