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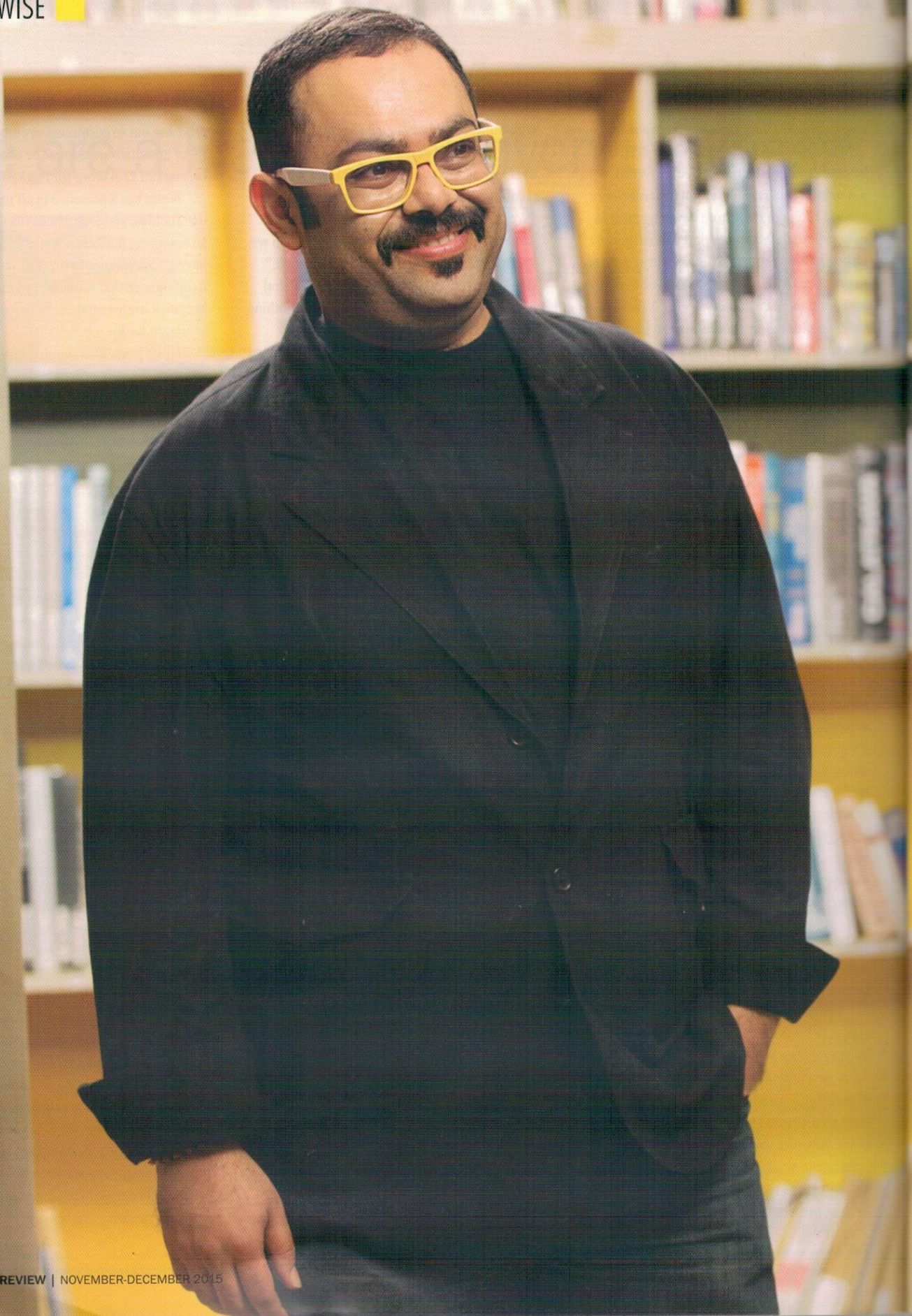
DESIGNWISE

