

## DEFENDING CHAMPS

Women leading in the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force

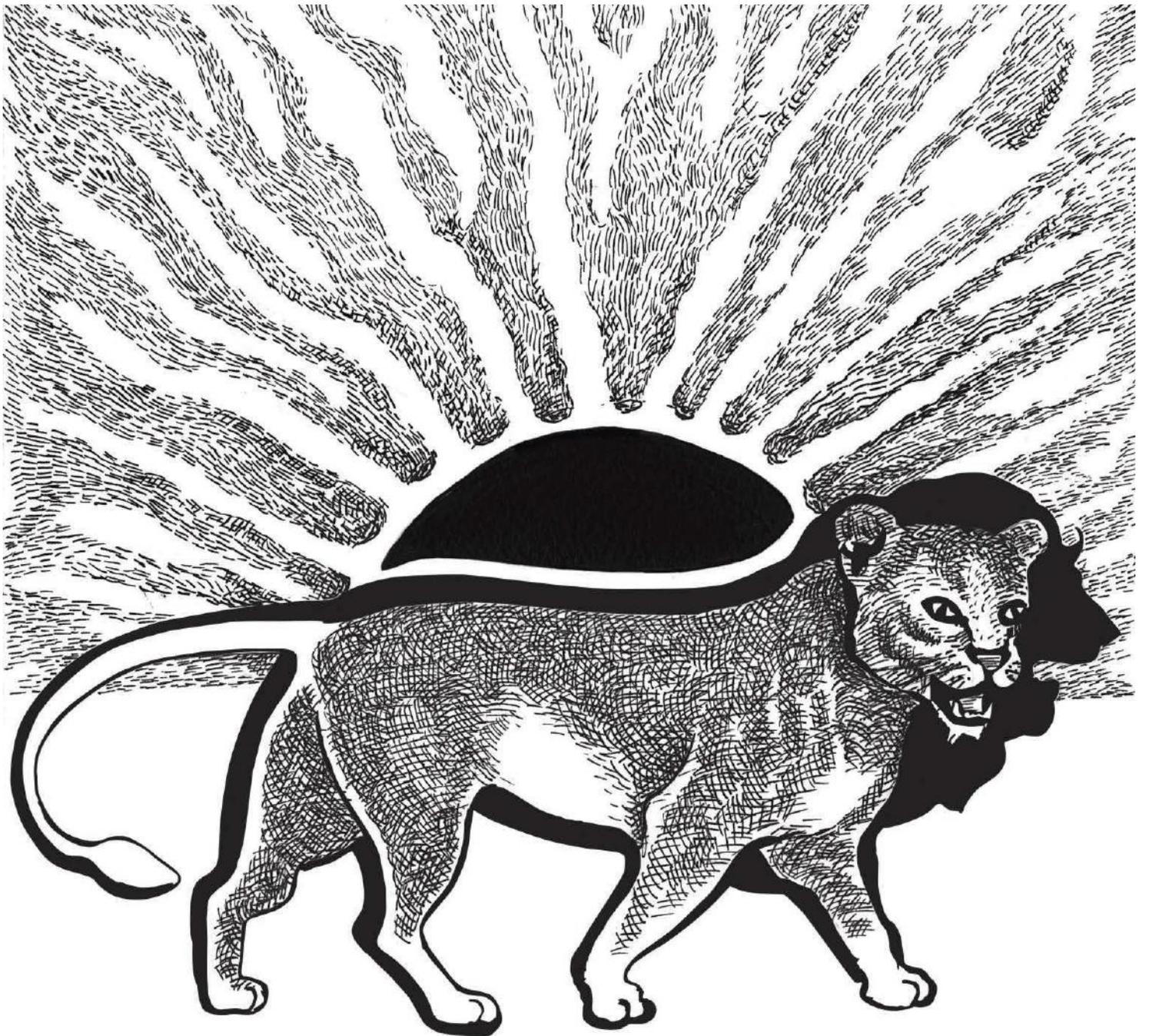
## WOMEN'S SPECIAL

How women are powering India's workforce

## TOP SCIENTISTS

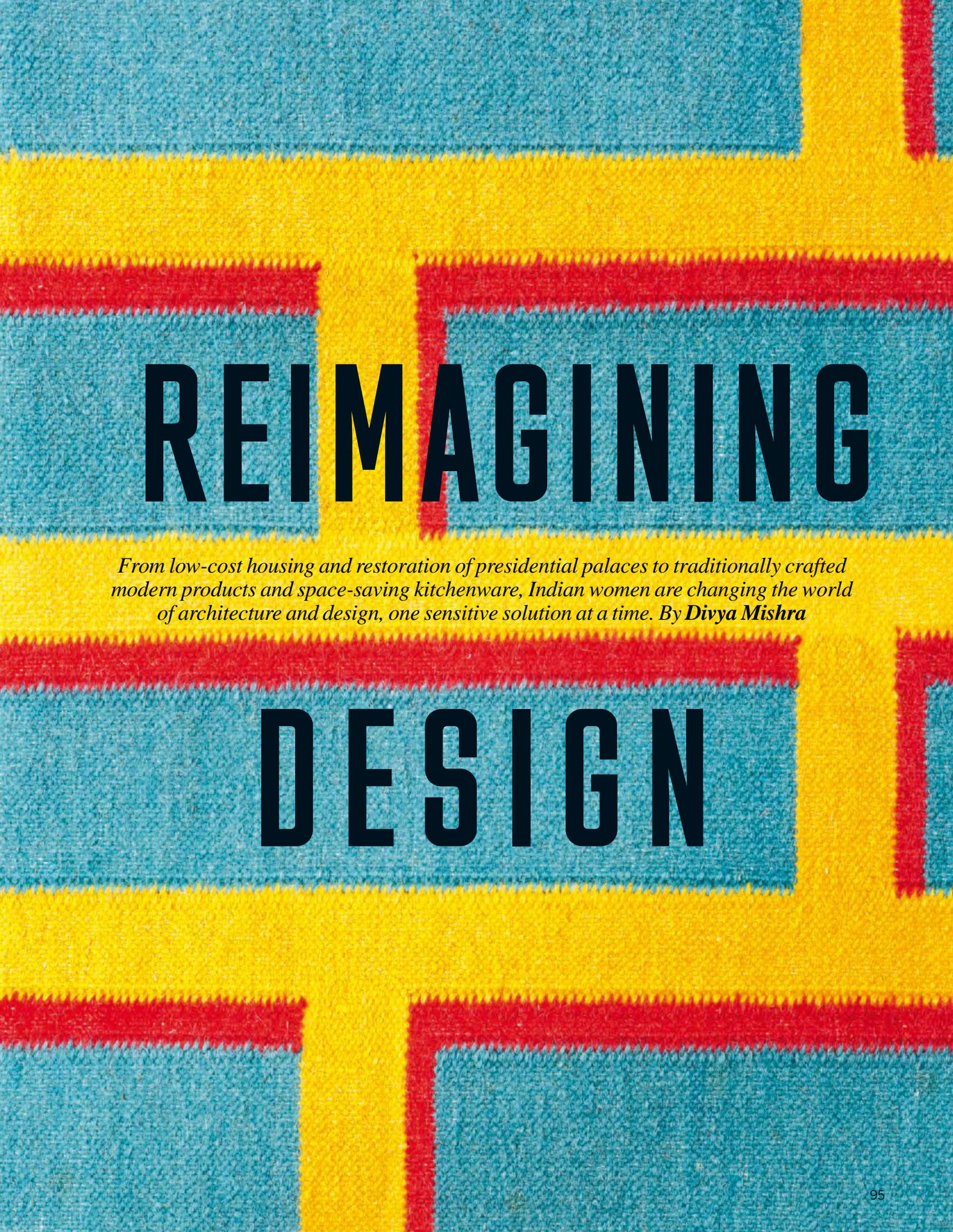
From biotech to botany, these women are making waves

# MAKE IN INDIA





**Architect Suchi Reddy at Salone Internazionale del Mobile 2013 in Milan** Opposite page: **This kilim by London-based designer Kangan Arora, was manufactured in Bhadohi, Uttar Pradesh**



# REIMAGINING

*From low-cost housing and restoration of presidential palaces to traditionally crafted modern products and space-saving kitchenware, Indian women are changing the world of architecture and design, one sensitive solution at a time. By Divya Mishra*

# DESIGN

If design may be defined as an activity undertaken to solve problems, then Indian women have been doing it since the Paleolithic era. Consider the cave paintings at Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh. Among delicately rendered scenes of war and revelry are several drawings of humans hunting (and being hunted) by the local fauna.

