



THE FOREIGN HAND

MANY INDIAN DEVELOPERS ARE ROPING IN ARCHITECTS FROM ABROAD. WHY DO FOREIGN ARCHITECTS LIKE TO WORK IN INDIA? ARUNA RATHOD FINDS OUT

1. The Lotus Tower, a 52-storey residential building in Mumbai, is being designed by architect Sharon Jutla from the UK.

2. Architect Kim Nielsen, founder and principal, 3XN Copenhagen, Denmark.

3. Architect Sharon Jutla, head, Interior Architecture and New Business Development, AFL Architects, Manchester.

4. The Museum of Liverpool by 3XN.

Glass facades, golf greens, grand podiums, plush clubhouses - all these and more are part of residential projects mushrooming in the major cities of the country. Tall towers with podiums, basements and world-class amenities demand cutting-edge technology, and designs that require a sharp sense of planning. Consequently, it is becoming increasingly common for developers to employ the services of foreign architects or consult their Indian branches.

The Lodha Group's two iconic residential towers - World One and World Crest - are under construction in Mumbai; these symbols of the metro's rising aspirations are designed by the New York-based architectural firm Pei Cobb Freed & Partners.

In a landmark development, Harresh N. Mehta's Rohan Lifescapes recently joined hands with US billionaire real estate developer Donald Trump for the development of Trump Towers, a luxury residential tower in Mumbai. Not far behind is the Ambuja Realty group that has engaged architect Channa Daswatte from Sri Lanka for some of their projects, which include the Ganga Kutir Resort and Spa at Raichak.

There are many reasons why Indian

developers are approaching foreign firms. Niranjan Hiranandani, MD of the Hiranandani group, says there is a big difference in the approach of Indian and foreign firms that undertake design jobs. He feels that international firms are more empathetic to the contemporary needs and aspirations of developers.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Foreign architects associated with Indian developers usually enjoy working here. It is a learning experience for them - be it the bureaucratic hurdles or the rich Indian culture. Architect Kim Nielsen, founder and principal of 3XN, Denmark (whose prestigious projects include the Blue Planet, Kubus in Berlin, the Museum of Liverpool, Ørestad College, Muziekgebouw Concert Hall in Amsterdam, and the Danish Embassy in Berlin), says, "Working in different countries has taught us to be aware of the impact of cultural differences. Our approach to a project is analytical, and we work hard to understand the cultural context of our projects."

The Lotus Tower, a 52-storey residential building in Mumbai, is being designed by architect Sharon Jutla from the UK. She is the head of Interior Architecture and New Business Development at Ather-



en Fuller Leng, AFL Architects, Manchester. Jutla has to her credit Moscow airport's Terminal 3, Ferrari World, Abu Dhabi Sports City, Taby Centrum shopping centre in Sweden, and the PWC head office in London, among other projects.

The Lotus Tower is a fluid, sinuous and elegant form reaching up to the sky. It emerges organically from its complex site condition to become a landmark in the regional skyline. The petals are made of linear mesh that creates a beautiful texture while reflecting sunlight; while the screens serve the purpose of providing shade to terraces, balconies and the glazed areas behind. "The concept and



name have been derived from India's national flower – the lotus – that that symbolises spirituality, fulfilment, wealth, knowledge and illumination. I have taken the overlapping pattern of the lotus petals as inspiration to create a unique and beautiful façade,” says Jutla.

She believes that India transforms the dreams of international architects into reality. “Architectural and design opportunities are far greater in India today compared to that in

other countries. The developed nations are ‘over-built’. There is less scope to be creative, and fewer projects are initiated there.

“India, on the other hand, offers a healthy combination of traditional craftsmanship and the latest technology, which is attracting architects and designers from all over the world,” she adds.

Prof Zdeněk Fránek of Fránek Architects from the Czech Republic is all praise for India and its culture. “I think the most important is a detached view on the architecture of India, both historic and contemporary. For me, India is a country with an extraordinary history and glorious future. Exceptional Indian architects bring Western influence, which they learn during their studies and trips, into contemporary Indian architecture.”

Employing foreign architects is not only about the design, but also about adhering to other issues. Ashok Korgaonkar, MD, Archgroup Consultants, UAE, says, “I see the international experience as a whole – from the drawing board to the end product on the site. India can benefit fully if this exposure is complete. International architects are proposing new ideas and challenging the existing framework.”

