DESIGN
MATRIX
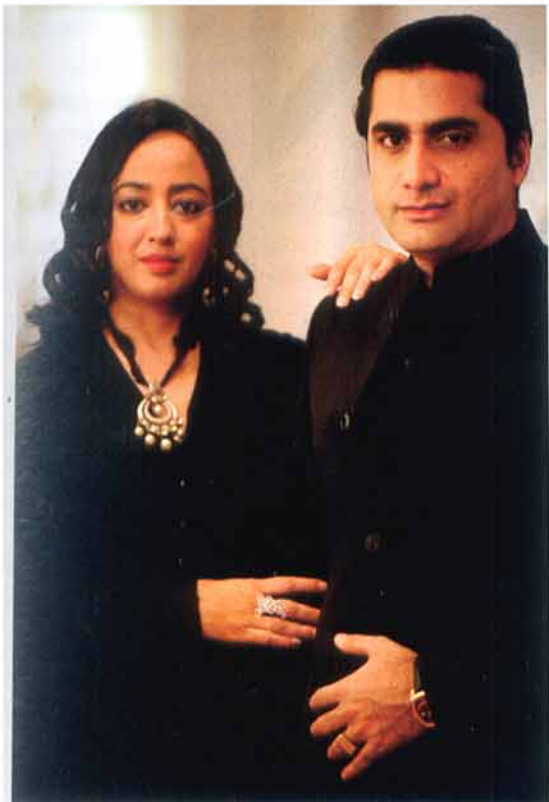
PEOPLE • LIFESTYLE • DESIGN • INTERIORS

Kalhan
Matto

Santha
Mattoo

"You just **have** to be true to yourself; then there is **a** greater chance of **success**"

"We **have** never idolized any one and have done what **we** are comfortable with"

GLOSS TO... GLAMOUR

DON'T LOSE YOUR mojo
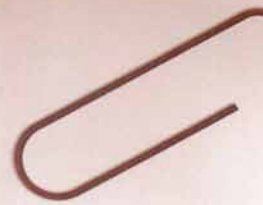
- **Cover featuring:** Santha & Kalhan Mattoo
- **Photograph by:** Prashant Bhat
- **Hair & Make-up by:** Anne Bharati Subba, courtesy Rudra Spa
- **Location:** Le Sutra, Mumbai

Babita Krishnan: The first question is to both of you. Was architecture always your ambition?

Kalhan Mattoo: When I was in the 7th or 8th standard, I had a clear interest in architecture. There are three reasons for that: firstly, I was a little creative and used to draw a lot and knew that I had to follow something creative for a living. But I come from an academically-inclined middle class family (both my parents are professors). Had I told them that I wanted to become an artist, they would have thrown a fit. Secondly, I never scored high marks that could get me into any top engineering college. Also it was not of my interest, so architecture fitted the bill perfectly. Thirdly and most importantly, at a very impressionable age I saw the movie *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*. The whole mood of the movie was seductive and I liked that. Unfortunately, I didn't know that it was SPA Delhi; I thought it was JJ and landed in Mumbai! So, architecture was interesting, to my liking and a profession – it fit all the requirements.

Santha Mattoo: In my case, it was my dad's idea. He is a civil engineer.

KM: …she got into medicine as well, but opted for architecture.

SM: Because I was destined to meet you (smiles).

BK: So, you met in college?

SM: After ten years of marriage, discussing this is very embarrassing…

KM: Yes, we've been together since college. First as friends, then as professional partners when we established Planet 3 Studios and then – life partners. It is a 20-years-young relationship.

BK: So, how do the design sensibilities come together? Since you work closely, both personally and professionally, do the differences hinder creativity?

KM: Actually, it is not about the two of us agreeing, it is more about all of us agreeing to whatever is being created. For us design is about collaborating. All of us together ideate and everything is discussed. Everyone contributes and the best proposal thus created is taken forward. Though most of the time it ends up being our basic idea, sometimes these kids also come up with wonderful ideas. But, between the two of us there never is an issue, as all decisions are taken collectively.

SM: I don't remember any major conflict. It is never his idea vs mine…

BK: How big is the Planet 3 Studios team?

KM: We have a team of about 35 people working on different projects across the country.

BK: Santha, professionally, you have a large team and husband as a colleague – it's perfect. But now, as a mother with a small baby, how do you balance the two?

