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Rastogi: "The project has become a mission."

Architect Manit Rastogi on the challenges of developing lodges for Amarnath pilgrims

APARNA CHANDRA

FOUR MONTHS ago, the architecture firm Morphogenesis got an unusual request from even a more unlikely client. The Amarnathji Yatra Shrine Board wants to develop the 15 km-long Himalayan pilgrim trail and they have selected the Delhi-based studio to do the job.

The brief was simple. A blueprint has to be designed for two sets of dwelling clusters, near the base camp

Baltal located at an altitude of 9,000 ft, and a second one at the Holy Cave at 13,000 ft. While 1,250 units consisting of restaurants, hospital and fire safety facilities will be built at the base camp spread across a 100 acre land, the Cave will have 125 units. The project will be ready by 2007.

For a company which is mainly known for its expertise in constructing aluminium and glass buildings like the Apollo Tyres corporate headquarters and Metropolitan Mall in Gurgaon,

this is going to be a challenge. "This project has taken on a mission-like status for us," says Manit Rastogi, who set up the studio with wife Sonali in 1996. Along with partner Sanjay Bharadwaj, Morphogenesis is currently executing 30 projects, including a Rs 1,500 crore real estate development complex.

But the challenges before them are formidable. For this treacherous part of the Himalayas remains 15 ft to 30 ft under snow most of the year. About 5,000 to 10,000 people trek up to the holy shrine every day between July and August. "Apart from coming up with a high-altitude building solution, climatic hazards like avalanches and blizzards will have to be looked into," says Rastogi who graduated from the London-based Architecture Associate.

While he did not discuss money, Rastogi said his team has to keep in mind that pilgrims come from varied socio-economic backgrounds. "We also have to maintain a balance between contemporary design and tenets of living culture," he says. Besides, he is also sourcing satellite images from NASA to "plot areas where we can build". "We will use lightweight collapsible structures as we don't want to resist the forces of nature. The structures will have to be easy enough to erect in a month before the pilgrims begin arriving," he says.

Designing for pilgrim trails seem to have caught on with Morphogenesis. Next they are eyeing to develop the Vaishno Devi base camp at Katra.