A Good Kitchen Should Inspire Non-cookers to Enter the Area

Manish Gulati

BRACECORP







“A Good Kitchen Should Inspire Non-cookers to Enter the Area”

Gyanendra Kumar Kashyap & Meenakshi Rawat

OVER 15 YEARS MANISH GULATI TOOK ROADS THAT LED IN DIFFERENT directions, but the journeys helped him eventually become an architect. As founder of M:OFA Studios, he runs a multi-disciplinary firm that dabbles in varied design fields that demand equally diverse approaches. His creativity has brought accolades to him and his firm, including the IIID Anchor Awards-Wellness Space; NDTV Grohe Award; CERA Architecture+Design Award in institutional architecture category; IIID 10 on 10; and Architecture Digest AD-50 Most Influential Names in Architecture & Design-Indian Sub-continent.

Gulati is of the view that a strong foundation is a must for an architect if he has to be able to experiment and innovate. In an exclusive interaction with Kitchen Review, he talks about his professional journey, design philosophy, technology, projects, and much more. He also explained what he believes should be the thought behind designing kitchens that Indian families need. Here are the excerpts...

How did the idea of architecture get into your mind? Was it a pre-determined choice or did you discover this to be a passion a bit late?

Architecture was not a pre-decided career choice; in fact, my goal was to become a financial advisor. While advancing towards the target, the chase appeared a bit tough to me and I re-evaluated my decision. At that time, one of my friends suggested that I take up architecture, and fascinated by his definition of an architect I settled on becoming one. Until then, my impression of an architect was that of a person who travels to different places and does illustrations of monuments. In 1993, I joined Centre for Environmental Protection and Technology (CEPT) at Ahmedabad.

The foundation of CEPT, which is counted amongst the premium institutes of Asia, was laid 50 years ago by Dr Balkrishna Doshi, who mentored the school for years. It was built pretty much on the lines of the Bauhaus School of Design, Germany, and is considered as the Harvard of architecture in India. After CEPT, I went to Itihad University, Zurich for an exchange programme. By end of 1999, I had completed my architecture studies and had started practicing in 2000.

The transition from a learner to a beginner in the professional field was not an easy one; in fact I did not pursue architecture right away. I wanted a break post the rigorous procedure of CEPT, and therefore I took a job at an events and exhibition company, Magnum Nexus Events, as its creative director. During this career of two-and-a-half years, I designed sets for '25 years of India Today' exhibition, the first India Today conclave, a series of conferences for Hindustan Times, and a lot

more. By then I had designed 40 diverse concepts.

My going back to architecture is an equally exciting story. On the set of the first India Today Conclave I saw my creation, on which I had invested more than a month, being broken down, and that was a wakeup call for me. Right at that moment I decided on building creations that would sustain for a longer time, and the crazy struggle into mainstream architecture started.

What was your vision for setting up M:OFA?

When M:OFA started back in 2002, we had nothing in terms of contacts, but to sustain in the industry any project was welcome. I remember doing odd projects, like 3D rendering of Mach3 razor. Later I got a project with Omaxe, a real estate developer, which wanted their director's Sohna Road residence kitchen to be designed. International kitchens were not so much in demand then. I remember doing thorough research on each and every component, right from the hardware to accessories, moving from one market to another picking up the best. Since the budget was low, everything was done on site by carpenters. Through my previous experience with an events company and my approach as an architect, the kitchen turned out to be unique. Thereon we did a couple of more kitchens for various clients, and we started getting houses and bigger projects.

The inception of the company happened with a vision that design shouldn't be restrictive. The term M:OFA stands for Manifestation of Fluid Architecture, an open way of thinking where we don't stick

branded with a certain style of architecture. We have designed projects in various fields, styles and budgets, and every structure is reflecting the fluidity of designer's mind.

