

# ifj architect profile: SHEILA SRI PRAKASH

trying something new at every turn, ar. sheila sri prakash is one of the first indian women to have successfully incorporated her own architectural firm in a male dominated society



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**As the only child** of a World War 2 veteran and a classical singer, Ar. Sheila Sri Prakash was encouraged to balance studies and extracurricular activities and knows what it is to juggle such preoccupations. Born in Bhopal and brought up in different parts of the country, she learned to maintain a balance between studies, sport, art, music and dance. She says, "My childhood was a whirl of music, dance, travel, play and studies. I also liked to sketch and would immerse myself in school work making collages and models." In dance, she was an eager sishya and had her bharatanatyam arangetram (graduation performance) at age six. "I have danced as the protagonist in several Kuchipudi dance dramas, and performed with legends like Kamala Laxman, Hema Malini, Sri Vidya and Rekha. Those unforgettable memories, I cherish."

Ar. Sri Prakash says, "Dance is a meditative art form combining movement, drama and music. I see a connection in the fundamentals of dance and architecture. They share similar features like line, rhythm, mass, harmony and balance. I think architecture mystically connects art with space and ecological thinking. Humans react to space in complex ways and I find that exciting. I call this Spaciology."

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In 1972, when the mainstream professions were engineering and medicine, Ar. Sri Prakash enrolled to study architecture. She graduated from the School of Architecture & Planning, Madras University in 1977 and was mentored by Professors Pithavadian, Md. Harris and Md. Altaf. She later attended the Harvard Graduate School of Design's Executive Education Program.

At a point when women entrepreneurs did not truly exist in the country, Ar. Sri Prakash, breaking all norms started Shilpa Architects as a one-woman practice in 1979 with the support of her family, well-wishers and mentors after working under an engineer for 2 years. She says, "Women in architecture were confronted with the difficulties of a nascent profession, societal conventions and limited opportunity. In India when lone women drivers were fair game for hustling, predominantly male site engineers and masons at construction sites found it demeaning to accept working in projects under a woman as the lead. It called for conviction and courage to face them off on the scaffolds under the scorching mid-day sun. **The foundations for Shilpa were laid under towering challenges of skepticism and heart breaking prejudices. As in all fields, women have gradually gained social acceptance because of their relevance and sensitive approach to problem solving and team building.**"

In the initial stages of her career, Ar. Sheila started building efficient spaces that people could respond to, she says,

"I began working with brick and lime along with vernacular artisans. I tried these systems of architecture in my early projects and realised they were cost effective solutions to our hot and humid climates. The designs were Spartan and aesthetic." The Archaeological Survey of India commissioned Shilpa Architects to design the son et lumiere at the incredible Brihadeswara temple at Tanjore. "I was ecstatic. My daughter and I danced during the World Tamil Conference in the temple's pavilion with the majestic Nandi as the backdrop and in front of an audience packed up to the ramparts – it was transcendental!" she exclaims.

Learning and experimenting at every curve, Ar. Sheila believes in trying something new for each of her projects. "I have always experimented with a new material or done something differently in many projects. Some of them have been remarkably successful and some have not. They have enriched my experience, helped me understand sustainability, reinforced the India-centric design ethos and induced me to include art while seeking solutions for architecture and urban design." The extensive portfolio of Shilpa Architects includes residential buildings, custom designed villas, mixed use townships and hospitality, industrial, sports, educational, health and retail constructions and has received wide recognition for its design, with citations and awards. The firm has worked with foreign direct investment funds, developers, corporate houses, multi-national corporations, public

sector companies, as well as co-operative societies and NGOs. "Cholamandal Centre for Contemporary Art, Kuchipudi Dance Academy, KPMG's Office, L&T – ECC's South City Master Plan, SBI's local head office and OBO Bettermann's factory along with several residential developments for some of India's leading and aspiring developers helped SHILPA evolve as a design studio. They fostered collaborative partnerships with some of India's finest minds and firms in engineering, professional and educational institutions," says Ar. Sri Prakash.



