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History of Design in 50 Products & Spaces

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Jürgen Mayer-Hermann of J. MAYER H. and Lalita Tharani and Mujib Ahmed of Collaborative Architecture join forces to undertake an explorative approach to architecture

Compiled by Tina Thakrar



Jürgen Mayer-Hermann



Mujib Ahmed and Lalita Tharani

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COLLABORATIVE ARCHITECTURE

How did the association between Collaborative Architecture and J. MAYER H. come into being? Why did you decide to join forces?

Lalita & Mujib: We have been friends for several years and have been following each other’s work for a while. We did see a lot of overlapping synergies in the positioning of both studios and in the way we look at design and the built environment. Jürgen has been fascinated by India’s history, culture and food. We have been fascinated by his studio’s unbridled energy and integration of new technologies in poetic ways in projects of diverse nature and scale. This is an excuse to re-affirm those passions we share commonly.

Jürgen: There are overlapping ideas and converging points at different levels of design thinking. A generative process is common in both firms’ methodology. The two invest a lot in design research and the formal investigation of architecture. Both are passionate about innovation and appropriate technology. J. MAYER H. goes steps ahead, developing new technologies and material research as the projects and infrastructure allows for this important exploration. If we have to point out one important factor that brought the studios together, it is the ability of both practices to zoom-in and zoom-out of a project. In other words, we are capable of looking at projects at macro levels and micro levels with equal intensity.

Collaborative Architecture focuses more on the critical exploration of ideas and visions for the future, whereas J. MAYER H. explores the relationship between the human body, nature and technology. How will these differences contribute towards an exchange of innovative design thinking?
Jürgen: Both studios are more divergent than

they appear to be on the surface. But yes, we do share a lot of commonalities as individuals; our design ethos and sensibilities overlap at various levels, which are our anchoring elements. What makes this collaboration unique is the idea of two firms getting engaged right from the design research stage, and our commitment to knowledge sharing.

Lalita & Mujib: Through this collaboration, what we want to stress on is the knowledge sharing between the studios, which in turn connects end-users, our clients and people who work for both studios. We hope it will result in very positive and remarkable value proposition.

Where are you both similar in your design sensibilities?
Jürgen: Both offices look at new technologies and contemporary media as part of the creation and experience of space, both public spaces as well as private living environments. Each moment in time has to find its own architectural expression and we are still at the very beginning of understanding the potentials of digital technologies, smart materials and social media.

Lalita & Mujib: As studios, our design sensibilities overlap at various levels, but also vary to a great extent, which we consider a huge positive for our collaborative effort. Both studios push the envelope of conventional architectural production and design thinking. What makes us an effective team is the extraordinary pain we both take to transform these ideas into buildable and realisable projects for our clients within their realistic parameters. Seeing the sophistication in our work, a lot of people tend to think that projects are built on European budgets. Nothing could be further from the truth. Most of them are well within the acceptable budgets of projects normally executed in

the country. J. MAYER H. could do some amazing innovations with wooden structures that generate a distinct language, which have been way cheaper here than in Europe. We look forward to bringing their knowledge and expertise with new technologies and building materials to India. This is the vital intersection of both studios, that design need not be expensive to be innovative.

Considering the two studios are from different countries, what is the design process that you plan to follow for joint projects? How will design responsibilities be shared?
Jürgen: We are going to bring in a lot of cutting edge design research. Collaborative will combine it with their understanding of Indian ethos and the limits and possibilities of technology and their deep knowledge of poetics of spaces. This is the perfect collaboration between two studios - J. MAYER H. has a global footprint and Collaborative Architecture has a global vision.

Lalita & Mujib: With the shared design ethos and digital communications as the backbone, both studios could easily work as a cohesive whole.

Jürgen, you refer to your own architecture as an elastic space. Why?
Our design process is based on a repertoire of strategic explorations that we have developed over the years, by pushing limits and being driven by the curiosity for the new. We look closely at the site, critically rethink the programme and extract something that is special to the specific site. We establish parameters as a skeleton or framework for each project. These are conceptual conditions rather than design driven compositions based on a client’s brief, including contextual references and programmatic logistics.



