

OCTOBER 2025

insite

INDIAN DESIGN MAGAZINE

Minimalist Design



LALITA
THARANI

DHARAM
PATEL



LADY KISHWAR
DESAI

CHETAN
LAHOTI



LESTER
ROZARIO

KRISHNA
MISTRY



ANIRUDHA
DEHADE

RAJESH
PATEL





MINIMALISM & MISINTERPRETATIONS

Mumbai-based Collaborative Architecture's Take
On Minimalism

Text: Ar. Ayushi Roy

Photographs: Courtesy Collaborative Architecture

Collaborative Architecture is a Mumbai-based design studio, which is today at the forefront of the new Asian avant-garde, where cutting-edge innovation meets rich cultural intelligence.

Founded in 2004 by architects Lalita Tharani and Mujib Ahmed, the studio's projects are dynamic explorations, intricately woven with in-depth research, material experimentation, advanced technology, and ecological consciousness. Each creation is a beautiful blend of poetry, context, and practicality. Lalita passionately champions diversity through her leadership of Collaborative Lab's material research, while Mujib inspires with his bold conceptual vision and academic pursuits. Together, they craft awe-inspiring architecture that forges connections between people and cultures, transforming complex ideas into contemporary, meaningful spaces that leave a lasting impression.

A discussion with architects Lalita Tharani and Mujib Ahmed, about the core ideas of minimalism, went much beyond project briefs and design concepts. The thoughts shared by the architects compelled a closer inspection of all that we learn while studying architecture, provoked an insight into the deeper meaning of minimalism. We also discuss two projects that reflect Collaborative Architecture's interpretations - Diyar Al Muharraq, and a proposal for TATA Steel's international "Notions of India" competition, in which they got the second runner-up position.

The act of doing the bare minimum and turning that restraint into an artistic statement is how most people, also including designers, initially think of minimalism. But when asked about their viewpoint, architects Lalita Tharani and Mujib Ahmed offered a new perspective: 'minimalism is not reductivism'... They contend that a stripped-down or nullified design does not capture the spirit of minimalism. This viewpoint, which is widely held by the public and many professionals, misunderstands the fundamental nature of architectural creation. *"In the canonical sense, architecture is a series of overlaid decisions; functional strategies, cultural nuances, and individual idiosyncrasies put on top of other more prosaic determining factors like programmatic efficiency, economics and technological inputs,"* says Mujib.

"The minimalist war cry 'Less is More' is grossly misunderstood," observes Mujib. *"Then architecture becomes a reductivist exercise – leading to meaningless abstractions."* Minimalism does not suggest to

strip away meaning and cultural context in favour of a stark aesthetic; minimalism was never meant to be devoid of substance. Its emotional depth—rich with references and significance—has been overshadowed by modern interpretations that reduce it to mere surface imagery. *"As we dig deeper, the emotional archaeology of classical minimalism is far richer than its contemporaneous interpretations, which, unfortunately, are bereft of any deeper connections and associations."*

But neither of them are convinced about the way minimalism is understood and practiced today. *"What practitioners claim today as minimalism is nothing but its distant cousin-reductivism – which is philosophically divergent but similar in its outward manifestation,"* says Lalita. *"Could our work be classified as minimalist? Certainly not...! Our projects do not consciously strive for that fetishized imagery that one associates with minimalist design. Our body of work is best described as a 'tapestry' – even more than as reductivism...."* she adds. *"But at the same time, we are transfixed and infinitely inspired by the minimalist epoch of modernism."*

Historically, minimalist modernism is known to have drawn deeply from Japanese vernacular and aesthetics. Figures like Bruno Taut openly celebrated the quiet precision of Japanese houses, and even Mies van der Rohe's distilled forms carried cultural and technological subtleties. *"Taut's celebration of Japanese sensibilities and his admiration for Japanese houses had a deep influence on his European contemporaries,"* says Mujib.

