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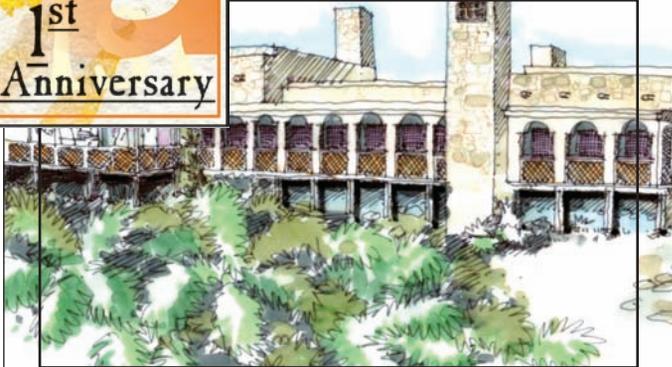


Illustration: Shahta Ecolodge

Please tell us about your long stint with EDSA, the landscape architecture and planning firm from the US.

I started in 1997 and left EDSA in 2007. It was the most wonderful and learning experience. I was given the opportunity to start the world's first ecotourism studio of any office and the ride was exciting and memorable. The Board at EDSA supported me fully and we ended up doing more ecotourism projects than any other firm in the world. EDSA is like a mini-United Nations as it has people from over 35 countries working there, and so the social culture is just awesome.

Why was it that you set up a separate practice recently? Are you still associated with EDSA?

In January of 2007, I went on a sabbatical for six months to write my book but then realised that it would take me one-and-a-half years and also I was running out of money and had to work to pay for my book. I therefore left EDSA to concentrate on my book. However, I am very much associated with them and am working as a consultant on their projects and helping in any way I can with their ecotourism market sector.

You are known as one of the biggest authorities on ecotourism and ecolodge designing in the world. Do clients come to you with set expectations because of this reputation?

Yes, clients do their research on me or have heard me speak at a conference and expect a high-level of service, which happens to be the only way I know how to work!!

Why did you choose this particular area for specialised designing?

My upbringing is in the Indian philosophy of Jainism, which as you know, has the greatest respect for non-human species. In my family, we have probably been vegetarians for over 40 generations!! I do not call myself a Jain but I must say that the *ahimsa* ideals have greatly influenced me in my work. I am now a vegan. I got into ecological planning and design over 12 years ago and have never looked back. It is the right thing to tread lightly on this very fragile earth!!

What is ecolodge designing all about, how different is it from other types of designing? What are your observations in this regard in respect of India?

Many eco-architects and eco-interior designers are taking great efforts in ensuring that building exteriors and interiors are designed in low-impact ways. This comes in many ways. Architects use 'passive eco-

Hitesh Mehta of H M Design is known the world over as one of the biggest authorities on ecotourism and ecolodge designing. The US-based architect of Indian origin explains to Manjushree Naik what ecotourism and ecolodge designing is all about

ECOTOURISM AND ECOLODGE DESIGNING

design' and 'active eco-design' techniques on the drawing board whilst interior designers are selecting environmentally friendly materials. Passive eco-design includes use of air convection currents, long roof overhangs, balconies, natural finishes that



reflect heat etc. Active eco-design includes use of PV cells, solar water heaters, wind mills etc. Environment-friendly interior design materials include organic cotton bedsheets, wood from sustainable forests, non-VOC paints etc.

The basic elements of ecodesign projects should:

- ▶ help in the conservation of the surrounding flora and fauna
- ▶ have minimal impact on the natural surroundings during construction
- ▶ fit into its specific physical and cultural contexts through careful attention to form, landscaping and colour, as well as the use of vernacular architecture
- ▶ use alternative, sustainable means of water

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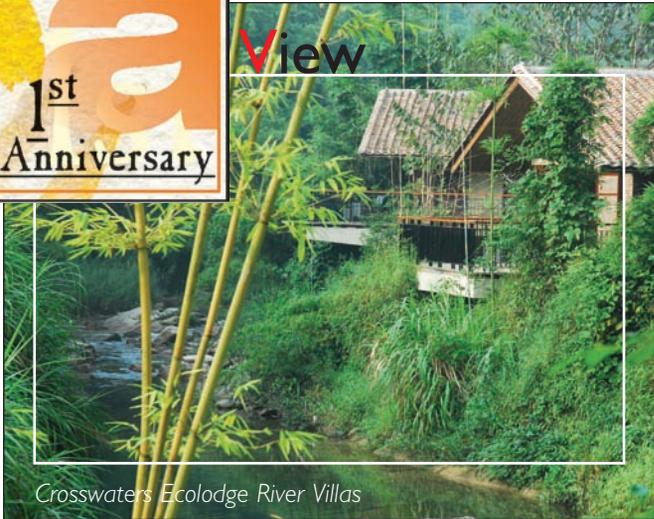
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View



