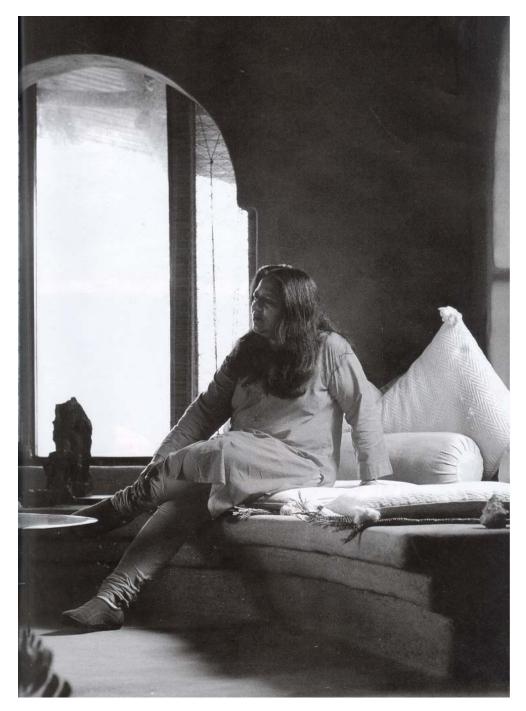
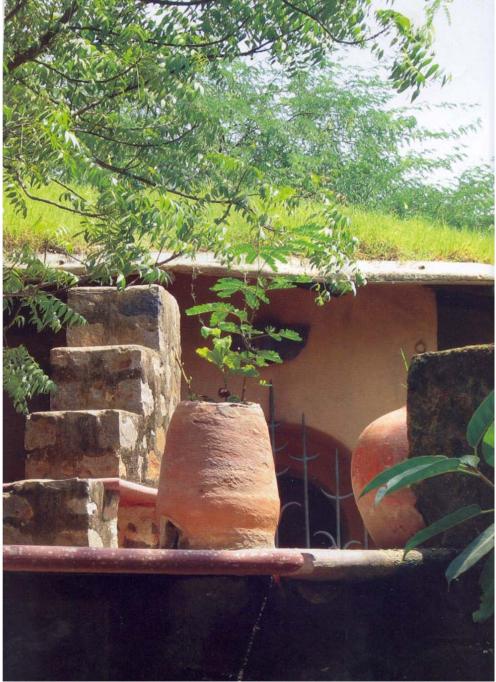


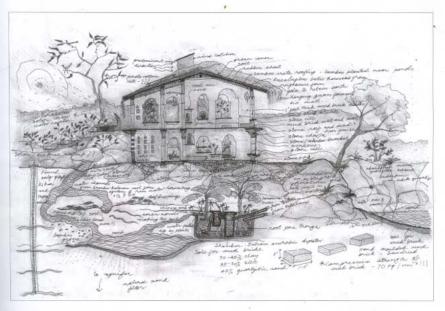
# MUD, NATURALLY!

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







#### Babita Krishnan: You live so far from the city!

are the birds, peacocks in particular, frogs, insects, etc. some of the it gets even better.

# BK: Tell us about your home Kachchi Kothi.

entire surrounding ecology is a part of this house. I have recently made a sketch that documents all the birds, creatures of the ground, the use of solar energy, the green roof, wind-catcher, materials used, When you hear a frog croak in the pond, it means all is well with it is fine to do it for a house, it has to be done at the scale of the city and civilization.

ask for it?

RK: Oh all the time. I have done a home for Nandita, a friend Revathi Kamath: Yes, isn't it marvelous. You are surrounded and client, which follows the same ethos. There is another home by this forest; there is no sound of vehicles to disturb the peace in Hartola, near Nainital that we are working on. Have also impleor concrete jungle to distort the view. The only sounds you hear mented this in the conservation of the Ahilyabai Holkar Fort, where the owners were reviving the traditional weavers and their craft, etc. peacocks even answer back when I call! Our most recent guests are And not just homes, we are working on several institutional projects a band of monkeys - they swing from the trees, use my solar cooker as well, which again use these kind of materials and they are beautias a lhoold and peep into the house. With the monsoons coming in, ful. Then there is the Tribal Art Museum in Bhopal that is underway,

