forest for the trees
trees for the forest

2015

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LEAF Documents
Exhibition at Trichy
Introduction

While putting together this compilation, at some point while we were reviewing the projects, I asked for the file that listed projects from 1973; when the office was established by my father. There were about 30 names for each year and as I read them my heart filled with remorse. Many names were of projects that never took off; the number that did not in those days, far outnumbered the ones that did. And of those that did, we had no documentation.

Of those, many were places I knew as a child or visited when I started studying architecture. They were simply divine landscapes; mostly homes; but were elegant, simple, tranquil and very skillfully planted. Others were institutions such as NID, which I maintain; had the best landscapes I have ever seen amongst institutions till date. Even these never got documented and what remains today is fragments of what was a glorious garden. Then there were the precision like groves planted at IIM at Louis Kahn’s behest and they remain, or the trees that line all of Gandhinagar, but all those poetic gardens are now gone and are only in the memory of those who made them or enjoyed them.

Such is the real tragedy of landscapes.

They are ethereal but temporal, unless a culture evolves to safeguard them.

I learnt that rather too late, in the work I did when I led design in the firm. A lot of the early work beginning from 1987 for many years did not get documented. Perhaps just as well, since in retrospect a lot was tardy.
The projects here in this compilation, really are a record of selected work done in the last 17 odd years; and when I look at them, were there some more that I wish were there and now have no records of? The answer is, yes; and that is the sad truth.

Nonetheless, here they are - representative images for a series of 50 odd projects, shown in great brevity. We have only compiled those that got built or just about to be completed. Many that never saw the light of the day or those on the drawing boards waiting to find their moment in the sun are not here.

Upon looking at them when finally put together, it's with some satisfaction that one realizes that many are extended narratives in themselves deserving a lot more telling and more importantly, they all stay true to some core values of articulate exactitude, spatial explorations that are exuberant; an unhindered use of materials, of symbolism and poetry and a bold but responsible freedom and joyousness that peppers all the work. And they demonstrate a large range of scale and typology; all done with great passion and conviction. Also interspersed in this book are three discussions; the notable one with Professor P. B. Bhagwat in which he recounts his life.

Then there are some pages from the LEAF documents that we do and smaller essays making comments on the decades beginning from 1975 till 2015.

Recently we were invited by a college of design at Trichy, to deliver their annual lecture, but also were asked if we could mount an exhibition. This we did; and it was called 24 Intercessions; and post this exhibition, this effort seemed a natural conclusion.

Aniket Bhagwat
January 2015

The Exhibition at Trichy.
In conversation: Part I

Professor P. B. Bhagwat talks to Aniket Bhagwat.

Tell me a bit about my grandfather, Bhalchandra V. Bhagwat; How did he learn about gardens; what was his life like?

You know him - he was a tall, regal and fair man who always turned out immaculately. He lived his life by a motto; “If anyone can do it - I can do it better”. He believed that fully and he had three qualities that were to be his strength always. He spoke the English language with aplomb, he had excellent cursive writing skills and he had a quick head for figures. This had led to him taking jobs as they were available as a clerk or an accountant where possible. My early memories of him are when we were living in a village called Raita, near Kalyan. This must have been 1934. Someone told the local land owner who had a flower garden and was looking for a farm manager, about a man called Bhagwat and he was offered the job. As all things, he learnt on the job.

Years later, on a trip to Pune, he went to the Empress Botanical Gardens and inquired if there was a job there and as luck would have it, there was an opening as an accountant. When there, in addition to his work, he learnt as much as he could in the gardens and spent a lot of time in what was a small but excellent library. There was Firminger’s Manuals on Gardening, and George Watts’ Dictionary of Economic Products of India, along with a host of old books on English Gardening.

When the Superintendent of the gardens had to retire, the committee felt that since young Bhagwat was there and had shown great interest, commitment and had learnt a lot in his time there, there was no need to look elsewhere and he was offered the job.
He had a sharp eye and mind. He soon realized that while the Britishers were very fond of cut flowers, the flowers grown, essentially *jasminums*, while fragrant, did not have a stem which disallowed the making of wreaths and bouquets.

He started growing tube roses and ensured that there was a good stock during Easter and Christmas. The bouquets became a runaway hit. Over time he grew *gerberas*, *gladiolus*, daylilies and michaelmas daisies. A wreath that adorned celebrations when done by the Empress gardens was soon considered a prestige.

I remember one time when Akka Saheb Maharaj, Rani of Kolhapur for one of her daughter’s wedding wanted flowers to match the shade of her wedding attire. *Bauhinia purpurea* was the exact match and when he sent it to decorate the space, it found much praise. Another time when the Viceroy was to visit Kolhapur at Shalini Palace he was sent to make the gardens. Upon reaching there and inspecting the grounds, he requested for the labours so that, he could direct work. And to his great surprise in a little while, a chained gang of 60 prisoners were at his service. He must have been the only landscape architect in the world who developed a technique for a chained group to pass soil, manure, dig and plant.

Over time, his fame grew and the *sansthans* who had to copy everything that the royalty did, started sending for him to do their grounds. At the botanical garden he had started growing English vegetables. It was 1942 and a lot of Britishers were in Pune; and the vegetables were in great demand. In another instance, the British Cantonment which was nearby, wanted a place to tie their mules and asked if they could find a place at the
gardens. He offered it to them, on the condition that all the droppings were put in a pit by the animal keepers and this of course gave him an unlimited supply of manure. In addition, as payment he asked for work and got many contracts to plant trees in the army areas. Little things made the difference. For example, he noticed that the garden pots then used needed a mould - something that the local potter could not do; hence they were expensive and in short supply. He called the potter, designed a circular garden pot and gave an order by the hundreds; so that he could easily multiply, stock plants and sell them.

He really took what was a ramshackle garden and made it a workable, well disciplined enterprise that was much loved in those days.

So, tell me about the days when you started learning about gardens, and the life from then on...

When my father was an accountant at the garden, we lived in the colony nearby and as a child of 10 or 12 years I was allowed to go there whenever I wanted. I was not allowed to pluck flowers or eat fruit but I could wander around and I started observing trees. By the time I was sixteen and my father was the superintendent, I was appointed as an apprentice trainee and my job largely was to see deployment of men to work or keep records. Of two of the head gardeners, Sopanna and Gopal, the former knew plants and would test my knowledge on it and the first name I learnt from him was *Alstonia scholaris*. He would rattle off the names in English or Latin, and a few days later see if I remembered them. But it's not that he knew the names well; I still remember him showing me a plant that he called *carmumum hebumbum*; and much later I learnt he meant *Cardiospermum halicacabum*.

But they taught me; and perhaps the most important thing that they taught
me was not about recognizing plants, but about dispelling the confusion when confronted with many that looked similar. The nuances were taught.

“See they look the same, but now look under this leaf; it’s coarser to the touch...” and bit by bit, I felt at home in this world.

I had already sought admission in the Poona University Agricultural College by then and worked weekends at the gardens.

In college, my thirst to learn was insatiable - I just wanted to soak in everything I saw. Often I would read an advertisement in English ten times, just to memorize it! But what I really loved was history and also what it did to parts of gardens and open spaces. The spaces of the Peshwa Poona were different from the British Poona and I absorbed the logic and how they were used differently.

In college I stood first for all the three years and hence was the overall best student and upon graduating took over the job as the superintendent of the gardens since my father’s health was indifferent. But by then, the garden was a sinking ship; the years around Independence had not treated it well and I found that I spent all my time only to keep it financially afloat. My father had promised that if I did well in college he would send me abroad to study and he scraped whatever he could and I went to Holland, at the University of Wageningen. This was 1949-50. I remember Prof. Edelmen, who was really an excellent teacher of soils and along with his subject that I really enjoyed, I studied landscape, plant breeding and floriculture.

Having spent a year there, I went to Denmark. In the earlier trips I had seen the work of C. Th. Sørenson and asked him if I could learn under him.
There was no programme as such, for landscape at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts but, he taught a few courses there and suggested that I work with him and attend classes too and when he would have the time, he would sit me down and tell me about the world of gardens. I still remember him; a gentle soul standing in front of me and touching his eyes and in a sweeping gesture touching the top of his head and then his wrist and saying “Designing landscape is three things, what the eye sees, the brain deciphers and instructs the wrist that starts to draw; when all three are honed well, the landscape will be well.” He taught me how to draw straight lines and would say, “learn to draw lines, so that in a line, you can express joy, anger or fear”

He was a genius but so childlike. His big regret was that his ambition to be an actor in the Italian opera was unfulfilled; because they told him he had a big head and a poor voice.

I spent a year and a half with him and learnt that Brian Hackett had set up the first one year post graduate programme in landscape design at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. I wrote to him and soon was in his early class of four students; Burns, Stevens, a girl from Australia who had a sheep farm and me. In addition to design, we learnt soils, climate, geometry, history, theory of landscape design, plant material, ecology and regional landscape. It was an intense one year and he was a strict task master and often given to saying “If you don’t study, then well gentlemen, you can choose to be a butcher, barber or a baker”.

He looked a lot like Sherlock Holmes with his fine felt hat and I often teased him about it. When I finished my course he suggested that I speak to the
British Landscape Institute to see what they could do to help me; and sure enough, when they heard that, I was his student, they allowed me the one year as a part of fulfillment for the requirement to be a member and suggested I appear for the second part of the exams. I was returning soon to India and when this was revealed, they were kind to send me to a site the same day and give me my work to do a regional landscape scheme for an area.

For the other written papers, I was allowed to return home and sit in the cabin of my Principal at the Agricultural College in Pune at the same time that the exam was being conducted in London. The Principal took the responsibility to assure them that it would all be done correctly and the sealed papers were sent back.

A few months later I was told that my regional landscape set piece was one of the best they had seen and I was made an associate member.

I must be one of the oldest Retired Fellows of the Institute today!

Tell me a bit of your life upon your return and before you went to IIT Kharagpur.

I came back and started looking for jobs and the memorable one that stabilized our economic health was the one for Burmah Shell at Chembur in 1954. I was told that there was some landscape work to be obtained and went to meet the officers there, and while sitting waiting to be called, I heard one of them muttering “Godverdomme” off and on, in rising tones of anger. I smiled and Mr. Vanpech, who headed the development work, noticed my mirth. Not amused, he asked what the smile was for and if I knew what he
was saying. My time in Holland paid off and soon we were conversing about what I had learnt there and my qualifications. When he learnt about my education there, the job was given to me without any further debate. I ended up doing a lot of work from planting the arrival areas to taking a contract for keeping the industrial premises free from grass since it was a fire hazard and also grass cutting work in the colony. The money I got, in all was close to fourteen lakh rupees which was a large sum then and after paying for all the material and expenses, still left us enough to repay the debt my father had incurred for my travel abroad.

I remember a rather amusing incident where, when I was asked by them at one point to prepare a large grassed area, in anticipation of the President of India’s trip. I was given really no time; so had to start work on the same day. My trusted labor agency by then, upon hearing about the tight schedule was unfazed; and the next day deployed 100 donkeys to move the earth. I asked him why there was no heavy machinery; and he replied rather laconically, that “bulldozers compact the ground so hard that it’s difficult for the root development of the grass - donkeys on the other hand, till the soil and improve the texture.” He was right.

When in Mumbai, I taught landscape for two days a week to the final year students at JJ College. But really, in those days no one knew what landscape really was all about.

One day the librarian with a solemn face, came and told me that Prof. Reubens had left a book “Plant Design” for me and wanted my thoughts on it. I looked at the book to find that it talked about factories and plant machinery; and that’s when the librarian let out a chuckle. She asked me
what she should tell the Director; equally solemn faced, I told her “Do tell him that at the moment, I am still learning about natural plants; the moment I get to artificial plants I will use the book.”

For 8 months I also tried a job as the Assistant Superintendent at the Victoria Gardens.

It was around this time that I met Kanvinde, who was designing the National Chemical Laboratory campus and he was to send me onto another chapter of my life.

So tell me about Kharagpur and IIT; I have faint memories, of the place - I was only four then…

Prof. V.N. Prasad was looking for someone to join his planning team at IIT. I was looking to find a place where I could use what I had learnt a lot more than what I was doing. I mentioned this to Kanvinde at one point when we were at site and he immediately recommended me to Prasad whom he knew well. I was soon the only person who was on that team who knew anything about nature and ecology. To map it, to understand it and to preserve it - this is what I knew well.

After some time, I found myself heading the team on the mammoth Damodar River Valley Project and we spent years mapping water flows, locating reservoirs and dams and assessing its impact and engineering.

It was here, that in around 1957, I started what was the first landscape programme in India. It was a two year course and part of the planning department. I ran it till we left Kharagpur in 1964-65 after which, they could not find anyone to continue the work.
It was also here that, I appeared successfully for the Indian Institute of Town Planners qualifying exams.

So when all this was going well, why then the move to Ahmedabad in 1965? Kharagpur after all was a good life, idyllic, perhaps a bit slow, but nonetheless….

Well, I had spent a lot of time at IIT; but I was itching to actually work on landscapes and that was not happening. I was restless. The University of Punjab was planning to set up a full-fledged landscape department and I decided to apply. I asked V.N. Prasad for a recommendation; instead he sent a telegram to the Chairman there, which said "If you are searching for a proper man. Stop. Stop searching. Stop. Bhagwat is your man. Stop." I got the job to head the department.

Around the same time, some students from IIT were at NID and they invited me for a lecture. At the end of the lecture, Gira Sarabhai came and offered a job and an offer to set up a professional Landscape Department. This was 1964-65; and the war winds were brewing so going to Punjab did not seem so prudent. The horrors of the partition were not forgotten. My parents needed me and while going to Pune was not an option; living as close as I could so that travel time was reduced was the best option and Ahmedabad fitted the bill.

NID was a nice place in those days. There was Thackray, Suresh Banker, Padmakar Karve and Sharad Shah in the department. There was our department, then Textile headed by the wonderful P. S. Rajan, Furniture and Ceramics. Those were the days when folks like Frei Otto, Leo Lionni, the film maker, Helena Perheentupa, Hans Christian Pulver and Adrian Frutiger spent a lot of time at NID. Then I think Banerjee joined for the printing department.
I ended up becoming the head of the academic programme, along with running the landscape department. We worked with Henry Kosina, the airport designer and we worked on the Delhi Airport and then of course Louis Kahn spent a lot of time there.

I don’t think we took good care of him at NID. I remember a trip that I took him for to Mandu; he ate simply on the roads and was so happy to see the place. Once I invited him for a meal to our house in Paldi. We had no furniture, so your mother wrapped a travel bag with a white table cloth and used it as a dining table. After the meal, he so very shyly and hesitantly asked for another helping of soup and puri and was happy like a child when he ate. He was very endearing. Sadly that was the last time he came to India and died so tragically.

While there, I really enjoyed working on the gardens of NID. I imagined this as a work in scenography and carefully constructed many landscape sets, to be viewed from different parts of the buildings and used in a varied manner. Slowly, we built an astounding collection of plant material there. One of my favorites was the Divi Divi tree (Caesalpinia coriaria) that I planted along the entrance. It was so fragrant! A small bunch of flowers could transform the area.

It was from here that I worked on projects like the Air India Housing Colony in Mumbai or the IIM landscape; and of course met and worked with people who were humane, but giants in their own right like Dr. Vikram Sarabhai and Kasturbhai Lalbhai. The latter was fond of me and often when I would visit his house, would order a whole lot of food, and supervise me to make sure I ate.

