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Chief Architect, Shilpa Architects

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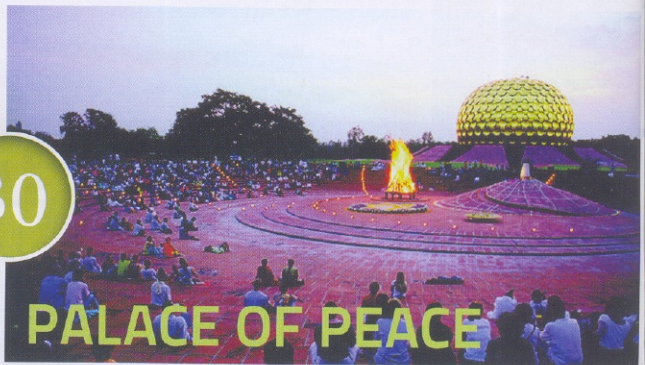
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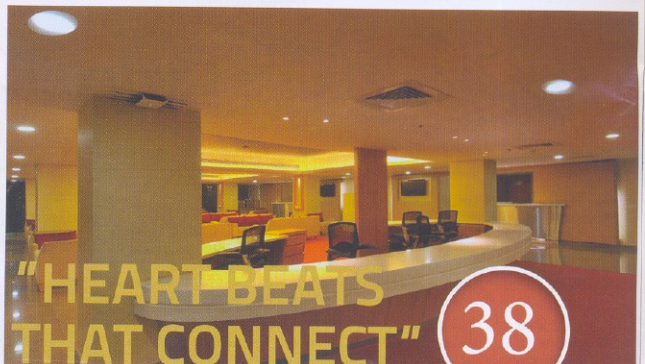


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*"I've long recognized  
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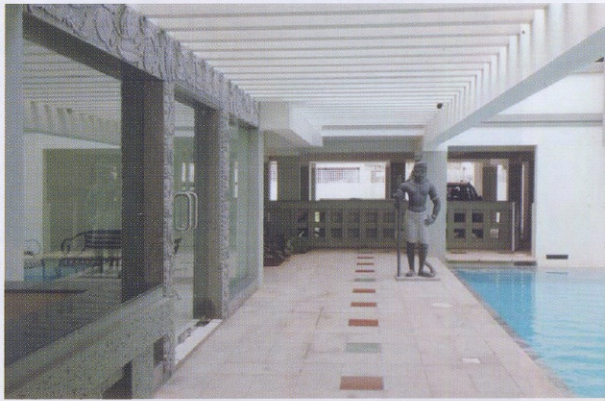


Sheila Sri Prakash  
Chief Architect

*She is a trained classical dancer with over 700 stage performances of Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi. She studied architecture at the Anna University School of Architecture and Planning and also attended the Harvard Graduate School of Design's Executive Education Program. She played a key role in establishing the Indian Green Building Council, Southern Chapter. She has been invited to serve on the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Design Innovation. She has developed a "Reciprocal Design Index" that prescribes parameters and metrics surrounding sustainable design to factor the environment, sociology and economics. **Sheila Sri Prakash** (July 6, 1955, Bhopal, India) is an architect and planner of Indian origin. She founded Shilpa Architects in Chennai, India in 1979 and has the distinction of being recognized as the first woman in India to have started her own architectural firm that is most extant. **Sheila Sri Prakash**, Chief Architect, Shilpa Architects, tells Interiors & Décor that being an architect it's the responsibility to create an ambience without affecting the India's rich heritage. Excerpts.*