SM: *Ho jata hai.* I have never planned anything, never followed a time table. And Kalhan has always helped.

KM: We've been fortunate that there are a lot of people around to help. But on a daily basis, I keep the baby engaged in the morning. That gives me about an-hour-and-a-half with him and by then half the things are done. Also, when he comes to office, he gets the same real estate as I do – baby zone is as large as my cabin… there is always someone to look after babies in the office. All babies are welcome.

SM: It is good that we get him to work (a privilege that is enjoyed by everyone in the office) and continue working. I'm sure a lot of people have to really plan their schedules, mornings, etc. with the baby in mind, we feel truly blessed in that respect.

TWOGETHER

They have built a formidable reputation within the fraternity.
The young and dynamic duo – Kalhan & Santha Mattoo
– is as vibrant in their attitude as in their projects.

Words: Babita Krishnan; Images: Prashant Bhat

BK: You have a very young team. Is this a deliberate step, since your projects reflect a very different approach?

KM: We want our work to remain consistently fresh. 20 years hence, we would want to win the young designers award once again (laughs). But seriously, it is all about being dynamic and constantly reinventing yourself. The average age around here is about 25 to 30 years and the associates take their tone from the guys at the top. If you are solemn about work all the time, working in a structured environment, they, too, would work like that and their age would only be incidental.

SM: When some of the guys joined the Studio, they came in ties and then realized that though this is an office, they were the only ones dressed that way.

KM: We have never looked at any firm as a role model for our office. We just created an environment that we were comfortable in – like the crib, no dress code, everyone able to speak their mind, etc.

BK: But where did all this begin? I mean, your internship, training, before Planet 3 became a reality?

KM: Oh, that was only for a few months. Though it could sound very interesting as a story of how we struggled and started our own thing, the fact is that when we graduated in '96, the market crashed and there were no jobs. In order to survive, we did some very low-paying assignments. We established Planet 3 in '98.

BK: I recall our very first meeting many years ago when you had shown me the renderings of Vidyalankar project. How did you break ice with the clients and convince them for such a maverick design for an educational institution?

KM: For this we need to look beyond the question. Let me explain something about us. Most people have their academics fairly predictable – they know what needs to be done to work towards their degree. For us, actually, just me, since Santha was a bit better in studies; I flunked each and every architecture and design paper from my fourth to tenth semester. So I learnt to internalize the whole thing about how my designs were not received out there. And once in the field, I became more pragmatic, kind-of let loose and did my own thing.

SM: We went into the presentation with the approach that the worst that could happen was that we won't get the project. But not only did we get it, it has become like a benchmark. And that doesn't mean post Vidyalankar, things have been easy for us. It created a kind of image that we are these funky architects and we had to convince people otherwise. It gave us the reputation, but didn't get us work. In fact, we got the next architectural project 3-4 years after that.

KM: We had to convince people that a design is governed by requirements, so no two projects will be similar. Now people understand this and it is easier. A case in point is this developer

we are working with, who clearly said that he wants to work only with us because he doesn't need to work with different architects to achieve different looks. For long, people didn't understand that we had a large repertoire of work.

BK: Now fresh graduates want to join you, as your achievements have become aspirational. Do you think it could be a trap that they might fall into – of idealising your work?

KM: I have an issue with the fact that one needs to idolize someone else. What we are doing is unique to us. 99% of the work in India is not design intensive and that is painfully boring. But if it works for you and you can find a market for it, then well and good.

SM: Maybe it was destiny, luck… being at the right place at the right time and finding the right people. Even we could have fallen into the same trap. We never idolized anyone and have done what we are comfortable with. You just have to be true to yourself; then there is a greater chance of success.

BK: Therefore, did the absence of influences and idols and/or a formal training with a firm actually help you develop your own style?

KM: I don't think it would have mattered as working with someone can influence you only up to a limit. There is no formula to our work.

BK: How much does work intrude on your private space – at home or with friends?

SM: Only in case of emergencies does work get carried home – not otherwise. He doesn't like it and if I pick it up, *"office ki baat office main karenge"* is the response I get.

KM: I like to do things intensively in small spurts. If work is intensive at that point then I'd rather stay in office to finish it and then go home, but prefer not to carry it home. We both like to read a lot; that is one of our hobbies.

BK: There is a very involved work environment. What is the work philosophy that you follow?

SM: Sometimes I feel we are running a design academy here, because of the way we train our associates in every aspect of design.

