



# RECONSTRUCTION

In dialogue with Sheila Sri Prakash

By Aneesha Bangera

Sunlight streams in through the slatted window which stretches across an entire side of the conference room. Another wall is a network of sound-absorbing panels wrapped in rich Indian fabrics – block prints and raw silk – adorned with recycled wood carvings and mirrors weaving an artistic geometry. Light slips in, playfully spilling across the table. Architect Sheila Sri Prakash calls ‘The Muse’, the new office of Shilpa Architects, her ‘Temple of Design’. It is a miracle of natural light and open space, and it brings to life everything that the firm, founded in 1979, believes in.

‘Architecture was a natural choice for me,’ begins Sheila, whose eyes are gentle, sparkling. She recalls how her father would involve her in small renovation projects when she was little, how she loved doing up her room. Credited with being the first woman to have set up and run an architectural firm in India, Sheila has poured her life and soul into Shilpa Architects.



↑ 3D RENDERING OF CETHAR VESSELS PROJECT

At first it was cost-effectiveness that caught Sheila's imagination, especially while she was building her very first office on a limited budget. In 1987 she was invited to build a model unit for the Shelter for the Shelterless project, which sparked off her concept of 'incremental housing', homes that people have the flexibility of adding to over time as their budgets allow. Swept up in the wave of the green movement, Sheila also began to explore energy conservation, but she soon realised that sustainability was so much more than going green. It is her firm's passionate focus on sustainability – 'development that is responsive to human needs,' she calls it – that has come to characterise the work they do.

Sheila's revolutionary Reciprocal Design Index proposes an alternative, holistic set of parameters for sustainable design that address the environment, sociology and economics. 'We need to consider factors like income, age, disability and many others for development to be inclusive and equitable,' she says.

#### **THE GRAMMAR OF ART; THE VOCABULARY OF SPACE**

Art is completely open to perception, but a building serves a definite purpose, says Sheila. 'A building is a space for people to work, grow and spend their lives in. This is the responsibility of the profession,' she says. As she describes her journey of using art to create a grammar that is distinct, the world as we know it seems to crumble and rise again with all the possibilities that responsible and beautiful design holds.

'Being an artist does something to your persona,' Sheila says. 'It gives you grace and expression; it makes you sensitive to and appreciative of others' expression.' An accomplished artist in the fields of classical dance and music herself, Sheila finds a deep, almost spiritual connection between the arts and her design thinking.

'Take the sanchaali for example,' she says. 'This is the section of the dance in which the music is repeated and the artist is left to imagine the story and build the plot. I work like this, imagining how people will respond to the space at every step of the way, and I get stimulated by this.' The



principles of naatya and architecture are the same – line, movement, dynamism, rhythm. ‘In dance and music, rhythm is the distance between beats, in architecture it is the distance between elements,’ says Sheila.

With the belief that the design of a space can influence the way people live, work and interact with one another, Shilpa Architects has innovated, rethinking traditional perceptions of common areas. In the lobby of one of their residential buildings, they have used the inlay of tiles to build a hopscotch game into the flooring. Now children gather to play quick games on their way in and out of their homes, showing that the way a space is planned can affect the way that people relate to one another.

#### SOMETHING RELEVANT

Much of Shilpa Architects work is Indo-centric, reflecting their commitment to being culturally and geographically relevant (‘What is the relevance of a San Francisco-style home in Chennai?’ Sheila asks) and drawing on the country’s design heritage. ‘Our culture is so rich – the colours, the cuisine, even the kolams,’ says Sheila. ‘Cultural relevance is everything. We could build something that is ergonomically or technically perfect, but what is more important is what the building means to people, what it evokes in them and how it tells their stories.’

The traditional features of the home are there for a reason, she says, and she reinterprets these in her designs. ‘We need to look hard enough at our own traditions to rediscover how intrinsically beautiful they are.’ Pallava Heights is a Shilpa project in Mylapore, which was the seat of power during the Pallava period. Drawing on the style of the Pallava age and with Mahabalipuram as inspiration, the building has intricate stone carvings. The swimming pool, modern as it is, has been built to resemble a Teppakulam, similar to the one the Kapaleeshwar temple

in Mylapore is built around. Each element narrates a piece of the geography’s history, creating a feeling of connectedness to the past.

Named as one of the ‘100 Most Influential’ people in architecture in the world today by Italian design journal *Il Giornale dell’Architettura*, Sheila contributed to the 2012 Global Infrastructure Summit as part of the London Olympic Celebrations on the invitation of the British PM. She has also been on the World Economic Forum, as a member of the Global Agenda Council on Design Innovation in 2011-2012. This year she is on a new WEF panel – the Global Agenda Council on the Role of Arts in Society. The council will explore the role of art in meaningfully addressing global issues, in conflict resolution and in making the world a better place.

Sheila is convinced that one of the reasons she is invited to contribute to international forums is because of her ‘Indianness’, which she embraces in its entirety. ‘It is what makes us special, what makes us stand apart,’ she says of the Indian identity, which has always played a significant role in her life and work.



PALLAVA HEIGHTS, XS REAL PROPERTIES.



MAHINDRA WORLD CITY

#### BACK TO THE BASICS

'After I developed the Reciprocity Design Index, I found that grassroots awareness might be better than making changes at a policy level. We want to create a mass surge, a bottom-up approach rather than top-down,' says Sheila Sriprakash. It is ironic, she says, that in such a populist, community-centred country, we are increasingly isolated and left out of decisions related to public spaces and city planning. And so she conceptualised the Reciprocity Design Wave, an event that brings together design schools and students to use art and design to address issues of social importance. The result has been overwhelming, with young people using recycled material to create thematic sculptures to express their ideas and concerns.

The sense of community is a continuing thread in the work of Shilpa Architects. 'In times when everything is being closeted and people are feeling isolated, the ability to connect, talk and empathise is important,' says Sheila.

And so, instead of building walls, Shilpa Architects is trying to bring them down. In one of their large residential projects, they have left small open spaces in common areas that they call pocket parks. These spots have inspired residents to rediscover hobbies, from gardening to crafts, and to spend more time together. At the Shilpa office too, each floor seems to flow into the other, staying connected visually and creating a sense of fluidity that, Sheila says, lends itself to a feeling of openness in the workplace.

The story of Shilpa Architects is, in some way, a story of identity, of creating the new without letting go of the old, thus forging different ways of seeing and living in the world.