Above: Letter for establishing a documentation centre for Landscape planning department at NID.
Below: Divi Divi Tree.
But finally, NID succumbed to that evil that plagues institutions; Gira Sarabhai continued to try and treat it as her personal fiefdom doing things, appointing people from her factory in NID, in a way in which she assumed no accountability. Slowly, while it still had the ability to attract talent, it had none in being able to nourish it and consolidate the foundations of the institution.

Yes, so, finally you left in 1971-72; took the job as the first director of the Landscape Design course in Delhi and within a few months, fed up of the bureaucracy came back to Ahmedabad, and started taking up professional work and established the office we have now in 1973. From there on, I know the work you have done, and the office has some records of it, and of course many gardens grow gracefully even today. The quarry at Timba, the work you did with Ambuja Cement, or Shree Cement, or the innumerable homes in Ahmedabad, and Baroda, or the Kakrapara Nuclear Power Project, or the many other industries around the country, or the work at Gandhinagar when it was being developed as a capital of Gujarat, the work with many municipal corporations;

It's an exhaustive and prolific list.

I find always and even more so now that you seem to have three pet loves that occupy you with a rare passion; teaching, plants and all things that allow understanding of genealogy in the natural world and Vedic readings on nature. Why?

How do I answer this?

Have you ever seen a *Ficus religiosa* at the end of winter? Suddenly, fresh tender green leaves start poking out and soon they shine and shimmer like gold.

Once I was at the Chandigarh railway station and the train had a long halt and I spotted a specimen and we started talking; for over half an hour. I saw it swaying and dancing in the wind and as if that was not enough, soon a very small shining bird started visiting it and chirping; see the joy!
If you can sense this joy, will you not make this your world?

Do you know where the word “mohar” comes from? It comes from a form of “madhur - rakha”, that which keeps honey and that’s why when the flowers are buds it’s called “mohar”.

If you started enjoying this, it’s only the tip; and one thing leads to another, to another and it goes on and on…if you found this world, would you not immerse in it?

Do you know that when you teach, you revisit all that you love; you cherish it, you savor it; and in doing so, you bring joy to others. If you found this joy, would you not forever want to teach?

Prof. P. B. Bhagwat, continues to do what he loves the best, teach, think of plants and find the many meanings of their lives.
In 1975, the office had been now working for two years. After a long stint in the National Institute of Design, starting from 1965, my father had left it and in 1973, taken up the position to head the first landscape design programme in India, at Delhi. Barely a year into it, he had decided that the bureaucracy there was not to his liking, and had left rather abruptly to return home. The prospects had seemed dim; but much encouraged by a few friends, namely Navneetbhai Choksi and the late H.M Joshi he started his practice. To reassure him, his friends told him that he should work hard and whatever shortfall he had at the end of the month to run his household would be contributed by them; luckily such a situation did not arise.

I remember in 1973, going to the opening of the office in a four storied thin building, near the Bhadra Fort in the older quarters of the town. It was a space lent by H.M. Joshi, in a building called Jummah Manzil. It measured about 12 X15 feet. Many of his friends came and wrote beautifully wishing him well in a book specially bound for the day.

By 1978 I had joined the college to study architecture, but as a child I used to join him occasionally when he went to work- more as an outing, than as an education. Those few trips had started allowing me some idea of what it is that landscape architects do.

The one garden that I still dream about, that I saw on one of those trips was for a house of Balkrishna Harivallabhdas. It was only later that I learnt that the house had been designed by Kanvinde and over time greatly admired his work and lament to this day, that he left us early and his work is not celebrated enough. The garden was sublime. The grass was perfect, in level and an even hue of green. The trees were sculptural and arranged in a way that one could enjoy each group and yet one could also notice how they screened a window, or gave shade against the afternoon sun where a swing was positioned.
A thuja stood alone, like art in the middle of an opening in the garden and I admired it a lot for its form. This was the kind of work that he did; lyrical and gentle landscapes for homes and occasionally gardens for factories. The focus was on celebrating plants and creating humane spaces for outdoor use.

In college, architecture was really taught through the lens of Corbusier and Kahn which in retrospect was natural, given the work they have done in the city and the many teachers who had worked with them. We on our own steam, enjoyed the works of Ricardo Boffil, when he built the offices for his Taller de Arquitectura in abandoned silos or the greatly participatory work of Lucien Kroll.

Strangely no one taught the work of Nari Gandhi or Antonin Raymond then; nor do they now; as they do not teach the work of Kanvinde and Stein.

By 1980 we had already moved office; this time, to an empty space belonging to another friend, Tarunbhai Kothari in Embassy Market, near Ashram Road.

I had started working in the office in summers; mostly drafting drawings and making tracings. The world of landscape design was getting a bit clearer. In retrospect it was perhaps a golden age. There were few practitioners; my father, Satish Khanna, Ravindra Bhan and Ram Sharma; but amongst them, they held the ideals of the profession high and practiced with the discipline and rigor that really set the foundations for what could have been a great profession in the country.

By 1985, I was finishing my post graduate degree in landscape architecture at New Delhi. It had been two useful years. There was no education in the class rooms, since the department seemed in perpetual turmoil with heads of departments coming and going; but it allowed time to reflect and work with many abstract ideas in design, that rarely got discussed in the studios but were extremely important to me.
Early hand drawn drawings for residential landscapes.
My father has never tired of recounting the story of him and the client Indubhai, in the bowel of a basalt quarry on a day when temperatures were soaring above 40 degree Celsius; my father remarked he wanted to make this sheer hot hard mass of rock into a forest. Indubhai rushed him to the side of the rock face where there was some shade and called for cold lemon water immediately; he was convinced that my father was having a hallucination!
Stage I | Land
Stage II | Overburden
Stage III | Soil Overlaid
Stage IV | Ground Cover
Stage V | Planting
Stage VI | The Forest
Timba till today stands as a testimony to the best in landscape design; a conversion of hundreds of acres of devastated quarry into a self-sustaining forest using sound principles of ecology and large doses of patience has always and will continue to rival all the work we have done or seen, before and since.

When the topic comes up in conversation in the office, my father has unfailingly paid his debt by telling us that Timba was what Brian Hackett had taught him; a fact that Prof. Hackett gently seemed to agree with, on his lone trip to India many years back.

Above: The initial stage when ground cover was established. Below: The final results after landscape evolved.
Over time not only does the forest continue to bloom, but it has become home to hundreds of species of birds. The original owner fell on hard times and upon his demise, no one in the family seemed to much care for this forest and it was sold. It was with a great sense of pleasure that a few years back we got a call from the new owner, who called to invite us to see the place but also to assure us that he had bought it, so that the legacy was taken good care of.
In conversation : Part II

SRDA and PBB have collaborated for now over a little less than a decade. In these years, we had many a difference of opinions, have argued over design, debated and deliberated; but in all this, there was learning; and not always about design. I could have written about the works of PBB, and in that, would at best, have shared an opinion, formed by a lens that is only mine to measure, and in that sense limited.

What, on the other hand, really needed to be shared, and would be valuable to young architects, are the numerous admirable attributes of the larger realm of works; the intrinsic and the innate.

Samira Rathod : Your architecture alludes to the past. It is reminiscent of our history, our own roots and bears no bones to any other ‘ism’ or a western-ness except to the extent of its relevance in our modern functioning. There is also a surreal dream-like fantastical strain in your architecture that is characteristic of the unreal, the impossible.

Is the challenge of creating the impossible a conscious approach? Elaborate.

Aniket Bhagwat : In my mind is almost always an ever colliding, ever changing, sometimes morphing, set of spatial sequences; some historical, some recent, some from India, some not. I don’t distinguish them- I don’t code them, and I don’t labor on them in a workman like manner; but I am conscious of where they come from, and even more aware of why the semantics finds a certain expression and what is its societal import- I am keenly aware of their politics, cultural meanings, associations; and depending then on the audience on hand, I mould these narratives almost sub consciously to make them mine; to make them present. But at all times, I find the kernel of emotive expression in them and amplify them; sift through the layers, and allow the purest telling; but never in a sterile manner; never in an obvious manner. They come to me like a dreamlike sequence, and I am forever amazed at their power to move me, and somehow I try and bring that same amazement while making the projects, and hope I can transmit it for people to use. I suppose because the images have no end or beginning, no coherent sequence of reading, in my mind, and yet seem completely correct to me, they express themselves as such at times. I must confess that I don’t consciously allude to our past or history; but then in India how can you even escape it. It’s all around you all the time, in simple conversations, in things you pass by to work each day, things you see on every work trip- we just have such fascinating layers that are at some sense incomprehensible; that the only thing one can do is imbibe them intuitively. Having said all this, I realize that I must also clarify that I am careful that this narrative means something for the people for whom it is for; somehow they have to be characters of this tale- and without their consent the story can’t be told. About my disdain for isms; it’s not so- it’s not disdain or rejection; it’s just my bewilderment about understanding their roots and meanings in the life I live in India. I can’t see their relevance to the billions in the country - our lives are rich with so many threads; so invigorating, so inspirational, that I just finding embracing a philosophy that I have not lived, or seen as part of my cultures evolution, a bit dishonest.
Samira Rathod: In India Interior Design sits at two ends of a bargepole, a trendy and popular emulated language of ostentatious accruals on one end, and a Spartan minimal sublime expression on the other. You have discarded this polemic and have argued that the state of interior design, and the general claim made over it by almost anyone and everyone is an outcome of the profession’s own lack of a dedicated academic approach. Like architecture, interior design too must find its derivation in materiality and context and make for an equal music with architecture. In that, allow the realm of interior design a new space of placeness, context and tectonic, that one measures architecture with. Comment.

Aniket Bhagwat: Well as you know I have said this often and forcefully in public forums; to the extent that I at some point had excited so many people that I had a blog dedicated to reviling me. I believe that the profession of interior design is special – it’s the one that comes closest to the human body; and touches it sensorially and literally. And yet I find that even its best practitioners don’t seem to revere it for what it is. Often there is a desire to escape it, or at other times trivialize it, or find quick visually arresting ways of serving it; and I can’t fathom why. To me it’s an art and equally spatial design, that surrounds the human body in a tight wrap, and can be realized rather quickly (as compared to say landscape design or architecture) and can have a life of ones choosing (again something you can’t do in architecture and landscape); so to say, it can be temporal or done for posterity. What could be more fascinating than that? It does not suffer the vagrancies of development permissions, nor gets washed away or shrivel because of the climate (as do landscape and architecture); and what could be more secure than that? So really to me it’s a liberating form of design, one that tests the mind at many levels, and scales of attention simultaneously; I do believe if taken seriously it can be seen at such poetic and philosophical heights, that would leave us moved each day and yet, its birth in the country was by mid wives who were mediocre architects, or snobbish ones; and perhaps therein lies the problem. I think much like landscape design; we need disruptive ways of finding the essence of what the profession of interior design can aspire for, and build a future from there. I’ll tell you something; the day we liberated our thinking that landscape architecture always has to be in tandem with architecture, is when we grew in our minds; we realized landscape design had so many tales to tell; and many had nothing to do with architecture; and we started telling these stories in the company of architecture at times; and at times alone. That was a point of departure.
Samira Rathod: Your buildings are gorgeous, beautifully crafted, piece by piece, and nuance by nuance. Craft embedded in its structure is integral to your buildings. While most of us suffer modernism, and our buildings remain bare-boned; stripped of visual texture and devoid of a sense of joy, yours seem to sing! You have desisted modernism, from your very early college days, and stood by your own position and ideology of the “plentiful” in your architecture. Some of the salient features of your work one would identify, as Cartesian planning of geometric forms, axial walls, corridors off which spaces are strung, water bodies with islands, strategically proportioned volumes, shifting light, and an overall resplendent tectonic, that all together exudes a sense of power and awe, both at once. There is a festivity of nuanced features and in its various elements, often discordant, each with its own story, as folks at a masquerade, frozen in the midst of a waltz. A quirky celebration.

A feast to the eye, ceaselessly engaging, often critiqued as being overwhelming, would you attempt architecture any other way?

How do you see and measure architecture and craft? Do you think craft is indispensible to architecture?

Aniket Bhagwat: Well, as to if I would attempt architecture a different way; I think the answer to that is yes. I don’t think or I hope I am not so rigid and so dogmatic that I can’t imagine other ways of doing design. Having said this, I have to hasten to add, that the honesty of the intention, the design endeavor and the design are important to me. I can’t design something that I am not; and I believe that what one is, is not a product of one’s education, but a product of the life we live each day, every moment. The conversations we have, the music we hear, the people we meet, the food we eat, and the way we think. I need to be clear about the mechanics of all this in my self and in the people around me- the mathematics, if I may say so, has to add up rather sharply- and when it does not , even after allowing it the widest latitude, then I become a bit wary and disappointed. We all evolve each day, we change, there is no constant and there cannot be in one’s work then; but to posture is rude, to take a position that one does, for reasons one can’t embody; that’s what I find difficult. And of course craft is indispensible. Without craft there is no architecture. But we do need to expand the meaning of craft and be generous. There is that moment when the mind , the hand, and to be dramatic, the galaxy collide, to allow a set of resolutions, that are intuitive, poetic, and beyond seemingly mundane reason; but they make the greatest sense- they transform our lives- make them more insightful and richer; to me that moment is the moment of craft. It has many expressions; of material and space; and without this, there can be no architecture- just buildings.
**Samira Rathod:** Your fool-hardy attitude and dash are evident in the way you live your life: - one day at a time, with never a strategy, or an agenda and no expectations; life is beautiful. Your design processes resonates this philosophy. One has not known you to ponder, wait and wonder about design. It is usually the first romantic idea sketch that miraculously meets fruition; impeccably. The process, am sure, is laborious and demanding. Needless to say, perfection is indispensible to you. You demand machine-like exactitude on site. I have seen you break away and undo parts of your building so easily and simply, like it was a sand castle. Ironically, with people who surround you, at work, your colleagues, students, and men at site, you embrace their imperfections, work on them, never do them away but take them along with you – to fly. Whilst often architects must find it tenuous to handle the two - process and people, you have always expressed that design concerns must be humane and processes should imbibe humility. Architecture for most is defined by perfectly realized projects. What in all this, is for you, the fine balance?

**Aniket Bhagwat:** The pursuit of mankind is excellence, or every now and then perfection. The journey of humans is to walk that path. It’s a simple paradigm; that which we do, must aspire for exactitude; but along the way we must stray, contemplate, even make mistakes, and be what we are genetically; unsure, vulnerable, emotional, aspirational, but also honest. This duality we face each day, every moment. One can try and stifle it, or embrace it. If you embrace it then you allow others to grow, to experience things, to become their own people and influence them enough to seek their own paths of excellence. For many of us, we are rarely touched by ideas such as this; and when we are, it’s a revelation- one that we want to make our own and seek our own directions; be excellent in our own right. It’s a natural emotion. But it can’t grow enough in society if we don’t create the space for it to grow and nourish it; and finally why do we all design, or make good buildings and landscapes; not for them alone; not for the object in making – but for making a better world; so to me the objectives are the same- they are just two different paths.
Samira Rathod: Your office has grown in size and maturity. It has seen an accelerated growth curve. From single residences and private landscapes, you are now involved in master planning and in some sense in the master minding of very large developments, and designing the landscape of new cities, all of which maybe estimated to take over decades to see realization. As a principal of your firm, you must have had to adopt and be adept to many changes and align the entire office to gear itself to take on such large responsibilities, which your office has shouldered very well. I am sure it would take a certain kind of mettle to sustain such growth and straddle such opportunities and motivate an entire team of people to sustain it. In the light of a new map of development for India, young firms will be inundated with opportunities to rise to the challenge of a complex development resolution. Can you share your experiences that may be of significant help to these firms?

