



## A Sustainable Icon

Manit Rastogi, Managing Director of Morphogenesis, is one of the region's most exciting architectural voices when it comes to the issue of sustainability and design. While attending The Architecture & Design Conference he spared a few minutes with Deborah Erwin to share his thoughts on the current shape of the industry.

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Before settling into the interview room, Manit Rastogi tugs open the floor-to-ceiling drapes for some natural light. He's just finished presenting an informative synopsis of his firm's recent work, detailing the project brief, realisation and usage of the Pearl Academy of Fashion in Jaipur – an archetype of passive design. Like most natural leaders, Rastogi exudes a nonchalant confidence when speaking about his practice's approach to architecture. Although his firm consistently delivers green and sustainable projects, this should not be a point of distinction, he remarks. Rather, building with the environment in mind should be an actively accepted norm. While he refuses to assume the role of herald, neither does he agree with the boundless, ego-pandering developments sprouting up across the globe by fellow professionals.

At the core of his professional creed is a resolute commitment to build within an eco-conscious

paradigm. “What has always stunned us – and we have been practicing this way for maybe 20 years now – is that our buildings are generally cheaper,” he says.

In response to the economic climate and its ripple effect on the industry, he admits to being happier as a designer during these times because good design decisions are appreciated by the clients, as opposed to prosperous times when no one really cares about cost- and energy-efficient options. When economies are stable, clients spend a lot more and constantly compete to construct, as Rastogi puts it, “the world's tallest, largest, widest, deepest building. The consequent problem is that it sets up the wrong aspiration value. As architects, we generally end up designing for the top one percent. The remaining 99 percent of the economic pyramid aspires to that one percent. So if we get



Pearl Academy of Fashion, Jaipur.

it wrong, the aspiration value trickles all the way down. That's what destroys the planet, what gets built for the top one percent is not enough to destroy the planet."

### Crisis, costs and culture

Credit crises are healthy for the industry professional, he says, because "It forces the designer to work out innovative solutions, and protect the integrity of design. If the emphasis moves away from really expensive materials to adaptive materials (which are cheaper), then that's only good for architecture." However, he warns, "If the designer says, to cut costs, 'I'm going to reduce the quality of the glass that we use or reduce the quality of the structural materials', that's a non-start." In addition to creating quality design, Rastogi believes practitioners should endeavour to reduce energy requirements and employ local materials innovatively.

"All Asian cultures are highly aspirational cultures," he asserts. "If the king, president, prime minister or the top authority, decides to make a parliamentary building that's green, or says that all public buildings will be sustainable, we'll see a big change happen. It has to be top down. There's no point if the premier is living in a highly ostentatious palace but preaching to the proletariat to be sustainable." Big corporates, MNCs and banks also need to shoulder a large degree of the responsibility, says Rastogi.

### The true price of an icon

Sustainable architecture is rarely associated with iconic value, he asserts. "This is where change needs to happen. If the Beijing stadium was a truly sustainable and visually iconic piece of architecture, then the aspiration value goes through. But it has that external skin which is full of metal, only for the purpose of aesthetics. And that isn't the right message to be sending down." Instead, he proposes that, "iconic architecture move away from structural gymnastics and high expressions of wealth to being really attractive examples of sustainable building."

To successfully sell a green approach to developers, one needs to understand "three things that fundamentally affect the developer: cost of construction, speed of construction, and the marketability of the product." He personally offers to "knock 10 percent off their construction cost and, if possible, increase the speed of construction." He also highlights the wealth of publicity to be gained from endorsing an environment-friendly building.

### An Indian view

Peering through introspective lenses, Rastogi casts his gaze on India's built environment and his hometown of New Delhi. "It's extremely worrying," he begins, "There is a lot of activity – a lot of construction. Democracy in a place so large, with so much inequality between the rich and the poor, is not necessarily the best form

of governance. Policies of land conversion and urban planning are based around a nexus of politicians and developers, rather than on principles of city planning. A lot of it is being done in an ad hoc manner". On a positive note, he praises the consistent quality of housing projects, highlighting their AC-free composition. "I can't think of a single housing block – even high-end – that is air-conditioned." Much-needed infrastructure work, under public-private-partnerships, is also being implemented by the government. In preparation for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, to be hosted in New Delhi, a brand new metro system has been installed. "For once we have a decent mass transit system!" he says. India's crucial areas of development in the near future, according to Rastogi, are power and water.

While not completely satisfied with his own country's progress, Rastogi finds urban upstarts in the Middle East both unnerving and unconvincing. The inherent audacity of planning an entire city prior to occupancy seems unnatural and doomed for failure. "Cities need to organically grow over time. A city gains its soul only after at least 100 years of existence." The generic supply of mass housing assumes that all people have equal opportunities and want the same things but diversity in the social, cultural and economic sense is characteristic of Asia, he says. "City-making has to be prescriptive. You lay the seeds, put in some infrastructure and see what happens." [RFP](#)