

# Inside Outside

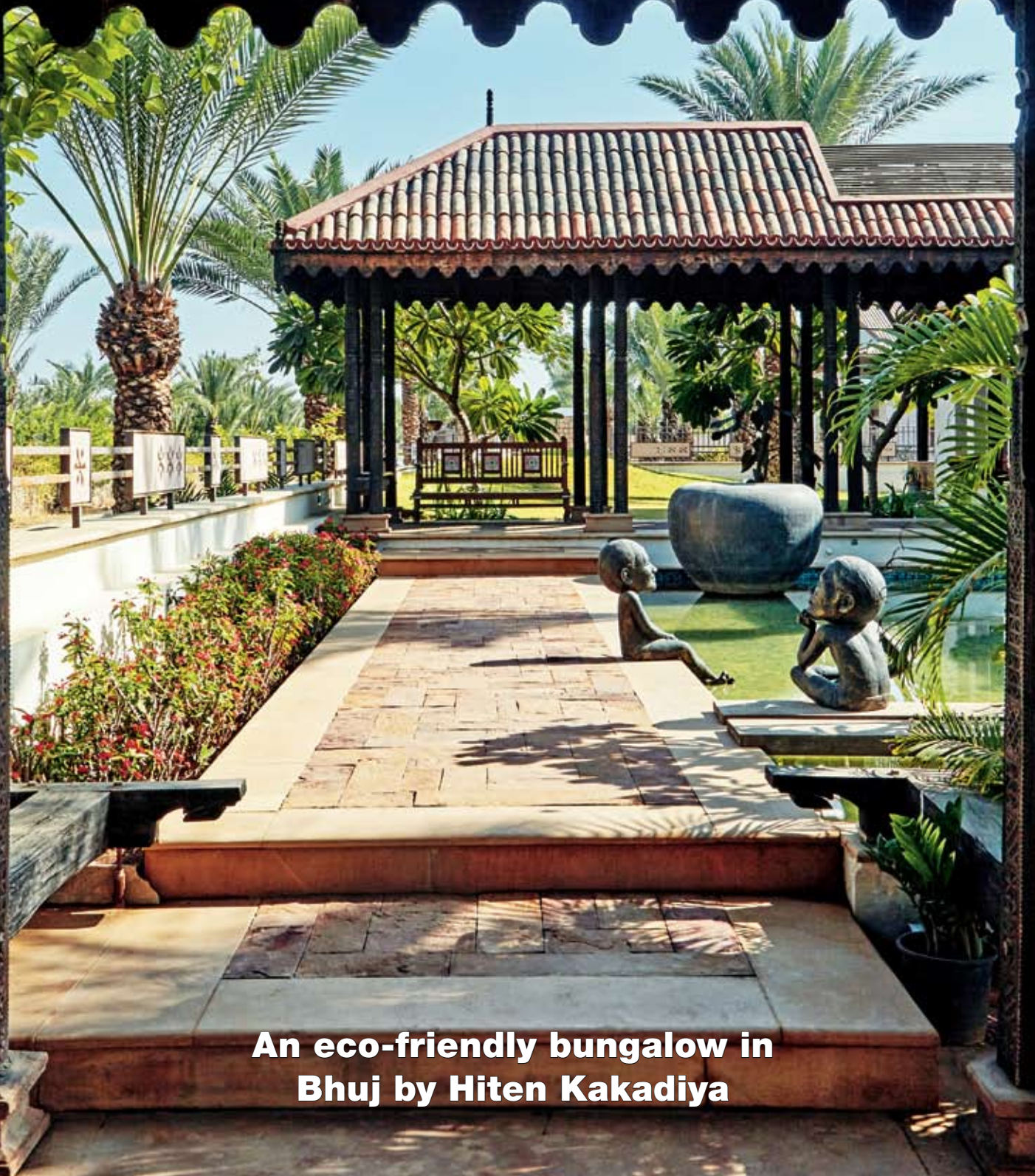
THE INDIAN DESIGN MAGAZINE

[www.insideoutside.in](http://www.insideoutside.in)

ISSUE 371

JULY 2016

₹100



**An eco-friendly bungalow in  
Bhuj by Hiten Kakadiya**



# Random Musings



**Lalita and Mujib of Collaborative Architecture share their concerns as a studio and the processes and challenges of their profession with Devyani Jayakar.**

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY COLLABORATIVE ARCHITECTURE

Looking at the practice of contemporary architecture with a candid eye, Lalita and Mujib pose serious questions, though the blow may be softened by humour.