Aniket Bhagwat: You are right. We have never had a grand plan. But we are alert and we look for conversations and possibilities. We have some rules that really have served us well. Never, treat a client as one; always think of him as a partner; someone you share your concerns and thinking with and listen to him closely; never be worried at all about admitting a mistake however grave it is; dream to dare- but know you will fail too; nothing is greater than the cause of the project; many such what almost sound like grandmothers remedies; and yet they have allowed us a astounding range and scale of projects in architecture, landscape and master-planning. But if there is one, that I think really serves us well is to really believe that every drawing we do, and every design decision we take and every project we do, is the last; and really invest that kind of energy in it. You know this, more than most- there are no miracles; no shortcuts- a whole lot of hard work and some luck. There are some skills that help; the ability to bring searing focus on the discussion on hand ; and also the ability to forget it the next instant and focus on something else- and do that intermittently 30-40 times a day; the ability to start dealing with work and completing it even before its defined and articulated; the commitment to clear the table every day… things like that …good habits if you may call them…..well…I don’t know what to say - except yes, it’s already been an incredible journey, and I don’t think we were specially chosen- or there is something unique about us; so I believe everyone can do this and better. I am sure of this. I think it’s finally about relevance; to be that every moment of the day, and to expand its meaning all the time.
Samira Rathod: You are three generations of landscape architects. I have known your father, Prof. Prabhakar Bhagwat, and seeing his landscape designs, one finds there is an intrinsic affinity towards nature that seems to define his work. Your work, on the other hand, leans heavily on sculpted “hardscape” that is mingled with the landscape; precisely manufactured, sharp and meticulous. Experiencing your landscape is a garden walk or an overwhelming sky of man-made clouds (lights) floating in a night sky, one becomes almost a part of its various others. The landscape like your architecture leads and steers one through it with every experience heightened as a stage performance under the circle of light. The ubiquitous island throne on your water-bodies, the mist, choreographed water, the rolling rumbling green mounds, monsters and creatures make you more a sculptor of land forms and experiences. The soft scape of plantations seem, on the other hand, less sculpted with a planting strategy to include a large variety of plants, all mingled like people in a crowd - hard to differentiate as any “one” – but when one barrages through them; one is surprised by the various characteristics of each.

If this maybe your one phase as an artist, what do you see your next phase in landscape design as? Would you attempt landscapes that are less dependent on or even devoid of the hard sculptural form, less visual and more sensual?

Aniket Bhagwat: I don’t know about this. It really depends, I think, on where we find ourselves. A recent work we did near Bhiwandi on a quarried devastated basalt area, or the lower croplands in a house in Baroda, or even some planting for the Drum House, works less with the idea of land art, and more with basic tenets of ecology and the pleasure of the plant. But I understand what you are saying and someday, perhaps in a very small commission, to plant in manners expressly emotive seems like a great idea.

Often we worry about if the plants will be taken care of after we go, and many such real worries plague us; and yet we have dared to do factories or old forts, or workplace landscapes with planting in very expressive and symbolic ways; so I suppose a more lyrical and gentler landscape will come; maybe when I am calmer; older…less frenetic….I don’t know. But I agree…. I do see a change. In the last few years I care less for the sharply expressed spatial compositions, and have started enjoying landscapes that work with fractals, or superimposed but colliding geometries, or even those that layer time scales over each other and become different entities at different times; or those of contradictions; so the mind wanders and will soon find the landscapes you allude to.
**Samira Rathod**: Public Spaces in India are still not an evolved space. They are, at best, large barricaded gardens, maidans or of late simply replaced by malls. The notion of the public space as a large open integrated pause-space in our new and changing urbaniy is still not as prevalent as we would like to see it. Art in public spaces and public space as an art form are concepts still new to our people.

It may be a bit audacious to say that the design quality of our public space is largely due to the lack of an evolved populace or architects? Are we a nation that is still gathering its own cultural relevance in contemporary times? Do comment.

**Aniket Bhagwat**: It’s one of the great tragedies of our urban-scapes. Most Indian cities had a tremendous sense of public space; scales varied, there was great depth and ethos in them, and they worked. The typology was not of large squares, since shade has been important, and also a multitude of activities, for a range of diverse economic group of people had to coexist in a generous and egalitarian manner. Over time we have disregarded this, and the sense of these spaces has often been greatly diluted, to become a caricature of space; and sadly a caricature of a space that is not relevant for us. I don’t think there is any meaning in finding reasons for this beyond our own fraternity; when given a chance we have shown abominable colors and really the worst values. The problem starts there. People, always have a great way of being appreciative of whatever is put in front of them; rarely do they (sadly) express a voice to articulate their choices. In India we don’t even encourage this! So finally it’s left to the designer to work his energy, wit, sense of purpose, sense of propriety, to fight for and propose spaces that matter; spaces that take a typology and make it relevant- but of course we don’t do it- it’s not seductive enough I imagine…so busy are we in making grand monuments to self.
Samira Rathod: Learning for an architect never stops. Indians are not in the habit of archiving and documenting. So the written word is inconspicuously absent, and theory on contemporary Indian architecture, by Indian architects remains dismally unfounded. Academics, pedagogy, research are all a significant part of a people’s evolution. Either as a full-time professor, or as an architect, you have taught with an assiduous zeal. Even today you continue to propagate research through Spade, the Future institute, Leaf, your blog; and talk of design through your innumerable essays and articles strewn in your everyday mails to your close friends and colleagues. Give us a glimpse of your larger perspective on the idea of academics, pedagogy and research, and its significance of an engagement in the same by practicing architects.

Aniket Bhagwat: We don’t have text books on Architecture or Landscape Design. We don’t really have too many areas where we can discuss the work we do. And yet many of us hold the cards tight to our chest like it was a poker game, or a state secret. I find this exasperating. Spade is of course more you than me; and that and all the other endeavors you refer too including 12 on 12, is to tell, tell honestly, tell without fear, tell without being worried how the world will judge you; but tell so that people can use you as a mirror and calibrate their lives. If we don’t use every breath we have, in the mails we write, in the conversations we do, in allowing the wonder and world of design to be felt by many; what future can we expect? Its that simple. From here, this concern manifests itself in many ways; how to draw, record, analyze, think, design, communicate and each one needs a special effort and self-consciousness, that focuses on an aspect in an acute manner and then communicates it to anyone willing to listen… so its not enough to be committed to communicate, but equally if not more to keep expanding the circle where others can think, talk and write… that’s really all that there is to it…rather simple actually. I must here caution that this is not the same as people spewing their vision of the world and wanting an audience; its more about allowing many to find their voice.

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www.srda.co.in
1985 - 1995

When I joined in 1986, the office had already been working for over 15 years. Every year my father would sign on about 30 projects; so there were already about 450 projects on the list and then the many more he had done when with his father, or then when part of NID. It was a large repertoire. It consisted of homes, small factories and some amount of work for city corporations.

My father worked alone, with 2 draftswomen. He would usually leave at 7.00 AM in the morning and visit sites, supervise the work, do the planting and come home for lunch and then go to office where he would sketch new designs for a garden; and give it to be drafted; post which, he would check the drawings that had been done in the morning.

It amazes me to this day, that he executed almost all his projects with 3 to 4 drawings. There was a final plan, a dimension plan for civil work that had lighting and irrigation marked on it; and sometimes a drawing to show typical civil details; and finally a planting plan, which usually was more of a guide - since the actual and finer placement of plants he did himself at site.

In my first two years in the office, my wife and I were unfortunate to start work with three clients who would make us work on many designs and then not pay. This went on for some time and my father was too polite to ever say anything. Finally in rebellion, I decided to undertake a project for one of his old clients on my own and quoted a fee, before I started work. He was aghast, both at the impudence of quoting the fee and also at what he thought was an obscene amount. Then and many times later in the subsequent years he was sure that I would run to ground the hard earned reputation that he had gained and often asked me to leave the office. That project was exquisite and while the garden is long gone, the parts of the fine brick work in it still remain; and I was paid what I was asked for.
I had by then also been taken under the wings by an architect in Ahmedabad, who was doing a large amount of real estate work. A very gentle and fine person, he gave me all the work he designed to do the gardens for; and I did them feverishly. By 1990, I had on my own done some 100 gardens, and when I went to review them, I was shocked that most were not the way I left them. The love for gardens was slowly dying in the city and everyone wanted an instant garden, and had no patience to grow with the trees.

Luckily for us, a large industrial estate was being developed near Surat and this led to the office doing huge commissions for industry, many measuring over hundreds of acres. The work usually meant doing soft landscape schemes for the portions delineated in master plans. With my father, for another five years I threw myself in this work and did shelter belts and industrial landscapes of great scale. And barring a few examples, found here too, that the work was mostly being requested for regulatory clearances and only to occupy land that was earmarked till expansion was taken on board. Many of those gardens were also lost.

Ten years of work and little to really show for it, except names and drawings.

Thankfully, there were still enough very fine small gardens or the occasional institutional garden, that built the office’s reputation. My father had started leaving a lot of decisions to me, and I decided to not take on any work till I could enthuse clients to care for the landscapes we did; and of course for years we had no work. It seemed a foolhardy decision at that time, but in retrospect it was a good one - it just strengthened our resolve to only take on projects that we imagined had a better chance of surviving the years.

In 1993, my father had set up the landscape department in the city and this too demanded large amounts of collective attention.

Above: The poster for the landscape architecture program at CEPT in 1993 when it was established. Below: Stamp from the office in 1986.
I distinctly remember that rainy day. It was pounding and most of the town had shut down. The attendance in the office was low. I was sitting in our office, a very small apartment that we had managed to finally buy; in my father’s chair since he had not come that day. Bhupeshbhai walked in soaked, saw me and without much ado launched into a very endearing complaint. He asked if I was going to do his work and also said that he was making this trip simply because it seemed he had no choice but to ask me.

Many months earlier, I had been invited to visit a town called Shirpur, to do some work. I had happily agreed, since I thought it was a small town of a similar name that was just an hour or so near my city. When I learnt that this was another place, almost a 10 hour drive, my enthusiasm waned and I was not keen to explore this work opportunity. Bhupeshbhai had since made many calls and even invited me to Mumbai where his office was, to try and convince me.

That rain soaked figure of his changed my mind.

Above: Map of Shirpur. 
Below: The Municipality Office.
Above: Amusement Park.
Below: Public Park.
I went there the week later, to meet his elder brother Amrishbhai who was the member of the legislative assembly from that region and I started working on redoing the gardens for his house, since it coincided with a substantial architectural extension. A few months into work, Amrishbhai remarked that now that I had come to Shirpur, I would never leave it; there would always be work for me.

I put it aside as the kind of thing people say, but don’t really mean.

It’s been almost two decades now and we keep going to Shirpur and in that time, we have redesigned the main roads of this town, help build check dams, organize urban forestry programs, designed the city parks, the grounds of its many colleges, schools and factories; the many public squares, and the work continues.

Above: Urban Forestry. 
Below: Check Dam.
This effort has been hugely augmented with transparent and honest initiatives in banking, clean water, city hygiene, education and business growth; and in the last 20 years Shirpur has become a model town that keeps winning the Government of India Civic initiative awards year in and out.

I was made some years ago, the honorary citizen of this town; and it is so clear to us the kind of pride that simple civic landscapes can instill into people of any town. It’s not difficult to do; and we keep wondering why this can’t happen to the over billion people who are part of this great country.
Things started changing slowly. The office from a 5 man firm had grown a bit. My wife Smruti came in intermittently, busy as she was taking care of the daughters; at work we seemed to be finding a new wind. As a school boy and right through college I had been a voracious reader and Carl Jung’s book, “Man and His symbols” along with the work of many other existential thinkers, such as Camus, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky and Jaspers, had somehow left a mark; and I was intrigued in finding the abstract signs and narratives that landscapes could be embedded with.

That coupled with a lot of reading on the paintings in India and their implied spatial space, had me convinced that there was more to landscape design than what was then a rather lyrical, but singular way of imagining space. This decade allowed us to experiment some of these ideas, and by the end of it we found that we had done a clutch of projects that seemed to be appreciated a fair amount and that also satisfied us a great deal.

Projects like the Ghuma House, Devigadh, Aman, Tithal and Blossom all happened in this phase. But these were not the main stays of the practice. The cement company near Veraval for whom we had started work in the early 90’s was a relation that grew in this decade, in which we did some very well received landscape design and architecture, but also did a large restoration of lime stone quarries and then for another cement company later, were doing complex afforestation work in the deserts of Rajasthan.

These ten years at least for me, helped clarify the many roles of the profession; part poetry, part abstraction, part ecological, part theatre of human drama; and all of it with large doses of common sense and pragmatism.
It also helped us feel reassured about our ability to undertake any scale and complexity and we had really done it all; fine small residential gardens, restoration of historic landscapes, extremely large industrial or housing landscapes, wasteland restoration, public parks, institutions; the palette was large and it seemed exhaustive. And along with this, we had started accepting architectural commissions, largely out of our conviction that the architecture then, would rarely allow a healthy dialogue with the landscapes we wanted to create; a conviction that holds mostly true till today.

The post graduate landscape design programme had matured and this too allowed many academic excursions of the mind; and it also was the time when we finally moved into the offices we now work from.

In 2003, we along with a few others, set up the professional body for landscape architects in the country; and after a few good years it fell prey, to misguided pursuits and little discussion of content and relevance emanates from it.
In 1993, a few years after I had just started work, with some landscape experience and really no architectural experience, a client for whom I had done a residential landscape asked me to visit a land he had near town.

It was barren.

But had two majestic mango trees on it; the rest of the large land sun scorched and bare. He wanted to build on it, a place to sit; that's all - and did not want to spend much money. I remember seeing the trees and deciding that I had to build somehow engaging them.
LEGEND

1. Access Road
2. Service Trails
3. Staff Quarters
4. Service Road
5. Car Parking
6. Mango Trees
7. Lawn
8. Sitting Pavilion
Hedge Detail – Part Plan

Wicket Gate Detail

Sections
The branches were low and so I finally sunk the ground around it and built at a diagonal, between the two trees, so as to not disturb the branches. And since the ground was bare, I marked the space around it with “shevri” that grew quick and circumscribed a circle. The negligent budget determined the material - brickwork in mud mortar or just mud walls.

Then I planted many trees in the ground and left the site.

Oddly, I never went to visit it for over 20 years. But I finally did, about a month back.

Above: The pond on the higher ground. Below: The lower, sitting pavilion.
The dense bamboo groves line the path leading to the pavilion. A gate of rough wood with metal wires, leads to the circle. A pond on the higher ground and the pavilion, nestled under the trees is held by the circle. One is a lower pavilion, used to sit; and the smaller upper one has a swing, a store and a washroom.

The “shevri” over time has been replaced with a hedge - the circle intact. The sitting pavilion, with the mango trees reading in a diagonal with a dense grove of trees now in the background. Inside, there is a large low table to sit and eat and a small pantry.

The client and his wife narrated tales of how they use the place, and how lovingly they have taken care of this fragile mud pavilion for 20 odd years and kept the details intact.

