MY LIFE IN DESIGN: RAHUL MEHROTRA

By Payal Khandelwal

'Please be brief' was the rather intimidating signboard at the museum like conference room where we sat amidst the miniature models of buildings created by RMA Architects over the years. Thankfully, our meeting with Rahul Mehrotra, founder principal of RMA Architects and chair of the department of urban planning and design at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, was anything but brief. Over the next couple of hours, we galloped through the extremely fascinating graph of Mehrotra's life in design.

Mehrotra decided to get into architecture rather early in life, when he was about 15–16 years old. "While growing up, my parents moved homes a lot because of my father's job and I realised that I really enjoyed those moves. It was not at all disruptive for me like it would be for many kids. I loved arranging the rooms and furniture along with my mother," he says. While he vaguely knew he was interested in spatial and interior design, during a conversation with a friend of his parents, a well-known Delhi based architect Ranjit Sabikhi, he realised

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that architecture is a profession that he could seriously take up.

After school, 17 year old Mehrotra applied to School of Architecture, Ahmedabad and just a few months into it, any miniscule doubts in his head about his future profession were entirely dispelled. He calls himself an "Indian trained architect" and thinks that his education in India was fundamental and fabulous. "Studying at CEPT's (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology) Faculty of Architecture, earlier called School of Architecture (SOA), was an incredible experience for many reasons. Since it was then a private school, it had the flexibility to have its own curriculum and was not bogged down by government norms. In the process of this autonomy, it could cultivate networks which were broad." This was an interesting time to be at SOA as its founder BV Doshi stepped back and other people from interesting backgrounds started getting more and more involved. "Suddenly, there was a wave of new ideas which at that moment (1976–79) was confusing but by the time we were in our third or fourth year, we realized that as a result of that, our work and more importantly, our thinking became quite plural. We also realized that the singular modernist aesthetic and the kind of style developing in Ahmedabad at that time really needed to be expanded."

In retrospective, being a part of that experience explains a lot of things that Mehrotra does today. His might be the only architect firm in India which does contemporary buildings, community work, historic conservation and research work. He himself has been actively involved in civic and urban affairs in Mumbai

for years now, and has served on commissions for historic preservation and environmental issues. At SOA, he took about nine years to graduate as he indulged in various projects and extended research, which at that time seemed wasteful but it actually sharpened his focus. Eventually, he decided to study urban design at GSD at Harvard University where he focused a lot on Bombay for his research. *The Cities Within*'s (his book) seeds were sown in his post graduate work there. At that time, he also taught for two months in a program called "career discovery" which facilitates young people in deciding if they want to study architecture. Another imperative personal discovery that happened at that time, was when he worked for nine months for an African American architect, David Lee, in Boston. This was for a minority firm which did citizen participatory work in poorer areas of Boston. "If not for this, I would have left America thinking that every American was affluent and walks around with a backpack. It was mind-boggling to be exposed to a diametrically opposite environment in the same city. It really helped me to see how the role of an architect can be expanded." Now when he looks back, he knows that he jumped so confidently into matters that involved advocacy and working with citizens in a participatory mode because he had that exposure.

In 1988, he heard Rajiv Gandhi speak at the Harvard University and at that very instant, he decided to go back to India. Interestingly, he left the US at a time when the American economy was booming. "All my friends in the US were shocked; my friends would take me out for dinners to convince me to stay. The same thing happened when I left India to teach in the US in 2003, when the American economy was a disaster and the Indian economy was on an upswing — my friends then tried convincing me not to take up my teaching job! It is funny how, in my friends' perception, I was always supposedly going in the wrong direction, but for me, I was always following my intuition."