## **Why can't architecture reprogram the program?**

'In our practice we've often found that a client brief is only a list of fears and uncertainties, which may take the form of comments like "I know what I don't want, but I don't know what I want," or "I want a house like the neighbour's house",' says Mujib.

'It is our role as architects to find out what the hidden brief is, what the clients really want...and to partner with them in the process of design thinking' says Lalita. 'People often perceive innovative and out-of-the-box designs as being non-functional, experimental and expensive. There are several negative tags attached to such design, which is far from the facts.'

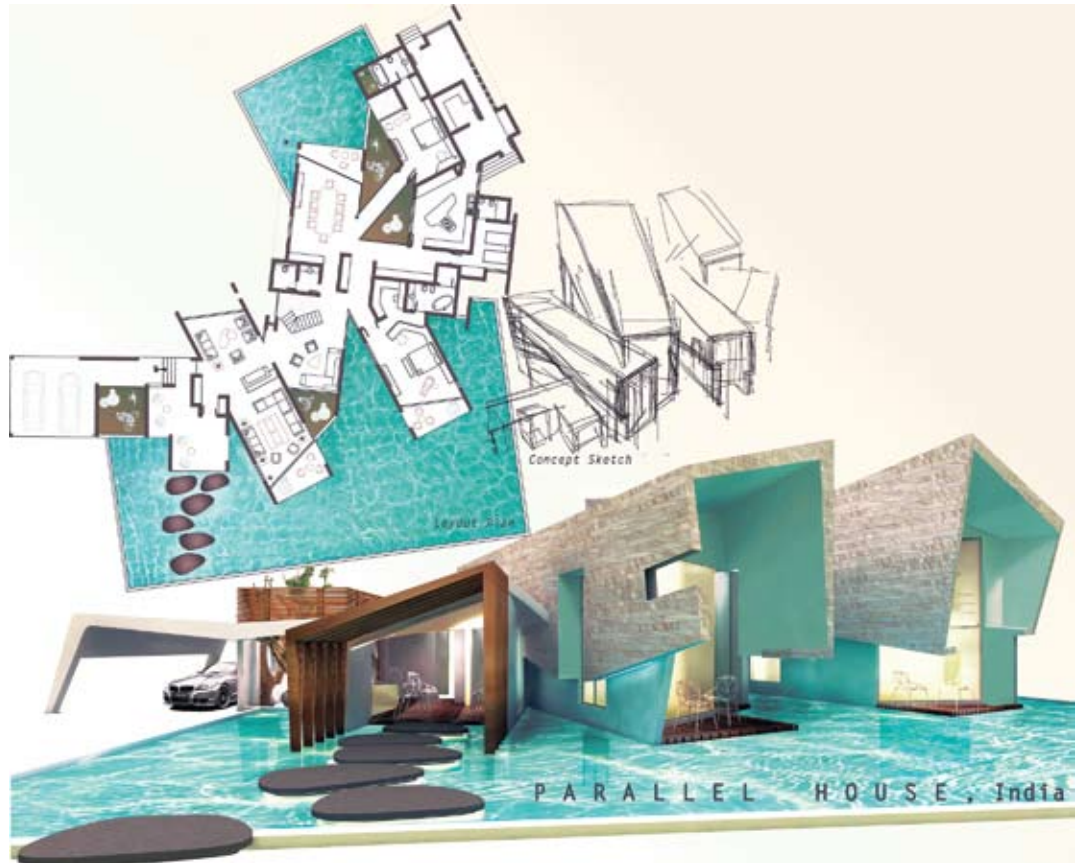
So the duo has decided to create a new benchmark, which, as they are quick to admit, isn't often a happy path. 'One of the clients stopped communicating with us for six months,' discloses Mujib. 'But we were ok with it,' Lalita interjects. 'As later, they thanked us for pushing them into a design which not only met their brief to the T, but gave them a project which they were truly proud of.'

Challenging clients to transcend their limited brief, and the one dictated by mere functional considerations, is what Lalita and Mujib do frequently. 'A public space lobby which we designed recently for one of the first Platinum LEED certified IT parks in the country, is doubling as a workspace in several pockets designed for the purpose and is generating revenue for the owners,' says Mujib.

'Architecture is more often than not perceived as solution-driven. It is meant to make things more



House of Cantilevers – Collaborative Architecture.



Parallel House – Collaborative Architecture.





Farnsworth House – Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.



Reflected Topography – Collaborative Architecture.

economical and efficient. When we talk of “design solution,” we are actually limiting the architectural possibilities for multiple solutions which add value to the project,’ says Lalita.