Top Left: Mud Plaster.
Top Right: Brackets.
Below: Window Detail.
There was a world of Indian weddings in the western part of India before Aman and a world after.

Literally.

Weddings prior to Aman were usually held in the evenings of the winter months in scraggly lawns with a ramshackle kitchen used to prepare the food.

The bride’s family then spent large sums of money decorating these places with walls made in cloth and *shamianas*, paid separately for the lighting and a lot more for making the place respectable.

Aman sought to change all that; and did.
The project came to us through an old working colleague who executed the gardens my father designed. The client was a young lad with huge energy, who came to us out of trust that he had in our colleague and imagined we would do a nice garden for him.

When we started proposing long curved tall walls along the walkway and a lot of supporting civil work, he was mortified and was sure that we did not know what we were doing.

When a particularly long free standing wall was proposed, he called in his friend; the person who was to be the structural engineer on the project to dissuade us from building this, perhaps on the grounds that it was unsafe.

We, I remember, launched into a passionate description of the vision for the project and at the end of it, the engineer turned to the client and with great earnestness told him that if there was a way of doing this project it was with our vision; and that it was a good one.

Above: Detail.
Below: The square at the end of the walkway.
That day was the start of a relation where, the client Munnabhai, today is who we consider family and he graciously returns the emotion.

Aman was a well-conceived but simple plan that created enough of a setting to allow weddings to be held with no extra cost and yet allowed enough for someone to make it a more personalized space if they wished too.

It had a long ceremonial walk that ended in a small square that opened into a large garden. The kitchens, two well-appointed guest rooms and the entire supporting infrastructure became a permanent infill. It was a runaway success; and forced every other business in our state and many neighboring states and cities to revamp their properties, by using the standards set here.

Model of the entrance portal and walkway.
LEGEND
1. Ceremonial Entrance
2. Car Parking
3. Scooter Parking
4. Lawn
5. Planting Area
6. Office Building
7. Rooms
8. Pantry
9. Drinking Water
10. Kitchen
11. Store
12. Toilets
Prior to this we had restored the gardens of the Samode Bagh in the year 1992 in Jaipur. This was a large garden with a pavilion in the centre and has a plan that was clearly inspired from the traditional charbaugh. We went about restoring it in a faithful manner and recreated the fountains and the water channels, the planting and the arbours.

The end result was satisfying and honest.

However from the point of allowing landscape design in a space that allows dialogue with time and culture and learnings resulting from such a possibility; these were not greatly explored possibilities.

Located near Udaipur, the palace of Devigarh, allowed such possibilities. Built along the face of a hill, over 100 feet high, it had courts at many levels. The dilapidated palace was carefully being restored and the spaces fitted out to be a hotel that was rather modern and yet deeply invested in the crafts of India.
Top Left: Entrance court with the copper moon motif.
Top Right: Zenana court with introverted fountain and white fragrant flowers.
Middle Left: Darbar court with hewn white stone seat on black floor.
Middle Right: Kamal court with abstracted lotus motif as a water feature.
Bottom: Vegetable garden.
Deciding the nature of landscape design was an intriguing question; the rough, but generous exterior of the palace was getting an internal make over that was rather sophisticated and chic.

The landscape had to negotiate this variation. It was spread over a series of courts; some were the entrance courts of the palace, others were the courts of the stables (then being converted into hotel rooms); yet others were the Ladies court or the Royal court or just a piece of land left below where in the past the well was located and with it some trees. In addition to this, there were many spaces that revealed themselves as the work progressed.
The landscape as it finally evolved was many connected constructs of the mind. These were mental scapes. They took the genesis of the spaces and reinvented them and crafted many hidden dialogues and commentaries; some that are apparent, some that intrigue the viewers and some that can easily be understood.

The list of things done is long and telling it as words, may well be banal; but to give some idea, the royal court which had nothing but mud when we found it, now has a throne that sits at the rim of a floorscape that is circumscribed subtly as an orb; as if to rule the cosmos and has a tree of life planted behind the stone throne.

Or, in the ladies court the fountain spews water inwards, inside the womb as a tribute to women in feudal lands.
Or, the Lotus Court pays tribute to the water rills of Mandu.

Or, a perfectly correct 4-square garden created with a central gravity head of water to grow vegetables. Or in the Stable Court, fodder grass at times becomes the landscape. Or in the back of the palace, mock soldiers moulded out of rocks with Sansevieria planted in them, rest in peace time.

The list is long; and loses its charm somewhat in telling, but most who have been there, seem mesmerized by the landscape.

Above: Planters as soldiers. Below: The vegetable garden.
The project came at a time when as a firm, we were regaining a certain clarity on how we desired our landscapes were maintained; and more importantly how we would facilitate that process. It was around that time, that we had decided that any project we did, so long as the work was done to our and of course to the owner’s satisfaction, would be something we would be willing to monitor and help guide to maintain forever.

Today we find that there are a very large number of finished projects that we seem to revisit for decades. This has been one of them.

When I first visited the site in 1999, it was an abandoned factory that the client had bought. We helped him refurbish it with minimum effort so that it could be re-commissioned, but then spent a lot of time crafting landscapes that border on land art.
The sculpted earth rises up to capture a much larger borrowed landscape view that surrounds the site and descends again, to enter a grove of mango trees that we restored. Within the landscape are narratives of art and productive landscapes that work as choreographed set pieces.

The gardens after we finished were maintained to precision and it really did not matter when we visited them; they were always perfect.

Many years later, the owner wanted to undertake a large expansion and had been told by his industrial consultants that this could happen only where the gardens were, since there was no other place. This, he refused. And I remember him telling me that he had told them that if the expansion was possible only at the loss of the garden, then he did not want to expand; the gardens were his soul.

Above: Sentinel mounds leading to the restored grove.  
Below: Banded entrance ramp.
Upon being requested to lead this expansion effort, we found that by skillfully using the loose spaces in the factory and by working along the edges of the site, it was possible to build, with a minor loss to the garden, and we managed to keep intact almost all of the grounds.

It has been almost 15 years now and I have a pending visit, since there is one more expansion planned and the process will be an interesting one.

Left: Before extension.
Right: After extension.
It had been 10 years since I had started work; and in that time I had done a fair amount. With my father I had worked on large industrial landscapes, spread over hundreds of acres, and on my own steam had built a large housing colony, a school, a guest house and some homes and done gardens for over a hundred homes. It was competent work.

And yet, things did not feel right.

Many of the landscapes upon revisiting were in a poor state of disrepair and the architecture while sensible was not satisfying.

I had stopped taking work for many years, till I was sure that the client cared about design, or that at least I would be able to enthuse him.

These were bad days. The office had almost no work.

One of my contractor's friend wanted a small weekend home built and we started work on it. I remember that we did many drawings of his barren site, and imagined it with a forest, sometimes with fields, at others a landscape where the woods met the agricultural lands, at yet others, a grove. And we kept showing it to the client asking him what kind of land he had dreamt about.
A sketch with water at the cusp of the forest and the field made the cut, and we started designing the house.

Here too, we first designed the courts, and placed them carefully on either side of a walkway, so that as you walked, you could see a court, absorb it, forget it and then see another. Everything was carefully calculated. The house then just filled up the spaces left by the courts.
The earth court
with basil born out of fire

The domestic court,
reminiscent of home gardens

The water court

The pavilion
to nowhere

Entrance

Model of the Ghuma House

Elevation
This was also the first time that I experimented with planting so that the sense of spatiality was conveyed in its full from the first week onwards. For this we drew up plans for spaces to be read after 6 months, up to after 5 years; and worked with crops, grasses and trees, that had varying rates of growth to create a space that was consistent; a technique that over the years has become something we are very comfortable with.

Above: Deck at the edge of the earth court. Below: The axial spine.
This must be the fastest project we have ever done.

In about 4 months, we designed and built the building and the landscape of this highly customized and crafted house.

Upon completion, various people would go and see it and one of them was an architect from outside the country, working for nobility in the Middle East. We told him how we designed this house. All the handles on doors were intricate, and specific to the project, as was each and every component of the project from the floors, the lights, the hardware, the plaster, the metal work, the wood work, the basins and so on.
Each day respective tradesman would come to office around early noon, by which time we would have sketches of the components that we wanted to design - sometimes a lock, sometimes a light. He would take the sketches and by late evening or early night return with it, as a scale sample in wood.
We would then make changes and refinements and he would usually by the end of next evening come with a finished sample. We would then make the last changes and in record time, never exceeding a week, the full delivery of the material would reach the site.

After so many years since, of working on projects, I can now understand his complete incredulousness; but at that time it seemed rather a natural way to work.

The house enters from the street and leads one to the sea and along the movement line are the living spaces. It’s a rather simple plan, but made delightful by a level of fine craft and detail that is joyous, whimsical and precise.

The Dining court.
LEGEND

1. Forecourt
2. Lily Pool
3. Drawing Room
4. Arrival Space
5. Verandah
6. Bedroom
7. Kitchen
8. Store
9. Bridge
Gurgaon, for anyone who has been there is an assault on senses and urbanity gone crazed. The site sat amidst a medley of rather indifferent, aggressively uncouth buildings. Our first response was to turn away.

The building also became a laboratory to examine the many tenets of modernism, from integrity, rationality and leading from that the choices made on materials. We also noted with some concern that except for an effort by the artist Satish Gujral for the Belgium Embassy Building, the humble brick was never allowed to reincarnate; and concrete as a material was used in its brutality or neutrality, but rarely as a plastic material capable of gentle poetry.
Model of the exposed brick work in the central court

South East Elevation
LEGEND
1. Atrium Court
2. Pantry – Cafeteria
3. Art Gallery
4. Courtyard
5. Store
6. Office

Ground Floor Plan
The building is honest; rigidly so much so, that the slabs cast are the floors. The exterior is wrapped with a skin that uses corten steel on the outside and plywood inside with insulation in between. Gills dot the skin to breathe and take in light. The parking basements are pristine with immaculate concrete retaining walls and roofs.

Above: Corten steel on the external skin. Below: Detail of the entrance portal.
And the building that meets at the central court has brick faces in conversation; one ebullient, joyous and whimsical - twisting and turning and the other more somber and calm. We fired many different bricks for the project so that the walls sway and ripple.

This habit of making our own bricks or shaping them seems to have stayed with us and came back recently in Living in the Orchard; a project featured elsewhere in this compilation.

Above: Brick wall in the central courtyard. Below: Detail of handcrafted brick.
Above: Detail of the structural system.
Below: Detail of the exposed concrete basement retaining wall.
The office now had a robust and a stable group of people who had stayed on for long. Chetan, my wife Smruti who had come back to work full time earlier, then Kalpesh, Vinay, Jigar, Megha and now many more. In this decade from an office of 12 odd people, we now number over 40.

After a decade of finding some assurances in work, we looked at the world of landscape design around us. We imagined that we would find an echo in the work we were doing. The results of economic liberalization were buffeting the profession, throwing all kinds of new challenges every day; and yet it was as if in the last two decades the world of landscape design had been stilled and relegated to a position far distant from the lofty one that the founders had imagined for it. It was clear to us that we had as a profession lost ground.

To be fair, the same situation seemed to have plagued architecture.

After about two decades of teaching various subjects in design, I decided to stop and focus my energies on other areas; and from that extra time came with vigour, a series of 12 ON 12 events that put the fraternity of architects together for four years in a row, and allowed them to talk to each other with no pretenses.

Along with students, I edited the first issue on landscape design in the country for Home Review, and led by Samira Rathod we set up Spade, a design journal of extremely high graphical and content value. The simple difficulty in finding audiences to read this, or even support this was and is telling.

We continued with a great sense of inquiry the research that we initiated with LEAF (Landscape and Environment Advancement Foundation) and published a series of thought provoking documents and along with friends in Delhi, ran a first class
international design competition and then set up Future Institute that continues intermittently to do research on matters of urbanity.

We also set up as a Spade initiative, what perhaps is the first retreat for architects in the country, where we debated matters close to our heart and a book and a film is soon the result, and we did an exhibition of our works along with an annual lecture in Trichy, that perhaps set up the process to do this document.

And along with all this, we worked with a passion that knew no bounds. And from this, has come many urban landscapes of scale and complexity, extremely demanding master plans for very large tracts of land, and architecture of many large homes, offices, hotels, institutional and industrial buildings.

But more than the work itself which was large, it was the conviction with which we conducted ourselves. We led the design in almost all situations, and were relied upon to lend our thoughts to guide developments way beyond our prescribed roles as landscape architects or master planners.

We worked 7 days a week and on most days most of us leave office at around 9.00 PM and we also started a small office in Mumbai.

To the many people who attributed our behavior of excessive work, to a lack of balance in life, we had and have no answers that are convincing, other than to admit that this is the only world we know and truly enjoy.
In conversation: Part III

A free wheeling discussion between 43 colleagues about the firm, design and related matters

About Growth / Evolution

Juhi: Every time that we do something even if it is a small case study or mapping that we do, whatever the scale might be, in the beginning itself we don’t tend to think whether it would be useful, profitable or if we would have a loss of time or energy on it. We still refer to a study that someone did ages back and it helps us today. That is a very good attitude that I feel helps us not only grow as an architect or landscape architect but also as a person because we don’t look at everything as a profit or loss statement. Just by being here and seeing the smallest of ideas coming true on land, it makes me feel as if everything can be true only if we have the determination or the belief to do it. So I feel that has made me a better believer.

Pranati: Usually when we discuss, what is asked of us is “What are the three different ways we can do this?” Those are the different views in which we can look at things. Once, during a presentation, I had done a couple of rubbish sketches and hence was asked “what stops you from dreaming?” That really starts pushing you and that is when you really start getting yourself out of your limits. And then your journey will actually begin.

Vandhana: The working environment here wasn’t very different for me. Because as long as I have known my father, he has always been a very hardworking person. So I have always been exposed to someone who is very passionate. And when I come here I see a whole bunch of people who are extremely passionate about what they do. The only thing that drives someone to stay up and finish what one is doing is that passion. It makes one more determined and really raises the bar for oneself.

Vinay: The most important thing to me in the office is the culture that is established, the way of conducting or the way of living life in the office that is being fairly well articulated. There are many things which if the mind is in the right place, the mind starts accepting gradually. It is a very slow process.
For some people they really start grappling it fast and for some it is slow. With due patience and the right spirits it starts falling into place. I think one of the most important parts of this culture is that the energies are of many directions. The energy of investing time at an individual level is also taken care of. How to nurture that mind, how to understand his or her thinking starts making it more confident.

It’s a very democratic environment; it allows the mind to be free, to be individual thinking minds. It lets the child, the innocence to be a part of the discussion and not bring a serious repulsion to it.

The moment you start talking about this culture it gets into morals, how to conduct your life, how to keep learning. I think it is more about life getting imbibed into your own self. And then it goes across. Then it goes towards the making of the project, towards the making of a small exhibition and anything that the office does.

Gautam: The process and work pattern are strengthened and bound by a certain discipline; discipline for time and for ones efforts, whether it be a small garden or a city. One understands the value of commitment and deliverance, of detail and accuracy. One is always motivated to set high standards for one’s own self, irrespective of how the world judges or criticizes the work. I have always believed that a good practice, in whatever domain, is judged to be a good practice only based on the parameters of ethics, morals and basic fundamental values. Along with learning design I feel it’s extremely important to absorb values into one’s conscience.