Over time, however, the original thought diluted, got reinterpreted, and each architect, designer, and artist would have brought in his/her personal understanding. For Lalita and Mujib, true minimalism is closer to Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry: powerful not because it is empty, but because each word is weighted with associative meaning. Their own work comes through as what they call a "tapestry" - layered, contextual, and alive - rather than a quest for the "fetishised imagery" of minimalist design. *"The production of architecture, by its very nature, is the antithesis of what minimalism, both the public and to a great extent, the practitioners of the craft, generally understand and imply,"* conclude the architect duo of Collaborative Architecture. So, while they remain inspired by the minimalist aesthetic, their work resists the label, choosing depth and cultural connection over the allure of mere reduction.





Diyar Al Muharraq:

This project exemplifies the fusion of culture and modernism in its design. It serves as an innovative public infrastructure that not only creates a landmark but also weaves heritage into a modern city. By firmly integrating the traditions of the country's culture within this new township, it has become an iconic symbol of Diyar Al Muharraq and reflects Bahrain's significant investment in its human and technological capital.

The Diyar Al Muharraq entry bridge serves as an example of how

profoundly contextual and expressive minimalist design can be. Rising to prominence as a landmark that is instantly identifiable from a distance, the building is inspired by the site's maritime history and the overlapping arches of Diyar's logo and other architectural elements. Two soaring pylons, standing 65 meters high, create a quiet yet commanding silhouette for the bridge. Constructed from structural steel plates and finished with anti-corrosive paint, they exemplify the minimalist principle of functionality. A concealed cable system, hidden within a double layer of stainless-steel solar screens, supports the pedestrian pathway while preserving visual clarity. These screens, coated in marine-grade paint and inspired by the region's traditional mashrabiya design, filter harsh light and protect against heat without adding visual clutter.



1. Collaborative Architecture: a tapestry of layers and expressions

2. A practice inspired by the epoch of minimalism in modernism

3. Diyar Al Muharraq - where structure, culture, and engineering converge to form a poetic civic icon

4. Mashrabiya-inspired screens: filtering light, controlling heat, and preserving clarity

The bridge deck uses simple wooden planks and has radiant cooling to help keep it comfortable during hot summer days. This feature is practical, not just for show. Escalators and lifts are integrated neatly within the pylons to maintain a clean appearance. Important services like fire stairs, electrical rooms, and control spaces are located inside the structure or below ground.

In this context, minimalism transcends mere reduction or emptiness. Instead, every choice regarding structure and materials is thoughtfully distilled to its essence, guided by a careful layering of context, climate adaptability, and engineering principles. The result is a bridge that appears inevitable in its simplicity—a modern maritime emblem that strikes a balance between practicality and poetic grace.

National Unity Pavilion:

This project addresses abstraction and seeks inspiration in its purest and simplest form. The design proposal posed the question: how



can we encapsulate the diverse identity of India as a singular entity? Is architecture capable of representing the intertwined, competing complexities within one construction? The discussion focused on the ideas of notion versus identity. The Unity Pavilion stands as a testament to embody multiple identities as a cultural bond. It celebrates diversity and range rather than emphasising the concept of a single identity.