KM: That's ok. Why shouldn't we use them to their full potential and give a client the benefit of getting 3-4 design options.

SM: Yes. Sometimes great ideas come from the youngest person in the team.

BK: So, how would you describe your designs?

SM: We don't attempt to describe them; we just design. It may not be very "safe" in terms of design (though we like to give that option to our clients as well), we try to do different things and that works for us.
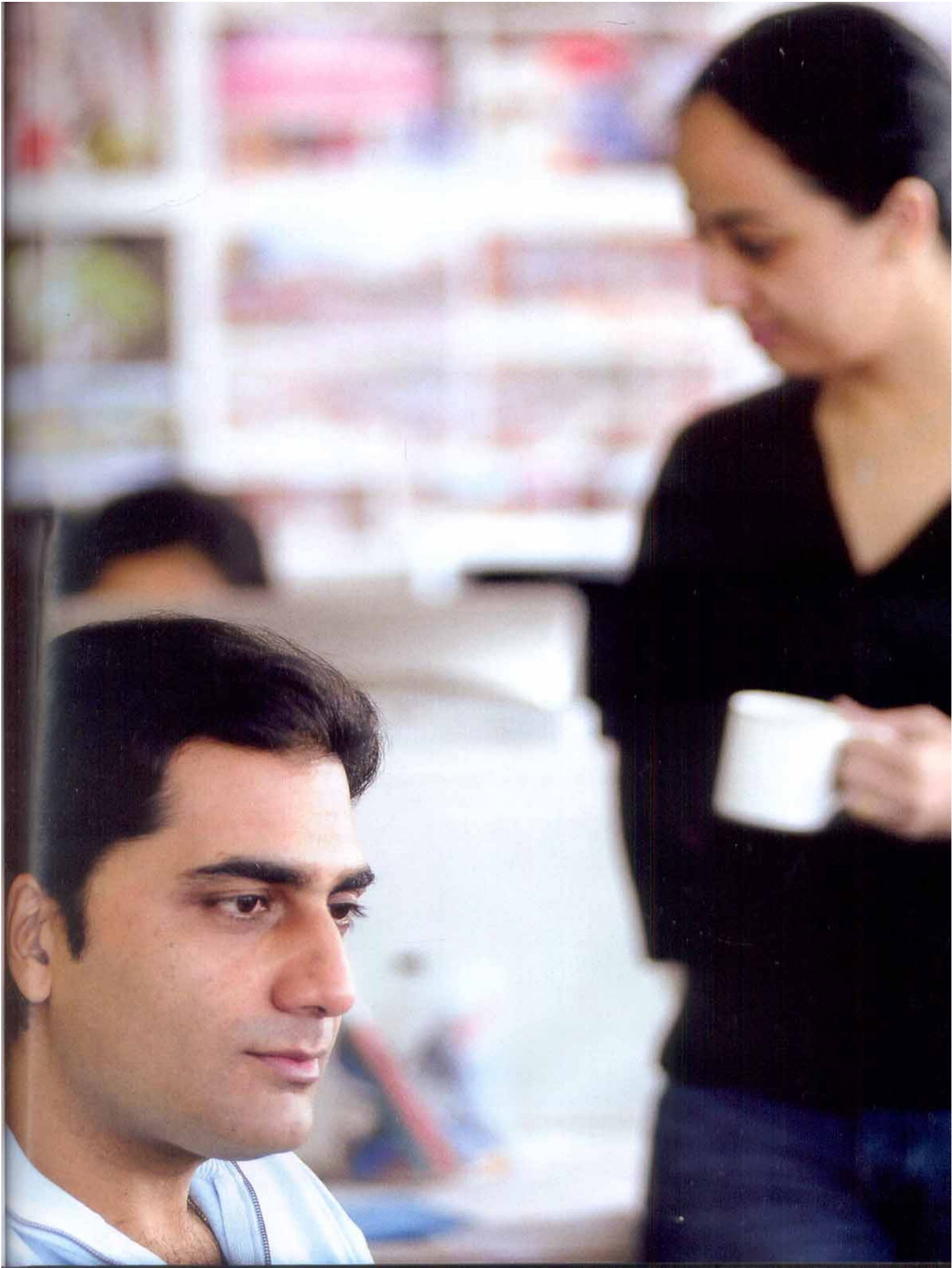
BK: When you say that, I am assuming your client is satisfied. So how important does the client-designer relationship become in the profession?