The rigor might push boundaries and set high standards and discipline but it shouldn’t cross the limit where one just starts producing for the sake of it. It might start reducing the emotive and experiential quality because of the rising pressure or because of the imbalance between commitment and deliverance capacity.

Why do we design?

Bhushan: To make a space work better.
Rashmita: It gives me peace of mind.
Vandhana: To create something that makes you feel like God.
Pranati: To make people happy so that eventually you also feel happy.
Priyal: It allows me to dream of the unimaginable.
Divya Gor: It gives you a satisfaction.
Sagar: Because, it pushes me forward. Design touches everyone.
Apeksha: Because, sometimes you do not know its accurate outcome.
Abid Ali: To achieve comfort and improve its aesthetic quality.
Divya Dhancholia: It lets you travel.
Smruti: Design lets you live many lives.
Dhwani: It’s a journey to find oneself.
Shailaja: For me, it’s a circle. In design you never really get anywhere.
Dhwani: This is more a family to me than my real family at the moment. Learning is not only on work front, but also on the personal front, because here you really see a family working together towards a goal. I really like sharing things with my dad now and going out for movies with him. That’s something I really find of value here.

About ways to design

Bhushan: We always bring in our personal experiences in our projects. It shows that every day we are learning about how people behave in certain spaces, how clients react to a certain idea or how clients have seen the world. So all these day to day learnings, that might have been from a conversation or our visits to certain spaces, all of which are reflected in our designs, which is very important and that is what we do.

Vidita: I think what makes us different from other offices is the value that we achieve in any of the projects. For example we don’t really just treat a residence as a residence, we do things and somehow what we achieve is a sense of timelessness to the work.

Trupti: It’s really about courage. Today we are at a stage where we are courageous enough to go ahead and customize each and every element in the landscape as our imagination demands. For example, we have always been learning about bricks, but to take a step forward- to shape and reshape bricks in different forms, and to reinvent it – that’s courage!

Nikhila: There is a huge cultural difference in the way we design. We don’t restrict ourselves with too many constraints which is what the outside world does. Everywhere else the emphasis is on function and costing and the design really begins with those restrictions but we open ourselves to the idea of design more than others.
Shailaja: *I think we are not afraid to be uncertain and more than change here, uncertainty is the constant.*

Shalini: *To me the interface between us and the others comes about when we have a discussion. By an interface I mean a platform where various people’s ideas are discussed. When a couple of us are sitting and trying to build an idea, you realize everyone’s opinions are driven by their own experiences, cultures and backgrounds.*

Vandhana: *When you have looked at a few offices, what you realize is when it comes to the profession, architects lose what they call a process. It really becomes an initial drawing which is developed and then it goes into execution and this is because there is pressure to just complete the project. But here, there have been many times where I have been asked, “What is the intent behind your sketch. Where is the process?” So the whole fact is that the design evolves, it’s a process. The process makes me confident to say that there is still good architecture.*

I design from…

Bhushan: *Aspirations.*

Divya Dancholia: *Nature.*

Divya Gor: *History.*

Shan: *Observations.*

Kalpesh: *Emotions.*

Dhwani: *Moments.*

Shailaja: *Values.*

Vinay: *Immediate state of mind.*
The one thing we did not like about Aman was the lighting.

We had resorted to tall, high mast lights to illuminate the 4000 sq.mts space. A few years later, when we were asked to do another venue for the same owner, we resolved to change this. The space was over 9000 sq.mts and upon researching we found that there was no equivalent in the world where a space so large needed to be lit with soft light that at least allowed 50 lux and did not cause a glare.

Left: Detail of light. Right: Walkway leading to the venue.
A large span grid was designed over the space and when it actually came to designing the light, my wife Smruti, who was sketching options, took the earrings she was wearing, and sketched that as a light.

The idea worked.

Aakash became a surreal space, that when the sun set, had 63 large moons that hung in space and lit the grounds. Each light had 6 sources and each of them could be individually controlled. We could then precisely light up any part of the space ranging from 5 lux to 50 lux.

While doing the project and since then, we have not come across something similar anywhere in the world.

The project was supported by tall structures that encompassed the space, and the planting was lifted atop them. Not many people realize that it’s the size of a football ground that is humanized because of the elevated planting and the grid above.

Above: Wall flanking the rooms and kitchens. Below: Planters screening prop stores.
Many years after its opening and recently, the entire lighting arrangement had to be brought down because of safety concerns. We all wondered what to do.

Aakash had set a benchmark that was not easy to improve; at least for us.

After many false starts, we restored the grid and this time manufactured 3000 lights that can change colours and hues and over 35 large clouds- to make a star lit sky, on a sparingly cloudy night.

At the cost of hyperbole, I think it’s even more surreal than the original space.

But what was really amazing is the speed at which this was done. Over 70 tonnes of steel was fabricated and erected, 3000 lights manufactured along with the clouds, tested, and wired, all in three months, in time for the next wedding season.

To me, that is a miracle.
With great fanfare about 8 years ago, a massive redevelopment project over 250 acres in what was the Bata Shoe factory along the Ganges in Kolkata was launched, a group of 5 India’s better known architectural firms were assembled; as were we. Our job was to hold together the master plan and also undertake landscape design and coordinate the infrastructure of the project.

An unexpected slowing down in the economy coupled with a government who could not galvanize any growth in the state, led to despair. For years the project dwindled, all the architects tired or their contracts finished and left. We stayed engaged in bits and pieces; sometimes, a flurry of activities in short months and then silence.

The client, who has since become a dear friend, left the state and tried his luck in Mumbai while running the project remotely. Mumbai, for him did not open the doors he imagined and he returned at a time when the winds of development were changing with a new government in place. The work plodded on and slowly gathered pace.
Suddenly spaces that for years had been meticulously crafted on paper started to reveal themselves; walkways, lakes, gardens, plazas, children’s play spaces, parts of the river side, rehabilitated shops, entrances and driveways.

It’s a long way from completion. Perhaps, another 7 years.

If anything, developments like this teach the two qualities that are needed to make them successful.

Patience. And an unwavering sense of purpose.

And work continues. And bit by bit, as sectors are getting completed, the despair is turning to unbridled joy. A strongly passionate site team held firm to the tenets of the ambition and never let go, the owner enthused them and guided them; we supported the process.
LEGEND

1. Entrance Hub
2. Transport Hub and Market
3. School and Maidan
4. IT Hub
5. Retail
6. Golf Course
7. Golf Housing
8. Riverfront Housing
9. Lakefront Housing
10. Promenade
11. Central Club and Park
12. Bata Factory
13. Rehab Housing
Halfway Retreat | Ahmedabad - 2006

Arjun, the owner was all of 28 years old when he commissioned this house.

It was called Half Way Retreat because the original plans were for a much grander weekend home down the road would have taken too much time and money - two things that always seem in short supply till one learns to breathe regularly.

We decided to build it in the shortest time possible, and if I recollect from design to occupation it took under 13 months.

It started with a conversation in a car with Arjun, where he doubted that an idiom that was modern and truly localized was even possible - any mention of that in Ahmedabad meant exposed concrete and exposed bricks; or when extended, it led to an aesthetic that seemed to place us in parts of Spain or Mexico; the palette ended there, as did the logic and articulation of spaces.
LEGEND

1. Entrance crack
2. Grove
3. Stark Court
4. Moist Shaded Walkway
5. Sunken Court with Mist
6. Garden Room Extensions
7. Stepped Meadows
8. Hidden Spaces
9. Crop Planting
10. Storm Water Channels
11. Hidden Pond
12. Lowest original Datum/
    Agricultural Court
13. Lowest original datum
    court with existing native
    trees
14. Native Flora Edge
15. Walkways
It was built in stone, exposed concrete and steel; a palette that we enjoyed reworking when we did the Bridge house a few years later.

The house vehemently allowed me to debunk a lot of things that seemed canons in the minds of architects who then seemed to anchor critical thinking. The house far from having any sense of placid continuity, works with fractals, overlapping geometries and extremely divergent realities colliding next to each other. It also rather than being a tranquil space, is filled with tension, that allows a taunt calm.

Above: Connector to the living room. Below: Lower landscape court.
The landscape uses patterns from agriculture, and there are water channels that crisscross the space and carry storm water. That geometry is overlaid with a topographically ascending order of a spiral. The planting comprises of plants that gardens have dismissed - and we chose a palette from those that are grasses used for fodder or wild plants that grow along roadside.
Deviratn | Jaipur - 2007

When on trips to Rajasthan, I used to remark that the old palaces and forts were what they were also because of the idea of thickness; a luxury that is not available now. And yet, anyone building in such historical contexts had to aspire to create spaces which were choreographed with rhythm and lyricism that the earlier architecture was rich in.

In Jaipur we were invited to build a large hotel over 22 acres of land. A series of rather interesting questions occupied us all through the journey of designing and building this hotel; some of which we answered satisfactorily, and some not as much.
The plan structure relied on social hierarchies; of the palace, the nobility and the town; and each of these use basic cosmic geometries to denote their presence. The circle, the square and the arc.

The architecture relied on clear but powerful forms, and carefully manipulated the stark desert sun. References to the astronomical devices at Jantar Mantar and the step wells of the dry land were built in.
The project now is a medley of starkly accessed spaces, or layered and labyrinthine spaces, creating a slow choreographed sequence. The *jali* was reinterpreted, as a component of integral structure and not as an infill in the architecture.

The landscapes sadly not executed well, worked with immense land art, and very fine grading, that was conceived in layers that connected to the vast wild landscape that the hotel looked at or the spaces that were resplendent in stark colors as is the nature of the desert and then the quieter more sensuous interruptions when least expected.
Model of the restaurant area.
Top: Model of the rooms.
Bottom Left: Rear landscape fora.
Bottom Right: Model of the room cluster.
It was barren; in all about 3-4 trees.

The first time I went to site, it was bare scorched earth. There was a large retaining wall holding up the higher part of the site. An abandoned plinth of a house started earlier sat safely in the center away from the edge. As I walked around with Atulbhai, the client, he told me about homes in the neighboring areas which had their foundations collapsing because of poor sandy soil; and of course, that landscape was difficult since the water was very saline.

But the one thing that struck me was how beautifully located the land was - it was 15 minutes from the middle of the city and yet seemed like it was at the edge of civilization- it overlooked hundreds and hundreds acres of forest land; albeit degraded and from the higher ground that we were on, our views were infinite.
Later after the first few discussions, a friend of his came to quiz me, since he was convinced that I was taking Atulbhai for a ride. I had promised a precariously sited house between two hills, that was connected by a bridge, with the valley being used as a pool and a theatre, but more importantly was sure that the entire site would be a rich and textured landscape. I had dispensed with using storm water trenches, and retaining walls.

He was convinced that I was headed for failure.
More than the details for the house, built in stone, concrete, and steel, often not noticed is the way in which soil was systematically stabilized and put under a planting regime that over the years has greatly improved the soil. The house acts as an object in a vast created and borrowed landscape. The drama of daily life is enacted at its periphery.

The bridge starts from tamed nature, riding the cusp of created humane and wild landscapes and then descends into the wild, while piercing the house as it traverses a length of over 120 meters. In doing so, it allows the house to have many relations with many theatres of landscape; cloistered and safe when confronted with the wild, open and encompassing when in the presence of the more humane landscapes.
Above: The library.
Below: The copper room.
Above: Installation in the copper room.
Below: Installation in the entrance pavilion.
Adjacent to a large villa, was a garden that I had been asked to do in my early stages of work. I ran late for an appointment one day, and it was enough to convince the owner that I was tardy and decided not to continue with my services.

About two and a half decades later, we were invited to completely redo the landscape and also as part of this exercise, redesign a small outhouse with a pool where the old demolished one stood.
This small architectural endeavor relies on a cross axis, that is repeated so that one axis forms the large verandah and the others that sit perpendicular to it, the indoor spaces.

Rather different from the language we seem to be comfortable with normally, we chose a rather muted mix of materials since, this composition sat very close to the larger villa.

The project resulted into what has now been a long standing and solid relationship with the client and us being commissioned to undertake architectural and landscape commissions for several other sites for him.

LEGEND

1. Entrance Area
2. Verandah
3. Lounge
4. Gymnasium
5. Massage
6. Yoga Pavilion
7. Pantry
8. Store
9. Pool
10. Deck
11. Bar
12. Bedroom

Below: Detail of verandah.
I remember clearly that it was around the time, that for some reason I was reading and seeing movies with very strong but very different characters. Also, I had been to meetings and social occasions where the room had many people, rather different but still managed to produce amiable and animated discussions.

When the first sketch for this house was done, I knew it was a space with many characters- many actors; who not only dressed differently, but behaved differently too. As the process of design progressed we managed to hold on to this thought and eke it out well.
Model of the drum
LEGEND

1. Entrance
2. Lounge
3. Projection Area
4. Bar
5. Wooden Deck
The house has a mask made in fine concrete that flows like fabric; behind the mask is a warm generous verandah space that connects you to a gorgeous landscape; then there is the drum made of customized bricks that denies itself the pleasure of looking out, but looks inwards and towards the sky, with small apertures to remind itself where it is located, and then there is the stockade, that protects and houses the sleeping spaces.

Exposed concrete at entrance.
The landscape is lyrical, with planting of fruit trees, herbs, vegetables and many flowers, and much like the house, presents a face and slowly reveals and draws one in, as one explores it.

We have been to the place often, with different people at varying times, and it does seem that an animated conversation is always on.

Above: *Erythrina* trees near the dining room. Below: Verandah space.
In a large compound, where we had already refurbished the landscapes and built a small structure, the client wanted to build his home, separate from the family home.

Having just built the lounge for him and with a weekend home under design, he wondered if he should work with another architect. We fully agreed and helped set up many interviews till he selected the designer. The house that was built is strongly introverted and focused on an internal court.
LEGEND

1. Walking Trail
2. Flower Beds
3. Existing Grove of Trees
4. Woodland
5. Grasslands
6. Car Alighting Bay
7. Parking Shed
8. Service Walkway
9. Utility Building
10. Servants/Driver’s Room
11. Proposed Servant Block
Large land with the remnants of an earlier planted orchard surrounded the house; the landscape then needing to enhance the bio diversity allow, screening and many walks amidst it, led to a careful process of planting design that assessed sightlines, shade, stratification, screening and the old fashioned principles of planting - colour, form, texture and shape.

It was a good return to the basics.
Indulgence is a much scorned emotion when it comes to architecture nowadays; we live in an age where we talk about being optimum, minimal or reductive and somehow that is meant to be responsible. The fate of the planet is tied to every action we take and in some sense this is true; but we do carry it to ridiculous lengths. But more importantly because of this, in design we seem to have forgotten the sheer joy of spaces and materials. Our minds have been gradually affected, wherein our ability to absorb a vivid and varied mélange of occurrences has diminished. In many ways, we have been surprised at this turn of things and have never quite understood its logic.
1. Entrance Court
2. Service Entrance
3. Parking
4. Arrival Space
5. Office
6. Massage
7. Steam
8. Verandah
9. Gymnasium
10. Terrace
11. Lily Pool
12. Pool
13. Pool Deck
14. Tennis Court

LEGEND
This lounge, sunken below the ground is an urban getaway. It’s in the middle of the town and yet hides from it. There is no place to stay overnight but otherwise has a pool, a garden, a small spa, dining spaces, terraces and a large living space.

