

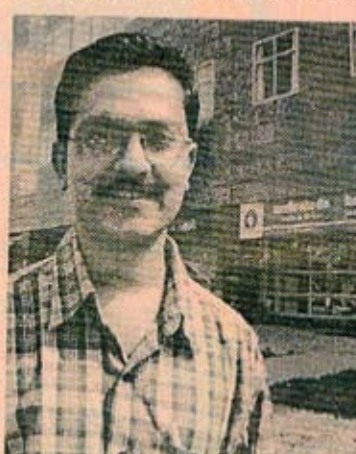
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From left: Morphogenesis's Mani Rastogi (centre); Matisha Kothari; Studio U+A's Sandeep Roy, and Dikshu Kukreja: styles for the future

Multi-storeyed growth

The countrywide building boom has provided architects with a range of exciting projects, says JAI ARJUN SINGH

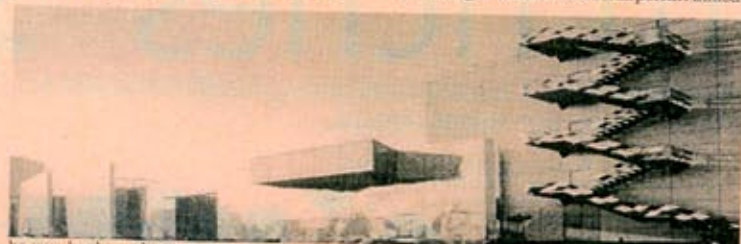
These are busy times for architecture firm Studio U+A. Around the end of 2002 the firm, which is an arm of a British firm, had only three major projects on its drawing boards. Today it has 10 major contracts and growth has doubled in each of the last two years. The company is now working on three office complexes, a five-star hotel and a giant 3 million sq ft residential complex Vatika City.

It's a similar story at another Delhi-based architecture studio, Morphogenesis, which has grown four times in the past three years. The company is currently handling projects worth over Rs 700 crore, including a 500-acre township near Siliguri and the 50-storey World Trade Centre tower in Mumbai.

Building fever has hit not just the National Capital Region (NCR) and other metros but also smaller cities and towns across the country. And among those most affected by the boom are architects who are being asked to turn out bigger and fancier structures than ever before.

That's reflected in the plethora of exciting new building projects that architectural firms and studios have on hand. Take CP Kukreja Associates — named one of the top four architectural firms in the Australia-Asia region by the UK-based *World Architecture* magazine — which has seen its employee strength grow from 180 people last year to 225 now. The firm is working on the Delhi Metro's underground stations and on a new nine-storeyed 150-bed superspecialty wing in Delhi's Ganga Ram Hospital. "Earlier there was an 'anything goes' attitude to the designing of hospitals," says Dikshu Kukreja, "but now even these are expected to look classy."

Other key projects include the jewellery mall Gold Souk, which will open next month in Gurgaon. "We did some research on similar souks in the Middle East," says Kukreja, "but the final concept was ours." The interior of the design,



he says, has been done so as to "evoke the image of a pearl in an oyster shell". CP Kukreja Associates is also working on The Forest, a high-end residential complex being developed in Noida by Omaze, complete with high-rise towers and penthouses.

Morphogenesis already has an impressive list of glass-and-steel creations under its belt. It built the Metropolitan Mall and the Apollo corporate office in Gurgaon, as well as several PVR cinemas in the NCR and other cities. Morphogenesis is now handling projects worth around Rs 200 crore — one of which is the 500-acre Uttarayan township on the outskirts of Siliguri, on the site of an abandoned tea garden. The development plans for 1,600 apartments and 300 lower- and middle-income group units for a total resident population of around 50,000 people. Around 150,000 sq m will be set aside for shopping, offices, community halls, health facilities and schools. While the project will take three years to complete, the first two phases have been sold already. "That's quite an achievement for the region," says Rastogi.

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The Siliguri township is an indicator that the growth is not restricted to metros and big cities. "B-class cities like Ludhiana and Jaipur are attracting a lot of attention," says Sandeep Roy, director, Studio U+A India, explaining that a small group of developers has established an oligopoly of sorts over prominent suburbs like Gurgaon — "which means that the other builders have to look at other areas". Rastogi goes a bit further. "Metros are becoming less lucrative because of the high property prices," he says. "In the long run, towns like Jaipur will bring in much higher profit margins."

The building boom is percolating to satellite towns like Chandigarh and Pune," says Kothari Associates' Matisha Kothari. Her firm is working on an international airport in Ahmed-

abad. "Greater attention is paid to landscaping requirements around buildings," he says. "And when an office complex is being planned, one of the first things to be factored in is where the staff will take their lunch break and the relaxation options that can be made available."

Third and most important — at least from the point of view of execution of ideas — Roy believes developers are now more open to the idea of putting in higher capital costs for long-term benefits. "They are realising that higher capital costs will give a better return in the long term, since the life of a building is at least 40 to 50 years." The immediate result of this has been a preponderance of buildings with longer-lasting aluminium and glass finishes. Matisha Kothari believes architectural briefs have steadily moved from functionality to aesthetics. "People demand harmony between the building exteriors and interiors," she says.

Kukreja says that till recently there was a lacuna in the Indian architectural scene. "Design was not looked at as an integrated exercise, he says. "We have tried to rectify this by having lighting technicians, mechanical and civil engineering workers as part of our company's in-house staff — whereas in the past the norm has been to source such work from outside."

But some architects insist there's a downside to all the development. While conceding there has been a boom, Mani Rastogi says: "Many Indian firms have agreed to become the back-end for international architecture companies. As a result, there has been a thoughtless, indiscriminate aping of the West, with disregard for what is suited to Indian conditions."

Rastogi points to large projects, for instance in the middle of Gurgaon, where each building is a severe strain on its environment. "Monsters suck water out of the ground and burn fuel for power, and there are no controls on emissions." Morphogenesis has tried to make the Uttarayan township as environment-friendly as possible. There will be no stormwater drains in the township. "The slope has been planned in such a way as to create natural reservoirs," he says. "The sewage will be biologically treated with reeds, to convert it into drinkable water."

Rastogi also grumbles that there is no coherent architectural identity in the country. "A thousand years from now, when our civilisation is excavated, they will be very confused about us!" he quips.

Dikshu Kukreja agrees that while malls need to be modern and jazzy, there must be some representation of the Indian ethos. "For instance, our consumer profile dictates that we have *lahori puri* stands inside the mall. We can't blindly ape the international template." ■

in Raipur. "You'd be surprised at the awareness of people in smaller towns," he says. "One of our clients in Indore told us expense was no bar as long as we made something as fancy as what is available in Delhi."

What are the major changes on the Indian architectural scene? According to Roy, these notable trends have emerged in recent years. First, he says, there is an increased consciousness about high quality. "Clients are demanding better quality and finish for both residential and office complexes." This view is backed by architect Vijay Kapur of Line and Form: "People played safe in the old days but now they are better travelled, have greater media exposure and are more receptive to new ideas."

In architectural terms, says Roy, there has been a big leap in thinking of a building in environmental terms, not just as an isolated enti-