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# INTERIORS + DESIGN

DEMYSTIFYING  
GREEN  
BUILDINGS  
JASON POMEROY

ARAB  
ENGINEERING  
BUREAU  
CREATING A  
PERFECT PALETTE

COLLABORATIVE  
ARCHITECTURE  
DESIGNS THAT STUN

DESIGNING  
A SPACE  
FOR MEN  
NACHO ALVAREZ

QATAR'S  
FIRST  
INTERIORS &  
DESIGN  
MAGAZINE

A YEAR IN DESIGN  
CELEBRATING  
CREATIVITY

THE  
COMPLETE  
CIRCLE

“ISLAMIC  
ARCHITECTURE  
IS NOT ONLY  
OF THE PAST”

ALI MANGERA



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# IN PURSUIT

WITH DESIGNS THAT STUN AND QUESTION THE SENSES, THE ARCHITECTURAL FIRM, COLLABORATIVE ARCHITECTURE, TENDS TO EXPLORE THE UNCHARTED REALMS OF INTUITIVE SPACES.

BY SINDHU NAIR

# OF THE ANOMALY



#### INVERTED TOPOGRAPHY

Light is the element that is played on; through the subtle lighting, the play of lights and shadows and the clear clinical perfection of the space is touched on.

**What do you write about a talented college mate? That he showed his design stripes right from his formative years; that he clearly shone among the rest of us, the lackluster, insipid would-be-designers? Arrogant and obnoxious to the core, this friend of mine had nothing to speak about other than design and his contributions to it. Needless to say, none of us listened to his rants, 20 years ago.**

Fast forward to 2015, we all sit up to notice this livewire of design contradictions, exemplified in living, breathing, successful buildings. Structures that seemed impossible to conceive; forms that seemed to flow than exist; sketches that seemed unimaginable on paper had materialised into buildings that attracted attention, with layered complexity and seemingly impossible and bizarre topography.

A founding partner of one of the most celebrated architectural firms in India — Collaborative Architecture — is Mujib Ahmed, my junior at the National Institute of Technology, Calicut. With his partnership with Lalita Tharani, the co-founder of the firm, Ahmed found

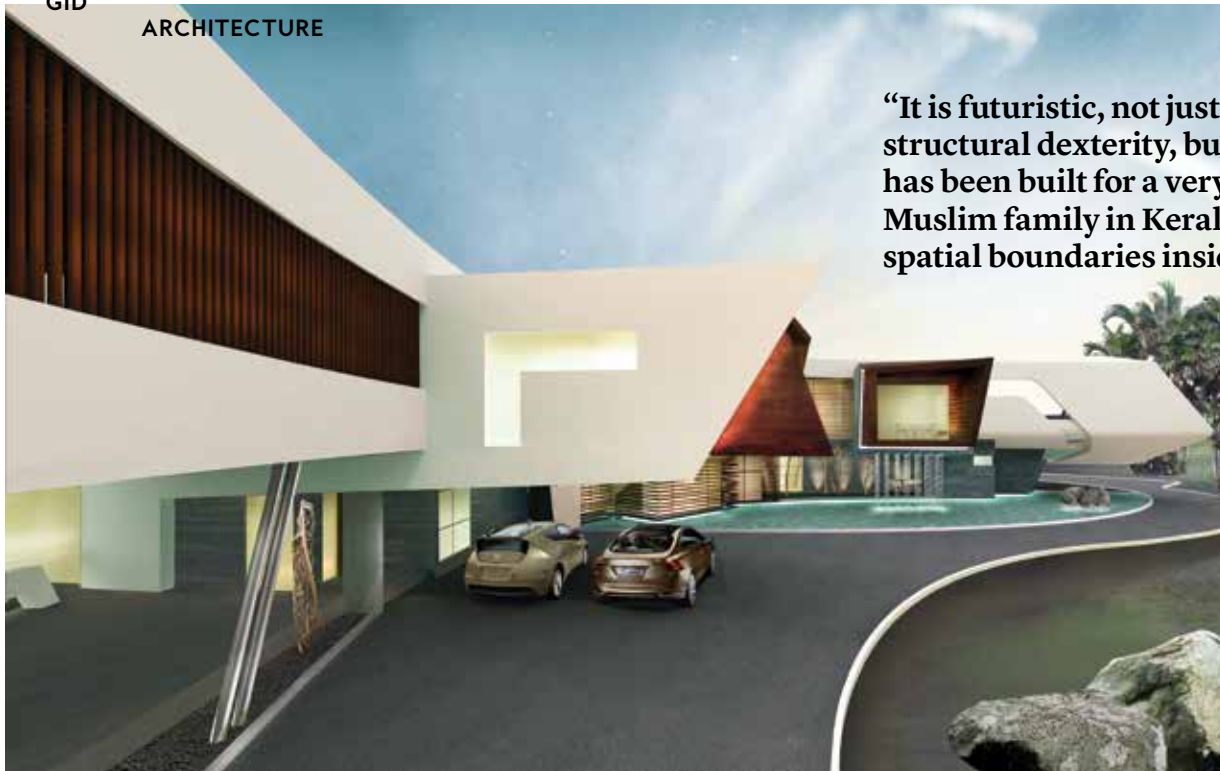


his footing and a life partner; and the passion for design continued past work tables to their home.