Of joy were the simple sculptural decisions, off the ramp that leads you below ground, the screens, the forms of the many habitable spaces and of all of this put together with many materials ranging from steel, engineered wood, exposed concrete, wood and walls coated with specially developed paint.
In what seems set to become a fine example of industrial campuses in the country, we undertook the master planning, architectural and landscape design for this rather large piece of land, with lakhs of square feet of construction. Good sense, sound ecology, responsible and pragmatic ideas of sustainability, refined but low key architecture and poetic landscapes have been the building blocks that has led to a vehicle free campus where every step of the process from siting, building orientations, construction details, material choices, fenestration design, storm water management, lake revival strategies, pollution free lighting, landscape language and choice of plant material, waste disposal and waste water treatment technologies have been debated intelligently and intensely, while allowing at all times the design to be experienced well.

Right: Construction photographs.
Left: Orientation studies.
Located in the Western Ghats, this 6000 acre development was an arduous and a long journey.

The Western Ghats are one of the bio diversity hotspots in the world and hugely degraded over time. It is also, rightly the attention of many environmentalists and media. The level at which it has been callously treated is a sad sight.

We approached this development with the strong resolve to uphold the highest standards of ecological parameters and examine the nature of the development that would emerge. This, we did out of the strong conviction that unless sensitive ecological tracts are put under responsible stewardship, the country’s ability to safeguard them is a bit suspect. In short, we do believe that development is a tool to protect the environment if done well.

Our effort was preceded by media attention on other such developments in the country which had not done too well when it came to environmental safeguards and development and hence, the suspicion was large.
Land slopes down and at the end of the trail, a steep slope and a stream.

Land sloping gradually down, interspersed with forest. Sound of water is heard after an hour.

Flat

Rocky plains with steep gorge at distant.

Land slopes down with forest on both the sides.

Land sloping gradually down, interspersed with forest. Fields seen at lower plains.

Flat with small streams. Steep cliff on the left.
For months we collated data, made our studies and tried hard to convince authorities of our integrity and vision. But the elephant in the room was dominant; while we were often complimented for our work, we were also told that in past such efforts had been irresponsible and also that not too many people had the courage to give us permissions; the project was too big and too complex.

To add to this, an extremely respected environmentalist who was commissioned by the Government to make suggestions, more or less suggested a full ban on most kinds of development in this mountain range. While deferring to his wisdom we did feel that the recommendations were extreme and more importantly not sustainable or possible to adhere to.
We, along with a sincere set of supporting consultants plodded on and met the media, politicians and officers to plead our case and years dragged. Over time a new set of officers of the government started reviewing our applications and bit by bit we could with detailed studies on hydrology, flora, fauna, soils and slopes; supported by extensive environmental modeling, started convincing them of our vision.

Many months later we got the final permissions.

However we are not sure if we rejoiced more when we got the permissions or when as professionals we were told that the effort we had done had set standards in the country and would now be used as a benchmark.

Above: River homes.
Below: Bridge over retained stream.
Building sustainably has become the pious chant of many and therein rests the tale. For too long we had noticed work, barring some by friends in Auroville that lacked architectural quality but gained credibility since it had paid obeisance to the humbler materials and ways of building. Many of these projects often chose a typology that was unlikely to find resonance in buildings in the city.

When offered the chance to build a school in the city promoted by a fine, young, clean energy company; the situation allowed itself to developing a building language that used cast earth, stabilized earth blocks and brick vault ceilings.
The two storied structure has cast earth walls in the lower floor and stabilized earth blocks, then plastered and painted on the floor above. The overtly zealous structural code in the state entailed that the corners had to be stabilized in concrete. The site plan itself is akin to that of a settlement, with many homes, and streets, and each building hosting a few classrooms, some connected with bridges. A phase of this development has been recently commissioned.

Left: Brick vault.
Right: Detail of cast earth wall.
At the beginning of my professional career, I had assisted my father in doing the landscape for a large pharmaceutical complex near the town and as the work progressed, I slowly started managing the project and my father monitored it. Almost 2 decades later we were invited again to the same site, this time with a much larger mandate. More land had been bought so, there was a large expansion.

Well underway now, the work involves building six large buildings and refurbishing some of the old ones along with doing the gardens. While a lot of the architecture that has come up is very satisfying; of great interest is the administration building that allows the entire staff of workers in the factory to traverse through it each day as they go to their respective plants; an egalitarian gesture that we thought was important.

The landscapes are complex. They have to deal with soil with no absorption capacity, very high water table and large quantity of water from the industrial process that needs to be dealt with within the site. This has led to long studies of recharge rates and droplet dispersal studies. A landscape of large valleys to soak the water and hills to allow it to slide off easily, has started making an appearance.
LEGEND

1. Proposed Administration building
2. Existing Canteen building
3. Proposed location for QC-QA building
4. Formulation Plant
5. IT Building
6. Changing Rooms
7. RM/BSR/EBA/ASL/PM Building
8. Insulin Building
9. Central utility Building
10. Existing F.G. Store
11. Boiler Room
12. Solvent Store
13. HT Room
14. Existing RM Store
15. Fresh Solvent Store
16. API
17. Scrap Yard
18. Proposed Solvent Barrel store
19. Location for ETP
20. Solar Pond
21. Building for any Future expansion
22. Mounds
23. Space for Fire hydrant tank
24. Quadrants with Grasses for Future expansion
25. Area with Permanent Planting
26. Ware House
27. Loading/unloading Bay
28. Weigh Bridge
29. Entrance Plaza
30. Parking area as per present requirement
31. Toilets
32. Main Entry
33. Utility Building
34. Existing Building
35. Existing Tank Structure
36. Frisking for Contract Workers
37. Mound with Existing trees
38. Congregation Space
39. Dining Court
40. Brahmasthan
41. Service Court for Congregation space

Master Plan with expanded site and new buildings
Of late, the firm finds itself doing many projects of this typology. Spread over 170 acres, this is a middle class housing project with a density of 800 people per hectare.

The curse of the car is always with us. After designing the roads and the parking, the green spaces literally need to be carved and wrested from such developments. We anchor the master plan, help in siting the buildings, design road networks and the landscape spaces. Over time we have found that sensible and balanced neighborhoods can be created, simply by paying attention to the smallest details.
Above: Early rendering of landscape.
Below: Studies indicating movement and nodes.
This particular development has occurred at a fast clip and is nearing completion and we find that there is a tremendous rigor and leading from it a deep satisfaction from focusing on what is often the mundane; the exact location of each manhole, the turn of the curb, the garden spaces, the pedestrian cross over, the signage post, the bus stand and such areas of daily life.

While sounding perhaps simple; it is not so; scale and its related complexity, the ability to construct such large volumes, makes the process arduous and sometimes convoluted. The budgets are very frugal, the time limited and yet, the end result is a tribute to the ordinary, done with unparalleled exactitude at such a scale in this country.
Above: Riverfront. Below: Rainwater harvesting lake within residential clusters.
Pooja is a young passionate educator who lives in the southern part of India and actually manages to run one of the best schools in Delhi which is miles away from her. She visits it often, makes calls and lives on Skype. She inherited an old school built by her family which was mostly neglected and was fired by the zeal to make it the best. While she had commenced on rebuilding large parts of the school, she appeared in our office and was convinced that we had to do the landscape.

I remember trying to dissuade her. The project was too small and there was just not enough to do. She would not take no for an answer. Over the years that we worked on it, this became an extremely touching and joyous journey.
We did workshops with the children and the teachers and asked them to imagine the landscapes they would like for their school. This led to a series of whimsical and fantastic thinking; and bit by bit we designed the landscape. Of scarecrows, large sound-mobiles, mirrors on the walls, crops in the garden, tunnels to hide, dragonflies in metal, floor games, and many such spaces.
A year or so after completion and with the school running full steam, she invited us to see it.

We knew it was a formal invitation, but were overwhelmed when we actually reached there.

All the walls were put up with drawings of the gardens that the children had made, and after a tour of the school, we were led into the auditorium where the entire school had assembled and the children talked about the gardens and put up performances, rehearsed for the day. The teachers then talked about these as learning spaces. We were gifted a small book about the gardens designed by the teachers and the children. And finally we were felicitated as the first founding fathers of the school.

We wept.
A first home for a young couple, this rather large house is like a gentle giant, hiding amidst the trees and succeeding. Carefully sited amidst the many trees and yet, staying with a plan that is simple and in some sense formal, this house uses a crafted brick wall that is undulated to draw people in. A large copper roof acts as the shelter for the verandah and handcrafted, specially designed terrazzo floors mark each space. Three bold concrete pavilions encircle it; one is a parking space, the other is the entrance porch and the third along the garden, the breakfast pavilion. The garden is formal and as it grows I am sure will create layers of vision, but also at least three dramatically varying landscape experiences in a small space without seeming to try too hard.
LEGEND

1. Main Entrance
2. Security Cabin
3. Parking
4. Proposed Parking
5. Plaza with Existing Trees
6. Porch
7. Walkways
8. Grassed Space
9. Pathway connecting to Paved Deck
10. Deck
11. Kids Play Area
12. Dense Plantation
13. Existing Tennis Court
14. Gravel court with Planting
15. Existing Swimming Pool
16. Existing House

Landscape Plan
In what is one of the largest podium landscapes in Mumbai, measuring over two acres are tall residences that sit cheek by jowl with tall offices.

Well under way and nearing completion, this has been a very satisfying albeit long journey where site agencies and engineers rose to a call to demonstrate what quality can mean in times where ideas of quality are greatly diluted. Precise craftsmanship is apparent in the stone and metal work, but also in beautiful earth sculpting and planting underway to create landscapes with a strong sense of art and identity.
1. Main 9m wide driveway with pedestrian walk on both sides.
2. Plaza leading to the central garden.
3. Entrance courts with planted islands.
4. Amphitheater
5. Screens / feature walls.
6. 6m wide driveway.
7. Elliptical sit out area.
8. Planter
9. Air shafts.
10. Fire escape staircase.
11. Thin pathways traversing the central garden.
12. Tree court & plaza.
13. Central garden with mounds & lawn.
14. Flower courts.
15. Thick planting buffer
17. Entry to parking.
18. Parking for service vehicles.
The first presentation had a rather stylish woman with fishnet gloves covering her eyes and peeking through her fingers.

Located on the edge of a valley in a development in the mountains, the site was beautiful; but marred by clusters of poor architecture, stacked shanty like along the hill sides. It became clear that the house had to choose and pick what it saw and yet, act as if it was seeing all that there was to see.
A huge wall flanks one side of the plot and a ramp leads one up to a living space that overlooks the valley. Like hoods on cameras, the view is directed from the windows. This house using a medley of concrete, stonecrete, corten steel and painted walls is nearing completion.

Above: Detail of entrance court.
Below: View of the house.
Workplace landscapes for tight urban offices often do not allow too much scope. For a series of branded offices in Mumbai, the first one takes what are only driveway spaces or small balconies and terraces and uses devices from screens, grasses, small rocks and steel rods to create landscape spaces that we hope can create the identity and the sense of place for what otherwise are often generic building typologies that are repeated overtly.
Left: Terrace Café area.
Right: Detail of entrance screen.
Over the last decade and a bit more, matters of Indian urbanity have gained a lot of traction. The view seems to be that while a majority of India is rural, this is set to change and more and more people will migrate to urban centres to seek a better future. Evidence seems to support this assumption. But this recent attention has nothing to do with Mumbai. It has and will continue to be India’s city of dreams. For decades, millions of people have been lured to its wily charms and Mumbai continues to grow at alarming rates where today a shade under half it’s population lives in what really may be called shanty like conditions. As it bursts at it’s seams, many efforts have been made to find homes for the residents of this city; but perhaps no other experiment is as ambitious as Palava.

LEGEND

1. Waterfront - River
2. Waterfront - Lake
3. Gauchar Maidan
4. Swale Park
5. Grid Park
6. 3.5 acre Community green
7. Pocket Parks – Spaces within Buildings
8. Suggested location for STP
Population of Mumbai in 2011: 20 million

Population of Mumbai in 2050: 35 million

Population of Ahmedabad

Projected population of Palava

35% SAVINGS IN ENERGY PER METRE CUBE PER YEAR

24 HRS ELECTRIC SUPPLY
24 HRS WATER SUPPLY
24 HRS EMERGENCY SERVICES
24 HRS SECURITY SURVEILLANCE

INCREASED LEISURE TIME TO 1/4TH A DAY
3 MONTHS A YEAR

70% REDUCTION IN POTABLE WATER

120 SQ.M. GREEN SPACE PER PERSON

0 DEATHS DUE TO ROAD ACCIDENTS
0 INCIDENTS OF ROBBERY, THEFT, MURDER AND OTHER CRIMES

TOWARDS MORE LIVABLE INDIAN CITIES
DECODING LIVABILITY FOR A CITY
Spread over 4000 acres, Palava aims to be home to over 2 million and more people; and get there in the next 15 years.

This is audacious.

There is certainly no other equivalent in the world where using a free market economy a city is sought to be established in such a compressed time.

We anchor the master plan for this city and also undertake its street design, landscape design, coordinate its infrastructure and furthermore mentor or assist some of the architectural programmes.
It’s a great honour and a great responsibility.

Such efforts have no linear responsibility and we find that at times we are walking over hundreds of acres, mapping the ground, at others doing studies of parks across the world, at yet others drawing up detailed road architecture, designing shops on the main avenue, co-ordinating manholes on pavements, designing street lighting, guiding discussions on surface hydrology, drawing up river front strategies, imagining children’s place spaces; the list is endless.

It’s making a city after all.

Work on great parts has commenced on the ground and the next 4 years are the exciting times.
Office documents on Palava.
The Tank | Mumbai – 2012

A note by Darshan Mehta

It was meant to be the UNO store, all our Brands in one. The One store and yet, when the space was into the last mile of its coming to life - when Vyom’s lit monster went up - UNO did seem very inadequate. That’s when Aniket mentioned that his daughter had come up with The Tank. I Instantly loved the sound aesthetic of it. It brought up an imagery of something raw, metallic and unexpected. It seemed to match the mystique of the space. So The Tank it was. And is. Thanks Malvika.

When I first visited RPL house, I knew that this was the opportunity. To push the envelope, to dare and to make a leap into taking fashion in India from the real to the philosophical. Serendipity that I was at that time also talking to Aniket Bhagwat for designing another space. “Aniket, would you design a retail space?” “Sure, would love to. Never done one before”. The perfect qualification. When I saw the first presentation, the two alternate design concepts, the history of the beautiful building and it’s neighborhood unearthed - I knew that we were on to creating something very unique and disruptive. There was then the long journey of fun and frustration, of monies and purchase orders, of conference calls and tempers, of successive opening dates come and go.
When I first met Vyom Mehta at a factory shed of what looked like a scrap yard, I saw the skeleton of his “monster”. And all the mortification and ignominy of the never opening store, paled into insignificance. The second time since project RPL House had started, I smiled a happy smile. In Fashion, as in Art and Architecture, as in Design, as in any thing that merits a comment on aesthetic, my approach has been the same.

Don't understand it. Don't explain it. There is no rationale nor any clever commentary required. Instead you stand still. See if it draws you. Makes you greedy. Makes you want to be richer than you are. Makes you feel inadequate, because you were not its creator. Takes you beyond the obvious to the metaphorical. The Tank is one such oasis of aesthetic.
It was after many years that we had accepted a commission to do a landscape for a real estate project, that we had not done the architecture for. It was a long space in the middle of tall, well proportioned faceless apartments. There were parking garages underneath.