Border checkpoint, Georgia



Parallel House

Your works are known to be visually striking and bordering on surreal, and tend to blur the lines between ideas, scales and even disciplines. What are you trying to achieve, explore through this design ethos?
Jürgen: Architecture is a catalyst that is not a background to everyday life but something that provokes you to rethink spatial conditions and concerns about our built environment. We might evoke curiosity and surprise for the potential of a building and its context. Architecture should work as an activator to engage people from a passive mode of expectation to an involved level of participation and attention.

Collaborative Architecture was set up in Mumbai in 2002, opened design centres in

Beijing and Calicut, won numerous awards along the way, and has now joined hands with J. MAYER H. Lalita and Mujib, how would you describe your journey?
Lalita: It has been fantastic and challenging. Fantastic because in the last decade we could create a body of work that contributed to the contemporary architectural discourse and praxis in the subcontinent. Challenging, as we needed to look for the right clients and create works of highest quality in an environment where striving for excellence is mostly seen as an avoidable pursuit, and most of the time it doesn’t make any business sense in the realms of architectural production in the country. Our collaboration with J. MAYER H. couldn’t have happened at a better time. As a practice, we have kind of solved that ‘Indian conundrum’ of



OLS House near Stuttgart, Germany



Stacked Tectonics

creating works of credible architectural value, even with the most prosaic programs and debilitating constraints.

You have said that ‘architecture is about building with positive redundancies’. Could you elaborate?

Mujib: Positive redundancies are the essence of architecture. Without them it is mere functional or programmatic assemblage. They define and differentiate the character of the building or space. They are the difference we see between the earlier and later works of Le Corbusier. The enduring nuances he could weave in his later works like Ronchamp and La Tourette were missing from his machine aesthetics-inspired earlier works. Positive redundancies are what make Frank Lloyd Wright’s Falling Water still the most loved piece of residential architecture. Those impossible, expensive cantilevers are show-offs by Wright, but what a difference they made to the landscape.

Jürgen, you create your own patterns or ornaments that are incorporated in the designs. How are these then translated into architecture?

Over the last few years we have developed a catalogue of design strategies. We are interested in the questions of forms, formulae and formalities that shape the rituals of our everyday life. One major source of exploration is data protection patterns. I have a huge collection of data protection patterns, found within secure mail envelopes from banks or

government agencies. We use these patterns in all possible scales and explore them in a variety of projects – from art installations to urban complexes. These patterns envelop and contain spaces and highlight ambivalent border situations between the inside and outside. In 1995, these patterns became a metaphor for a lot of issues that we’re dealing with: boundaries between public and private, inside and outside, meaning and non-meaning, information and erasure, writing and content. Data protection patterns also represent a precise technological development that conceals the personal through a superimposition of text, a blurring of an aesthetic—these patterns: designed, lyrical—that’s very strategic at the same time. Sometimes we may use a fragment of a particular pattern and it may be directly used as an element in our project.

This partnership is unlike any other seen in the country. What can we expect to see from the association in the coming years?

Lalita & Mujib: It is a partnership built on J. MAYER H.’s ability to work in diverse cultures and economies to create architecture that is transcendental and global, and Collaborative Architecture’s ability to design some of the most sophisticated and complex projects realised in India.

Jürgen: Good design is good business. That is what has made JMH and Collaborative Architecture known widely. With Collaborative Architecture we are currently in an advanced stage of discussion on an exciting project in the Chaoyang District of Beijing.

J. MAYER H. und Partner, Architekten, is a Berlin-based design firm founded in 1996 by Jürgen Mayer H. The firm is most recognised for the design of the Metropol Parasol in Spain and the New Airport Building in Georgia. Mayer has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Mies van der Rohe Award for Emerging Architects in 2003 and the Red Dot Design Award in 2012. He has also taught at Princeton University, University of the Arts Berlin, Harvard University, the Architectural Association in London and Columbia University, New York. In 2014, Andre Santer and Hans Schneider joined Mayer as partners in the firm.

Co-founded and headed by Lalita Tharani and Mujib Ahmed, Collaborative Architecture is an award-winning design firm based in Mumbai, with branches in Beijing and Calicut. The firm is known for its innovative architecture that goes beyond the accepted notions of functionality and challenges the simplistic approach to problem solving. Since its inception in 2002, the firm has won 36 national and international awards, including the Indian Institute of Interior Designers Award and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture.



Metropol Parasol, Spain



Sonnenhof in Jena, Germany



Prototype N(ON)