We have touched pretty much every sector. Projects like national projects, international colleges, schools, hospitality projects like resorts, projects, high-end residences, offices and office designs have been done under the M:OFA brand. The feasibility of National Games, and Chhattisgarh Sports city was done by us. We are yet to touch schools and hospitals. Our gamut is that we can design from a small-scale project to a large-scale project. We have worked with Ernst & Young and HOK, Toronto, where we were long-term partners.

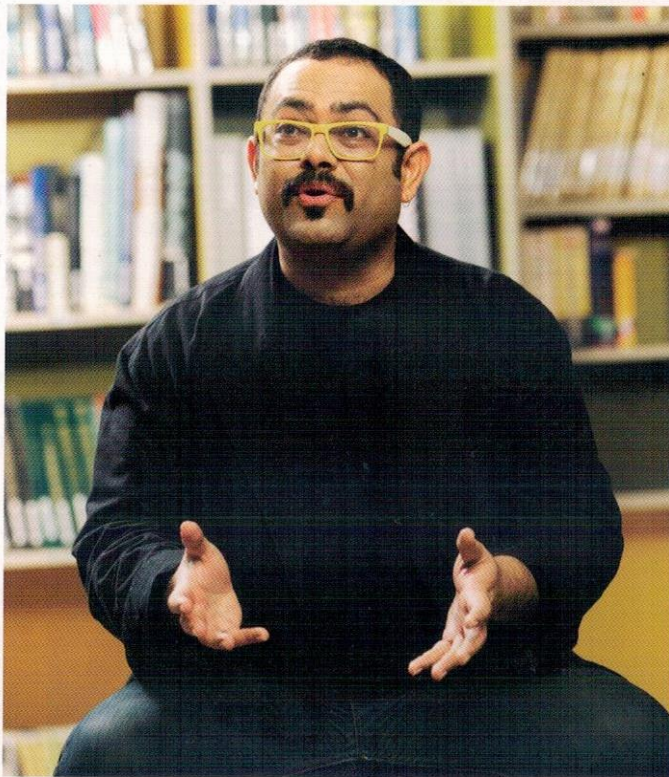
Next assignment: How to design a kitchen. What's your understanding of kitchen design?

A kitchen is not an accessory, it's as important as a house. It's a complex piece of machinery that has to work by its own. One who eats three times a day, so the person who cooks spends twice as much time in the kitchen. When you design such a place, there has to be an intrinsic understanding of the user, the environment, space, ergonomics, functionality, look, feel, and user interface.

When it comes to kitchen designing, we have a passion for food; we are a food blogger and a food designer myself. The only reason

we design a kitchen comfortably was that I knew cooking. German kitchen manufacturers brought kitchens based on the cooking needs of people abroad. They have better chimneys and filtration systems, but they don't have the understanding of Indian cooking needs. The international companies would not know the placement of appliances and other things. They would fit in their standard kitchen modules without understanding the sequence of their usage. That's where everything goes

Wrong. Designing of commercial kitchens is a totally different ballgame. An architect has to understand how the team of chefs and other staff will work. Food has to be cooked in a matter of hours and served quickly. If the design is not efficient, the whole process will be a mess. Kitchen designing is a specialised study where proportion to the platform and attention to detail to anthropometrics need to be taken care of.



How would you compare the intricacies of designing a house and a township?

A township is easier to design than a house, it is based on the psyche of masses where designing is based on numbers, rules and pre-assumed parameters. The same is not applicable for a house because there the psyche of every individual needs to be understood. You have to get into their minds and deal with them on an everyday basis to bring them to a level where you want a certain kind of design.

Over a period of time, I have understood that a house is far more complex to design. It's more of a challenge; a bigger puzzle which I love doing. That's the reason for my doing individual residences rather than planning projects. Every house is different; people, their background, economic conditions, way of living, everything differs from one house to the other. A house has to reflect the personalities living in the house. So at times, along with designing we have to work on the personality development part as well.

In the architecture profession, how much of formal education is converted to practical knowledge?