When Mehrotra came back to India from Boston in 1988, he did not have the chance to use his passport for the next seven to eight years as he got sucked into a million things here

including heritage preservation, conservation work and co-authoring books with the Late Sharada Dwivedi, whom he met accidentally at the Asiatic society library in the old Town Hall building, where she was organising an exhibition. "We soon started working together on a weekly double-spread column in the *Mid Day* newspaper. Every week, we would pick up an area in Bombay and write about its history and contemporary problems." While doing research for one such column, they went to meet journalist Rahul Singh in Brady's Apartments in Colaba and he mentioned how he has been collecting their columns' clippings and wants to use them for a book on Bombay. Dwivedi and Mehrotra looked at each other and they just knew they had to do a book. Post this, they worked together on many books.

As the first book came out of a rather convoluted idea, so did the whole Fort preservation involvement. Mehrotra was standing in front of VT (now CST) and explaining the structure of VT and the Fort area to a group of colleagues who were involved in the listing process and that's when he realised that instead of fighting for the preservation of each building separately, they should be fighting for the whole area. "All these have been unprojected paths and the credit for everything goes to my education. A broad education sensitizes you to many different modes and allows you to see opportunities in things that are not apparent. And that's why I am so motivated to give back by teaching."

Juggling between two full-time professions hasn't exactly been a smooth ride but over the years, Mehrotra has learnt how to make both his professions mutually beneficial. He says, "It works in two ways — Reflection and Values. Teaching really helps me clear my mind, which in turn helps me as an architect. Also, when you are teaching, you have to walk the talk and as you set your benchmarks through education, you set your benchmarks through your practice. I have become much more conscious about my values because of my teaching. I want to do projects that facilitate these values."

The talk about values brings us to probably one of the most crucial and inspiring facets of Mehrotra's work as an architect. For him, architecture and activism (which he prefers to call 'engagement') are intricately linked. Most of his work is rooted in engagement. "For me, sustainability or sustainable design is not about if your airconditioning sytem is more efficient or the insulation is better etc. It's about social equity and about people. The 'social' has to be material for architecture and therefore, at RMA, we find ways of dealing with a site or problem through

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local materials and responding to local issues ranging from issues of inequity to cultural norms of a place. The KMC Corporate office in Hyderabad is a great example of that. The principle behind the facade is inspired by the idea of a double skin that allows a modulation of light and air through the building and the company employs about 20 gardeners who tend to this façade. "It allows fairly poor people to participate in the building as they are within the threshold of the building. They make eye contact with the people in the company. It is just a gesture, but a powerful gesture. Sometimes even the illusions of equity are important to start the process of correcting asymmetries in our society" he says.

Unfortunately, Mehrotra says, this kind of engagement is hardly to be seen amongst the Indian architects today as a lot of energy is being put into self projection and self-centeredness. "People are self-centric because society today is self-centric. We have mobilized the economy and the elite minority sees this as an opportunity and all this has an effect on the profession. There is also a sense of cynicism which comes both out of laziness and self justification based on 'what's the point of doing anything as the system is rotten'." He feels that architecture is but an expression of a broader culture and architects are merely responding to that culture and it is important for architects to find ways of being self critical and communicative. "One way of doing this is to communicate the issues that surround the profession to layman. Currently, the profession almost mystifies itself so that people look at it with awe. Since architecture is people and place based, it must talk to the people it is serving. I have tried to do this through my books."

If activism or engagement is one integral aspect that defines Mehrotra as an architect, the other equally important, if not more, aspect is the city of Bombay with which he has had a unique and evolving relationship over the years. It is the city where he grew up and the city he knew intimately. "At that time, I knew the city and enjoyed it but I didn't understand it. When I came back from Ahmedabad after studying at CEPT, I began to understand it as I could see various patterns more clearly and those patterns became even clearer when I came back from Harvard after studying urban design." However, he feels that over the years this deep interest in identifying Bombay's historic patterns started to wane and the thought that is filling up that space is the need for some projective and speculative thinking about Bombay. "We are just reacting to problems in Bombay—rear garde action! There is a massive need for projective planning. For example, New Mumbai was imagined as a possibility that did not exist— it was speculative thinking of the most exciting kind. Why doesn't that happen anymore? Today, we fix sidewalks and historic buildings in the

city and become urban heroes. Our aspirations have become very myopic. We need to bring back into the debate projective large-scale planning/thinking which has to do with infrastructure. But most importantly, we have to engage in critical ways with the rapidly emerging future." His present obsession clearly is to use his knowledge of Bombay's history, its evolution and patterns to imagine the future of the city.