#### **Why can’t architecture pose questions, instead of being the answer?**

‘Wang Shu’s work questions the validity of demolishing existing structures in the name of modernity. When he reused salvaged masonry from the demolished historic quarter, he was paying homage to the history of the people and to their roots. The masonry has a story to tell and embodies a mute critique of the development,’ says Lalita.

#### **Why can’t architecture connect anymore?**

Almost all the renovation projects undertaken so far in Beijing’s old districts are seen as partly successful by scholars and conservationists. Their failure to connect to the existing residents in an engaging way makes those insertions more speculative exercises, than projects aimed as regeneration processes. ‘In Dashilar Hutong – a key heritage zone in Beijing - residents have rejected spiffy new developments in favour of the communal togetherness of their old way of life,’ says Mujib. ‘While well-meaning, many of the projects in the area seem to have failed to connect an emotional connection with the residents.’



Wexner Centre for the Arts – Peter Eisenman.



Stacked Wedges – Collaborative Architecture.





Wrap 3 – Collaborative Architecture.



### Why can't architecture fail?

'As architects, we have to acknowledge and manage our failures,' says Mujib.

He quotes some of the most celebrated examples, such as Mies' Farnsworth House which has been called a 1-room house that is nothing but a glass cage on stilts. The extensive use of clear floor-to-ceiling glass opens the interior to its natural surroundings to an extreme degree, destroying the privacy a home is expected to provide.

Peter Eisenman's House VI in Connecticut made it difficult for the users so that they would have to grow accustomed to the architecture and constantly be aware of it. For instance, in the bedroom there is a glass slot in the centre of the wall continuing through the floor that divides the room in half, forcing there to be separate beds on either side of the room and be seen from the living below. Many other difficult aspects disrupt conventional living, such as the column hanging over the dinner table that separates diners.

The Nakagin Capsule Tower is one of Tokyo's most famous buildings. Resembling washing machines stacked atop each other, it was designed by Kisho Kurokawa in 1972 and caught the world's



**Stacked Techtonics – Collaborative Architecture.**



attention with its minuscule, fully fitted, living spaces for the country's single office workers. In a tight squeeze, each unit contains a bed, a fold-out desk and a bathroom area all in just 10 sq mts. The building's dilapidated state does not make for an easy life. Not a single capsule was ever added or dislodged from the structure due to the high cost involved - which was the original intention of an organically growing and pruning system envisaged by the Metabolists. This most celebrated structure of the Metabolist movement is due for demolition.

The Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio, again by Peter Eisenman, was built to accommodate a multidisciplinary space for the exploration and exhibition of contemporary art. At the museum's opening, no artwork was featured so as to ensure that visitors were not distracted from the architecture. After the museum's completion, the building was plagued with a series of construction and design issues that tarnished its public image. In 2003, the building underwent an invasive, three-year renovation, only fourteen years after its christening.

Habitat 67 in Montreal, the pilot project of Moshe Safdie's mission to reinvent apartment living, became mired in controversy. Wildly ambitious, it was Safdie's government-sponsored attempt at reimagining apartment living. Comprising a three-dimensional landscape of 354 stacked concrete



## talking point



Nakagin Capsule Tower – Kisho Kurokawa.

'boxes', Habitat 67 pioneered the combination of two major housing typologies – the urban garden residence and the modular high-rise apartment building. The building, designed as social, affordable housing, soon became a sensational hit, making it amongst the most expensive real estate in Montreal - so much for social housing!

'Architecture as a profession doesn't have a mechanism to acknowledge failures. We shunt this aspect and are terrified of it. But consider this...80 per cent of the architecture built around the world has failed in some way. If we have a calibrated attempt to acknowledge small failures and make it a fundamental part of innovation, we could avoid much larger failures in the long run,' says Lalita.

'Architecture can be like a Greek hero –

heroic and tragic at the same time,' adds Mujib.

### **Why can't architecture be affordable?**

'One of the central tenets of Collaborative's practice is to establish the fact that a good design need not be expensive. We always strive to create a body of work which is celebrated for its design innovation while being very, very economical. Our projects portray a different imagery from the usual "affordable iconography" that is generally associated with projects done on shoestring budgets,' says Mujib. 'May be the best example of this is our project "Stacked Tectonics," created for an orphanage in south India. It won the SEED award for socially responsible architecture and was nominated for the first round of the Aga Khan awards. It also won a host of national awards,' says Lalita. 