A good formal education is a must in architecture as it builds your very foundation. The understanding, observation, and intrinsic knowledge of how to

conceive an idea quickly, can only develop once you have a strong foundation. Architecture is not an art, rather a complex machinery which has to work because people's lives are linked to it. For that, one needs to have an understanding of what's going on behind the curtain, and it comes with formal education. Once you step into the practical world, the usage will be part practical experience and part theoretical knowledge. But to experiment, innovate and to take risks, an architect has to have a firm base. Until your feet are firmly on the ground, you cannot fly.

What's your approach toward house design, and how difficult is it to strike a balance while doing it?

There's a certain way M:OFA has done projects. The reason clients approach me for a house is project handling. We look at things in an

out-of-the-box manner, where rather than solving problems we look at how to make things better. Thanks to the learning of all these years, we have developed efficient systems of designing, construction and project management, which normally take years, for completing projects on time.

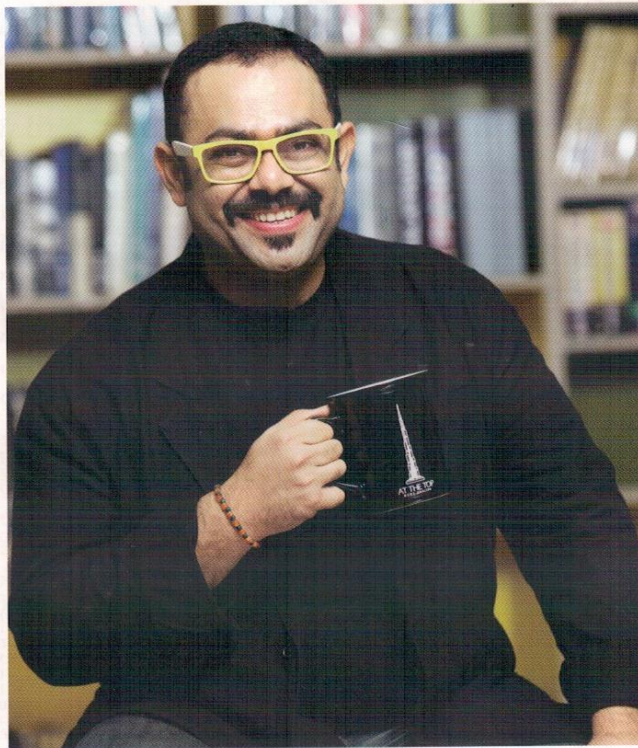
In a place like Delhi where there is a tradition of joint family, house designing is an extremely complex job. At times, there are three generations staying under one roof and we have to satisfy each individual. Mainly, the concept you thought about as an architectural statement has to come in, and within the statement individual dreams have to be fulfilled. For that, the designer has to step into their shoes and make them trust you.

At times a lot of people are indecisive about what they are looking for. Understanding their psyche and culture helps me understand their needs so that they can stay happily in that house for the coming years. This learning came to me when I was designing the house of one of the Omax directors, where we made an elaborate dining room. Only later, after understanding their lifestyle, the dining space had to be reworked and a part dining table was modelled where they could sit on the floor and eat.

Kitchen designing is not a last minute decision. Right after the concept of the house, we get into the kitchen. In most of the cases, kitchen designing starts in the first three months of house designing. Since international brands are used, orders have to be placed in time for them to make it. We work with kitchen companies in order to adapt our design. We never take a standard design from the kitchen company and customise.

How is technology changing the language of design? If we zero it down to kitchens, what role does technology play in giving a unique look to this space?

We need to look back to how design evolved over the years. The industrial revolution has changed the language of design for the world. Similarly, the digital world too has changed the understanding of design for people. From mechanical systems we have now come to



a digital age and this also gets reflected in architecture. The more we are moving toward the age of communication technology, the more efficient architecture is becoming.

We use technology to make designs efficient. Earlier, design options were limited to the mind of a single person but with technology we are able to do multiple permutations and combinations of complex nature in a short span of time. We are using programming and coding in designs now. This gets translated on site as well, and you're able to give the right fabrication drawings. With technology today very precise drawings can be taken to site.