Korgaonkar believes that in the implementation process, certain issues need to be tackled. For instance, the process starts with the architect and then goes on to the contractor or a project management company.

“Prior to international exposure, despite having talent within the country, people were working within the constraints of what would be practical and ‘buildable’; and in most cases, the project management process was either absent or archaic. The result: India had few world-class projects to boast of, and even regular projects were riddled with the problems of quality control, delay, cost overruns, workmanship, and so on,” he adds.

International experience is definitely an advantage for India, believes Ru-



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pali Nimbalkar, vice president – Design & Services, RNA Corporate. “With additional FSI allotments under various government norms, high-rise residential development is growing. Designing and building high-rises is new in the Indian context, but the international market is well-versed with it. International experience brings in the knowledge and expertise to deal with the complexities of high-rise design and development. International designers have a very good sense of detailing that enhances the quality of the design.”

Jutla believes that international architects bring in tried and tested processes, and function with precision to enable a complete turnaround in the way projects are designed and built. They pair up with Indian firms who have the expertise on the ground to get work done faster.

LOCAL TOUCH

Using locally available materials is a challenge for architects from abroad. Nielsen says the major difference is India’s climate. “The cultures are also quite different, and that is reflected in the design of the cities and how people use the city.”

Jutla uses the difference as an inspiration, and implements the local flavour in her designs. “My work in India is based on a ‘concept and story’ model, wherein I incorporate the historical and geographical meaning of that location into our designs. One of our sites, the Raipur Chhattisgarh Hockey Academy, is located in an area which is sometimes referred to as the “rice bowl of India”. The inspiration for site morphology derives from a simple rice grain stem seen under the microscope; and the two main elements of the master plan are the field hockey stadium and the athletics track.”

Adapting to Indian conditions in terms of design and materials, Nielsen says, “First, we make sure we find good Indian

architects who will help us thoroughly understand the conditions. Secondly, we investigate how Indian cities work: How do people move around? How do they like to meet, live and socialise? We always adapt our choice of materials to the climate in order to ensure the best solution for our design and the people who will use it.”

Fránek is still at a nascent stage of operations in India, but has some experience of working in Asia. “I am just finishing some larger realisations of projects in China. I used local materials in new contexts at the finishing stage. Though this was a long-distance project, the local workmen knew the material and could work with it well. I just brought in more detailing, and I would like to use the same approach in India.”

Echoing the amazing adaptability of

foreign architects to Indian materials and practices, Nimbalkar observes that statutory regulations govern Indian designs a lot. “Once the foreign consultants are briefed on the basic approvable design principles, they adapt quickly. In case of materials, I think they have good exposure and understanding,” she adds.

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS

Roping in the services of foreign architects can have its own limitations, of course. “For the process to be complete, there is a need to introduce international contractors with expertise in cutting-edge construction practice and project management. Also, we have the challenge of raising the quality and range of construction materials available in the country,” says Korgaonkar, adding that it is only a matter of time and demand. “Indians are well aware of what’s available. For instance, see how quickly the car industry in India has transformed in the last few years. There are many like me who are slowly but surely seeking these changes at their own level.”

It takes some time for international architects to get familiar with Indian systems. Nimbalkar says, “One deterrent is the understanding of the statutory norms and regulations, besides understanding of the approval processes and frequent changes in design.”

These are some factors that can be stumbling blocks, though Nielsen chooses to call them challenges. “India and Denmark are two different countries – not only culturally, but also when it comes to climate and legislation. That is also what we find exciting and inspiring. We’ve had a good experience working in India. The reception from Indians has been positive, and we hope to do more work in the future.”

The world is now a global village, and working processes are almost the same. “Indian architects have studied at Western universities and are exposed to the world,” observes Fránek. “They like using large glassed-in facings, which I believe are not suitable for India. We use similar offices – but ironically, when I am in India, I try to explore the very Indian thing for India.”

Jutla has a philosophical approach towards the entire issue. “Someone is sitting in the shade today because someone planted a tree a long time ago. That’s what I am here for. As a professional with the backing of my company, I want to plant the right idea and opportunities to ensure that every talented individual is a recipient of what he or she truly deserves. Talent without opportunity is nothing. I believe that with the advent of infrastructure at the grassroots level, we can bring about a refreshing and heartening change.”

5. The CCC Gallery in Beijing, designed by Prof Zdeněk Fránek of Fránek Architects from the Czech Republic.

6. Ashok Korgaonkar, MD, Archgroup Consultants, UAE.