Over time, and particularly in the last 10 years, almost all of the new Indian cities have become faceless. About two decades before that the landscapes along the country’s highways started unheeding climate, topography, soil and water and along miles, it was either *eucalyptus* or those wretched *prosopis* trees.

Now, the architecture is no different. And the gardens for such architecture continue to be trapped into the recreation of meaningless glib images.
Model of the Dinosaur.
LEGEND

1. Entrance Plaza
2. Trellis Plaza
3. Parking
4. Lawn
5. Sculpture
6. Bridge
7. Ramp
8. Retaining Wall
9. Opening in the Mound
10. Cave
11. Toddler’s Play Area
12. Pathway
13. Planting
14. Children’s Play Area
15. Steps leading to the Bridge
16. Sand Pit
17. Volleyball Court
18. Multipurpose Court
19. Amphitheatre with Feature Wall
20. Cricket pitch
21. Pebble Court
22. Thematic Herb Courts
23. Jet Fountain
24. Water Fountain
25. Sit out
26. Ramp to Lawn
27. Mound
28. Gravel Court with planters
29. Lily Pool
30. Slide with Sandpit
31. Skylight
We wondered how people who bought these places, ever managed to distinguish their homes from the thousand others and we wondered even more about what was happening to the idea of identity in our cities. Then we rued the lack of any emotions that seemed to be displayed in a lot of this rather generic work.
And I think we just revolted.

The whimsical garden now has a large set of trellis structures that mark the space of community gathering, gardens to play in, water to touch, caves for children to hide and read, and a giant dinosaur 33 metres long, that spans the gardens and connects many different play spaces.

Detail of the dinosaur.
The first time I went there I had difficulty in understanding what constituted the site. We drove off the road in Bhiwandi and stopped at a place that looked like acres of barren basalt, a lot of it excavated and what was a rather degraded landscape. The site was somewhere there and we could not really map it.

This was to be a night shelter and resting place for pilgrims who walked from Mumbai, to the shrine of Sai Baba in Nashik. Surveys were difficult and every time a survey was done, it showed up with large inaccuracies.
Over time, folks from the office spent hours and days, mapping the rocks and shallow soils and kept working on strategies to negotiate levels, rocks, movement, storm water and also the siting of the various buildings.

The project moved slowly and I had been busy with other work and when I routinely asked about the progress, I was confidently told that it was happening.
It was then to my complete joy that many months later, Vinay who had literally camped at site often and forged great bonds with the people who worked there, quietly took me to site and walked me around and it was clearly touched by the Gods! What was once a hostile barren site had become a sublime, poetic and spiritual place with fine planting, gentle paths and crisp stone work.

Details of planting.
Featured elsewhere, is a large development spread over 175 acres that has middle income housing and will over the next few years house over 45000 people.

The very nature of mass housing somehow enforces a clone like similarity that for reasons of time, complexity and cost is something that developments like this can't escape. Located at Dombivali, a far distance from the more richly woven urban tapestry of Mumbai, the area shows no sign of history or architecture of identity and consequence. While we anchored the master plan and undertook a complex and frugal landscape design for this development, we were asked to design the club house for the community.
LEGEND

1. 600mm x 600mm stone with grass verge
2. Continuing grass of grass verge
3. Thin Lawn
4. Paved Area
5. Sand Pit
6. Splash Pool
7. Hedge
8. Thick Plantation
9. Paved area for Services
10. Party Lawn
11. Paved Walkway
12. Shrubbery
13. Thin Lawn
14. Thick Lawn
15. Orchard with floor games in the flooring
16. Aviary (bird cage)
17. Kids’ play area with play equipment
Engulfed by tall residential towers that all looked menacingly similar, we went about collecting urban memories of the many architectures of Mumbai - the docklands, the Parsi Homes, the Art Deco, the buildings of the cinemas, the lovely wrought iron stations, clock towers and many such vignettes and wove them along a space reminiscent of a railway platform; like stations that come often when one travels in the city’s sinuous local trains.
And each location was built choosing one memory of the architecture of this great city. The building will be commissioned in the next four months. When I showed my friends the project while under design, I got rather surprised looks and in a recent conference a very serious faced architect was moved enough to ask what was wrong with me and if I was losing my sanity.

Perhaps; but not on account of this building! I think it’s humorous, cheeky and light hearted and my hope is in the end, delightful.

Humor, however is in short supply - so seriously do we take ourselves.

Above: Library and verandah. Below: Detail of verandah.
When, the owner of the Bridge House wanted to build an office for his company he first showed me a plot of land that was tight, and really had little possibility of doing something interesting. He then showed me another that seemed much better, but already had a working plan sanction that we could not deviate much from. Keeping the same footprint and the broad schema, we worked to design this building greatly inspired by Paul Klee’s 1929 painting, “Uncomposed Objects in Space”, and we also dug into references of mining and minerals.
Legend:
1. Entrance
2. Arrival Court
3. Security Cabin
4. Drive Way
5. Car Parking
6. Scooter Parking
7. Entrance and Reception
8. Women’s Restrooms
9. Men’s Restrooms
10. Lounge Area
11. Bridge
12. Staircase
13. Lift
14. Private Lift
15. Entrance to Art Gallery
16. Art Gallery
17. Staircase to Basement
18. Cafeteria
19. Indoor Cafe
20. Serving counter and Pantry
21. Ramp to Basement
22. Exit Gate
23. Services
24. Transformer
25. D.G. Set
26. Softener and Salt storage
27. Drivers Toilet
28. Underground Tank
29. Fire Exit ladder

Ground Floor Plan
This had a reason. Atulbhai has long been a patron of arts, hosting plays and concerts at the Bridge House and also a modest collector of art. His love for this grows by the day. His company is into metallurgy.

The two narratives fuelled the design for this office which is under construction.

Detail of central court.
The atrium is composed of almost freely suspended objects, leading to a kind of controlled tension; and these lead to monastic office spaces bathed with light that are serene. The basements for parking are truly sculpted and reminiscent of many interpretations from mining traditions and its related imagery.

Construction photographs.
Reams can be written about this city. It is the oldest living city in the world and the most spiritual centre in India.

But beyond that, Varanasi is a mental labyrinth that holds a mirror to the world in areas ranging from craft, music, alternative healing, education and yoga to name some.
POPULATION OF THE DISTRICT: 3.7 MILLION (CENSUS 2011)
POPULATION OF THE CITY: 1.2 MILLIONS (CENSUS 2011)
POPULATION DENSITY: 2,399 PER SQUARE KILOMETER
SEX RATIO: 909
RURAL: 187,810
URBAN: 128,057
GROWTH RATE: 17.32% AS OF DECADE 2001-2011
LITERACY RATE: 77.05%
NUMBER OF VILLAGES: 1,327
TOWN: 4
RELIGION: JAINISM, HINDUISM, MUSLIMS AND BUDDHISM
LANGUAGES SPOKEN: BHOJPURI, URDU, HINDI AND ENGLISH
It’s always been a cosmopolitan city for hundreds of years and has many names. It’s the city of Shiva, it’s the city of “gallis” (narrow streets), it’s the city of knowledge, it’s the city of spirituality; it’s all that and more.
Renderings to communicate the introduction of tanks along the Holy Ghats.
The office anchored and led an intense effort that put together over a dozen firms / experts in the areas of planning, infrastructure, mobility, waste management, culture, history, conservation, education, landscape, ecology, hydrology and governance along with citizens of the city to compile a vision document for the development of the city.

Renderings to communicate the introduction of tanks along the Holy Ghats.
The premise is that, since Varanasi literally is the emotional centre of India; and if it can be demonstrated that it can be reincarnated, India will believe that it can too. The effort has the audience that matters in the country and hopefully over a period of time, good things will happen.

*Above:* Sandbar and proposed sacred forest.

*Below:* Proposed cultural complex on the Varuna river.
Samode Bagh
Jaipur - 1992

For two young brothers who have since, built one of the most respected hospitality brands in Rajasthan, we helped in restoring their ancestral gardens. With research on the plant material used in the medieval times and the stone work that accompanied it, the water systems were carefully restored and the gardens were planted. What was also done was a skillful densification of the woodland in the grounds at the rear, so that it’s rambling character stayed intact.
This was really a floorscape exercise; with barely any place for trees; so tight, was the site and so high, the demand on paved space for the children. There was a dramatic central court and then inside the primary school, a joyful floor with games and patterns.
Khemani Distilleries
Daman - 2003

A project for industry where, screening two internal roads that were separated by a drainage channel became one of the design concerns. A sculpture in stainless steel, crafted out of thin sheets, that tip toes on the drain, becomes the center piece for the entire development. There were other smaller vignettes, such as the court landscape with customized lights and water held in strong geometry.
Pool in the Garden
Delhi - 2004

As part of a garden refurbishment brief, we designed a linear silver pool, with a two level pavilion nestled amongst dense foliage. The composition sits in a garden between two houses. It was an ode to modernism but in a way that we thought it should be.
Mariwala House
Alibaug - 2004

Samira Rathod, who has assisted us on innumerable interior design endeavors on the homes that we have designed, commissioned us to design the landscape for a house she had designed for a wonderfully young at heart, older gentleman. The house seemed to have many architectural characters that were comfortably unified, to form a sense of a sculptural entity.

The landscape carried the idea and engulfed the house expressing very divergent characters that included stark gravel courts screened by a metal wall, water, sculpted land forms and the sense of the fields, on each face of the house, which seems to have blended well.

I am told that after years of using the house and enjoying it, he plans to sell it and I hope the new owners take good care of it.
1. A driveway that snakes through the trees.
2. That connects to a gravel edged surface.
3. That allows you to alight in an earth court.
4. From where you step up on a black axis.
5. A goblin wall holds the earth court, with water spouts with water that you walk through.
6. A Byzantine hill, most edges the platform falls in the pond.
7. Collect in a trough, and through a Byzantine hill, most edges the platform falls in the pond.
8. The ramp.
9. The ramp.
10. The ramp.
11. Marble streaming medieval rose garden.
Jariwala House
Ahmedabad - 2004

This is a house for an old school friend and it works with the modernist credo of the city, which is expressed by fine exposed brick work and exposed concrete. The house wears that garb but then, hollows the inside to make space for a plethora of influences from various parts of the country. Built around a court it uses extensively, wood screens as the internal walls.
Symbiosis
Pune - 2004

This really was a sad ending to what could have been a spectacular institutional landscape. On an extremely large site, atop a hill we sited all the architectural pieces of this university campus, developed all the grading and formation levels and evolved a logical and poetic storm water strategy; and then using some rather immaculate stone work, created a series of courts, streets and plazas. Just when the project was completing a retired army man was appointed to be the administrator and with him in helm, all thoughts of design and logical planting went out of the window since, he wanted trees that looked like military formations. The outcome was a rather pristine stage, ruined by tardy planting.
Devarshi House
Ahmedabad - 2006

A house that was abandoned; but before that happened, had been built to a stage where crafted stone had become the skin and the exterior wall of the two wings of the house.
Children’s Play Area
Visnagar - 2006

As a part of pro-bono work initiative within the office, we designed this small playground for a village near Ahmedabad using scaffolding timber and other construction waste. While it was being made, on one of my trips, I could not but help notice the graphical similarity of the crop that grew all around the grounds of the playground.
Office Landscape
Mumbai - 2006

A small office landscape became a stage to help; respond to the loss of the relation of water and the sea that the crowded city of Mumbai suffers from. The landscape is an ode to the many forms of water that falls, travels, becomes mist and the land form echoes the waves.
Sunken Retreat
Ahmedabad - 2008

A lounge built, buried below ground level, which is approached from the terrace to reveal a sunken garden and the architecture.
The Park
Chennai - 2008

An urban hotel, that uses a strong axial landscape, to screen the world outside and create a quiet court, that uses plant material, landscape elements and lighting in the way that allows the siting of an image pool as its central focus.
Ecostead
Ahmedabad – 2008

A land exceeding 150 acres which uses agriculture and orchards as the dominant space making elements. The houses all sit on artificial lakes that are created to manage storm water and water recharge.
Torrent Research Centre
Ahmedabad - 2008

The centre undertook a large architectural expansion. Landscape helped in restructuring site linkages and open spaces. The gardens now comprise of orchards, courts, grasslands and wetlands. It also has some sculptural settings in the form of some ideas such as paying tribute to the founders of the company by expressing the roots of a set of trees planted by them over time.
Rajesh Brahmbhatt’s Garden
Ahmedabad - 2009

A small residential garden for a plant lover. It’s a pity that we don’t seem to have the time or ability to do a lot of this typology any more.
Monsoon Palace
Amby Valley - 2009

One of the many landscapes that we have done for an old client, friend and mentor in manners we are extremely ill equipped to do; all of them are reminiscent of the old English gardens. This one has modeled land in sweeping curves and exuberant displays of seasonal flowers; the closest we have got to pay our respect to Kent, Brown and Jekyll.
Very occasionally, the office undertakes interior design commissions. This one is for the display and retail center for premium bath companies along with accompanying floor and wall solutions. The design deconstructs the space into smaller components and boxes, expanding the display possibilities and allowing private and group viewing of the products.
FLAME University
Pune - 2010

A large university campus suffered from hurried site planning and landscape strategies that had not been evaluated well. The grounds were painstakingly reconstructed and remodeled, without any stoppage of the campus activities and a minimum disturbance to existing work.
World Trade Centre
Gandhinagar - 2014

Tall buildings have a peculiar challenge to deal with; they get noticed, either by how tall they are, or how sculptural; rarely do they seem to have any other device to fall back on.

The World Trade Centre building that is soon commencing construction draws parallels and hence meanings in interpreting such work places as the new temples of India.
Landscape Environment Advancement Foundation (LEAF) is engaged in research and publication in the area of landscape design and environmental planning. It supports research programs of varying durations every year.

We realized that there is very little by way of text, for landscape design studies, as also for architecture in India. There is even less, by way of a body of knowledge with which to theorize.

Then we have forgotten how to see. And when we do know how to see, we know very few ways to do so.

LEAF was born out of these concerns; and through many research projects we look at things that no one often cares to; how birds fly? Can we show sound graphically? Or smell? How does a cow in a city move differently from one in the village? What really happens in the small cracks and pores of the ground on which we walk? Can we find a structure in natural landscapes? And many such questions.

The research is always primary; always things we can sit and observe; the ways of representing this greatly debated and experimented.

Aniket Bhagwat
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>L E A F Documents</th>
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<td>1. Seeing the City</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<td>2. Observations along the Sabarmati</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<td>3. Understanding the idea of nature in the city</td>
<td>2010</td>
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<td>4. Observing the ground in the city</td>
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<td>5. Art and Landscape</td>
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<td>6. City Sounds</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<td>7. Birds in the City</td>
<td>2011</td>
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<td>8. Cow Day &amp; Slumventures</td>
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<td>8. Summer Smells</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>10. Open spaces in Mumbai</td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>11. A Million Gardens</td>
<td>2014</td>
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Public open spaces are not just about the physical realm; but they induce behavior and also nourish socio-psychological aspirations of community.

The objective of the study was to understand the behavior of people in relation to the open space in the context of Ahmedabad city, to re-evaluate the need of public open spaces.

Teen Darwaja represents a market place in the historic context of the city; University Road and Ellis Bridge represent the typology which works as non designed public spaces; ATIRA represents a institutional campus working as a public space.