KM: The investment that goes into building this relationship is phenomenal – the client is putting in a huge amount of money, you are committing a huge amount of time and creativity to it. And many times these attempts fail from both sides. When things click, it is special and if in your entire career span you build 5-6 such permanent relationships, it is a precious achievement. But one needs to be careful so as not to become predictable.

BK: For example, any such learning experiences?

KM: The very first project that we were working on was an interiors project. Even after developing many concepts, this gentleman kept us hanging in.

SM: He kept on postponing the project with some or the other excuse and we gave it up.

KM: Then he approached us again six years later for the same thing. He had not approached anyone else and we did it, not for the money but simply because it was our first project. But we have never fooled ourselves on one thing – the importance of money. The relationships that we have built with individuals are never at the cost of practicality. There was this client we worked with for a couple of months and then it was time for our first payment. When I reached his office at 11.00 AM, he was on his way out and said that he would return by 6.00 PM and could give me the money only on his return. So when he returns in the evening, he finds me patiently browsing magazines at the reception. "You must really need the money," he said, to which my simple reply was, "It is my money and I don't mind waiting for it."

SM: Whenever a project has come our way, we've never said no. Let's try it, has been our attitude. Each one has taught us something or the other.

KM: RPG Group is now a regular client, but the first time we worked with them was on a design-build (DB) small temporary office to accommodate 42 people in a budget of a-lakh-and-a-half to be completed in 20 days. You can't be faced with a bigger challenge.

SM: DB has been a learning process. It was our first design and build project and we had no clue about so many things. But we asked, learned and completed it in 18 days, we even slept on site!

KM: When the manager saw us sleeping on the table and the carpenter on the floor, he said that this is a great social equalizer; and when we got our cheque, it was really hard earned money! While some of our contemporaries were doing their masters in the US, we were learning practical details on site. Not that the design part was not of interest, this just seemed more real to us. And that money at the beginning of our practice helped us go a long way.

SM: No profession should be static, small beginnings have led us to where we are today. There are so many things that one can do.

BK: What do you feel about the attitude of today's generation of architects and designers?

SM: The fault lies with this whole culture of ideologies. I'm sure even we had it then and didn't realize it. I remember us telling a client to take back the cheque - that was attitude.

KM: Designers have always had an attitude. The kids look up to some of the icons in the industry and listen to their anecdotes. The symptoms of the creative process are taken as the attitude that makes you creative. They think that unless you have attitude you are not creative. I don't think it is necessary. We are quite chilled out. I don't think you need any of those perceived trappings to be creative.

BK: So what pointers would you give them to hone their skills and make them better professionals?

KM: One must remember that while it is a creative field, it is also a profession where you work with others and clients. Secondly, you have to demystify every opportunity. It is not about becoming the next so-and-so, but about giving what the requirements are. You need to have the right communication skills. Next, you have to stay with your convictions, whatever they may be. Most people tend to follow others, like spending lakhs for a Masters from a foreign university, sometimes mortgaging their parent's homes. But no one stops to think further. This trend scares me as I cannot understand the co-relation between architectural success and a foreign Masters. Many of them later end up doing stupid work that is a sad waste of talent. As a designer, you know how good you are; find your line of expertise.

SM: Glory is not in building only iconic structures. Everyone who passes out of design school wants to become the next Zaha Hadid or Charles Corea. I'm not discouraging that, but there has to be some introspection about what you are good at, that nobody can teach you, that has to come from within.

BK: And finally what do the two of you do after work?

SM: We are always out. We try not to miss any of the latest movies, we take the entire office and go. We also love to go for a lot of trekking and camping trips. Not only are they fun it is also a great way to bond with your colleagues. We used to do this at least twice a year but, it reduced due to my pregnancy.

KM: But we will restart now. Even in office, post work we all sometimes sit and have wine together.

SM: If someone is working late into the night, a break at about 8 in the evening is fine.

BK: Drinks in office?

KM: Most people act very responsibly when they are given the freedom ↺

PERCEPTION...
and a touch of whimsy...

Reviewing their projects of the last few years, one realizes how progressive design can impact the thinking-mind, without disrupting the inherent tenets of conventionality

Words: Savitha Hira
Images: courtesy Planet 3 Studios

The art of translating a concept into a workable solution…with deft strokes of professional expertise, peppered with a dash of conviction… is perhaps the secret of success that Kalhan-Santha thrive on in their leadership of Planet 3 Studios.