Crosswaters Ecolodge River Villas

acquisition and reduce water consumption

- ▶ provide for careful handling and disposal of solid waste and sewage
- ▶ meet its energy needs through passive design and renewable energy sources
- ▶ use traditional building technology and materials wherever possible and combine these with their modern counterparts for greater sustainability
- ▶ endeavour to work together with the local community
- ▶ offer interpretative programmes to educate both its employees and tourists about the surrounding natural and cultural environments
- ▶ contribute to sustainable local development through education programmes and research and
- ▶ use only native plant species

India is unfortunately taking the same route as China and there is minimal focus on eco-design. Bangalore, Mumbai and so on are growing at an alarming pace but there are no truly green projects that I know of. I foresee an environmental disaster similar to China.

What are the courses available in this area?

Unfortunately, there are still not many universities in the world that offer specialised courses. However, this is changing as suddenly the world is beginning to realise the environmental problems we are facing. The best thing is to attend one-week workshops.

Does ecolodge designing impact the green building movement and vice versa?

Yes. Very much so. I was recently interviewed by *Travel and Leisure* magazine and it was about this issue. In most cases it is a one-way street—green buildings have lots to learn from ecolodges.

You have worked all over the world. Can you tell us which are among the best ecolodges in the world?

That is a difficult question!! Each ecolodge has its own qualities and it also depends on the location, context and so on.

What about ecolodges in India?

There are unfortunately few and far between. Kerala is the leader and in my new book, I am going to feature a couple of them—Coconut Lagoon and the Tourindia houseboat.

How many such projects have you done in India, which are the key among them?

I have to-date not yet completed a project but have planned and designed several ones. I planned a few in Vagamon in Kerala and more recently helped on the renovation of the Dhikala Lodge in Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve. I was also the Project Manager for the first planned ecotourism destination in India - in Vagamon, Kerala. Unfortunately, the project has been on hold due to the squatter issues.

Who are the other designers you feel have impacted ecolodge designing in India?

There are no professionals that I know of but several pioneers doing their own thing. Among these, three stand out: Babu Varghese for his pioneering work in eco-houseboat design and tree-houses; Jose Dominic - CEO of CGH Group and the brains behind Coconut Lagoon; and Rajiv Bhartari, Director of Corbett Tiger Reserve and person behind the eco-renovation of reserve lodges.

Please tell us more about your other ecotourism projects.

Crosswaters Ecolodge, Guangdong Province, China: I was the Project Manager for the team that planned, designed and supervised the construction of the first ecolodge and wellness centre in China within the Nankun Mountain Reserve. Crosswaters has won the Oscars in planning and site analysis. EDSA provided full services (from conceptual design to construction documents) and the team consisted of well known Australian ecolodge architect, Paul Pholeros; the world's leading bamboo architect, Simon Velez from Colombia; and Linda Garland, the well-known bamboo interior designer. The master plan includes an ecolodge and conference centre, wellness centre, nature activity centre, boutique resort and trails. The project opened in spring 2007.

Koanari Ecolodge, Dominica, West Indies: I am the architect and landscape architect for the team that is planning and designing an ecolodge in the eastern part of the Commonwealth of Dominica. It will be the first planned authentic ecolodge in Dominica and there are many benefits to the neighbouring Carib Indians. The main concept is to create a new style of architecture - forest Caribbean, which will be both environmentally and socially conscious. The master plan includes an ecolodge and wellness centre, forest and ocean cabins, tree house, swimming pool, library and trails.

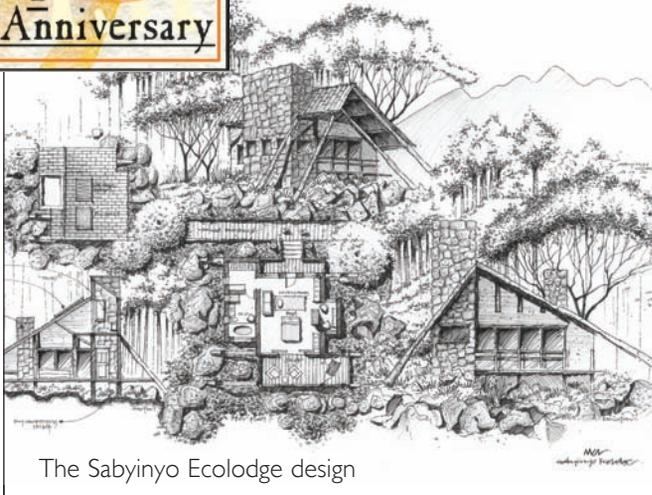
Please tell us more about your projects other than ecotourism and ecolodging?