No one knows who drew these figures or why but I have a theory. I believe these paintings were the efforts of Paleolithic women to not just document their lives and beliefs and to communicate with each other but also to mark their existence for future generations—a Paleolithic “I was here,” so to speak. Ever since, Indian women have been getting things done in ways large and small, and it has almost never been easy.

In 1972, when the then 16-year-old **Sheila Sri Prakash** was being interviewed for admission into The School of Architecture and Planning, Anna University in Chennai, one of the professors on the panel (probably the kind sent by the gods to test you) asked her if—because of her apparently inconsiderate ambition—she wasn't depriving a male candidate of a seat.

“For a young girl with stars in her eyes, I really wasn't ready for that kind of question. I told him that I was very serious about my profession but what he asked me that day just made me more determined,” says Prakash. Despite her class having a dispiriting gender ratio of five girls to 60 boys, Prakash graduated with flying colours, and within a year of graduating, set up India's first women-led architecture firm in 1979. Her now 37-year-old practice has been responsible for some of India's most sensitive architecture, and Prakash herself is seen as one of the world's leading experts on sustainable design. She's also part of the World Economic Forum's Global Future Council on the Future of Environment and Natural Resource Security forum for the 2016-2018 term.

Although the women's liberation movement had been in place across the globe for over a decade by the '70s, the state of things was dismal even internationally. In the late-'70s, when designer **Sunita Kohli** arrived in Cairo for a meeting regarding a hotel she was commissioned to design in Al-Arish, on the Mediterranean coast, she was faced with a roomful of incredulous men. Shocked by the fact that they were now expected to deal with a woman (the very thought!) and, perhaps doubly so, because she was wearing a sari and sporting a braid that went down to her knees. “But once the discussions and design work began, they recognised and were respectful of what I brought to the table,” says Kohli, generously. A self-taught designer, Kohli has since earned a reputation as a leader in restoration of historical interiors and architecture, and in 1992, became the first interior designer to be awarded the Padma Shri. Partly responsible for the second restoration and decoration of Rashtrapati Bhavan in 2010, she has broken stereotypes by taking on assignments and going on site visits in places such as Uganda, Iraq and Pakistan during those countries' most unstable periods.



For the longest time, architecture and design were considered the most “masculine” of the arts. Probably because historically, things were built more as a show of strength and dominance, rather than for the people who needed and utilised it. Women were often actively deterred from taking up these professions, with certain older practitioners believing that their designs were weak because they factored in their clients' needs. Fortunately, things are now changing, with the old order reluctantly coming to the realisation that their sensitivity-as-weakness philosophy might not actually produce the best designs. What a shocker!

What is unmistakable is that women's designs often come with a certain thoughtful consideration of environment and usage—both aspects often incongruent with looming skyscrapers and large-scale infrastructure built purely for commercial purposes. When they do design skyscrapers using the same material palettes (glass, concrete and metal) as their male contemporaries, the results

