

# Inventing futures with architecture

Combining various modes of working and engaging with the world — writing, international relations and programmes and designing buildings, architect Romi Khosla defines architectural practice and the role of a professional in a programmatically intricate way. In this conversation he discusses his three books, the 'idea of Delhi' and the characteristics of cities in contemporary India as he also notes his experiences while working in Syria and Palestine, and the world of speculative architectural spaces

**KAIWAN MEHTA** What was the purpose of working and producing the three books — *Buddhist Monastries in the Western Himalaya* (Ratna Pustak, Kathmandu, 1979), *Loneliness of a Long Distant Future* (Tulika, 2002) and *The Idea of Delhi* (Marg Publications, 2006) and how did their format develop?

**ROMI KHOSLA** The three books were written over a period of 25 years. Each of them is rooted in architecture and comments on interpreting aspects of different kinds of architectures that have spanned almost a thousand years. These are linked together almost abstractly, at the level of ideas, knowledge and wisdom — the three qualities which deeply influence the training we receive to become architects. Like Medicine, Accountancy, Engineering and Law, Architecture needs a long period of learning and yearning which is why it still remains one of the classical professions in post industrial societies. The other modern professions such as Journalism, Film making, Graphic design etc. have relatively shorter spans of learning time.

Long periods of learning have two characteristics. Firstly, they could expose you, over an extended time, to a teacher, a contemporary equivalent of the 'guru'. The second characteristic of these old fashioned extended periods of learning is that those

who go through them, change their ways of seeing. Ways of seeing define one's creative endeavours, one's world-view and one's actions for change which are unique for each one of us. Let me illustrate this aspect with some examples from my own personal experience. I have changed my ways of seeing at least three times, so far. Each time this change took place, different packages and patterns of knowledge were imbibed and the way I looked at the world kept changing again and again. Ways of seeing need the practitioner to consolidate and be independent and this cannot happen in short spurts of exposure, enthusiasm or obsession. I believe every architect knows this very well. My first enjoyable way of seeing began unfolding during my education and training as an Economist at university. I was very fortunate to have world-class gurus who thought and taught differently. Subsequently, the theoretical pattern of these academic ways of seeing was consolidated in the field work done as an auditor and accountant in the City of London. I went from one corporation to another to examine their accounts and tick their vouchers.

The second, and even more enjoyable, way of seeing began crystallising at the Architectural Association, where I went to



## Conversation

**Romi Khosla**  
and  
**Kaiwan Mehta**

## Images

**Romi Khosla**

study architecture after leaving the world of economics and finance, having spent some seven years in it. When I first came to architecture, my way of seeing seemed rock hard and I saw the world around me in terms of fiscal policy, bankruptcy, false stock records and balance sheets. These were my daily cups of tea in the financial centre of London. The day I walked through the front door of the Architectural Association, I knew my life would change in a very short time. I began to see in a radically different way. I felt placed on some anvil for heretics where everything was questioned and subjected to doubt. The imperative for original thinking was beaten into you. Consequently, within a period of 12 years, I had already acquired two parallel ways of seeing. When that happens, one begins to think in patterns that move horizontally across disciplines instead of getting into vertical silos.

My third way of seeing came later, by the time I had finished writing my first book on Buddhist Monasteries. During all these big changes in my life, it seemed that I had gained parallel ways of thinking laterally about every issue. This develops an insatiable appetite for more knowledge as well as an incurable desire for creativity and adventure. Moving between different ways of

seeing requires some fearlessness which, I realise now, can also be dangerous. The appetite for knowledge and the desire for creativity and adventure are one and the same addiction and one cannot have enough of it.

*Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalaya* was written in 1979. It documented 10 years of field research work from three adventurous expeditions deep into the remotest Himalayan regions of India that lie along the Tibetan Border. These were difficult expeditions, which involved long marches over months in fairly dangerous uncharted terrain. I wrote in the book, "Wandering in the high valleys and passes of the Western Himalaya is always a very beautiful experience. If there have been dangers then one has only regarded them as dangers in retrospect. No doubt if one had been alone, the whole experience may have been different or even frightening." The book presented new knowledge about the architecture of Buddhist Monasteries located in the remotest parts of the Himalayas some of which are over a thousand years old. We walked through blizzards, stayed nights in freezing caves, and lived amongst monks in remote monasteries as their first non-Tibetan speaking visitors. These were the consequences of carrying the burden of excessive



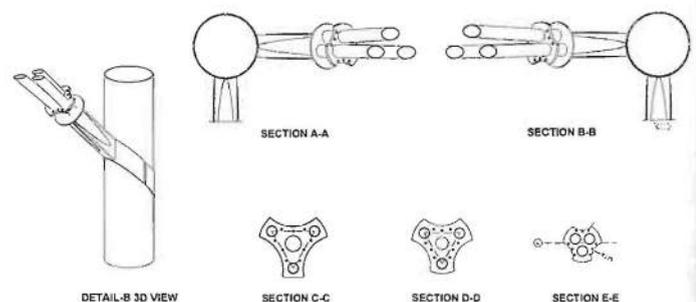
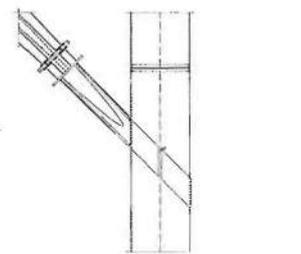
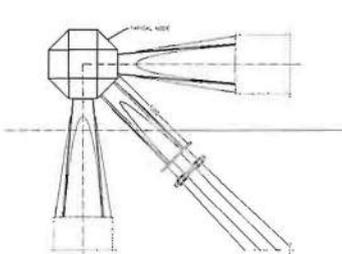
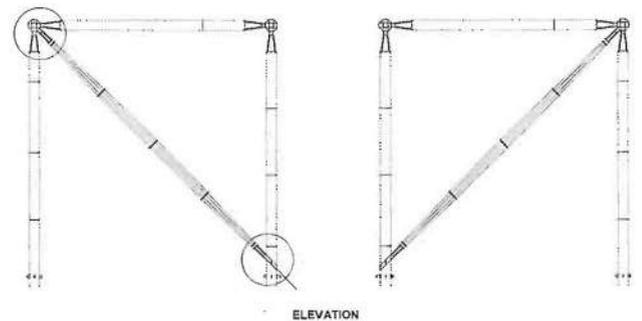
↑  
Bombed house in Kosovo  
— owner explaining the  
danger from snipers

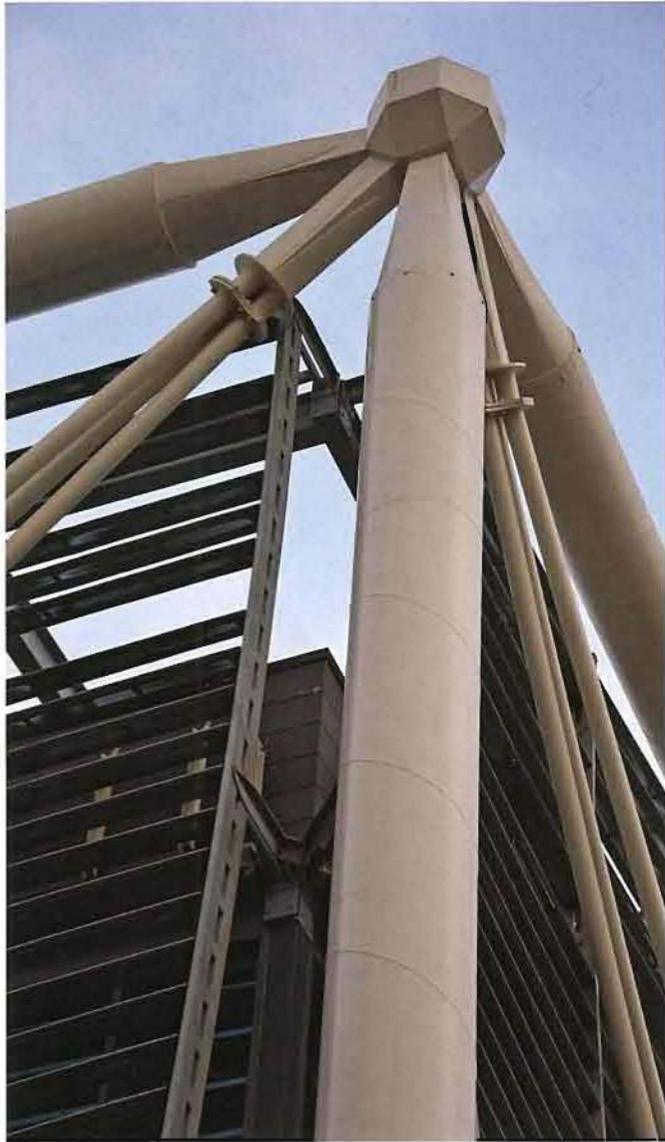
←  
Romi Khosla amongst the  
monks in the Himalayas