Explaining the transformative roles, Tharani goes into specifics. She says, “We started with independent practices and completed a couple of projects on our own before we formed Collaborative Architecture. Both of us won National awards in the same year, I won IIID

(Indian Institute of Interior Designer) for a health club in Mumbai and Ahmed won the Inside Outside Designer of the Year for Small Office Space in South India. We re-connected at the Inside Outside awards function after knowing each other briefly at work, a couple of years earlier and decided to collaborate. Later we formed the firm.”

“We didn’t have time to socialise while



**“It is futuristic, not just because of the structural dexterity, but also because it has been built for a very traditional Muslim family in Kerala, with very rigid spatial boundaries inside the house.”**

#### **THE HOUSE OF CANTILEVERS**

A house that explores structural challenges with design brilliance; an on-going project in South India.

setting up our practice as it consumed all our time in the earlier phase of the studio and those late-night suppers turned out to be our dates culminating into ‘partnership for life’ after two years of forming Collaborative Architecture,” Tharani reveals.

Explaining their design philosophies, Ahmed says that the firm had a clear focus right from the start on the projects they wanted for themselves to be involved with. “We wanted to stay away from the cookie-cutter design solutions, which neither had any depth nor any transcendental values,” he says. “At Collaborative Architecture, we invest in design innovation and design research more than anything, and that helps us to push the projects beyond accepted boundaries.”

With my insight into Ahmed’s personality, I am not the least bit surprised.

Tharani adds, “We work a lot more with patron clients than ‘generic clients’. These patrons collaborate with us in creating projects with a certain design quality, with innovation being the prime focus. Thus projects coming out of these collaborations tend to create a benchmark.”

So was there a single project that propelled them into the realm of best



architectural firms? “We wouldn’t say it was a single project, but rather a particular phase of the studio that made the change,” explains Tharani. “Both our second projects in our individual capacity won national awards, which made people recognize our works in India and prompted us to establish Collaborative Architecture. Then the Wrap series happened, which put the studio as one of the most innovative practices in the country and got us global recognition.” The Wrap series is a set of retail designs,

which can be explained as attempts to delve and question the age-old rhetoric of “Architecture vs Objects”. “These projects are architecture and ‘spatial objects’ at the same time, switching roles depending on the way one encounters or interprets them. The project is notable for its extremely simple detail and construction,” says Tharani.

While all their designs have leaned towards futuristic, one of the latest projects in execution stage is their latest attempt at breaking the norm.



### STACKED TECTONICS

The JDT primary school - in the outskirts of Kozhikode, Kerala - tries to offer a formal solution through simple but powerful architectural operations.

“The ‘House of Cantilevers’ that we are currently building in South India is one of those futuristic projects,” says Tharani. “This house overlooks a beautiful valley and has all the bedrooms cantilevered, as much as 8 to 9 m. Six such beautifully suspended volumes to take full advantage of what the site has to offer. It is futuristic, not just because of the structural dexterity, but also because it has been built for a very traditional Muslim family in Kerala, with very rigid spatial boundaries inside the house. We could merge the programme for traditional hierarchy of spaces, with highly open plan that respects those boundaries. It is a convergence of the futuristic outlook of a family with spatial aspirations which culminates in innovative design.”

It is not just in designs that the duo tends to innovate; even the labelling of the projects is seen as an assignment for the cognitive senses. A label that is then used as a design classification for the firm, a clear classification depending on projects that follow the same fundamental principle. “Inverted Topography is the second project in the ‘Topography’ series, where we use light as the most important spatial element in the project. Light becomes the *raison d’être*, to define or alter the space. The light source becomes the tectonic



elements in the space,” explains Ahmed.

“The restaurant brief called for an international appeal, as it is a multi-cuisine restaurant serving international fare. The client wanted a very flexible layout, with an increased seating efficiency. In fact, we cut down on the overall seating capacity, but increased the efficiency up to 80% by eliminating six and eight seater tables in favour of four and two, which could be grouped

together for a larger gathering,” he says.

White comes naturally to us at Collaborative Architecture, says Tharani, but it was a calculated risk at Mezban, the multi-cuisine restaurant. The risk paid off, as the customers loved it. “It was perceived not as a clinical white space, but as a warm vibrant space where you can have a nice meal and a relaxed evening out,” she says.

