

DESIGN

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Revathi Kamath

"Humanity has to
evolve sustainable
paradigms on this
earth which is finite"

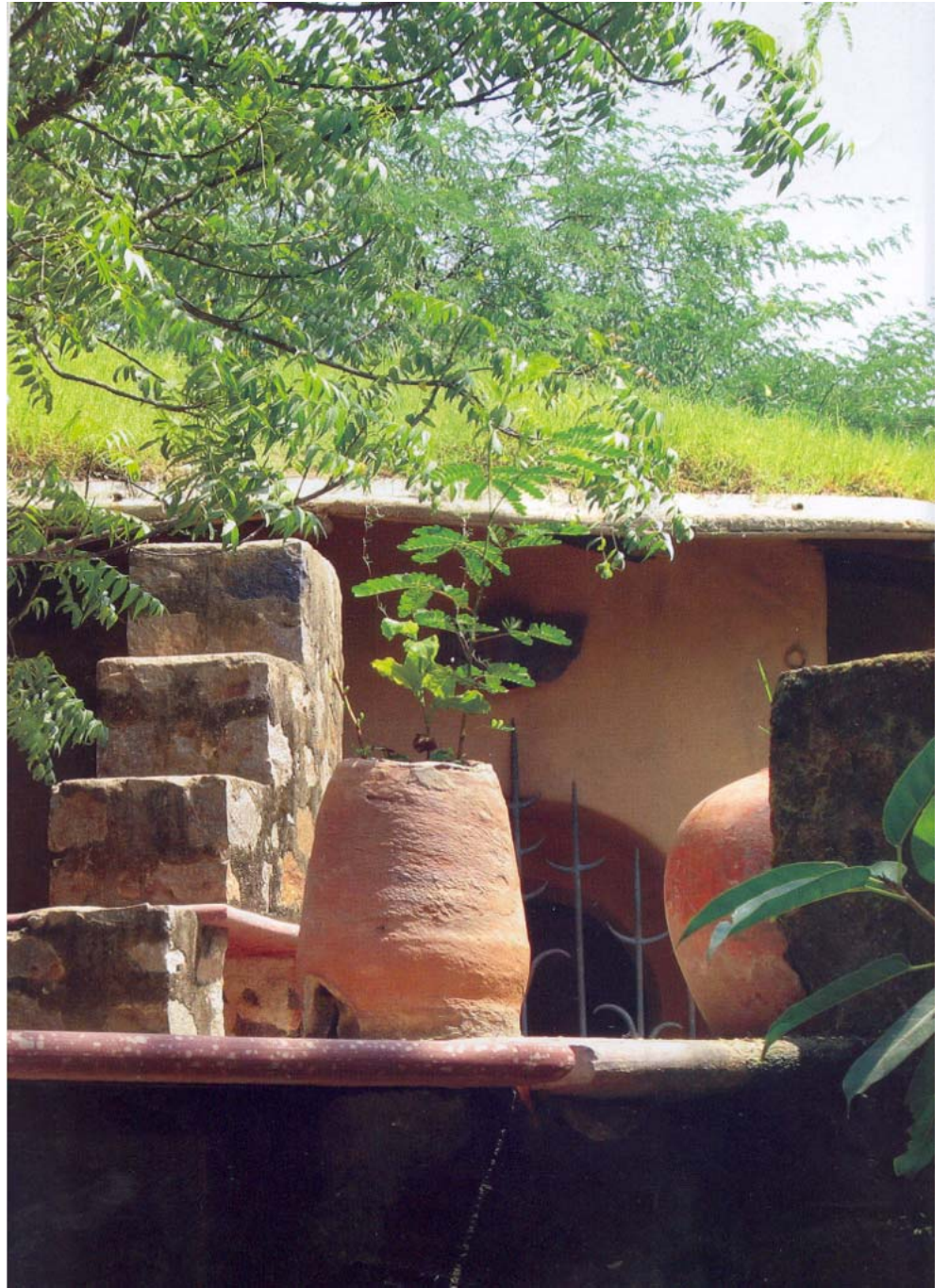


A Paprika Media presentation

MUD, NATURALLY!

For some people, being sustainable is a profession; for others it is a way of life. She is an architect of very strong convictions without being apologetic; her buildings are as ecological as they are timeless. We discover Revathi Kamath, the person behind the professional, who not just practices sustainable architecture, but lives it too.

Words: Babita Krishnan;
Images: Sameer Chawda &
(projects) courtesy Kamath Design Studio





cial relationships. I like symmetrical structures; but only if they have a clean and detailed rhythm within the symmetry.

BK: I see a pencil in your hand.

RK: All architectural design happens in a non-digital mind space; so till the computer absorbs and maps data of mathematical rhythm or music of designs, for us it is only a tool for producing speedy drawings and fast transfer to the site. It is truly amazing how the work space has changed completely. But it is still a tool and there is no substitute to hand sketches. That is how the design process starts. It allows the intuitive manifestation of the idea without us even trying.

BK: Is that how you create these huge spans – roofs or gateways, etc.? I'm specifically referring to the Jindal project.

