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# LEARN LIVE LIFE





**H**as technology empowered us to have a more informed and evolved understanding of our sites, their processes and subsequently our designs? This is not an easy question to answer. Most of us are still geared to think by hand, drawing sketches, doodling, analyzing and while imagining various future scenarios and contexts.

At the same time, technology has surely opened new ways of observing complex realities and imagining new ideas. As **Manali Nanavati** observes in her article on documenting vernacular architecture, photography, ideography and laser techniques have made the process of gathering interdisciplinary information much easier and faster. At the same time, the technical skills, at times, are so overwhelming that they block our natural ability to imagine which is nurtured by inherent traits of human mind. It is important to remember that technology is the skill to interpret our own thinking, imagination and knowledge into appropriate graphical and verbal formats. It is not the knowledge itself. **Marc Treib**, eminent academican observes that the students proficient at drawing by hand get more interesting and sophisticated results from the computer as they impose their will on the machine instead of being a slave to its default settings. In a special feature, he shares his views about the subject along with other interesting experiences.

In another article, **Frieddie Riberio**, landscape architect observes that the flexibility in hand drawing often reflects the personality of the individual drawing it. **Premola Ghose's** hand drawn sketches and illustrations of cityscapes paints a humane side of a city, with people, nature and animals, a work of a sensitive mind. **Ankon Mitra's** creations in Origami, in his views, "wander in the three worlds of Geometry, Landscape and Material and meet to create a vision of an interconnected whole." In a special feature, he shares few of his works along with the nature imagery that has inspired them.



**Adyar Poonga** is one of the examples of nature conservation that has amalgamated the use and expertise of science, design and art to create a public space that addresses the urban needs of a metropolitan city. It offers many lessons to address similar contexts in our cities, which are grappling with serious environmental issues.

Any calamity, natural or manmade, makes us reflect on the knowledge and learning of many of past research and studies. **Ayla Khan** reviews **The Silent Spring**, the classic book about the seminal discourse on environmental pollution, written about six decades ago, that gave rise to powerful global environmental movement around the globe. The knowledge of the book, especially in times of Pandemic is thought provoking.

LA Journal will be produced in a digital format for the next full year, in 2021, till the time the country recovers substantially from COVID-19 pandemic. As ever, we look forward to your support and wishes.

Wishing you all a healthy and positive times in the new year. Stay safe.

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64  
2020

tribute  
10

REMEMBERING  
KULDIP  
RAM SHARMA

33

THE MYSTICISM  
OF THE HIMALAYAS  
WATER TREASURES  
OF THE HIMALAYAS  
*Review by* DIVYA CHOPRA

design,  
conservation  
and planning

57

RE-IMAGINING ROLES  
SAMIR MATHUR

88

THE PENCIL  
AND THE MOUSE  
FREDDIE RIBEIRO

heritage,  
local traditions  
and crafts

14

THE AESTHETICS OF  
PLANTINGS IN EARLY MUGHAL  
GARDEN PAINTINGS III:  
POETICS OF PLANTING  
JAMES L. WESCOAT JR.

environment,  
ecology and  
biodiversity

37

AN ECOLOGICAL  
MASTER PLAN  
FOR ADYAR POONGA  
CREEK & ESTUARY  
IDEA DESIGN

66

VIEW FROM WITHIN  
MAKING A MARK  
GEETA WAHI DUA

94

IN WONDERLAND!  
ARUNA GHOSE

seeing  
the unseen

101

ART AS A  
LANDSCAPE  
OF FOLDS  
ANKON MITRA

26

THE 'NATURE' OF ART  
TRACING THE HISTORY OF  
MODERN PAINTINGS IN ASSAM  
ANJALI CHANDAWARKAR

52

WHAT THE EYES  
DON'T SEE  
SILENT SPRING  
*Review by* AYLAKHAN

city and  
culture

70

DOING MORE  
WITH LESS  
*In conversation with*  
MARC TREIB

80

DOCUMENTING  
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE  
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL  
APPROACH TO ARCHITECTURE  
MANALEE NANAVATI

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A scenic view of a paved path lined with trees, with yellow petals scattered on the ground. The path is made of light-colored paving stones and is flanked by lush green grass. The trees are tall and leafy, creating a canopy effect. The lighting is bright, suggesting a sunny day. In the background, a few people can be seen walking on the path.