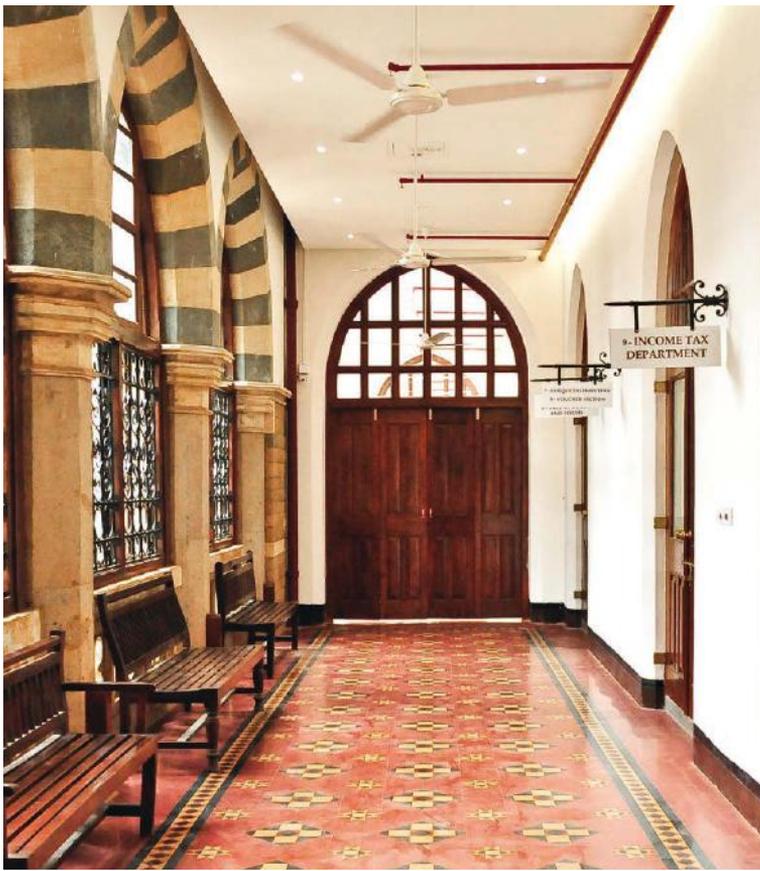
## SHEILA SRI PRAKASH'S 37-YEAR-OLD PRACTICE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR SOME OF INDIA'S MOST SENSITIVE ARCHITECTURE

Top row, from left: **Sheila Sri Prakash; Sunita Kohli** Opposite page: **This Vadodara home was designed by K2India, set up by Sunita and Kohelika Kohli**