curiosity. The second book about the Long Distant Future came a decade later while trying to quench a thirst for knowledge and adventure that had increased. The book on Buddhist monasteries and temples was driven by a search for knowledge within tradition and alternative logic and the second book was driven by the search to understand the contemporary world through its conflicts and how modernism and architecture, or the destruction of it, was used to formulate new national identities. That insatiable quest for knowing more and risking more is evident in the contents of the book, much of which was written when I lived in Palestine, Eastern Europe, Middle East, Central Asia and China. Adventure was never far away. Advancing Israeli troop bullets shattered all the windows in the room where I sat — a real reminder of the madness of the times. Once I attempted to reach Montenegro by travelling through a landscape in which war had not quite ended, attempting to cross the border between Kosovo and Croatia, in a desolate no man's land. Suddenly a local militia mercenary soldier appeared and hauled me out of the car by sticking the barrel of his gun into my neck. He screamed at me to return to Kosovo on foot (50 kilometers away) and threw my identity card on the road and stepped on it as if it was a cigarette. The identity card was vital because I needed to hold it up high above my head whenever I walked through the debris of bombed ruins showing the snipers, with telescopic rifles, that I was a UN person and not a disguised Kosovar. My ways of seeing as an architect never left me during all these journeys and the book is about an architect's way of seeing the world around us. The third book on Delhi was an editorial venture commissioned by Marg with contributions from Romila Thapar, Akhilesh Mithal, General S M Chadha (Ex-Surveyor General) and others, beautifully photographed by Nitin Rai. It has glimpses into my ways of seeing cities. The Delhi book explored the imagined conceptions of Delhi and how its rulers have tried to convert these ideas into urban reality. Cities are fascinating because they reveal more about ideas than physical organising of space and have fascinated me ever since my exposure to Archigram through my tutor, Peter Cook, who guided me through my architectural thesis on 'Ultimate City — the last city on earth'. Some of it was subsequently published by Denis Sharp in the *AA Quarterly* issue on 'Politics and Architecture'. For me, in architecture, ideas are far more significant than the physical outcomes of design solutions. Architectural achievements are greatly impoverished if they do not have the clarity of original ideas to drive their outcome. Original and innovative ideas result in exciting buildings being built. Of course not every client is interested in ideas and that is a sad reflection on most Indian patrons. This book attempted to capture a notion of the importance of ideas and hence it is titled *The Idea of Delhi*.