RK: All structures need to be analyzed. We create a mathematical drawing, which is then fed into the computer and analyzed. To relate to everything around you, think in terms of dimensional geometry and then use it in drawings. Naveen Jindal wanted us to do his house and also the township. We saw the site, ideated and looked at the whole town ecologically. The two most outstanding things there are the gateway and the auditorium. We used a lot of steel. I love steel as it is again a very ecological material. The gateway is very contemporary, minimal and very aspirational. My son helped me with that design. He is an architect and an installation artist in LA. With technology, you can work together from anywhere if you think alike. So he does these beautiful drawings that my engineers create here. Now he is helping me with the bamboo structure for the Bhopal Museum.

BK: So he is establishing himself as an installation artist/architect. What about your daughter?

RK: She is at Harvard pursuing Evolutionary Biology. But my son is far from content. Creative people are restless. You have to be dissatisfied, yet you can't lose your inner repose. There is an aggression in creative people and that shows in your work, this repose balances it. Restlessness has to be channelized in some direction. You have to visualize yourself within the system, not as a victim; but a manipulator, who is thinking in some direction. Even the smallest thought in the right direction becomes a part of the whole, I really believe in that.

BK: Take me back in time to the very beginning...

RK: Oh that was years ago (laughs)! I did my architecture from SPA Delhi. Working with Vastu Shilp Foundation, Anandgram came my way. The project was instigated by Rajeev Sethi, who wanted an architect to plan a permanent settlement for these nomadic performers and craftspeople. I was just about to start my professional life and I took it up as a challenge. It was my first project and I wanted to bring tradition into the fabric of design. We studied their existing lifestyle and then went about creating their dwellings according to their needs. It has been planned in such a way that their lifestyle

“ I love to use tribal motifs as they speak a universal language ”



My relationships with clients are for life. Ogaan was made years ago, but I'm still involved there in every minor change done.



is not hindered, but the city can now come in and interact with them. There are facilities all around. We have retained the trees. Even today this drawing holds. It was greatly appreciated by everyone in the Capital including Rajeev Gandhi. After that, things just started rolling and one project led to another.

BK: How do you manage to juggle the two – your approach to clients and your sustainable designing?

RK: First of all, being a woman in this field is not a very easy task – on a daily basis. Every day you have one encounter that will put you in your place and keep you grounded. Moreover, I am interested in the character of the structure that I design and build, if I go soliciting for work, how will I be able to do all this? (Laughs).

BK: What if a client doesn't agree with your choice of material?

RK: It happens. There are times when you do projects that are not ecological but you take the client one step forward and share your architectural sensibility with them. Neeru Kumar's home that we are currently working on uses the modernist idiom but it is my interpretation of that idiom. Each space, proportions, etc. are discussed in detail. There is a complex speculation of the kind of spaces required but there is a simple linearity to the whole home. By comparison, in Nandita's house there was a free flow of open and semi-open spaces, the compositions were like that. Compositions come through by understanding the sensibilities of the client. What helps is the desire of people to break out of the routine life.

BK: Is a LEEDS certification equal to being sustainable?

RK: That's what people feel these days. But these ratings have been designed for the European and American standards. It begins with the assumption that a building will have air conditioning, use artificial lights, etc. and then the whole endeavour is on how to reduce it. But look at our old Mogul buildings and *havelis*. They would score way beyond the LEEDS point system. It is all about how you market it. I don't have anything against technology, and I won't throw LEEDS out of the window, but architects who are aware of these materials can make better buildings than the kinds, which are blatantly showy. Let us say, for humanity, it is one step forward; so let it be. Design should be functional; it should have all the attributes within the context of recyclability. Whether it can be rated or not doesn't bother me. If I use this I get some points; and use that to get points! I am not giving an exam to clamour for points. I would rather use something within the urban context, like reflective surface for the roof that will bring down the heat quotient of my building. I prefer creating something that does not take anything away from nature; rather, when it is destroyed or broken down, everything should seamlessly go back into where it came from. When you breakdown my buildings, everything will be reused.

BK: You are probably the biggest champion of mud as a building material.

RK: There is a huge social stigma against mud especially in





North India, because traditionally in a patriarchal system, the physical reality in something like buildings was a way of expressing superiority over time. So something that is light and will blend back after you are gone is not acceptable. It is not about creating something that should stand for generations to come; whether they want and like it or not, it should have the ability to blend back into its source and should not harm the environment. All over the world, the process of breaking and rebuilding is continuous. So much is dumped into the landfills. So why can't we have it in our system to create in a way that even after 50 or 100 years, if we bring a structure down, it blends back into the environment. Nandita's home was built 30 years ago and it is still going strong, though now someone else is using it as owner-

ship changed hands, and it is all mud. You have to do it right. It irritates me when people write against mud as a construction material. Just because you could not accomplish it since your method was wrong, doesn't mean it can't be done. It depends on your understanding of the material.

BK: So what does sustainability mean to you?

RK: It just is. I don't think we have an option. You have to be sustainable whether you do it now or later – depends on your level of evolution. Humanity has to evolve sustainable paradigms on this earth, which is finite. Infinity is within each one of us and that needs to be explored to understand the finite energy and material on the planet 🌍