**You're the first woman in India who've started her own architectural firm. How's the journey so far?**

Yes! Way back in 1979 it was very tough, you've to prove yourself every time. But my toils, consistency and doing good design has aided and today I am quite rosy that my designs are getting universal recognition, which comes from various organizations like none less than the World Economic Forum - Design Innovation Council, where I'm able to share my knowledge and talk about my philosophy. It is the challenge only that ignites innovation in you, so challenges are a part of life and how it's circumvented, that matters. I don't think you execute better without challenges and it's important to benchmark yourself. In 1987, I developed what it's called as an incremental house for the EWS (Economically Weaker Section) and that was a house where the first seeds of my philosophy of reciprocity design came into an existence. Because I understood the flexibility of small format houses. Understanding one's need is the flexibility to use the spaces, differently. For instance, you've say 150 sq. ft. of space occupied by five people, doing all their daily routine work like cooking, washing, laundry, studying, sleeping and



culcation, different sectors of the society - the EWS, disabled, men, women, children, older generation, students, youngs and aspirational) or not. There are different kinds of people and all their needs are very different. It is essential for an urban design that the design of the city or the centre should consider important aspects like transportation, services, infrastructure, but above all what's important is that you're creating an ambience for the people to live, develop and to learn. The city should give them a stage to learn discipline, punctuality, honesty as going to school is not enough for learning and all these are the part of this template.



**You're the practitioner – researcher on Spaciology. What were your findings?**

It's the ergonomics which tells you what is the minimum space you required to do a function properly. It creates a space which is required to sit or stand. But beyond this there is a psychological need also, as you're sitting on this chair you wouldn't want somebody to sit really close to you unless you're close to that person. So the chair has to be designed not only for sitting purpose but little extra.

**Mostly your designs have drawn inspiration from India's rich heritage. Can you explain this with the help of any of your projects?**

Yes, I've long recognized the value of our art. Basically I am an artist, dancer & musician. I'm able to appreciate the value of arts that is there in India and in our cultural heritage. I think we should not allow them to die. We acknowledge the skills of carvers, masons, artisans, which have been given to them from one generation to the other. And now today, if they don't get the opportunity to do what they know best, they'll perish. It's our social responsibility that we should allow them to play their role in the growth of the country.

even socializing, they must need certain flexibility within that limited space. So that's what started of this incremental housing, which conceived more as a space rather than a place.

**You've developed a "Reciprocal Design Index". Can you explain it? How does it address social, environmental and economic issues?**

It's a template to benchmark yourself and to assure that have you included the required parameters (transportation, cir-



Incorporate their skills, blend it with modern technology and make life easier for them.

For the Cholamandalam museum, we used brick as a façade and appointed special craftsmen from Kerala who could do the brick work. In Cholamandalam Artist Village we came up with the unique design and manufactured buildings around the banyan trees, without cutting them. They also formed a part of the sculpture courtyard, and the international artists also contributed the sculptures for the outdoors. So, it's the part of inside and outside.

#### **What is the role of art & architecture in bridging the urban – rural divide?**

Art is usually barrier free, everybody can emote to art and appreciate it. If you've art in your daily routine you become more sensitive. And when you're sensitise you empathise with your havenots and it makes you a better person. While designing the township we should try and give spaces for the weekly markets, as we prefer to purchase sabjis (vegetables) from a local vendor not from the departmental store. We have such little spaces, arenas or patios which can give the opportunity for it being used like this and it's not only give them the vegetables but it also inculcates the feeling of community among those people. For e.g. In Mahindra World City we were saying that if the mandatory open spaces are planted with trees which can produce some goods and further it can be used for the various maintenance purposes. If you're able to generate income out of that, you can save your maintenance cost.

**You're a trained classical dancer. Do you still dance?**

No I don't. But I think it's in our blood to dance. It has taught me much more than the physical dancing. As a person you can concentrate on what you do and you're able to visualize better because you're creating ambiances. The fundamentals of dance and architecture are very similar like rhythm is common to both, line, straight line etc. are the principles of architecture as well as the principles of dance.

#### **Any message for the young architects?**

They are in the wonderful profession because architecture and designs are something which create spaces for people - to born, live, enjoy, suffer everything and finally die. I think it's a very responsible profession. It may not be the most paying profession but still a fantastic profession. Sustainable structure should be the part of their design philosophy all the time. Sustainability is not something which you take out and use for one project and throw it out, it should be the part of you. This will help in the long run, they should be aware of this.