If you zero down to kitchens, then a lot of innovation is happening than what is apparent. Hardware companies are doing constant research in terms of making hardware efficient and saving space. Same is the case with surface and finish manufacturers. The conditions in India are much rougher than in the west, so it's hard to maintain a design. So, much of the innovation and technology goes into creating a kitchen that can be sustained with minimum maintenance. So, efficiency and maintenance is where one goes for innovation.

What projects, especially kitchens, are you currently working on?

There are quite a few projects of various scales that we are doing right now - like a few high-end residences, National Institute of Water Sports in Goa, National Institute of Fashion Technology in Kangra, Institute of Hotel Management (IHM) in UP, a few resorts, restaurants and retail projects.

For now we have started working on a series of restaurants where we are designing not only the look and feel, but also their functioning. We go beyond our responsibility as architects and learn about the financial understanding of running a restaurant. Designing is a crucial part of any programme and there are certain design decisions where you have to be correct.

In one of the high-end residences under way, we are trying to give a studio look to the kitchen by increasing the height. It's an open kitchen and a central point connecting every part of the house. The major challenge while doing this kitchen was perception, because I needed to make them understand the significance of a greater height in that space. The understanding needed to be ingrained into every member of the house.

Going forward, what changes do you foresee in kitchen design?

With people getting busy in their professional lives and having little time to cook, kitchens are increasingly becoming a part of their living rooms. For the young professionals we do not design a separate kitchen, rather it's an open kitchen at the centre with living and dining areas around it. This way they can cook and not miss out on any conversation happening in the living room. A good kitchen, according to me, inspires non-cookers to enter the area.

It is important to not treat the kitchen as a side part, but as the heart of the house. If we go back to the traditional design practices, you'll observe that kitchens were placed at the centre of the house. Cooking was done near the open courtyard where family members use to have their meals. The understanding of making it central is coming back to India and it is the future of kitchens.

With the advent of social media, the design profession is changing as a whole. Global communication is increasing among architects, making them all the more aware and original. There was a time when designers were blindly following western designs, but now they are innovating and giving a local feel to it. A lot of young designers today are coming up with original stuff.

What challenges do you face while working on projects? Do clients insist on changing the design of the project?

I would say 75% of the projects are challenging because every project is an innovation. Working with people is a challenge in itself. There are times when we lose direction in the middle of the project, but that's good because then we put double the effort to get back on track. It is then that you do more than what's your role as an architect, to make the project happen. I've gone into the understanding of basic construction, of how things are made, to find economical solutions because it's all about economy at the end. You have to find solutions to get your concept within the cost frame and that's always a challenge.

Whatever be the challenges, they do not alter our design concept as we consider them beforehand. We are a small team of intelligent professionals who work to make a strong system. We do not revisit decisions, and every decision is well thought out before it goes on to the site. We do not get into trials and errors.

Once we get a project, a considerable amount of time is invested in finalising its design. Once the concept is approved by the client, efforts are made to put the design on site. A lot of practical knowledge vs. theory goes into this. We build projects with a philosophy that everything is possible. Presently, we are designing a resort in the extreme conditions of Himachal Pradesh where there is snowfall for two months. On the beach of Goa also, we are building a resort where the water is saline. We have dealt with various conditions, economic backgrounds, and our knowledge of architecture in various sectors helps us understand practically how a project has to be accomplished.

You assert that every building is a living organism and a storehouse of energy. Please elaborate this statement.

I strongly feel that architecture is not a dead piece. People living inside it use energy and release energy and waste; this is how humans are made. If the design of your house or architecture is efficient in a way that it produces its own energy by using human waste, then it won't harm the environment. This is what we are doing for Delhi Pollution Control Committee, where the sewage water of the city is being used to run gas turbines from the generated methane, which then generate electricity. The waste water goes into air-conditioning, and the solid waste is treated as manure in plants, which are a source of oxygen and provide a better living environment. The rain water is collected and used the whole year for drinking purposes.