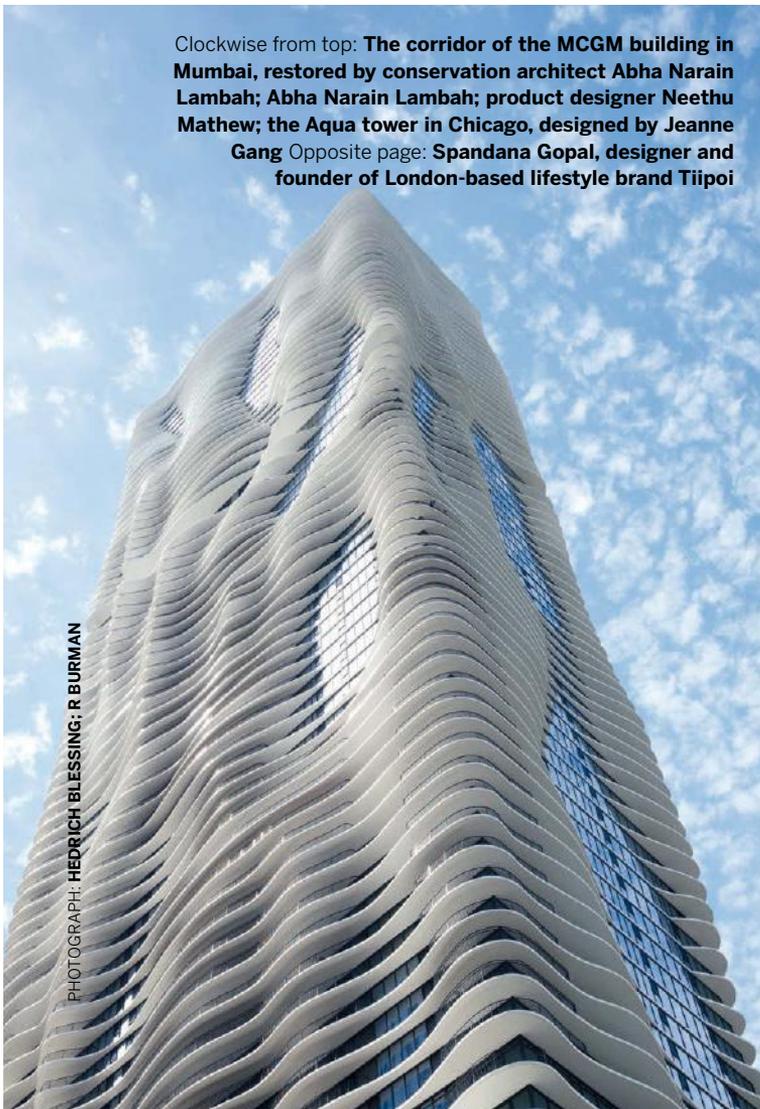


PHOTOGRAPH: MONTSE GARRIGA

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Clockwise from top: **The corridor of the MCGM building in Mumbai, restored by conservation architect Abha Narain Lambah; Abha Narain Lambah; product designer Neethu Mathew; the Aqua tower in Chicago, designed by Jeanne Gang** Opposite page: **Spandana Gopal, designer and founder of London-based lifestyle brand Tiipoi**



PHOTOGRAPH: HEDRICH BLESSING; R BURMAN

are things of beauty, like **Jeanne Gang's** 82-storeyed building in Chicago, called Aqua. Considered the tallest building in the world designed by a woman, it appears to live up to its name, giving Chicago's skyline what looks like a standing column of gently rippled water that magically also houses humans.

In 2004, the late **Dame Zaha Hadid** became the first woman to win the Pritzker Architecture Prize, long considered the Nobel for architecture, effectively storming the last bastion of sexism in the field. It had been a long time coming, not least because the selection process over the 37 years of the prize's existence has not been without controversy. In two years—1991 and 2012—the prizes were given to architects Robert Venturi and Wang Shu respectively, ignoring their spouses Denise Scott Brown and Lu Wenyu, both of whom were equal partners in the practices. But things are looking up, albeit slowly, and largely because of the efforts of the women practitioners themselves.

Conservation architect **Abha Narain Lambah** was once told that she would have to marry an architect if she meant to practice. Lambah studied architecture at what was possibly one of the most liberal educational institutions in the country then—the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi, and courtesy that education, always thought of herself as an architect, rather than a “woman architect.” She admits that architecture is not entirely conducive to child-rearing and family life, which results in a high drop-out rate among women in architecture. She herself rose to its challenges driven by a passion for her work. She says, “I often took my daughter along on my field visits, and she's grown up playing with labourer's kids and conservator's kids,

and somehow, I think this is much better than taking her to piano lessons.” In her own 22-year-old practice, which is largely dominated by women, Lambah has tried to create a more women-friendly work environment by having the option of working remotely where possible, and in one case, even setting up a makeshift crèche in her office for an employee who'd used up her maternity leave.

New York-based architect **Suchi Reddy**, founder of Reddymade Architecture and Design, feels that women have to work twice as hard as men to be treated as equals. “The onus is on us to prove that we are smarter and more creative. The real disadvantage is that innovation by women architects is not really in the public eye.”

Aside from large scale projects, Reddy's firm has worked on residential and commercial interiors as well as furniture designs and artistic collaborations. Oddly enough, this diverse portfolio has tended to limit her firm's client base. “The issue we run into sometimes is that people like to categorise, and we try to defy categorisation.”

Despite the roadblocks, Reddy is grateful for her chosen profession. “It has given me a deep appreciation for creativity of all kinds, and I can safely say that I am never ever bored.” Her firm's latest project, a large loft in the Murray Hill area of Manhattan, uses materials such as translucent concrete with embedded fibreglass fibres, electric glass that can go from clear to opaque and carved Corian contrasted with stones to create a jewel-like home.