# DESIGN, CONSERVATION AND PLANNING



# RE-IMAGINING ROLES



PHOTO CREDIT | Deepak Chauhan

**Samir Mathur** set up his landscape practice, Integral Designs International Studio Pvt. Ltd. in 1994. Presently, along with managing it, Samir also works as a member of Delhi Urban Arts Commission [DUAC] and is involved in various positions to guide urban policies regarding aspects of landscape architecture and environment, both at State and National levels. In the feature, Samir reflects on his journey while sharing views about his various roles, practice and other issues.

## Education

My keen interest in technical drawings in the last two years of high school led me to enroll in the B.Arch. program of at School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. During the course, in the first summer, I worked as part of a team that listed the monuments of Delhi with Anuradha Chaturvedi and Nalini Thakur, who were amazing guides. In my second summer, I interned with Ramu Katakam and Pradeep Sachdeva and with that internship money, I backpacked to Kashmir, Leh and Ladakh including a pre-season Amarnath yatra. In the third summer, I worked on the listing of monuments, this time in Nagaur, a small municipality in Rajasthan. By the time I was twenty-one, I had traversed the country many times and was deeply inspired by experiences of the interplay of nature and development with an awareness of architectural, cultural, landscape and historical layers of understanding of our diverse country. A year of working with Jasbir and Rosemary Sachdev pointed me in the direction of further studies in landscape architecture.

In 1991, I joined the postgraduate program in landscape architecture at Amherst, USA. The faculty included eminent names such as Julius Fabos, Nick Dines, John Mullen and Hal Moser. The program promoted a diverse lens to explore the subject - sciences relating to land-use planning and scenic values as well as art, literature and poetry in reference to the natural landscape character. I got to work on the Master Plan for a portion of Central Park, New York for the Central Park Conservancy.

FACING PAGE

### UTTORAYON TOWNSHIP

SILIGURI

2006-2009

*The image of the project encapsulates the ideas of egalitarianism. The landscape aims to create a sense of a liveable, pedestrian-friendly and safe walking environment.*

*The circulation network becomes crucial for the conceptualisation of the entire township. Here, the pedestrian walkways were set apart carefully from the motorised roads, and the structure was planned such that a person walking out of their cluster immediately reaches one of the main pedestrian spines without crossing traffic.*

ARCHITECT: Morphogenesis



## Back home

Back in India in late 1993, I collaborated on professional projects with Mohammed Shaheer for the next eight years. I worked on urban landscape projects around the country. This led to a practical understanding of the complexities of professional practice dealing with diverse contexts. My interest was overwhelmingly in academia and research. Therefore, in 2000, I joined as Assistant Professor at the Department of Landscape Architecture at SPA, New Delhi. In the same year, the idea of ISOLA was thought of at a joint studio program at Pune, attended by Prabhakar B. Bhagwat, Mohammad Shaheer, Jayant Dharap, Ravi & Varsha Gavandi, Aniket Bhagwat and Prasanna Desai.

With the idea of exploring new areas, I resigned from full time teaching in 2004. In subsequent years, I have remained associated with academics at various schools and the department at SPA as an external jury member and as a visiting faculty.

## Learnings

My personal learning over the past few decades has been in the five domains:

- *In Practice, through professional work at Integral Designs, some of the possibilities of addressing these challenges.*

I started professional practice in 1994. When, in 1998, I got my first large commission, of 'The Ananda' at Narendranagar, we had a team of two young architects. Over the years, many talented architects and landscape architects have joined our team and the practice has expanded. We have learned to be disciplined and are intensely focused. We have completed many projects belonging to a diverse set of typologies in national and international contexts. For us, small projects are key laboratories for carrying out design research. On urban projects, in many cases working with international consultants, there is a lot of learning in the areas of design, documentation and management skills, and we push ourselves to be better each day.

Our initial handling of any large site is through its water management networks. Functional and sustainable responses follow, but every part is held together by a spatial narrative that is informed by a unique identity. The studio draws from a deep understanding of the unsaid design brief and aspirations, international best practices, simple construction methods with deference to local materials and social requirements. There is a conscious attempt not to have an overt 'style'. We aim for freshness in our design responses, and a sense of timelessness, robust ecological underpinnings and being innovative.

FACING PAGE

### **ANANDA IN THE HIMALAYAS**

NARENDRANAGAR, RISHIKESH  
1998–2000

*The amphitheater is located in the core of the site, within a natural depression and is a unique landscape element that blends with the topography with its planting inducing a sense of tranquility. It uses natural rough materials that are contextually relevant, like dressed boulders from the site to induce a sense of balance with the natural systems. There was also a water stream that demarcates the stage from the seating area. Altogether, it forms the visual core of this complex and offers a view of the Himalayas.*

ARCHITECT: Gary Galore +  
Chaddha Siembeda



- *In Teaching, as a full time and later as a visiting faculty to encourage, inspire and train young minds about the range of tools that landscape architecture bestows.*

Starting as a teaching assistant in 1991, I have emulated two sets of educators as my role models. During my post-graduation at the University of Amherst, John Mullen, Nick Dines and Julius Fabos, all eminent professionals, brought erudition and intensity to their classrooms. The students learned in a culture of equality between them and the faculty. Academic growth meant understanding norms and taking them forward based upon theoretical authoritative works.