Also with the help of scientists, we have designed a different type of wall that works as a filter. The walls take in the pollution of the parking lot and convert it into fresh air. So, like an organism that takes in energy and gives out waste, the building works on the reverse principal and liberates energy through waste. This is our philosophy. We are trying to enforce this system in all our designs so that buildings can generate their own electricity, produce water and not put pressure on nature.

Who have been the major influencers in your life?

Various people from different fields have influenced my life. One who inspires me a lot is Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French architect and one of the pioneers of modern architecture. Even chefs Ferran Adrià and Heston Blumenthal and artist Vengai have been my mentors. Be it science, art or technology, I look up to all the masters who have worked towards bringing something new to humanity.

One building that inspires me on an everyday basis is Notre de Ronchamp, by Le Corbusier. I have tattooed its design on my hand as well. It's an icon of modern architecture where he broke his own rules.

An architect cannot design by living in his own mind space. Most of my understanding of design and architecture has come from travelling. I have travelled to Europe, Australia, Middle East, and various other parts and have got a feel of people and their culture, which gives an intrinsic understanding of design and architecture. I read and discuss various topics because learning I believe comes from everywhere. The learning from Arthashastra, Ferran Adrià, and other masters, when translated to design, develops an exceptional structure.

Any project that's close to your heart and a space you would like to redesign?

Every project of mine is equally precious to me. I have done 400 projects; each one diverse and every project is a learning. All these projects are refining my skills for the master project of my life, which I guess would be my last!

Yes, I would love to redesign my residence at Tara Apartments. About 40 years ago, Charles Correa designed that place, which could

not take in the lifestyle of people today because of expanded families, spread housing and many more reasons. Based on the philosophy of Correa, we have redesigned the premises where we have freed the ground space for green area. Now only about 10% is covered and 90% is green surface. The units have been moved higher for fresh area. But the ethos of Charles for cultural and community-based residences has not been changed. We are following the same principle in a newer manner, going a step ahead looking at the lifestyle of people today.

How do you give back to society on a personal level?

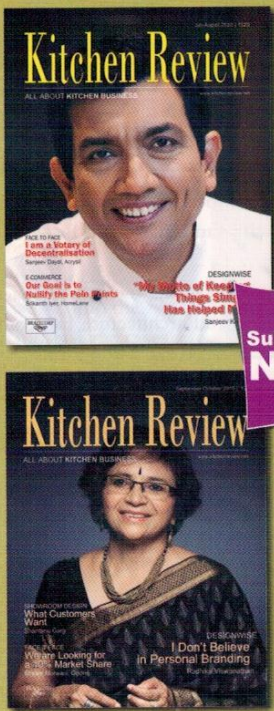
I believe in collaboration. Design is not just an architect's forte; it is a collaborative work of sociologists, artists and product designers with whom he works. We are doing a lot of social projects. Recently we designed efficient dustbins for the city, for which we have won a couple of awards. The smart bins work on an RFID chip which is fitted into them. Whenever a person throws garbage in that dustbin, by the virtue of its weight the RFID communicates through the chip in the user's Metro card. The more garbage a user throws in the bin, the more points he

earns, which can be redeemed while travelling on the Metro. The idea has been proposed to Delhi Government to put smart bins, made of recycled plastic, at every light pole. We have developed a prototype of the product, which worked really well.

We have taken up social causes which aren't working in the society and are trying to solve them through design. We believe that every problem has a solution through design. We have a research cell, a foundation that looks into inefficient social practices. We put forward our ideas on these issues from time to time.

You say that M:OFA is a team of efficient architects. How do you manage the team and keep it motivated?

M:OFA is a self-motivated place; people work for themselves here. It's not a one-person run company but a democratic body where everybody puts forward their ideas. We do not believe in the culture of junior and senior, everyone is an equal. People want to join the place and they treat it as their own company. The project becomes their own and they start treating challenges as their own. When everybody looks at a project in this way, the place becomes self motivating.



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