

# SHIMUL JAVERI KADRI

## *In conversation with RAJIV PAREKH*

The two powerhouses come together for the first time ever, to discuss their understanding of design, and their individual journeys to becoming prominent figures in Indian architecture

Text TINA THAKRAR Profile images RAJESH JOSHI

In our nine-year run, we've found ourselves privy to so many design stories – of landmark public projects, challenging urban plans, awe-inspiring residences and path-breaking design. These ventures are often the result of collaborations, detailed plans developed over years, dialogues and arguments, mundane necessities and fantastical dreams. All these years, we've brought to you a vision of the world of architecture and design as we see it. But this issue, we decided to take a backseat, and play audience to a conversation between two creative minds.

The duo met and interacted at the reD Architects studio in Mumbai on a rainy afternoon, and the conversation that conspired covered not only the subject of design, but also civic society, feminism and personal ambitions. Although divergent, their meandering journeys seemed to meet and overlap at many junctures, creating an interesting give-and-take of sorts that sat comfortably between their two generations.

**SHIMUL JAVERI KADRI** is a multi-award-winning architect, speaker, jurist and teacher based in Mumbai. After studying at the Academy of Architecture in Mumbai and the University of Michigan Ann Arbor, she set up SJK Architects in 1990 with an aim to build sustainably, practically, contextually and in harmony with natural elements. Her projects span the board, including offices, public buildings, hotels and residences. She's a self-confessed feminist and a country-wide propagator of women's rights in education, civic society and of course, design.

Armed with degrees from Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies in Mumbai and Pratt Institute in New York, **RAJIV PAREKH** is the co-founder of Mumbai-based full service design firm, reD Architects. His diverse portfolio covers everything from a single bathroom redesign to building a large hospital from scratch, and has consequently helped him develop a strong level of expertise in all aspects of design. He set up reD Architects with his wife, Ekta Parekh, and has two other firm partners, Apoorva Shroff and Maithili Raut.



## ON MODERNISM AND THE MIND:

**Rajiv:** There's a quietness, a silence that speaks loud and clear in all your projects. I see you now, and I understand how that transfers from your person to your work. It's quite the opposite with me. I'm hyperactive and my brain is constantly whirring, which comes through in my actions and my work.

**Shimul:** I'm glad you notice the silence, because as a practice, we strive towards it; to find that central idea that we weave through the whole project, and then decluttering everything else. The best example of this is probably one of our better-known projects, the Leaf House in Alibaug. It seemed uncharacteristically gimmicky, but the conceptual idea seemed to work, so we restricted ourselves to the use of three materials – kota stone, concrete and wood, and the conscious choice of keeping the light sources hidden. A lot of our work is done in the mind, which calls for some decluttering throughout the process. We define the words that encapsulate the project and test every decision against those words to decide its validity. Is your thought process along similar lines?

**R:** I was always encouraged to see a train of thought through, right to the end. But I couldn't think with linearity, I liked diverting from a thought and then having the option to come back to it later. At first, I couldn't articulate this, but then I was introduced to the work of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. They wrote about the Rhizome as a concept, and I was finally comfortable with the brilliant ideology of rhizomatic thought and the random connections that develop through them. This occurs in practice too; while working on the details to allow light into a hospital in Kanpur, I saw the hand pen stand on my table and decided that I needed to design a way that hands would not touch surfaces to avoid transfer of germs.

**S:** We're taught about linear thought, but that's too rational. My generation was influenced by modern thinkers, persuading us to be rational, functional and actually create 'machines for living'. The "Masters" like Corbusier and Kahn and later Doshi and Correa were able to interpret this with poetic license but the

outcome in our cities until today is disastrous. Soul less emotionally bereft machines for living are still being built every day. What does your generation perceive of this?

**R:** We learnt under the very next generation after this second wave, so a bit of modernism trickled into us as well. The struggle for us was to own it – to adhere to modernism but root our designs in India. As a people, we're loud, extroverted and love colour, and the challenge is to bring that personality into contemporary design.

One of our recent projects was an eight lakh sqft commercial construction in Estonia. Originally comprising dilapidated Russian structures, it was being used as a paintball arena. Due to water seeping in and later freezing, the bricks had exploded into beautiful imperfect fractures that are priceless traces of the ravages of time on a building that needed to be preserved. After demolition, we proposed to use the 5,000 tons of carefully dismantled debris to create the façade with 23 arches, which were 52ft high and structured with steel meshes. The slashes of paint and void spaces in between the rubble façade added an additional layer to the design.

