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THIS PAGE Clean-cut lines make up the structural divisions of the Castro Café where principal building elements like the roof and wall are independent of each other, giving a sense of existing without a base support.

INSET A night-view of the Jamia Canteen's futuristic student kitchen-cum-dining space program. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Sturdy, durable, all-weather materials like RCC and Sheesham wood (for the top of the blocks) make for long-lasting and user-friendly seating options on a



CREATIVE SENSIBILITY

The Castro Café, at Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi, embodies revolutionary architectural aesthetics of accessibility, contemporary design and remarkable cutting-edge spatial equations.

TEXT BY DEERANJOLIE FIGG • PHOTOGRAPHS SAURABH PANDEY, COURTESY THE ARCHITECTS

A college hangout with a difference - that's the Castro Café at the Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi; the difference being it was designed with the intent of serving more than endless rounds of *chai*, attracting the flies one typically associates with dingy, crowded college canteens, and actually serving as a socio-intellectual hub for its student body while also aspiring towards aesthetic architecture!

The last was easily assured to the college with its choice of one the country's premier design consultancies being selected for the project - Romi Khosla Design Studio, formed in 2001, led by a father-son duo, both of whom are highly regarded as creative thinking architects with internationally governed sensibilities of conceptualizing form and structure innovatively by stripping down ideas to their least elements!

Both father, Romi Khosla, and son, Martand Khosla, are graduate products of the Architectural Association, U.K and have years of experience in Urban, Tourism and Educational planning projects, which they successfully integrate into the ones accepted by their Design Studio - and all of which, require resourceful interpretation of contemporary designs applied to a wide cross-section of assignments, ranging from large Industrial projects to small, niche interiors. The 600 acre SEZ for Suzlon (Udupi), the National Gallery of Modern Art (Mumbai), School for Spastic children (New Delhi) and a 200 acre campus for the Assam valley School besides buildings for recreational purposes, such as the Luxury Meridian Golf Resort and Spa in Kathmandu and corporate planning issues, like the Eicher-Volvo Head quarters (Gurgaon) serve as prime examples of their diverse design portfolio.

However, though the studio has also undertaken ambitious projects like the Indian Embassy in Uzbekistan and Apeejay Corporate office in Calcutta, the Jamia Canteen was among Martand Khosla's first independent architecture projects, upon his return from the UK.

Led by the general artistically advanced, layered thinking atmosphere of their design studio's philosophy, Martand was keen to take the endeavor of 'a sense of contemporary Indianess' out of the office and into the Jamia campus via his construal, creative plan for its canteen. He reveals having visited sundry other college canteens before progressing on the concept for Castro Café; he is also quick to add that this reconnoitering helped open his eyes to aspects he definitely wouldn't include for the Jamia Canteen project! "I decided it would be nothing like the dull, dreary places conducive





to flies, lacking ventilation and often being cramped, rather than centers of debate or simply a place to chill-out.”

Of course, that the budget didn't cover air-conditioning costs for summer use (temperatures soaring over 45 degree centigrade would well warrant this, unless proper alternate cooling measures could be ensured) and 'chill-out' could literally mean so if an al-fresco design theme were followed, what with Delhi's winter temperatures dipping below 5 degree centigrade. These extreme climatic conditions were instrumental in determining the essentially undefined boundaries for the end result at Jamia Canteen, which is best described as a semi-open air café.

Strategically placed wall-mounted fans over the interior seating area provide for ventilation needs for occupants besides added circulation that is provided by blurring lines defining a certain articulation of spaces for outdoor-indoor usage that

THIS SPREAD The semi-open air café scheme provides for ambient temperatures for most of the year with varying degrees of shade provided in summer along with good ventilation ensured by the partially-concealed dining area walls (one long, one short but both independent of the roof, thus allowing for free flow of fresh air). **OPPOSITE PAGE** A wide passage provides for easy movement from kitchen (far end) to table. Simple, sturdy benches made of precast RCC and block-seats with Sheesham wood-tops flank rows of tables made of RCC, mounted with granite tops, make up the official seating for 500 persons.



allows varying degrees of light and shade within, like the decision to reserve two walls and a roof for the eating enclosure, but doing away with one wall further on which, like the floor, stills into space upon a short walk towards the edge of the design.

Ever since his first visit to the Jamia site left him with a 'claustrophobic' feeling, Martand was certain he would utilize the space for the new canteen in a way that would afford "a design concept that was programmatically, materially and climatically sensible for a high-traffic zone as a college canteen should be," while also accommodating an enclosed area where the actual cooking and food storage would be competently and hygienically handled by the staff.

This is how he struck upon the idea of straddling spaces for open-ended and closed usage so the whole soul design principle for the Jamia canteen would comprise of an ambiguous space in totality.

Asking about his preparation for the free-flow-

ing lines of Castro Café's design (located near the college auditorium and which, seamlessly merges into the upcoming Art Gallery project area also designed by him) elicits this laughing rejoinder - "Loads of mock-ups and lots of head-banging!"

Thus, to generate the 'sense of intrigue' so indispensable for a youth-friendly zone they could call their own, Martand introduced the Jamia student body to their first ever-steel building on the campus! Its sleek steel columns and beams, and walls constructed out of waste marble add to the futuristic look of the canteen while ensuring a unique texture that is economical, extremely functional and easy-maintenance, too! A simple hosing down is all that is required for a quick and effective clean-up job for the building, thanks to the ingenious usage of waste marble for walls, thereby eliminating the need for any whitewashing.

"I wanted it to catch people's imagination; the aim was not for a stylistic building, but to find a

THIS PAGE A 5-point elevation plan raises the shorter end of the front wall off the floor to close the cafeteria's semi-enclosed project design deal for Castro Café. Because it does not continue all the way to the roof, the wall also allows for a partial view of 4 of the pillars within and the concealed ceiling lights that give the space its distinctive, programmatically sensitive, look that is unique and contemporary.



solution to simple programs for kitchen purposes combined with clean eating and seating spaces that would produce a welcoming, expansive atmosphere and aspire towards contemporary aesthetics. This is why the design for Jamia Canteen is not ornamental at all, but something new, functional and accessible, which is so important for real architectural to offer - a sense of equality in communal spaces."

But, the fact remains that its changing sense of interior-external, distinctly defined yet independent and varied elements of the building (floor untouched by walls and the roof self-sufficient without these too), the use of locally available, hardy materials for flooring (Kota stone for skirting, dado, step-risers etc.) working to keep to a modest budget (project cost approximately Rs. 36 lacs for the 890 sq.m. area of the canteen) and a ceiling made up of perforated aluminium sheet (works effectively to reduce noise levels and also

holds concealed lighting for clean soffit), works to effectively engage the interests of a varied youth community.

Could sheesham wood tops laid over precast RCC benches and the rugged RCC granite-top tables, the non-reductionalist nature of a brick (for kitchen, besides the RCC structuring) and steel (for eating area) equation and waste cuts of marble stacked on their side and raised from the floor on a steel I-section actually amalgamate undefined architectural boundaries so these act as a negotiator between canteen-goers at India's most renowned mass communications college and the climate of Delhi?

As the subtle shift from simple to more complex forms in a community-focused youth environment is realized on a second glance, we'll let the 200 plus students hanging out on the fringes of Castro Café (officially intended to accommodate 50 persons) at any given day answer that!