When **Spandana Gopal** studied design at Central St Martins in London, the gender ratio in her class was equitable, and she feels that design practitioners, in London at least, comprise an equal mix of men and women. Gopal launched Tiipoi, her London-based lifestyle brand, in an effort to change the perception of Indian design internationally. Her designs use

traditional materials (copper, wood, brass and glass) and Indian manufacturing techniques but reflect an aesthetic that is purely contemporary. Along with the task of translating Indian design sensibility for an audience who sits outside of its context, Gopal faces a second challenge: “There is a certain level of openness and comfort that culture in India only allows with men, in situations of manual work, labour and

## CONSERVATION ARCHITECT ABHA NARAIN LAMBAH WAS TOLD THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO MARRY AN ARCHITECT IF SHE MEANT TO PRACTICE

From left: **Designer Kangan Arora; cushions designed by Arora** Opposite page: **Designer, artist and actor Lekha Washington with one of her designs**





## NEW YORK-BASED SUCHI REDDY'S LATEST PROJECT USES TRANSLUCENT CONCRETE WITH EMBEDDED FIBREGLASS FIBRES, ELECTRIC GLASS AND CARVED CORIAN

Architect **Anupama Kundoo** Opposite page: For the Venice Architecture Biennale 2016, Kundoo's firm designed the eco-friendly and affordable Full Fill Home and Easy WC



factories.” But she hasn’t let this stop her. This September, at the London Design Fair, her curated large format exhibition titled ‘This is India’ showcased Indian design practices and their relationship with their environment.

The pavilion for the ‘This is India’ exhibition was conceptualised by London-based designer **Kangan Arora**, who runs an eponymous design studio that focuses on interior-fashion textiles. Arora’s design for the pavilion was inspired by the ancient astronomical instruments and jagged geometries of Delhi’s Jantar Mantar, and manifested “as an installation of over 500 terracotta pots, hand-painted and stacked as circling colonnades, stepped towers and shaded screens”

Arora’s family has been in the business of textiles for over a hundred years now, and she feels that while the textile space has always attracted more women than men, there is now a small but significant shift towards a more balanced scenario.

Product designer, actor and artist **Lekha Washington**, who studied at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, dismisses any links between her gender and thought process but finds that it affects the way people react to her. “I fight hard to have my work be the centre of the discussion rather than the way I look, and it’s an uphill task,” she says. Washington eventually started her own company because she was frustrated by the misogyny in the Indian film industry, and wanted to express herself as an individual. Since then, she has designed a range of eclectic furniture and lighting products, and even had a solo art show in Mumbai.

In 2013, for homeware brand Artd’inox, **Srishti Bajaj** designed the strikingly clever Tattva Stack, a combination of the four separate tools of chapatti-making into one space-saving, stackable unit. Her design was not merely functional—it was meant to be beautiful as well, to counter the idea of aesthetics only coming into play outside the kitchen. Bajaj feels that while design is largely an inclusive field, women have to prove themselves time and time again, which is “often exhausting and really quite unnecessary because as a professional, you just want to get on with the work, and let that speak”

What is interesting to note here is that there have been no blustering, blistering pieces by women design professionals stating that men might not

have what it takes to be designers. Possibly because women realise that the world has quite enough problems for designers of both genders to solve.

Architect **Anupama Kundoo**, who shuttles between India and Spain, focuses on architecture that has low environmental impact and is socially and economically contextual. She believes that while gender does not necessarily manifest in a different quality of architecture and design, it is important to acknowledge the lack of equal opportunity for women. “The truth is that if a woman does not have the basic right to participate in cities and public spaces safely, as a man can, it is bound to manifest in all other areas, not just architecture.” Kundoo also feels that one of the greatest challenges she faces is about discriminating between “what is good for one’s inner development and what is not”

The absence of women in public spheres is so insidious that London-based product designer **Neethu Mathew**—who was named in the UK-based Design Council’s list of ‘70 Ones to Watch’—had never imagined herself in a leadership position in the design field. It was only after switching to a job that had a number of women leaders that she realised, “That could be me one day.”

Kundoo, who set up an installation showcasing easily fabricated, beautiful and affordable housing with minimal environmental impact at the Venice Architecture Biennale this year, believes that “As society evolves, it is bound to aspire towards a better balance. In order to accelerate this development, it helps if women themselves have the conviction that they do not intrinsically carry any disadvantage on account of their gender.” That she runs an award-winning practice that is sensitive to environmental, societal and economic realities, while also being a mother of two, indicates that, if anything, the opposite might be true. 🐾



FOTOGRAFIA: SEBASTIANO GIANNESINI