Over the years, what has fascinated him the most about Bombay is its highly pluralistic landscape including its architectural style — classical, gothic, art-deco and modern. But he also believes that there is a specific design challenge in a highly pluralistic society — how do you facilitate the adjacencies? "This is what led me to the question of softening thresholds, designing adjacencies, designing for accommodation, designing for density etc. This is what made me realise that architecture and cities need not be static entities. I am working on a book right now, titled *Kinetic City*, which is about the city where binaries like rich and poor, modern and tradition etc. blur."

Another belief which is very close to his heart is the importance of area planning in cities in India rather than blanket planning. He thinks that the idea of blanket planning is just emblematic of how the country is governed largely — centralised power, which in turn has to do with insecurity of power, laziness of bureaucracy to govern, lack of data and a falsely imagined ideal of equity. "I don't think central planning has worked and with new technology, there is absolutely no reason why we can't do area–wise planning. Why should the bylaws that affect Colaba (ethnically diverse, plural, demographically diverse) be similar to say Dadar Hindu colony. Every area has its own aspirations. We need to get the whole idea of something like a 'state and a central level idea' into planning. That would make the cities richer and gover-

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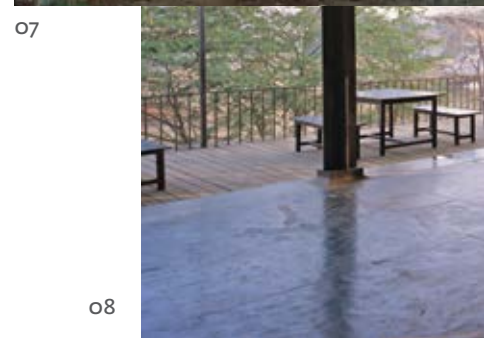
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nance better as everyone would feel they have a stake in the governance model."

Overall, he feels that the challenges in urban planning currently are two-fold. "Firstly, we are wrongly focusing our attention and energy on the mega cities which is a very limited spectrum. If you look at the statistics, the real growth is going to happen in the small towns. There are about 400 such centers which are called towns and are completely out of our radar. This is what I call the real urban time bomb that India is sitting on." These are the places where designers and planners can actually make a lot of difference because these are less contested politically and the problems are smaller, he feels. "However, even though these places are less contested and easy to intervene, there is no capacity in these places as there are no planners in these towns or in the adminstrative organizations that are responsible for them. Building capacity is the next big challenge, otherwise this is going to be a disaster."

Mehrotra is also a great proponent of the need for a dialogue with the Global South instead of the Global North. "We (Global South) have many more things in common than we have with the Global North. Currently, any dialogue between countries of the Global South either happens through or gets filtered by the Global North and their values infect the equation." A conference on Architecture in The Tropics that Mehrotra attended in San Jose, organised by Bruno Stagno, a Costa Rican architect, was a turning point in his life and made him realise the importance of having an amplified dialogue with the Global South. "Usually, I spend so much time in describing the context of India to any audience in a conference. But here I could just jump into the dialogue. As all the speakers at the conference were from the tropics, we shared the post-colonial condition, climate and a sense of time — in the process, we automatically spoke a shorthand that allowed us to drill much deeper into the questions facing us as architects and planners in these regions."

Even though he does this probably on a daily basis as a part of his profession, we asked him for some specific advice for young professionals and students of architecture. He says, "You should not leave your idealism in the college canteen when you graduate. You have to take it with you. Everything is possible if you can find the right model of engagement with the world outside". He thinks that one of the problems with education is that it teaches you very limited models of engagement but there are enough examples of people who do things differently. "I think students should look at role models and decide what might be their model of engagement. Some models require capital, while others don't and they have to find a way of negotiating between this spectrum. As a designer or an architect, if you are trained to imagine spatial possibilities for a society, there are many ways to do that."