Hand-picking a few from their diverse portfolio, we try to decode the mindset and working philosophy of the duo as they sashay through life – ticking and fulfilling, both professionally and personally. Internationally recognized, their rapidly growing portfolio comprises a range of eclectic projects that span institutional buildings, mixed use and adaptive-reuse projects, housing complexes, corporate offices, retail outlets, hospitality segment, furniture, industrial products….

'Self-appraisal' seems the foremost virtue of this team. Applying a candid evaluation process to the success of their first major institutional project – Vidyalankar Institute – they reintroduced the student connect into a vibrant environment for the institute's 35,000 sq. ft. bio-technology and life-sciences centre in 2008. Taking a cue from what was best appreciated in their former effort; various design elements were incorporated to corporeally image large student work displays, light sources and graffiti strips, etc. in the new structure. Whilst the new design borrows heavily from nature, it attempts to reiterate the intended use via the graphic quality of most constructs: a staircase with a railing evoking frayed, dried wheat stalk rendered in wood and steel; a meeting room with a twist, game board near the entrance; strategically punctured roof with skylights illuminating the interior corridors; ventilators as signage letters; etc. Amidst this pandemonium of whimsy-in-the-eye, are diametrically placed symbolic lotus petals – the seat of learning – and a few other such tongue-in-cheek discoveries that although a trifle blasé, bring the 'aaha' aspect into being!

Establishing the fact that an evolution is possible in set building typologies, and keeping pace with changing needs, Planet 3 Studios goes on to prove that thinking-out-of-the-box can be as much a subtle exercise as a blatant one. In their recent (2010) design of the reception, recreation and training areas at the RPG group headquarters at CEAT Mahal, Mumbai, traditional Indian ethnic elements of design and architecture blend with Grecian typologies in a contemporary idiom. The recreation area, marking the ethos of an informal active relaxation as the underlying narrative, is a contemporized interpretation of the Mykonos and Santorini architecture. The design evokes the pristine white vernacular feel and consistency of these Greek villages. Similarly, the reception area has a very distinct

character that syncretises modern planning and construction with local architectural tradition, delivering on the expectations that the building creates. Large parts of the space are left open and empty to receive art, and the only built space is an air-conditioned lounge with a distinct Rajasthani character. In absolute contrast and befitting its intent, is the training centre, which sports Spartan chic seriousness."Communicating the progressive ideas of the group gives the employees a sense of pride of ownership," says Santha.
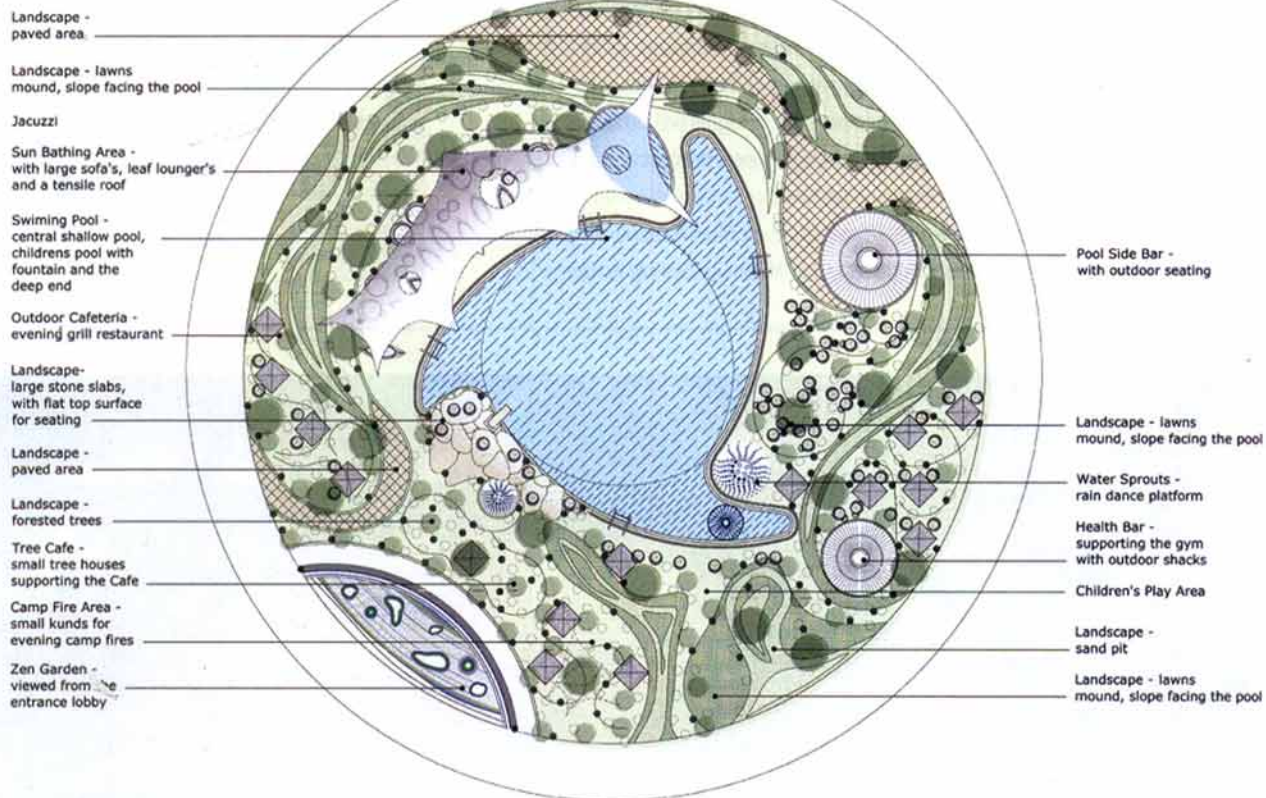
A pride that they would like to evoke in the residents of Shirdi, where they are furthering the social initiative of the Somaiya Group, by building a science centre within the now derelict, original factory structure situated on

