

INDIA SPECIAL

# Time Out

## Delhi

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AUGUST 30 - SEPTEMBER 26 2013  
VOL. 7 ISSUES 12 & 13 ₹100

9<sup>th</sup>  
ANNIVERSARY  
ISSUE



# SUPERSTARS

\* Filmmakers \* Art collectors \* Entrepreneurs \* Designers \*  
\* Writers \* Gallerists \* Architects \* Chefs \* Dancers \* Activists \*

# Steel life

## Kaiwan Mehta talks to Shirish Patel, the engineer of much of modern India.

The very first thing that Shirish Patel designed was an office chair. It is still in use. "I'm a designer interested in all problems of design," said Patel, one of post-Independence India's finest civil engineers, adding that his predisposition to the formal construction of objects extended from "the original office brochure to factories and bridges".



Patel, who is 81, established his own practice in 1960, later converting his firm Shirish Patel and Associates Consultants into a private limited company in 1974. Since then, his construction portfolio has accrued a varied spectrum of projects. The Larsen & Toubro and BHEL buildings, in Bangalore, Mumbai's landmark high-rise apartments, Petit Hall and Kanchenjunga, Goa's legislative assembly, parts of the Vizag docks, mass housing projects in Navi Mumbai and the Kemp's Corner flyover are just some of the hundreds of structures Patel has been associated with. The feather in his cap is the global International Federation for Prestressed Concrete award.

"In 1994 we won an award, for design of the headquarters building of Engineering Construction Company, a subsidiary of L&T, in Chennai. We were the first, and are still the only Indian company to have won this award."

For the country's architects and urban planners, however, Patel's name is intertwined with the debates on the development of India's commercial capital; particularly the planning of Navi Mumbai and the reclamations at Nariman Point and Cuffe Parade in the 1960s and '70s. Patel's forays into the argumentative battlefield of haphazard urban development began with his four critical contributions to the *Times of India* in the '60s against the South Mumbai reclamations.

He later came together with architects Charles Correa and Pravina Mehta, to work on the idea of a twin-city – Navi Mumbai. Although part of the trio that conceptualised Navi Mumbai, Patel has remained its most ardent critic. "The proposal was to acquire land around the city and make it into a planned development rather than them growing sporadically," he explained. A planning team composed of people like playwright Vijay Tendulkar, economist Kirit Parikh, Correa and Patel was constituted with the City and Industrial Development Corporation as the main planning authority.

However, Patel left the planning board after five years of work on the committee. The initial idea and goal remained important for him. "The New Bombay planning was supposed to be self-financing, which it achieved successfully, but in the process the government and planning bodies, rather than being the custodians and promoters of public welfare and interest, started operating with the logics of a private developer with counting profits," he said.

But what brings the best of engineering concepts as well as the critically driven urban ideas together in Patel's personality? "I am not a structural engineer, I am a civil engineer, and civil engineering is all about organising and putting in place systems and infrastructure, and planning is about engaging with systems and arranging them on land; in both cases, one is planning and organising systems for people, for the environment and making living conditions available to populations and masses," he said.

Patel also pointed out how the government needs to negotiate across conflicting interests, keeping in mind the public good and welfare of the city and its people. A continuing concern remains what will happen to Dharavi. "I would love to see a more intelligent, more respectful and more democratic approach to the problem of Dharavi."

## THE BIG 10

### Charles Correa

An architect, planner and theoretician credited with introducing a modern design idiom to post-Independence India.

### PK Das

Actively involved in organising slum-dwellers for better living and evolving affordable housing models, engaging in policy framework for mass housing, reclaiming public space in Mumbai by developing the waterfronts, urban renewal and conservation projects.

### Vikas Dilawari

A conservation architect who also works on low-cost restorations. He was awarded the Unesco Asia-Pacific Award of Excellence in 2005 for his work on the Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Mumbai.

### Vaibhav Dimri and Madhav Raman

Co-founders of Anagram Architects, a young and dynamic firm that specialises in public infrastructure planning, urban design, architecture, sceneography broadcast design, furniture design and interior design.

### Martand Khosla

An architect whose work ranges from theatre sets to institutional and corporate offices.

### Abha Narain Lambah

Has used her ideas to preserve buildings that exude a sense of the history of the city to which they belong. Her firm has been awarded eight Unesco Asia-Pacific Awards.

### Rahul Mehrotra

An urban planner, lecturer and author. He's also professor at and chair of the department of urban planning and design at Harvard University.

### Gurmeet Rai

A conservation architect who has worked on projects throughout India, particularly in Punjab. Two of Rai's projects – the Krishna Temple and Lakhpat Gurudwara, received Unesco Asia-Pacific Heritage Award in 2001 and 2004, respectively.

### Brinda Somaya

Has practised contemporary architecture and heritage conservation for over two decades.

### Chitra Vishwanathan

Runs her architectural practice in Bangalore with a focus on ecology and environmental consciousness.