**KM** How did you combine the work in the UN with your personal studio, metaphorically?

**RK** In my previous answer, I allude to the vast potential that opens up when your ways of seeing are influenced by architecture. For me, architecture, in its broadest sense, is about inventing futures and not just designing buildings. If architecture was just about buildings alone, then one would see a vacant plot, a vacant field and the architect would be engaged to invent a future installation just for that plot. To me this way of seeing may be the dominant way, but generally I find it difficult to restrict myself to the dominant way of narrowly interpreting architecture. But, I will admit that one can get tired of too much lateral thinking too. That's when I feel really tired and wish to see in silos that are influenced by buildings alone and I wonder, during those moments, whether I would have been happy just designing buildings and treating each site as *tabula rasa*. But, due to circumstances ("beyond my control" or shall I say "because of my control"), I acquired other ways of seeing, which inflated my egotistical curiosity to impossible levels. I became convinced I could invent futures for countries and cities and plots. I fear that this entirely unreasonable self-centred belief in my capabilities refuses to leave me. The Train and Water channel proposal for a Palestine-Israel peace project was one such outcome. It led onto missions in the Balkans and Cyprus.





Such ambitious arrogance is never fully successful or advisable, but sometimes it can change the circumstances of people, even on a large scale. The failures are far greater but a single success validates the justification of dreaming about inventing large-scale alternative futures. But this is dangerous ground to traverse. The mission in Kosovo to establish a national re-construction strategy failed. I like to think that the Allies sabotaged it, after all they had just bombed the daylight out of Serbia, and so there was every chance that my proposals were unrealistic. My mission in Bulgaria, on the other hand, was extremely successful and by putting a local team together and using the strategy I devised, we revitalised more than 100 towns using a new kind of Operations Manual. In Palestine, I assembled a Palestinian team and we wrote a handbook for its future schools, but it is a country whose future is controlled by the Zionists in Israel who will not let any re-vitalization efforts to be put in place. So, it is difficult to judge the success. Despite the uneven success of these mega-projects, that sense of adventure, the thirst for knowledge in the search for new creative solutions to problems of every scale refuses to leave me. Currently, I am working with Dr. Vikram Soni, a nuclear physicist and an environmental scientist, on a new generation of self-sustaining Natural Cities for Asia ([www.natural-cities.com](http://www.natural-cities.com)) This is inspired by a conviction that our present patterns of mega-led urbanisation are already unsustainable.

You might as well ask how one adjusts this entire insatiable thirst for adventure with work in a studio. When one works in the studio, one crafts architecture, not cities, not regions, not countries. One works like a jeweller, crafting a building and its intricate details. Working at this micro-level of architecture is most important and, for me it is an integral part of one's way of seeing. Let me give you an example. Recently, we completed a building for the corporate offices of Eicher-Volvo, which is the outcome of the pursuit of craft in contemporary architecture. Here, the effort was to craft a gem in pure steel, while at the macro-level, to address sustainability and global warming. So we designed and assembled all the tiny components of the building in radically new ways, as a master craftsman would do, and yet, at the holistic level, we designed for platinum LEEDS rating.

**KM** What are the primary concerns in approaching architecture in the context of India?

**RK** Architects, I believe, sit on a sharp edge that separates the ethics and compassionate side of architecture from the side that focusses on money and compromised solutions as a way to protect our fees. This uncomfortable posture on the edge ensures that architects can move from one side over to the other. In India, there is a range of opportunities extending between highly ethical concerns on one side and those that focus on monetary returns at any cost to quality. The ethical and compassionate profile of an architect attracts many clients, some seek charitable services and others somehow forget to pay your fee invoices. If, on the other hand, you opt completely for maximizing money and compromising on standards or creativity, then the quality of your work becomes insignificant but your bank balance remains healthy. So, in the end, most architects sit across the sharp edge focussing their eyes on the distant horizon for signs of a trail of dust being raised by that approaching client who respects ethics, treats you with compassion, and still wants to pay the fees properly to get a unique building. Of course, such an approaching client comes only once in a lifetime. For the rest of the time we are sharpening our tools in readiness. Pursuing a compromised architecture for accumulating money tends to dampen one's creative inspiration and the pursuit of new ideas, adventure, knowledge and wisdom. And yet how many of us can totally get away from this danger?