In India, there exists a robust set of programs of education that are comparable with the best in the world. During our time teaching together at SPA until 2004, Mohammed Shaheer challenged students to extend their intellectual boundaries to generate coherent planning and design thought. His relationship with students' was of a master patron.





Over a period, it became apparent that there were three teaching styles: the static repetitive, often disinterested model; the patronizing dominant, student ownership style; and the egalitarian and vision articulation style. In my view, an unbiased and equal relationship with the students, while helping them find their voices is the best way to go forward.

From 2004 to 2014, I taught Elective courses at the Department of Architecture at SPA Delhi that were based upon a teaching module I had attended at Amherst [informally called 'Hiking with Hal'], where students of the final year studied landscape ecology and design on field in different parts of the country. It was my most rewarding assignment. It initiated a larger awareness of the importance of landscape architecture to budding architects.

**THE ROSEATE**

NEW DELHI  
2008–2013

*An art-based approach that generates a sense of tranquility and a unique identity to this landscape. The scheme has been sustainably designed around the existing trees and landforms which has ensued in creating an oasis in an urban context, for a dynamic user experience.*

MASTER PLANNING: Lek Bunnang  
IMAGE CREDIT: Pankaj Rakesh



**THE KHYBER  
MOUNTAIN RESORT & SPA**

GULMARG  
2007–2013

*The site is nestled in the heart of Gulmarg within a forest clearing.*

*The idea was to build a landscape character that would incorporate the traditional vision of Kashmir within the modern context. The technique of maximizing natural systems employed in designing this project ensures that it is sustainable in nature. The water is not held but is led down the slopes to join a river.*

ARCHITECT: *Anil Sharma and Associates*

- *In Public Speaking, about landscape and engagement with social, research and specialist groups articulating a landscape environmental holistic vision.*

The lack of knowledge about landscapes in general and the public realm, in particular, is limited. I have been engaging with political decision-makers, industry groups, international funding agencies, heritage and conservation pressure groups on topics as diverse as Public Art, Urban Greenways, and Social implications of design, construction technologies, and Botanical garden best practices and even training of gardeners. Rather than enumerating problems, I aim for the listener to understand the underlying cause and effect scenarios required to create a comprehensive vision for the issue under consideration.



- *In Framing Policy, Framing Codes and guidelines such as the National Building Code that mandate superior environments for all.*

In 2015-16, I was involved in reviewing the National Building Code 2016 [NBC] for a holistic and contemporary approach to landscape. I was also involved in the framing of the Unified Building Bye-laws [UBBL] for Delhi 2016. Environmental aspects and Sustainable landscape related clauses were added to the document. I have helped framed a large number of guidelines relating to public art, street design, park design, educational institutions parking norms and housing development norms seeking to improve the urban landscape at the DUAC.

#### **UTTORAYON TOWNSHIP**

SILIGURI  
2006–2009

*The streetscape is done strategically to replicate the natural water flow system on site through the street network. The core site planning strategy aims to place the buildings and other usable areas within a continuous green network while conserving the natural system of swales. Located on a plateau, the site is divided into seven zones and is designed as a grid with a main central axis and different social and commercial infrastructure facilities spread across the site. This model of sustainable urban development has ensured that there is no negative impact on the larger watershed system.*

ARCHITECT: *Morphogenesis*



**BENNETT UNIVERSITY**

GREATER NOIDA  
2015 ONWARDS

*A crucial aspect of campus design is creating usable yet unique spaces. The aim in terms of the feel of the place is to create a contemporary palette of materials that are aesthetic yet durable. Efficiently planned and user-friendly spaces are the norm.*

ARCHITECT: RSP India

- *In Monitoring Implementation, to ensure that best practices are followed at the execution stage through checks.*

From 2013-16, as part of the Heritage Conservation Committee [HCC], I along with others formulated recommendations on Incentives for Heritage Preservation and Norms for identifying architectural, cultural and environmental assets of the city. For the past five years, as a member of the Delhi Urban Art Commission [DUAC], I am involved with the entire lifecycle of guiding conceptualisation to monitoring the implementation of public projects. This includes the review of the redevelopment of Chandni Chowk, and various proposals for the Central Vista.