He also feels that young architects and students need to stay away from ostentation in their projects. He says that in the new society, architecture is becoming an outlet for ostentation. Mukesh Ambani's house is emblematic of this shift. "This creates terrible forms of polarization in our already unequal society and young architects have to be cautious that they don't get co-opted in this projection of ostentation through architecture. The design challenge is how do you react to projects like rich people's homes, airports, farmhouses etc. How do you keep the architecture discreet, thresholds soft and non-ostentatious?"

Any building to come out of his architecture practice can moonlight as a great case study for discreet and non-ostentatious architecture and softening of thresholds. Take for example, the corporate office for Laxmi Machine Works. This was a project that RMA took early on (1995). This has been a very important building in Mehrotra's career. It had a lot of top artists involved such as Manjit Bawa, Yogesh Rawal and Rajeev Sethi. "It was the biggest building we did as a very young practice. It was a corporate building at the time when Indian economy was liberalizing. LMW wanted a steel glass structure and we did the exact opposite. We created a building with three courtyards

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KMC corporate office

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Campus for the Mumbai based NGO, Magic Bus in Panvel

with water bodies to cool the building etc. I thought we would be much stronger if we co-opted tradition rather than ape the west. And to get a client agree to all this was quite radical at that time," he says.

Hathigaon is a more recent and an on-going project for the government of Rajasthan, which is expected to go on for another five years. RMA has been mandated the task of creating low cost housing for elephants and their *mahouts*. The project just won a gold medal for sustainable architecture (organized by the Italian University of Ferrara) "For us, this project is exactly the opposite of LMW which represented corporate India and had a very clear and supportive form of patronage. The LMW corporate office is where architecture is in its best expression and emblematic of aspirations of the company and a particular program. In the Hathigaon project, architecture is the background and life takes over and corrodes architecture. Here we strategically converted the project into something much bigger than the sum of its parts. We conceived it as a landscape project in the broadest sense. What became central to the design was the moment of intersection between the architecture, people and animals for which this project was intended." The fact that in a place like Rajasthan these *mahouts* have access to water right outside their houses is just one way to correct asymmetry that otherwise naturally exists.
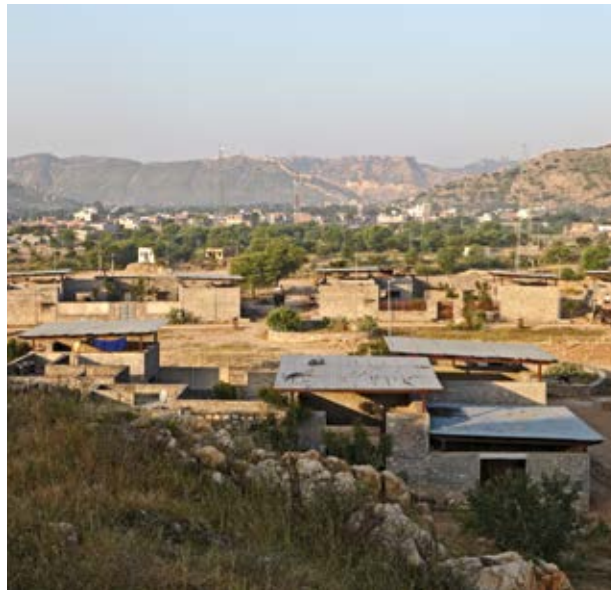
"You can't change the world with a few projects, but you can definitely shift the conversations. And shifting the conversations within the mainstream is where the real power of architecture can be felt." Mehrotra clearly walks his talk and is a great role model for the ideal future of architecture in India.

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Hathigaon

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**Community toilets
for the NGO SPARC**