7

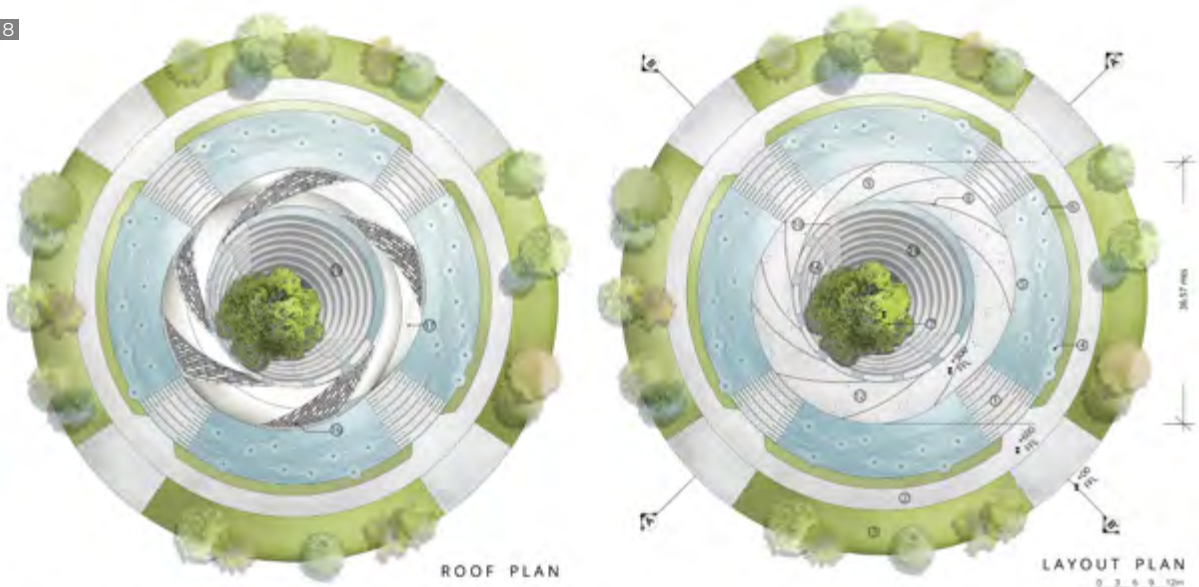


The design of the pavilion is inspired by the historical context and cultural evidence. The fundamental idea draws from the principles of Ahimsa and Non-violence, which established the most stable foundation for freedom. Morphological inspirations originate from the Sanchi Stupa, as the National Unity Pavilion aligns with the footprint of the Sanchi Stupa, an iconic heritage symbol of Gautama Buddha's legacy, measuring 70 meters in diameter, including the

surrounding park. The path weaves a connection with Dharma Ashoka, establishing a route for all religions and creating a unified platform. The Bodhi tree at the centre draws inspiration from enlightenment, which has for centuries become a symbol of wisdom and has been calibrated to serve as a space for people to exchange ideas and share knowledge and perspectives on various aspects of India.

The reflection pool with pylon-like structures is another experiential feature representing each state and union territory. The circular design fosters a connection with the space. The roof brings a contemporary interpretation of the universe, embodying the ideas of Sandhya and

8



LEGEND

- | | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|---|
| 1. Matt leather finished granite blocks. | 6. 12mm thick Corian steel (treated). | 11. 25mm dia supports. | 16. Space frame - structural circular sections. |
| 2. Circular path, hard pavement. | 7. 800mm x 800mm tiles. | 12. Circular Gallery. | 17. 6mm MS plate finished with paint. |
| 3. Lawn. | 8. 38 by 150mm drain channels. | 13. Amphitheater. | |
| 4. 300 & 250mm dia hollow section pylons. | 9. Polished concrete flooring. | 14. Steps. | |
| 5. 300mm deep reflecting pool. | 10. Green granite blocks. | 15. Customized flood lights. | |

Sandhi, which encapsulate the concepts of Body-Matter-Time and signify the notion of oneness.

The National Unity Pavilion is a manifesto for Collaborative Architecture, not just a competition entry. It illustrates how architecture may transcend the search for a single "iconic" image and instead serve as a forum for discussion, remembrance, and group identity.

In keeping with their tenet that minimalism is not reductivism, the pavilion builds a living, participatory space by layering history, context, and technological precision. The design reflects the firm's conviction that architecture should distil complexity without erasing it by fusing structural innovation with the spiritual and cultural legacies of Gandhi, Ashoka, and Buddha. ■

5. A bridge that rises as a maritime landmark, blending heritage with modern design

6. National Unity Pavilion: rooted in the wisdom of the past

7. The Pavilion layers Gandhi's Ahimsa, Ashoka's Dharma, and Buddha's wisdom into a spatial manifesto for unity

8. At its heart, the Bodhi tree anchors the space — a symbol of wisdom, shade, and shared dialogue

9. A pavilion shaped not just by form, but by the idea of oneness woven through many identities

10. A contemporary roof shelters tradition and future alike



10