## Thoughts

### Public Realm

Urban development in India is not on par with our aspirations. Although the Masterplans articulate the big picture of cities in regard to open space structures with the actual implementation strategies phased over a large time span. There is no documentation on the urban scale to mark the continuity of vision of open spaces across the time. No urban open space maintenance guidelines are ever framed or documented and very few rating systems are available to check the upkeep of open spaces, such as a well-documented facility maintenance index. The qualitative aspects of the planning and design of open spaces are not articulated in most statutory planning documents. The understanding of the code formation process is lacking, and the involvement of professionals is peripheral to it. The writings of Ranjit Sabhiki, Sudhir Vohra, Gautam Bhatia and Pradeep Kishen seem voices in the wilderness.

Egalitarian, democratic ideals, ecological robustness and meaningful spatial form and aesthetic are integral to the public realm. An articulation of a dynamic holistic vision for public realm landscapes is essential. The public realm can become more effective by designing streets and plazas, parks and greenways, river edges and conserving water conservation systems, heritage precincts, nature reserves and the rural landscapes. Landscape practice for the public realm needs to be holistic, subtle, nuanced and artistic. The key is to have a sense of uniqueness and identity for each expression of landscape design. I believe that landscape architects can lead by example by debunking conventional thinking.

### Nature Conservation

The 'vana' or forests have played a major role in defining the cultural and social landscape of India. Over the past two hundred years, environmentalists have demonstrated against large-scale deforestation and have lobbied for nature conservation and transformative natural open spaces. I am a strong

proponent of creating a network of greenways in cities and rural areas. Green corridors along the roads and railways, urban greens and forestlands, -natural drainage systems, surrounding low lying, nearby rivers can be connected to form ecological networks. It has been demonstrated in multiple contexts around the country through our work.

### Intent versus Imagery

Another issue observed in the contemporary works is the 'pretty picture' format, albeit with a gesture towards a functional and sustainable design approach, which is the order of the day. There is a big thrust on good-looking landscapes. Web-based applications adopt a shallow beauty over the depth of meanings and moods in the landscape. Sketches of eminent designers like Le Corbusier, Joseph Allen Stein, Geoffrey Bawa, Bill Bensley and Lek Bunnang are sources of learning of responses to challenges. Closer home, Mohammed Shaheer's drawings are evocative pieces of art in themselves, and capture the essence of the forms and traditions of the context. I think the time has come to reintroduce, without trivializing the original, the local styles, folk art or miniature paintings in landscape design work.

### Meanings and Moods

*'Human landscapes and the needs and achievements they embody were being confused with natural landscapes and their processes'*

— Laurie Olin, 1988

Landscapes respond to context, culture, social backgrounds and have other symbolic and metaphorical underpinnings. Meanings in the landscape depictions are layered. There is often an underlying resonance with cultural and social thought. While most landscape design theory focuses on meaning, it seems to be rather silent on the changeable aspects of landscape, of what may be termed as moods.

**MOTI JHEEL**

KANPUR

2015–2016

*A public park located at the heart of the city of Kanpur. lake rejuvenation along with landscape amenities around it makes it a robust public space for the city dwellers. The park is designed with an array of unique activities and spaces envisioned for all age groups and users rendering a refreshing identity to the space.*



Based on writings in the field, three questions come to mind. Can landscape architecture be framed as an ‘art’, untrammled by the rigours of practicality; or should it be viewed as a by-product of the ‘ecological sciences’; or is it a mere replication of ‘nature’? Today, in the public realm, and in landscape ideologies, the character of design tends more towards a neutral flavour. It seems conventionally desirable that landscape design appear ageless and not belonging to any time. Therefore, it seems that the viable landscape graphic today is fuzzy and bereft of context.

Then how does one impart character, content, specificity? How does one fight ‘rootlessness’ of the design form? Visual outrageousness seems to be a kind of answer used by many practitioners. Of course, ideals of sustainability need to be the bedrock of any landscape thought and depiction. It is therefore contradictory to be outrageous and sustainable in one coherent thought.

**Future**

There exists a long continuum of a history of designed landscapes in India. The common thread is one of assimilation, of ideas, of mythology, of social structure and cultural formation coalescing together over time. New landscape ideas from within have been intertwined with those that have come from outside, and this has resulted in a unique framework for contemporary landscape development. On reflection, it does seem that the best is yet to come for us, individually and collectively. Public realm landscapes, as well as other planned projects in India, can only get better with an evolved understanding of the landscape theory, more public awareness, more academic knowledge, and a finally better understanding of a larger scale of planning thought.



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