It is observed that public spaces like Teen Darwaja, University road, Ashram road, bridges, railway station, Ambawadi cross-roads, ATIRA are successful because they are policed to some extent.

**University Road**
- Typological examples of road edges and building edges which invites people.
- Foot path and road edge become a place for parking vehicles and socializing.
- Informal, public place.
Teen Darwaja
- Street, approximately 3150 square metre.
- Oldest commercial centre contributing to the economy of the city.
- Major transportation link with heavy traffic.
- Road-edges occupied by vehicles and hawkers.
- Public place.

Ellis Bridge
- Oldest bridge connecting the old and new city.
- Heavy traffic throughout the day, easily accessible.
- Foot path on both sides and connection to the river draws people.
- Public place.
- Association: recreational.
- Usage: late evenings and nights.

ATIRA
- A gated campus between the educational zone of the city with a large green cover.
- Informal activities at the edge of the campus invite many people.
- Private place.
- Institutional land use.
- Association: daily ritual and recreational.
- Usage: early mornings and evenings.
Observations along the Sabarmati
Ritesh J. Kamdar
July 2009

Sabarmati River originates from the Aravalli mountain range in the Udaipur District of Rajasthan of Western India. Sabarmati river acts as a lifeline for number of villages located on her banks.

The aim of the exercise was to understand the natural system of the Sabarmati river through various parameters. The study also aimed at documenting the nature and behavior of the river course and to observe the various activities taking place along the banks of Sabarmati river. The study identified ten villages located at the banks of the Sabarmati river dispersed at nearly regular intervals.

* Mahi, Narmada and Kim are not tributaries. Like Sabarmati, they also drain into the Gulf of Khambhat
Soil Types:

Type – 115
Moderately deep, moderately well drained, calcareous, fine soils on very gently sloping alluvial plain with slight erosion and slight salinity associated with deep, moderately well-drained, calcareous, fine soils with moderate erosion.

Type – 079
Very deep, moderately well-drained, calcareous, fine loamy soils on very gently sloping flood plain with slight erosion and slight salinity associated with deep, moderately well-drained, calcareous fine soils with slighter erosion and slighter salinity.
Understanding the idea of nature in the city

Ritu Rawat
July 2010

Landscapes that reflect the idea of wilderness or untamed nature are important vignettes of our surrounding environment. The locations selected for the study are based on different preferences like the degree to which a scene is natural or manmade, the topographic variation, and scale and openness of the scene. This study focuses specifically, on the experiential quality of these landscapes.

The study examines the specific character of the components and then the overall organization using the following methods:

- Observations: Perceptions while moving
- Layers defining depth and height
- Observing the sky
- Observing the Ground
- Components
- Inferences with typological examples

ATIRA

Ahmedabad Textile and Industrial Research Centre (ATIRA) is a gated campus within the educational zone. It is characterized by an open woodland cover with glades including a field layer of grasses which supports the habitat of birds like peafowl (*pavo cristatus*), kite (*milvus migrans*) and other resident birds.

Clusters of leafless trees within the woodland draw interest towards themselves.

Trees with low height, sparse spacing and absence of shrub layer allow vision through, towards the sky and the distant layer of trees.

Open spaces within the woodland with varying textures and dense edge create habitat for birds like Indian peafowl (*pavo cristatus*).

Large and small open spaces, where interest is directed towards specimen trees.

Observations: Perception while Moving
The ground is a surface that we traverse on everyday. As city dwellers, we usually tend to pave it, clean it for walking and sitting, or cover it with grass and pretty shrubs if it’s part of homes. We usually don’t look at it closely to observe the various life forms it supports and the daily transformation it undergoes due to the way it gets occupied by people, animals and plants.

For my study, I decided to look down, at the ground, in various parts of Ahmedabad city. The surface of Ahmedabad is a combination of a stratum of alluvial deposits and stabilized sand dunes. The city is also bifurcated by the Sabarmati River. The city also has a varied land use: industry to agriculture which renders the ground differently in different areas.

As a method, for each of these locations, I took photographs of the surface of the ground. I have also attempted to look at the underside of this surface, through sections of the top soil.
Ravines, River bed, Depression, Fishing , Sabarmati river

Location:
These ravines are located in the northern part of the city along the Sabarmati river.

Description:
The ravines and their immediate areas on the river bank are untouched by human activities. Ravines are formed due to surface water run off. This process of erosion degrades the land next to the river bed by washing away the top soil. Where there are exposed soil sections on the either side. These sections are highly eroded. The area is dominated by plant species like prosopis julifera, azadirachta indica, euphorbia antiquorum, capparis decidua.

Human intervention:
The bank of the river is used for cremation. People fish in the river and grow crops like (tomato), solanum tubersum (potato) and citrullus lanatus (watermelon) on the river bed. The soil from the river bed is also excavated for construction.

On the ground
The river edge is covered by cyperus rotundus grass. It is a perennial grass. Leaves are numerous, narrowly linear and finely tapered.

Below the ground
These exposed soil surfaces show the dry flowers of grass. The flowers, have probably retained the seeds within. These will germinate in the monsoon.

The edge between the river and land. These plants have been washed ashore and have remained on the bank while the water has receded.

The river edge shows the presence of cynodon dactylon grass and mollugo.

This irregular edge has been formed due to surface water movement during monsoon. Water moves towards the river due to which soft edges get eroded. Over a period of time this edge will become deeper.

Observations of Topography
Perception of environment is a multi sensory phenomena. Sight, touch, smell, and sound all together give a holistic experience of a place. Ahmedabad is the eighth biggest city in India by population - 5.4 million people spread over 205 sq. kms, make up the urban populace. Like all other cities, activities are varied and intense; and occur in dense or spread out fabrics.

I decided to explore this phenomenon of sound for my study. I chose five different areas within Ahmedabad, based on a combination of land use and building typology.

I recorded sounds in each of these places at three specific time periods of the day - morning, afternoon and evening. Based on these recordings, I have drawn ‘Sound Maps’ for each of these areas. The maps indicate the spread of sound over a given area at a given point in time.
Jami Mosque Edges, Old City.

**Location:** Near Teen Darwaza, Gandhi Road.

**Sounds in morning**
Silence in most areas, especially within the mosque. Sounds like birds flapping their wings and their chirping can be heard. No vocal conversation heard until hawkers start setting up stalls around. Silence is broken by occasional passing of vehicles.

**Sounds in afternoon**
The mosque court is one of the few quiet places at this hour. Conversations are heard on footpaths. These are the only shaded spaces in this area. Honking of vehicles is less as compared to peak hours.

**Sounds in evening**
Silence within the mosque, mosque court is largely silent; but and with a faint buzz of vehicles in the background. Conversations of pedestrians on the road edges. Roads intensively noisy with honking of vehicles.

**Call for prayers**
During sunset, the Azan from the Jami mosque and the temple bells from Manek Chawk can be heard.

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**Intensity of sound at distance from source**

- **100 dBA**
  - at 0 m from the center of road
- **90 dBA**
  - at 2 m from the center of road
- **85 dBA**
  - 0 m from road edges and 4m from center of road
- **80 dBA**
  - 2 m from road edges and 6m from center of road
- **75 dBA**
  - 4 m from road edges and 8m from center of road
- **70 dBA**
  - Inside a shop or building
- **65 dBA**
  - Silence with slight buzz
- **60 dBA**
  - Silence
- **55 dBA**
  - Silence
Birds in the City
Jobin Varughese
July 2011

Birds are a reminder of nature to every city-dweller. Because of their ability to fly, even a multistoried apartment resident is familiar with their presence and connection to nature. In spite of being a densely packed city, various birds seem to have found suitable habitats within Ahmedabad. The bird community in all these areas is rich and varied.

If observed closely, each of these habitats would have further divisions in terms of bird habitats. The reasons for such differences between various habitats of the city have been the basic intent of this study. The study for the site involved the following:
- Neighbourhood map
- Sightings along a section
- Bird Map
- Inferences
Foraging Point
Roosting Point
Nesting Point
Perching Point

Rock Pigeon
(columba livia)

Bank Myna
(acidothres greginianus)

House Crow
(corvus splendens)

Indian Myna
(acidothres tristis)

Asian Koel
(eudynamys scolopacea)

House Sparrow
(passer domesticus)

Bird Map
Cows roaming in a city are a phenomenon unique to India. Cows and livestock have participated significantly in Indian society for thousand of years. But as cities develop at unprecedented rates and cultural mentalities begin to change, the state of the cow is also being affected.

I figured following a cow and documenting its reactions to different stimuli may reveal some interesting and relatable insights about the state of the changing Indian society.

I followed three cows in regions demonstrating progressing degrees of development. The first in a rural village in Kutch, India’s most northwest region. The second in Ahmedabad’s Old City, a place that has retained many cultural traditions while juxtaposed against an urbanizing setting. The third cow was found in what would be considered the “ideal urban city”.

During my journey, I documented the cows’ habits of eating, pacing, defecating and their interactions with the environment.
Surveying Happiness

**Methodology** I went door to door at the slum and asked for their background, mood and stories. I then asked them to describe their happiness on a scale from 1-10 and gave them the number of commercial districts nearby.

- **Bhorda**
  - Statue Worker
  - Gulbai Tekra
  - 6
  - “The government is going to destroy my home to build a bus stop.”

- **Veeri**
  - House Wife
  - Gulbai Tekra
  - 8

- **Abha**
  - Statue Worker
  - Gulbai Tekra
  - 10
  - “I love the rain.”

- **Madhu**
  - House Wife
  - Gulbai Tekra
  - 8

**RELEVANT REASONS**

- Eviction
- Climate
- Punctuality
- Job

**HAPPINESS METER**

Sad | Happy
For this document, I chose to investigate the layers of smells of Ahmedabad where I live and study. Places have a distinctive smell that can be associated with them. The quality of smell (pleasant/unpleasant) is subjective and may vary from person to person.

To understand the complexity of this phenomenon, I decided to start my study with the inherent smell of certain objects and understand how the smell is.

Seven locations were chosen in the city to understand the layering of odors within them - their sources, their intensity, spread and their ability to linger in the atmosphere. These were observed through photographs and maps were generated for each location.

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Open spaces in Mumbai
Sushmita Paul
July 2012

Open spaces are a critical factor in determining the quality of life in cities. While many of these spaces have been consciously made, many others owe their origins to regular use by people. People and their everyday activities define space; sometimes in a more powerful manner than a given physical definition.

Mumbai due to its geography and history offers a range of open spaces which are used in a very, very intense manner. While the seafronts, mangroves, designated national parks and historic maidans are the more visible open and green spaces, there is a plethora of smaller open spaces that shape the character of the city. These range from spaces of leisure to spaces of requirement.

The focus in this study is on understanding the current manner of use of these spaces. The case studies have been chosen keeping in mind a sequential increase in scale; beginning with the space right outside a house (Dadar Parsi colony), to the neighbourhood (Bandra Linking road) to a well known landmark of the city (Marine Drive).

Dadar Parsi Colony

Sense of Enclosure

The front yard and trees form a tall volume of space for the residents. There is a sense of enclosure due to the presence of trees. The high fence maintains the privacy of the residents while giving a sense of porosity to the edge of the pavement.

Eyes on the Street

Big openings of the building towards the street and low height compound wall make for constant “eyes on the street”. This makes the road safe for everyone (children, women and the elderly) at all times of the day. It also ensures that the street remains clean.

Plant Species observed on site

Drypetes roxburghii
Artocarpus heterophyllus
Mimusops elengi
Polyalthia longifolia
Ficus benghalensis
Peltophorum pterocarpum
Nyctanthes arboristris

Palm spp.,
Delonix regia
Syzigium cumini
Samanea saman
Sterculia foetida
Kigelia pinnata

Canopy formed by trees along the street

The dense canopy of trees is an extremely inviting feature. The trees are of diverse species, planted at a distance of approximately 8 meters c/c and not in an absolute straight line. The species observed on the studied stretch of road are listed on the left.
07:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
- Walking (H)
- Jogging (H)
- Walking Dogs (H)
- Cleaning (M)
- Walking to School (M)
- Reading (L)
- Watering (L)

01:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m.
- Walking to Bus stop (H)
- Strolling (H)
- Playing (L)
- Sitting (L)
- Couples Strolling (H)
- Strolling (M)
- Walking (H)
- Watering plants (L)
- Walking dog (M)
- Chatting (L)

05:00 p.m. – 07:00 p.m.
- Strolling (M)
- Walking Dog (H)
- Playing (L)
- Watering plants (L)
- Walking dog (M)
- Chatting (L)
- Walking (L)

Intensity of activities: High (H)  Medium (M)  Low (L)
A Million Gardens

A Million Gardens was a collaborative compilation.

The word ‘garden’ in its etymology conveys both instinct and will; of marking out a domain and the act of ‘making’. It also implies this ‘marking’ and ‘making’ of a place as occurring within a larger territory. While this may tempt us to see gardens only as a rudimentary act of separating and creating a place apart from the wilderness, their organization and arrangement plays the role of negotiation and mediation between a place and its larger milieu.

Gardens can thus, be seen as both, a fundamental act; as well as a highly refined undertaking - of creating a place in the world.

The discourse of garden making can take innumerable directions subject to the specific physical and cultural framework in which it is working. It can be a manifestation and reflection of needs, cultural beliefs, practice and aspirations and this dialogue can also question, push and at times, even dissolve the boundaries of its primary act of establishing territory.

Thus, while being acts of both deep instinct and spontaneity, as well as of extensive, extremely deliberate design; they are essentially human constructs – in concept and execution. Whether intuitive or consciously designed, the multi hued nuances of a garden come from the human mind.

Gardens made by a few are experienced by many; each transforming into a new entity in the mind of the subject.

A million people, a million gardens.
Nishat Bagh, Srinagar
Kesariya Bagh, Jaipur
Lonar Crater Lake, Maharashtra
As spatial designers, our engagement with the idea of art needs to be intense and evolved. If in fact it is not so, then it is likely that we will not find ways of finding answers for the many questions that we are faced with; for example, such as those of individual and community identity, the impact of divergent urbanity, environmental degradation, the problems of depleting energy sources, the ability to comment on the nature of governance in our societies, the fissures caused by segregation in society, and so on.

Landscape Designers in India should position their faith in the idea of art, understand its mechanics and with this knowledge, forge a critical path in these times of flux.

**What do landscape architects do?**

Clarify, articulate, interpret, modify, record and imagine the many ideas of nature and their relations to the processes of this planet and with those who inhabit it.

Top to bottom: Adalaj stepwell. Helical stepwell, Champaner. The Drum house.
As spatial designers, art as a motivating force is a powerful idea. It allows spaces to be beautiful; to have soul breathing in them. It allows innumerable connections, both said and unsaid, to waft in the air, for any one to read what’s being said, or to sense, grasp and write a personal narrative. But if it did that, and just that, that would be a tragedy. Art is far more important than that. In any age, complex and innumerable questions abound. Art allows us to inverse the questions, and also to answer them in innumerable way simultaneously. And then, it allows us to imagine relations, meanings, truths that we did not even think existed; and more importantly abstracts and simplifies them in manners most palatable. And finally, it becomes the language with no script, allowing the disparate to bond and resolve, and find equilibrium in what can at times be unbalanced times.
“24 Intercessions” was the exhibition held to coincide with the talk “Spelt in Black and White – This is it” on 14th December 2014 at the Centre for Applied Research and Education (C.A.R.E.) School of Architecture at Tiruchirappalli.