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IN CONVERSATION

Shelia Sri Prakash

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CONSTRUCTION BRIEF

Lali Gurans, Kathmandu

LYRICISM BETWEEN DANCE AND ARCHITECTURE

In Conversation with IA&B, Architect Sheila Sri Prakash discusses about her journey as an architect and an artist towards becoming an accomplished global architect.

Text and Images: courtesy Shilpa Architects Planners Designers Pvt Ltd

Sheila Sri Prakash is a globally celebrated Architect and Designer. She founded Shilpa Architects in 1979 as a solo practitioner and was recently named one of the "Top 100" architects in the world by the prestigious Italian Journal of Architecture- Il Giornale dell' Architettura. She is renowned as a breakthrough thinker for her pioneering work on the "Reciprocal Design Index" that she developed on the World Economic Forum. It prescribes parameters and metrics surrounding sustainable design by extending the environmental framework of sustainability to factor socio-economics. She delivered the keynote address at the Milan Design Summit and the Kuala Lumpur Design Forum. Ms Sheila has been a prolific artist, musician and sculptor.



¹ Nursing College in Tamil Nadu.

IA&B: Your firm **Shilpa Architects** was the first practice started by a woman, how would you explain your journey, from the establishment of the firm till today; its progression, hurdles and achievements?

SSP: Women are the forces of creation with uniquely innate abilities to nurture life. It is up to each to differentiate and realise their full potential.

Architecture as a profession is in its infancy. Only in 1972 was The Architects Act passed by the Indian Parliament, when architecture came to be recognised as a profession. Till then Civil Engineers were designers and builders. The real estate industry was only dominated by men for thinking, deciding and acting on all matters related to development and construction.

As in all fields, Indian women architects too are confronted by the challenges of a nascent profession, gender bias, bearing children, familial responsibilities and societal conventions. Women have gradually gained social acceptance because of their relevance and sensitive approach to problem solving and team building. It takes time and hard work to develop a portfolio of completed projects that speak for themselves. In April 1979, I set up my studio which continues to operate meaningfully till date.

IA&B: Your approach for many of your projects seems to be intuitive, how strongly do you think Intuition influences the design process of an Architect?

SSP: I was recently a speaker at The 361° Conference on "Discourse,

Intuition & Syntax in Architecture." It was exhilarating to jointly explore the process of design with some of the finest international and Indian designers. Every designer has a vision for a project that is almost immediate. Building that concept into a story is intuition. It seems deceptively simple, but will only reveal itself in layers as the process considers the context and constraints. I trained rigorously as a dancer for years with the best dancers of India, like Kumari Laxman, Dr Padma Subramanyam and Hema Malini. As a dancer it is elementary to conjure settings in mind space. The architectural journey as in dance, springs from deep contemplation and immersion into what is possible. It is magical when the abstract manifests. The development of form and space is sublime. Forms exude energy and their subtle forces can be coalesced into spaces that permeate into its inhabitants forever. Architects shape destinies.

IA&B: Having built more than 1200 projects, if you were to choose one of your projects that would be the most significant, which one would it be?

SSP: Every project is close to my heart. We nurture our designs and are passionate about it. So it is hard to choose any one. Of course, some projects come with intrinsic constraints and we spend a lot of thought working around them.

IA&B: You also introduced vernacular and culturally relevant techniques into contemporary design, how do you think clients and the industry accept this amalgamation?

SSP: Holland, S Korea and Singapore are recent examples of countries that have built eco systems to nurture good design. These



Mahindra World City Club.

industrialised societies harnessed modern technologies to personify their ethos, their crafts and showcase them to the world. So, what is Indian design? That question at a seminar took almost the same time to explore as my address. We have a rich art and cultural heritage. Woodcarving, sculpture, music, painting, metal work, weaving, cooking and pottery, and so many more which together are embedded into our consciousness. Indian design and motifs are ubiquitous, and under our skins. Similarly, we venerate nature and the universe and all its beings as manifestations of the pancha bhutas. Plants and animals are woven into our myths and folklore. We were a green society since ancient times, in harmony with the environment for eons. Our construction materials, forms and techniques resonate with nature and the environment. The Indian sub-continent is arguably home to the oldest civilization. Our largely hospitable climate attracted waves of immigrants and conquerors who were absorbed and subsumed even as they enriched the societies with new ideas. It seems like our heritage was stolen and we have been brain washed during the last 400 years.