Since Estonia is low on sunlight through the year, we felt that Charles Correa's housing scheme sketches and the typical Indian Pol house street were a good method to create an internal street that all offices open into, and the scale ensures retention of heat. We further proposed that the street be covered by a long skylight to ensure that the little sunlight available is filtered to all occupants across floors. The next step was to propose a giant hammock under the skylight so that in the sunny months, people could use the terrace area to sun bathe.

So, the project is modern, in that it is a glass box, but on the outside, it has a broken brick skin with crevices, which create a different play of light and shadow. We preserved the historical imperfections, and the upcycled debris created an additional layer of skin for the structure. That's the kind of work we, as reD, find intriguing and engaging.



IMAGE RAJESH VORA

(Above) The Leaf House in Alibaug by SJK Architects  
(Right and below)  
A commercial building in Estonia by reD Architects



## ON SKILLS AND SOCIAL MEDIA:

**S:** I must admit, a big proponent of social and architectural change has been the advent of social media. But when it comes to work, I tend to think of it as just my morning dose of pretty pictures. Do you think it's a beneficial medium for our industry?

**R:** During the early boom, there would be a barrage of images that would be considered inspiration, and as an advocate of rigorous thought, I was never comfortable with the idea of publishing my work. But over time, I've come to understand that it's a fantastic way to document the process behind a project. It's not just about the finished picture, but the germ of the idea as well.

I recently invested in a small work of art by Jagannath Panda, and it's now had me fixated on layering. Currently, I'm struggling with the initial sketches of a project in Surat, because I want to bring in the depth I see in the painting. My ideas are unfinished, but unlike a lot of designers on social media, I'm not brave enough to put it out there.

**S:** Is there a curiosity to actually understand process, though? Because it seems as though it's all about having impactful pictures...

**R:** The pictures have to be engaging. It starts with a picture or two, and then the attention moves to the person. Soon, you start to find them engaging and what they have to say has value. It's a great platform for professional engagement.

**S:** And to find new designers and projects you haven't heard of or seen before...

**R:** Yes, there are so many small, local practices doing great work, and they get all their mileage through social media!

**S:** As much as that's true, I often find myself going back to the idea of long form writing; penning the process down and sharing it with those who like to delve deep into the process of creative thought. I did this for our ongoing Bodhgaya Hotel where the dilemmas of material choice – local and crafted vs industrial threw up big questions for us. The original idea was to use only natural materials but



gradually, we realised that only works on a small scale. The project has now become a study in the optimum use of materials. We have used terracotta pigmented RCC, aerated concrete, brick and just one indigenously crafted product – a set of uneven curved roof tiles. We opened ourselves up to different ideologies, each material doing what it's best at, and that's what eventually worked for us.

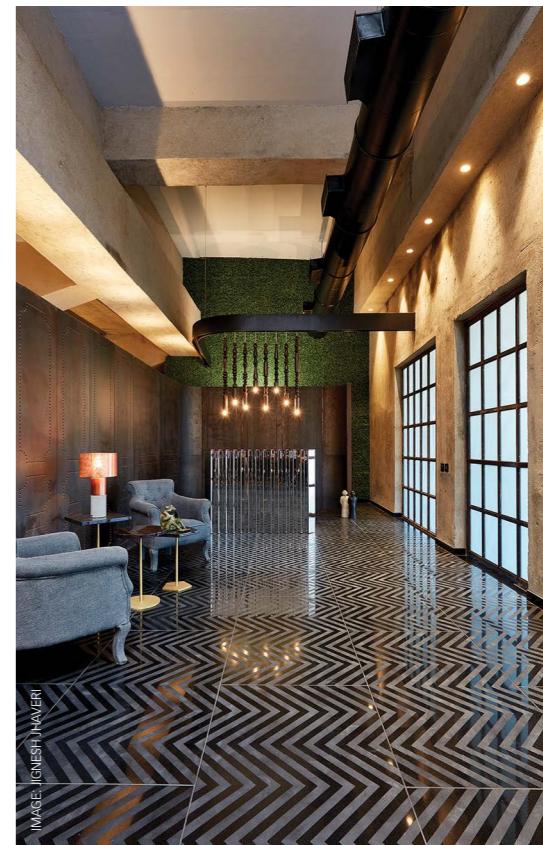
**R:** But in the last few years, the need to mass produce; to create 100 perfect pieces of any one product, has shifted and been replaced by people seeing a monetary and aesthetic value to creating handcrafted "imperfect" and yet beautiful products.