**KM** Can Architecture be regarded as an object that lives and breathes social and cultural spaces?

**RK** Generalising across the globe or drawing parallels between the Westward countries and us on any aspect of architecture can dilute our perceptions about our own reality. Most cities in India are currently passing through a phase in their history when cultural and social spaces and public institutions, such as the Delhi Urban Arts Commission that defend these spaces,

This spread and the next: Images of Eicher-Volvo building in Gurgaon illustrating the approach towards studio work that the Khosla studio considers to be like designing jewellery with custom-made design solutions; images show drawings, models and the actual building

are being trashed. In this difficult time that Indian cities are passing through, a lot of our architecture is living and breathing in an entirely new space called Speculative Space. It's a kind of virtual space enclosed by the vested and virtual components formed predominantly by monetary and fiscal pre-conditions. Human values or social spaces that enhance these values are not important in this speculative space.

The monetary constraints for this space get made when the FSI or FAR is punched into the calculator and multiplied by the square foot sale price. The fiscal constraint kicks in when transactions are signed to avoid taxation to conclude with a bag of cash and an envelope containing the cheque amount. In these situations, architecture installs a living-breathing object of speculation on the street. In the world of speculative architectural spaces, at the street commodity level, there are many agents for the building which is a sale and scoot deal to maximise cash returns from square-foot ownership. In this virtual space, in the typical Indian situation, it is difficult to allow conventional notions of creativity to play a significant part because the architect's creativity may also acquire the lowest common virtual values as he or she designs the installation to look good in catalogues and full-page colour advertisements. Architects then steer a crafty route between the builder's ambitions, the virtual images in the brochure and the municipal bye-laws. These are the conditions which inform the architect when he designs virtual space for the Marketing Boys.

However, whatever be the relevance of social, cultural or speculative space, architecture does respond with an end product by installing an object on a site. But, it would be reductionist to limit the debate about architecture simply to judging or commenting on this installed object. That object does not exist in isolation. It will breathe the values of the space within which it was conceived and then goes on to live and breathe in the larger space of the city. If it has been installed in speculative — virtual space, then it will live and breathe those virtual values. Here, I am using the word "virtual" to define values with a certain brittleness or intransience and indifference towards basic human values. It is evident in the absence of social intent that minimises sharing any portion of that installed object with the community on the ground. In these buildings, the glazing and façade vendors take over and cascade the façade from the top to the bottom which seals off the ground floor space away from the city. For instance, all those multistoried buildings in the center of New Delhi have privatised and monetised the space at ground level and fenced it off from the city by putting security guards on the gates and throwing the parking onto the pavements. This is an example of installing objects in virtual space. As far as the city is concerned, this space does not exist because it has been taken away. If such a space was to be real, the entire ground level would be available to the city for community use.

Buildings that breathe and live social and cultural space have an entirely different rationale. These are the buildings all architects love to do because, at heart, all architects have strong human values. For instance, when we designed the School for Spastic Children and the Castro Canteen in Delhi, we were able to let our creative instincts fly freely. We were not making virtual spaces but real ones that were going to change the experience and way of enjoying architecture by the users. During the design stage we spent many hours with the physically-challenged children to understand their world. In the case of the Castro Canteen in Jamia, we studied the existing canteen, which was not a nice place to be in and we knew what was needed — an open social space that was neither a pavilion nor an enclosed building. A space that would open up the mind of the users, a place for social interactions. A correspondent for *Mint* recently called this a semi-open café as a place with a semi-open intellectual character — part liberal and part conservative popular meeting hub.

**KM** Has the shape and form of Delhi changed in the last decade and do we need to re-understand our urban spaces and the architecture that is required for them?

**RK** Since I did the book *The Idea of Delhi* for Marg, my own thinking about cities and Delhi in particular has undergone a



sea change. Its not that this change in my thinking has reversed any of the earlier thoughts, its just that I have had the time and opportunity to go much deeper into the shape, form, and future prospects of our cities. Let us not forget that by the time 2050 comes around, India will have become a predominantly urban civilisation in terms of the number of people living in urban environments with connectivity, choice of retails goods and new aspirations and occupations.