I celebrate the cornucopia of Indian art, diversity and "Indianness" in my forms and spaces. I call this "indo centric" design. It is not too difficult for clients and industry to realise the beauty of this inclusive design concept. Persistence is the key but being consistent with this concept in design & construction is a winnable challenge.

IA&B: You quoted "The process of dance is like an architect's process of discourse". Could you elaborate on that?

SSP: Most people know when architecture is speaking to them, just as the Taj Mahal does. It sends a profound message about the nature of life. People involuntarily respond to space, and this emotional response is no different when one sees a good dancer perform. They empathise with the dancer. Aesthetically designed buildings produce the same kind of pleasure as works of art do.

Architecture is a symphony of lines, planes, colour and texture. It relies on mathematics to articulate physical form and space. The dancer brings to fore the emotion in the narrative (music) with costumes, expression and movement. Music is a mathematical progression of notes set to a melody. This commonality underpins dance and architecture.

IA&B: How would you describe your approach to design considering parameters of context, culture and sustainability as you explained for the Conservation of the Tanjavur Brihadeeswarar Temple?

SSP: In terms of its scale and grandeur, the Brihadeeswara temple consecrated in 1010 CE, by Rajaraja Cholan in Thanjavur marked a major change in the conception and construction of Hindu temples in south India. On its mammoth walls are recorded the names of persons involved in the design and building of the temple, the donations required to execute and maintain the temple, the hierarchy of officials, artists and wide ranging transactional networks that focused on resource mobilisation, political dispensation and cultural preservation for the city and the surrounding region. The temple was the epicenter of the kingdom's economy, and exemplified the king's inclusiveness of diverse faiths, gender, vocations and classes in the 11th century.

The site essentially drives the concept, and the context determines the solution. It is difficult to define the process of intertwining culture in the design. Craftsmen have to be recognised for their artistry, and their difficulties to work to a budget or a time line have to be appreciated. There are always challenges to move "fine art" into the realms of "commercial art" – for both the artist and the architect. Sometimes traditional craftsmen innovate to provide refreshingly new methodologies and solutions. Rajaraja's philosophy



Shilpa Architects office.

recorded on the walls of the monumental Big Temple a 1000 years ago is a perpetual tribute to Indian design and architecture, and resonates with my idea of holistic sustainability required to address the problems of India today.

IA&B: How do you believe your versatile talent of the arts complements your vision in architecture?

SSP: The dancer has room for self-expression, and the latitude to be true to her experiences. The architect has to build for others, and be the medium of another's vision. The architect and the dancer share the same process in establishing parameters, work with other professionals and suffer constraints. The similarities have enriched both my mediums of expression, and brought to fore the dilemmas of design and fulfillment.

IA&B: Being the first woman to start an architectural practice and representing India on a global platform at many forums, what do you think is the position of architecture in India compared to the world?

SSP: The World Economic Forum accepted my concept of holistic sustainability as a valuable guide to urban design. I call it the Reciprocal Design Index. The Reciprocal Design Index (RDI) is a synthesis of the social indicator and the urban design indicator. Cities of the world in a segment of the countries categorised by their gross national income (GNI) per capita become comparable. The social and urban design indicators of a city can be compared with the country's indicators and / or that of the segment of countries to which a city belongs. The world is looking to the east for answers to the toughest questions of the century on urbanisation, poverty alleviation and inclusive growth, and I am sure that Indian thinking as exemplified by indo centric approach to architecture will show a path. ■