a 100-acre site. Awaiting its various mandatory approvals, the project poses the challenge of maintaining historical continuity while building a modern facility with a minimally invasive approach. Their proposed design retains and extends the industrial art deco character of original structures while newer additions in modern materials blend in via subtle design elements. Within the confines of these structures, innovative technologies will be used to create futuristic displays and cutting edge science experiments, creating an experiential high among the users in this small town.
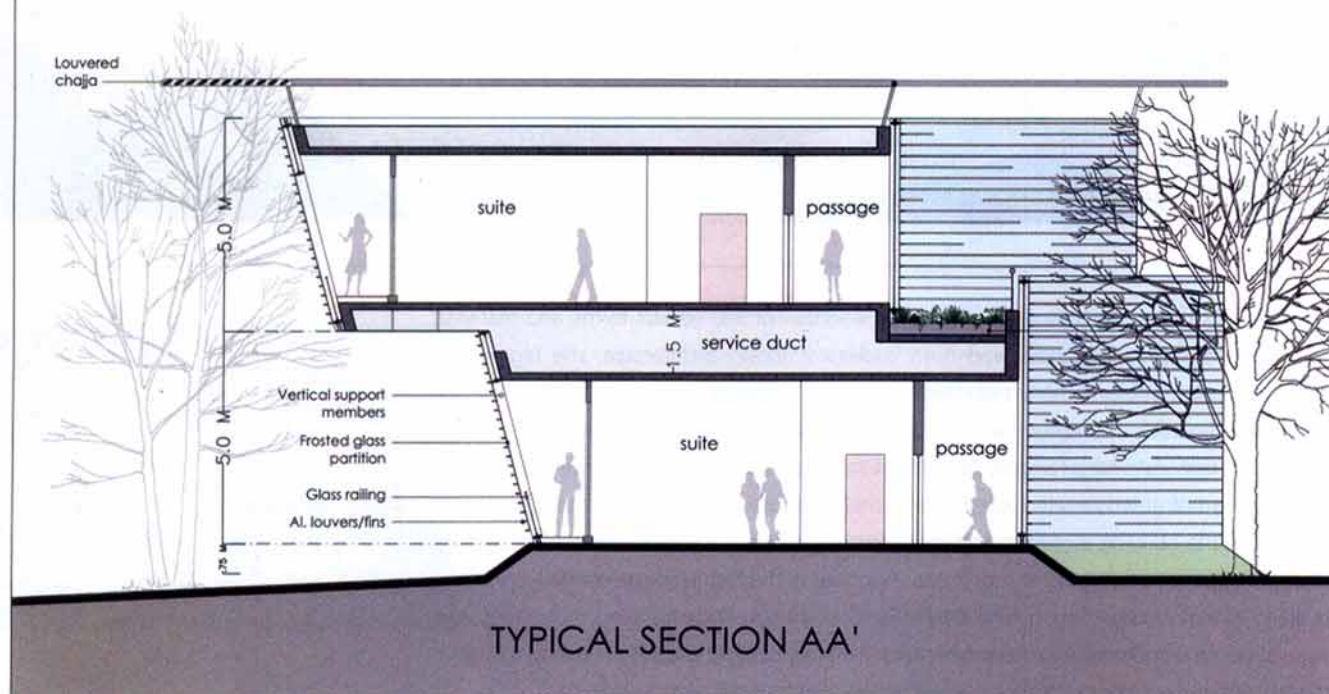
Using cutting-edge technology, the progressive architects have also elicited a 'wow' response to the proposed design of their upcoming luxury