If you want to believe those who conduct marketing surveys and make predictions, the Indian population is poised to become the second biggest middle-class blob in the world. Let me quote from one, "India is emerging as one of the world's leading consumer markets with the rise of the middle class income to US\$ 991 billion and where the total expenditure is expected to grow to nearly US\$ 3.6 trillion in 2020 with 65 per cent of this being spent on food, housing communications and transport." There are also other predictions and directives about letting all the future migrant population to settle in a series of huge mega-mega cities and satellites and industrial corridors that would connect these gigantic cities. These new visions for our urban civilisation haunt me with images of us all becoming inhabitants in a Matrix world programmed by the corporate sector to desire the comforts of the middle class. The nightmare is about those who are not in this middle-class blob but remain deprived and continue to suffer. Those people are also in the millions. It is when these unfortunate people become central to our concern that one's way of seeing cities like Delhi and Mumbai changes.

That was the time when I renewed an old friendship with Dr. Vikram Soni who had been an ace nuclear physicist once and had moved on to environmental sciences. We were both attending a colloquium organised by The Foundation for Universal Responsibility chaired by The Dalai Lama in Delhi, two years ago. At the meeting, interfaith teachers, astrophysicists and neuroscientists met to identify overlapping ongoing research efforts about universal knowledge and cognition. The occasion was certainly an appropriate one for conceiving the idea for a new urbanism that could challenge the nightmare advocated by international consultants that are preparing India to be the new consumer mega-market. Dr. Soni coined the title "Natural Cities" for this alternate urbanism, and we have been working on this model for a holistic sustainable urbanism for the last two years. The starting point for understanding the shape of things to come was to begin by looking at the city closest to us – Delhi and to identify its un-natural components. Then, I saw a city

that is barely governed equitably or transparently, barely able to decently house half of its population, barely able to treat its ordinary citizens with respect, barely able to supply water and barely able to restrain the continuous stream of in-migration. A city that has barely any savings or funds of its own. In short, a city of joy for politicians, officials, and the bold and the beautiful. Dr. Soni had already done considerable research on the water availability for Delhi and come to the conclusion that there was no way that the urban population of the National Capital Region was going to be able to have a reliable supply of water in the future. Contrary to the recommendations of international consultants, we realised that there was a need for a drastic reduction in the populations of all our metro cities if we were to get a clean water supply in the future. Unlike power, we cannot increase our water supply by using coal, oil or nuclear fuels to materialise springs and rivers.

My earlier perceptions of Delhi began to change. Delhi is like a giant parasite that sucks its water from the Himalayas, some 300 kilometers away because it's neighbour, the river Yamuna has died for the moment. Delhi sources its food from Himachal, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh, its meat from Rajasthan and its energy from all the surrounding states by exercising a VIP priority on the grid. Delhi is far from being a sustainable city. In its social, economical and environmental aspects, Delhi has become, in our assessments, an un-natural city with the poor long-term prospects, like any common parasitic organism. Unfortunately, politicians, officials and the builders have not yet had time to focus on this wall into which the city is driving. The policymakers are difficult to identify and whoever they are, they are convinced that the recommendations of the international consultants are the biblical predictions for our cities, so they are framing irrelevant policies such as building Delhi as a high-rise city to replicate Manhattan and Hong Kong, and to show it off to our international creditors. The policy makers imagine that Delhi needs yet another Master Plan with higher FAR. By doing so, they are ignoring the 74th Amendment of the Constitution, which has given this responsibility to the Municipalities. One's ways of seeing have to be revised and updated constantly because changes come swiftly in this globalised world of architecture. Working with other disciplines re loads one's way of seeing the present and the future and, for me, this has had consequences on my way of seeing Delhi today.



**Romi Khosla** is a Delhi-based architect who also studied Economics at the University of Cambridge. He has spent considerable time in the Balkans, Palestine, Israel, Tibet, Central Asia and China as a Principal International Consultant to the UNDP, UNESCO and UNOPS. His writings include *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalayas* (Ratna Pustak, Kathmandu, 1979) and *Future Schools in Palestine* (UNESCO, 2000)