## BK: You seem totally occupied with this project.

RK: Right now I'm in the process of correcting the building. This RK: The architecture of my home is totally an expression of who museum is for a lot of people. For the city it would be a repository we are. We have used bamboo, mud and stone from right here. The of information on the tribes of Madhya Pradesh, but for me it is very important that the tribals participate in making and recording their heritage. Then it becomes a place where people who don't live in the tribal fold anymore can come and be proud of their culture. This the waste generated and recycled, all the plants, tubewell, etc. place will look like a haat that these people can identify with. Whatever I know, I want to take it further. We are evolving constantly the eco-system here. Living with all this and appreciating it is the while working with certain materials, which actually generate and beginning of the desire to keep all of nature's bounty safe. There is sustain life. I love to use tribal motifs as they speak a universal lanno option but to be synchronous with all that is around you. While guage, I am trying to get some of the locals to create them for me.

#### BK: Is there a lot of people-involvement in all of your work?

RK: You are dealing with the poorest of the poor. I like to involve BK: But is there any other project like this? Do people actually these people whose only contribution to the economy is by being our daily-labour, because that is the only way of raising them to the

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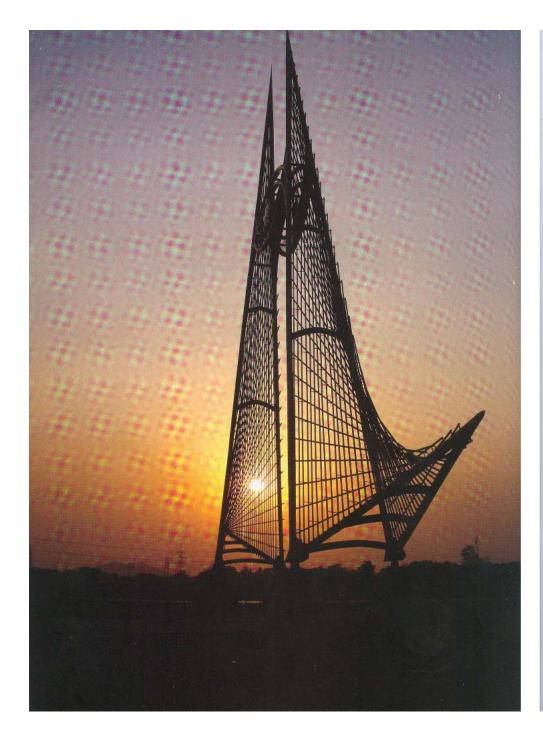
level of being artisans. A man who has been laying bricks should derive the pleasure of creating patterns with bricks to make his job an art. Let us not forget, today the biggest issue is to take economy to the people. We have been doing it for the last 30 years,

#### BK: This affinity with the tribals is a little unusual...

RK: Not from where I'm standing! (Laughs) As a kid I lived with my grandparents. My grandfather was the chief engineer of 8huvaneshwar and he had this architect friend because of whom we all became interested in architecture - works on progressive architecture was my reading material. My father was also a civil engineer, making these huge dams in remote areas. On my visits to him, I would watch the tribals dance, go to the haat bazaar, participate in it, visit the houses of weavers, and try to understand their culture; especially drawings. These drawings are inspirational and go beyond cultures and eras. I have always studied and tried to interpret them.

# BK: Your projects do not seem to follow the conventional symmetries...

RK: As opposed to intrinsic architecture, if you have to understand the relationship between spaces and the visual compositions. then you have to be in the complex geometry. It is amazing how many spaces can be visualized through the mathematics of organization. Complex geometries and mathematics have to exist in spa-



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 661 love to use tribal 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 Havard 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

motifs as they speak a universal language 99



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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.

# clients and your sustainable designing?

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 BK: How do you manage to juggle the two - your approach to havelies. They would score way beyond the LEEDS point system, It is all about how you market it. I don't have anything against RK: First of all, being a woman in this field is not a very easy 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





physical reality in something like buildings was a way of expressing superiority over time. So something that is light and will material. Just because you could not accomplish it since your blend back after you are gone is not acceptable. It is not about method was wrong, doesn't mean it can't be done. It depends creating something that should stand for generations to come; on your understanding of the material. 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 sustainable whether you do it now or later – depends on your we have it in our system to create in a way that even after 50 or

North India, because traditionally in a patriarchal system, the ship changed hands, and it is all mud. You have to do it right. It

# BK: So what does sustainability mean to you?

RK: It just is. I don't think we have an option. You have to be level of evolution. Humanity has to evolve sustainable para-