residential apartments in a Mumbai suburb. Inspired by Antonio Gaudi's forms, and marrying them with design details borrowed from traditional Indian architecture, the high-rise is conceived as a modular construct of interlocking solid surface acrylic panels anchored to the building frame, each thermoformed to create a fluid, soft character for the cladding. Columns of the same material, with a twisting fluted detail in various sizes adorn the façade and together with the thermoformed panels create a distinct character for the building. The cladding material will reduce the building façade maintenance to a minimum… something Mumbai buildings struggle with a lot on account of monsoons. Proposed as the first fully steel-framed residential building in India, integrating international influences, cutting-edge building technology and innovative use of materials in a thoroughly contemporary context, the path-breaking nature of this development is a bold attempt at rewriting the rules for such projects in India.

Landscape -
paved area

Landscape - lawns
mound, slope facing the pool

Jacuzzi

Sun Bathing Area -
with large sofa's, leaf lounger's
and a tensile roof

Swiming Pool -
central shallow pool,
childrens pool with
fountain and the
deep end

Outdoor Cafeteria -
evening grill restaurant

Landscape-
large stone slabs,
with flat top surface
for seating

Landscape -
paved area

Landscape -
forested trees

Tree Cafe -
small tree houses
supporting the Cafe

Camp Fire Area -
small kunds for
evening camp fires

Zen Garden -
viewed from the
entrance lobby

Pool Side Bar -
with outdoor seating

Landscape - lawns
mound, slope facing the pool

Water Sprouts -
rain dance platform

Health Bar -
supporting the gym
with outdoor shacks

Children's Play Area

Landscape -
sand pit

Landscape - lawns
mound, slope facing the pool

Pushing-the-envelope with design notions that challenge
an established or conventional outlook is a trait that seems
to come naturally to the duo

Louvered
chajja

suite

passage

5.0 M

service duct

1.5 M

Vertical support
members

Frosted glass
partition

suite

passage

5.0 M

Glass railing

Al. louvers/fins

.75

TYPICAL SECTION AA'

Another feather in their cap is the dramatic, spiralling design of a new panoramic resort in Karnala won through an invited competition. While local building codes restrict the structure to ground-plus-one, the client requirement of an iconic property provides the point of inspiration for this remarkable design. Radiating from a central core with luxury hospitality services and suites on the upper level, five arms extend into the landscape with out-facing rooms on two floors. The building skin is engineered in horizontal louvers to moderate harsh tropical sun; while the same louvers light up in subtle colours during the night, suggesting magical lanterns that float in air. The project is at take-off stage and envisages a 5-year completion period.

But 'time' is truly the essence of life and living. Back in 2007, when Godrej had announced a product design competition, Planet 3 Studios had deigned a modular portable workstation. They won the best product award but the workstation remained under production; until last month when Godrej rolled out the product after appropriate and adequate R&D. Christened 'Out-of-the-box', the workstation is a literal rectangular box, which opens up, much like a Swiss knife, to reveal two perfectly functioning workstations. It takes no special skills and couple of minutes to install. The trick really, is in using the surface of the box as a jigsaw arrangement of components that unfold in a logical and sequential manner. Packed within is the requisite paraphernalia down to the smallest detail of necessary cabling. The portable box is mounted on lockable castors and can be shut with the same ease when not in use. The concept encourages multi-use space design by its mobility, while its compactness opens it up to alternate uses.

With the focus always on context, the constraints and the opportunities that a project presents, the incisive vocabulary of the space and the project per se communicates with the architects to evolve into a solution that balances wit with wisdom, keeping it fresh in visual appeal ⊘