**S:** That may be true, but we must be careful not to romanticise craft. The roof tiles I used did help numerous families earn a living, but in the larger picture, how much did those craftsmen really make? For them to be valued, to receive sustainable wages and not just sit by on the fringes, requires a huge influx of technology. Wouldn't it then be more lucrative for them?

**R:** The Italians have a balanced way of achieving this. Handcrafted leather has a few machine-heavy stages like cutting and shaping, but the hand stitching is done by the craftsman. They use technology to improve performance and efficiency, but the skill reigns supreme.

**S:** And it's valued, unlike the drudgery here that we label as "craft". It often puts me on the fence – how much are we romanticising craft and to what extent can we add access, technology, and design to the fray to make it more viable?

(Right and far right)  
Midsummer Night's Dream and Under the Bleachers by reD Architects  
(Below) Bodhgaya Hotel by SJK Architects



## ON THE POINTS OF PRACTICE:

**R:** You had the option of making your place in a pre-established architecture firm, with your husband Rahul Kadri and his father, IM Kadri. But you made the conscious choice to set out on your own with SJK Architects. What prompted this decision?

**S:** At the time, it felt like the easier choice! I had plenty to say myself, and I wanted to be able to say it loud, clear and uninhibited. I didn't want to be part of an existing ideology, especially when as a woman, I would have been hindered by the bearings of a family practice. Growing up, I was subjected to the control that comes with patriarchy. So equality between people, paired with sustainability, has now come to frame my world view, and my work. Branching out on my own is the best decision I've ever made.

**R:** It was the reverse for me. I was always envious of colleagues and classmates who had an existing set-up in the design profession to tuck into. I would've thought what you did was the harder route.

**S:** That's what it looks like from the outside but I think the freedom to evolve and direct a practice without baggage has been exhilarating...and to miraculously find a team that aligns and could continue the practice in the future. What was it like, then, for you? reD is a group practice that you run with three other women at the helm...

**R:** They're quite the forces of nature and I'm often happy just taking a backseat and letting them drive things. Ekta and I have been together since architecture school...even then, design to me was all about discussion. My best ideas came from arguments with peers, sometimes with them completely thrashing my ideas. I enjoy being critiqued, having my head in the clouds doesn't help me evolve as a designer. When someone questions my design choice, I have to justify it to myself first.

This is where a group practice helps in constantly challenging your ideas to be better.

**S:** It's so good to hear you, a man, say that. I was once asked whether the emotional content in my work stems from the fact that I'm a woman. But to me, gender is not a binary. There's a little bit of the opposite gender in all of us and we all have the ability to allow our emotions to flow. I think one has to liberate oneself – from stereotypical cages that both genders are often imprisoned by, and allow one's innate nature to guide the design process.

**R:** And letting your vision evolve over time. Sometimes, it's okay to let it go, or tweak it to make it better. As a firm, we manage to hold it together because when it comes to the primary design idea, we don't let our egos get in the way.

**S:** Do all of you have very similar stylistic oeuvres?

**R:** Of the four parts that make reD, I am just one, and I couldn't have asked for a better balance. We all abide by simple, modern design aesthetics, but we're always leaning towards giving a strong personality to every project. The creation of the personality is sometimes inspired by clients, sometimes our own personal leanings...and now, the onslaught of visual images compels us to consistently ensure that our work is not "inspired". Sometimes, despite our best efforts, what we consider a unique idea has actually been done before. We often think we're putting a new spin on a project, but from another's perspective, we could still be limited.

**S:** What I've come to realise in the last 30 years, is that what human beings need, when it comes to their environments, is a connection to three things – nature, other people and their own souls. If you focus on just that, the clutter vanishes. Evaluate your work through these three simple ideologies, and you have a winning project. **H&DT**



(Top and top right) Mahindra and Mahindra automobile design studio and Synergy Textiles Office by SJK Architects  
(Right) Spanish Hacienda by reD Architects