I rarely have time for any other kind of projects. However, I am interested in greening the tourism industry and will work on traditional hotel projects and help them make greener. Let me give an example...

West Caicos Island Sustainable Master Land Use Plan, Isle of West Caicos, Turks and Caicos: I was the Project Manager for a sustainable master land use plan for a 6,000-acre island that had two national parks. West Caicos has several archaeological and cultural sites of high value which will be preserved. The integrated master plan includes opportunities for heritage tourism, nature tourism, ecotourism and a residential plan for the local population. There is currently a Ritz Carlton reserve project that is being constructed.



View



The Sabyinyo Ecolodge design

You are said to be a keen researcher. India is said to have a poor record when it comes to architectural research, what are your observations?

I have no comments as I do not know much about the research community in India.

What do all those honours and awards that have come your way mean to you?

They don't mean that much because for me it is the journey that is important and satisfying and not the destination. It was the same with me when I was getting honours and awards when I was playing cricket for Kenya.

Please tell us about your background and Indian roots.

My ancestry is from Rajkot and Gondal in Gujarat. My dad was born in Gondal but I was born in Kenya. I was raised as a Jain and with a lot of Indian values. I celebrate Diwali, New Year and a lot of other Indian festivals.

How often do you visit India?

At least once every two years on an average. I have now been to India over 10 times.

What do you feel about the current real estate boom in India?

It is crazy and out of control!!! As I said, you are going the same way as China and this is dangerous for the environment.

What are your observations on Indian architects and architecture education in India?

I have been a fan of the work of BV Doshi and Charles Correa. By far the one architect who has influenced me the most in design has been my lecturer at the the University of Nairobi, Kurula Varkey, who unfortunately died four years ago. He was then the Director of the school of architecture in Ahmedabad.

Many Indian architects are concerned about climate change and want to do their bit by designing sustainable structures? What would you advise them drawing from your experiences worldwide?

First educate yourselves about eco-design and then educate the clients:

many times, clients need to be educated as they are interested in making large profits. They need to be informed that going green means saving money, which means making money!! Contractors also need to be made aware of sustainable construction techniques.

Think about the landscape. Bring into the team a sensitive landscape architect: Landscape is an integral part of any project and should be important for any building anywhere in the world. Any building sits on the landscape and therefore it is as important as the building. There are only advantages to having a landscape design. Good landscaping increases value to the land, provides a place to rest, meditate, and play. Sensitive use of plantings can help lower temperature in hot climates.

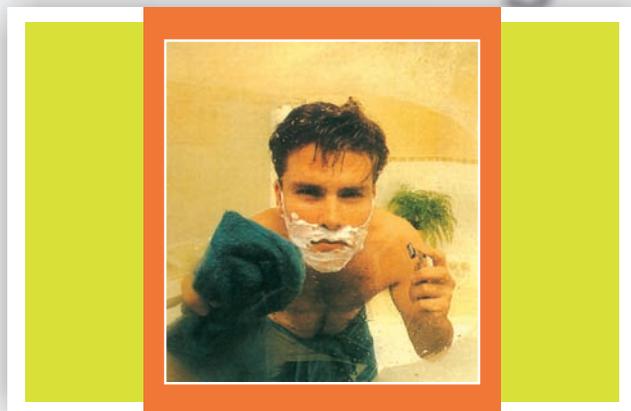
Think about the big picture first. Details can come later: environmental planning is an important part of the process to design any building. It is the big picture approach before going into the detail. It is crucial to first look at all the ecosystems of the site and understand them. I strongly recommend spending at least two days on the site to 'feel' it before beginning on the planning work. Use of programmes like ArcView GIS to analyse the various components is a key step. Employing the McHargian layering technique should help towards finding the optimum location for the buildings yet being sensitive to the ecosystems of the site.

India recently adopted GRIHA for rating green structures. It wants to slowly make it mandatory for all constructions. What more can the country do, according to you, in this regard?

City and regional governments should introduce stringent laws that all buildings have to adopt GRIHA. Enforcement and monitoring of projects is also crucial. ▲

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