“The project has been transformational

**REFLECTED TOPOGRAPHY**

"The lobby is dominated by a central column, which supports the waffle slab system that spans across the space. This column became the axis for spatial orientation."





for the client and for us alike. After three and a half years, it is still one of the best fine dining options in the city, for its ambience. The project put us firmly on the global design map. It won us five coveted international awards along with all major national awards totaling 11. This project also became one of the most internationally published projects of an Indian architect.”

#### **Topographical intuitiveness**

Another project named for its particular design ethos is a project in Bangalore called Reflected Topography. The space was designed as an answer to all these meaningful musings that the designers posed to themselves and to the clients. “What could a typical office lobby be? Could it be more than a reception space and trigger meaningful social interactions? Could it be more than a signature space, where the architects showcase their design skills and the clients reiterate their corporate influence? What could be the strategies for a successful public space design in a highly secured and controlled campus?”

The design solution answered all these ruminations. “The lobby is dominated by a central column, which supports the waffle slab system that spans across a 32m x 32m space, with a height of 9m. This column became the axis for spatial orientation. The lighting design plays the lead role in the overall architectural identity, and the project succeeds by effortlessly merging the lighting

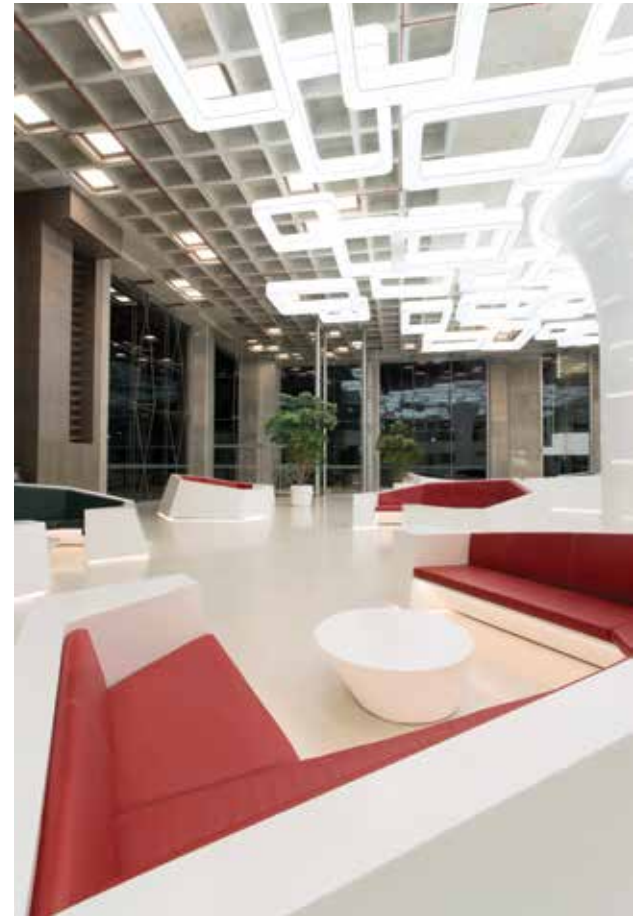
design and architectural space into a unified whole. The project is unique in that sense, to make the architectural

**“From palaces to personal spaces, commercial and retail spaces to residential premises of businessmen and Sheikhs, we have had projects across the spectrum in Doha.”**

lighting as the space definer, not just in stylistic terms, but in terms of tectonic manipulation of the neutral space.”

The seating cluster, again specially designed for the project, triggers social interactions and creates an undulating topography of contoured volumes at the eye level, in a way complementing the undulating pattern on the ceiling.

The waffle slab system, which is the most dominant part of the space, was left exposed to highlight the structural clarity of the space. The pattern of the waffle system acted as the spring board for the design of the customized lighting, which resulted in a highly dynamic space reflecting the geometry of the structural system. While Ahmed and Tharani are regularly designing for a wider audience, their mark on the global architectural scene seems to be faint, and this observation is generic to all Indian architects. “Indian



architects are slowly making their mark on the international scene. There are a dozen firms who frequently win many prestigious international awards. But, yes there hasn’t been a big transformational project coming out of an Indian firm for a long time,” agrees Tharani. “We need to have global ambitions and look at design from a universal perspective to make a mark on the global market. Indian firms need go beyond being inward looking, it is definitely happening, albeit slowly.” And with Collaborative Architecture, a practice driven by innovation and the ceaseless pursuit of quality in design to create projects which are highly sensitive, poetic and contemporary, where every project is an exploration, going beyond the functional brief, creating a symbiosis of people, places, culture, climate, economy and collaborative efforts of related disciplines, a more global footprint will soon be visible. ♦