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### IFJ had the opportunity to interact with the pioneering architect, some excerpts...

**ifj : How do you see sustainable and green architecture in the Indian context?**

**SSP :** In the single area of green building codes, we have at least three sets of rules: the Energy Conservation Building Code, under the Ministry of Power; the National Building Code of India 2005 constituted by the Bureau of Indian Standards, under the Ministry for Consumer Affairs; and Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment (GRIHA), created by TERI supported by the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy. Many Indian builders also use international standards such as the LEED.

Inclusion of Solar panels in sustainable facades has become hugely exciting with falling costs of production and technological possibilities like gluing carbon nano tubes on glass. They will soon replace conventional materials such as glass or ceramics for a constructive material with photovoltaic properties in ventilated façades and roofs, curtain walls, skylights, brise soleils and canopies. So, we should give priority to enforcing "green" building codes from an energy conservation perspective. Similar compelling arguments can be made for water conservation, waste and sewage management and rain water harvesting.

Taking a larger perspective, my efforts at the World Economic Forum and the Design Innovation Council are leading to a new paradigm and movement in sustainability thinking that I term "Holistic Sustainability". Clearly, there is a need to "encourage humanity to distinguish human satisfaction from excessive production, accumulation, consumption and waste."

**A holistically sustainable design sensibility emphasizes the values of harmony as defined by balance, flow and respect, which motivates people to sustainable behavior.** The question is how to overlay local traditional values on top of modern realities. And how to leverage people's pride in crafting this new communal identity, as well as make this new vision of prosperity personal and local. In the built environment, the most critical question is how improvements can be implemented in megacities in the developing world, where infrastructure and governance are generally underdeveloped. In creating a "smart city", innovations in governance and urban planning are at least as important as technological advances. Sharply rising urban populations associated with higher vehicle use, greater energy generation, and the concentration of industries in and around cities and towns are key sources of greenhouse gas emissions. The future will dare urban designers and architects for path breaking ask innovations, for multi-use of buildings so that a workspace can morph into a living space.

**ifj : What is your opinion with regard to the current scene of Indian architecture? Which way is it headed?**

**SSP :** Architecture in modern times is all about high rise buildings that incorporate modern technologies for conservation of energy, water, recycled materials and other things. The standard practice in cities with limited land is to raise the permitted FSI over time to accommodate urban growth, as in New York; Singapore; Hong Kong and Shanghai. The principles of design, construction and maintenance are universal, and therefore there is a superficial sameness about in Gurgaon and Nariman Point, Mumbai.

Intrinsically Indian Architecture is sensitive and frugal, and the quest to adapt their principles in modern architecture is exceedingly important to secure our future. Characteristics like foyers, verandahs and courtyards define

Indian living styles. In such nuances and embellishments the "indian-ness" in buildings connects with people.

**ifj : How is the architectural practice different in India? What are the positives and negatives?**

**SSP :** In developed countries, a city planner plans a city and coordinates all aspects from transportation and roads to infrastructure. Society at large is a part of this collaborative effort. Our city planning efforts are less inclusive and rather slow. A major problem for urban India is the generally poor quality of governance and services, shortages, traffic jams, garbage collection and disposal problems, sewage treatment and disposal, unauthorized construction and other socio-economic issues.

The institutional structure of urban governance could be simplified and cleaned up. Currently, there is a confusing multiplicity of agencies that manage the cities. It involves the national government, the state government and local government. Municipal laws that govern our cities need to be comprehensively revisited and then enforced.

**ifj : What would you like to suggest to the younger generation of budding architects?**

**SSP :** I would strongly urge our nation's best talent towards the profession of Architecture and Urban Design. It is paramount that designing for India's future be done with sensitivity and balance between gender, to achieve comprehensive solutions for our societies. As with any other entrepreneurial venture, **starting an architectural practice takes a robust attitude, immense self belief, resilient spirit and stamina to stay the course.** Opportunities to discover the true professional architect in one self are now aplenty and India needs the energy and vision of architectural entrepreneurs, to create a positive blueprint for our future. ifj



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