

Interview with Prof. Charanjit S Shah

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Date: May 21, 2014, 5:08 p.m.

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PHOTO: PROF. CHARANJIT S SHAH

"A built form should not be treated as a mass of brick and concrete but as a living organism"

Pioneer of the Green Building movement, [Prof. Charanjit S Shah](#) is an Architect, City Planner, Educationist, Author and an Academician with a prolific practice that spans over 4 decades. His works include the Jawaharlal Nehru National Co-operation Complex, New Delhi (1973), Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur (1980) and recently the new Chennai International Airport (2013). He along with his team of Professionals at Creative Group have won several design competitions, which include the National Design Competition for Chennai International Airport, Raipur Integrated Terminal, Goa and Vadodra Integrated Passenger Terminal. He is also one to implement net zero in green buildings and Green Ratings in Water and Energy Conservation.

Having authored many books including the Architect Hand Book and found the GPA in 1977 or the Guild of Practicing Architects, the noted academician opens up about the design and architecture scene in India, his personal journey and more in a candid chat. **Excerpts**

Some Personal information that you would like to share?

It has been a struggle but nonetheless in retrospect, a pleasant journey! My parents went through the horrifying phase of Indian partition, migrating from Islamabad in Pakistan to New Delhi where I spent my childhood days in a refugee camp in Purana Qila, where I was born.

Facing the hardships of being homeless, cloth less and moneyless, I can proudly say today, that no stone was left unturned while raising me. My parents constantly rehabilitated us with the basic comforts of life. I joined school from Harcourt Butler, getting admitted to the School of Planning and Architecture in 1965, and graduating in 1970. I was not too passionate about architecture until I joined the course here, it was sheer education imbibed by the teachers in architecture and its allied fields that embodied me with the interest and understanding and I got intrigued by the philosophies of architects and contemporary planners, and tried to emulate them.

When did you first start your practice and what kind of projects have you been doing?

The humble beginning of my practice began in 1971 with an exposure to exhibition design where I also built various stalls and pavilions, for the India Trade Fair which was held in 1972. It was challenging and I was fortunate to design stalls for the states of Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab as well as handicraft pavilions in Pragati Maidan in New Delhi.

I subsequently moved to designing individual houses, factories and interiors in and around Delhi which was both professionally and financially satisfying.

Around then I started to participate in open design competitions and won my first competition for flattered factories for DSIDC in the year 1973, subsequently winning the national design competitions for the Jawaharlal Nehru National Cooperative Complex at New Delhi in 1976, completing the multistoried project by 1980. This helped me with recognition and professional respect. In 1984, our firm won the National Design Competition for Institute of Development Studies in Jaipur.

We have grown today and our expertise besides basic architecture has expanded to infrastructure development specializing in airports, Metros, multi modal transportation Hubs, Railway Stations and large institutions complexes.

What defines your style?

My endeavors have always been to associate myself and groom my creations in a lively and eco- friendly manner. A built form should not be treated as a dead mass of bricks and concrete, but as a living organism. To my mind the built form needs to breathe and should be embodied in the natural environment to be a part of the nature.

Tell us something about your approach to your projects?

India is a fast developing nation; there is tremendous impact on urban growth. The cities are being re-defined, now growing in multi layers. The parameters of architecture practice have grown in terms of urbanization, scale and growth. There is changing lifestyles, modes of transportation and deficiency of urban land. The entire parameter of practice of architecture needs to be redefined.

We at Creative Group firmly believe to adapt to the realities and necessities of the day so as to have a pragmatic approach towards design issues. It is our ability to perform and an appropriate and adequate understanding of various issues and discipline that convinced most of our colleagues and consultants that smaller architectural firms can handle larger projects. Gurpreet, my son's, coming from USA to India after completing his Urban Design and with a global working experience was a turning point indeed, and we started working towards an organized practice. Luckily, we have the synergy to work together. He was instrumental in bringing global associates on mega projects. His vision and ambition brought a revolutionary change. Our global associates were also pleasantly surprised to see our professional work culture through a small team of architects delivering with global professional standards.

My younger son Prabhpreet too has a foresight to participate in larger developments taking place in India like the Delhi Bombay corridor, metro networks etc. He has been looking for eco friendly affordable housings to be built jointly with sensitivity towards design, material application and construction technique.

Which kind of projects do you most enjoy doing?

Kongu Convention Centre was one of the most interesting projects for me. The project was a Low-Cost Multipurpose Convention Facility for over 4500 students of the Kongu Engineering Campus. The designing and construction of this project imparts iconic character to the educational facility.

The basic form of the Auditorium has been inspired from the Garuda (eagle) in flight. In Hindu religion, Garuda is a Hindu deity usually the mount (Vahanam) of Lord Vishnu, having a body of a strong man with a white face, red wings, and an eagle's beak and with a crown on his head. The form of the auditorium evolves from the shape of the Garuda. The building's wing is intended longer & massive (resembling the body of an eagle) while both the side wings having a lesser volume with cut-outs for efficient light & ventilation for outdoor public interaction spaces.



Kongu Convention Centre

Tell us something about the design for the internationally acclaimed Chennai Airport. What is the story?

We were fortunate enough to have won over eight consecutive national/global architectural design competitions including the one for [Chennai Airport](#). The Chennai Airport has been a very challenging experience for all of us here. This was also the first time we were tying up with Global consultants. Being a government project, we were very conscious to create proper tender documents, conditions of contract, detailed specification and good for construction drawings, going through the bureaucratic challenges and approvals of ministries and the planning commission to make sure that it adheres to norms as laid on by the central vigilance, central audits and CPWD.

Chennai Airport was a running airport; hence we were pressed with availability of space within the site. The experience gained working with global consultants has also helped us maintain financial and timeline for mega projects like Chennai and [Goa Airport](#) etc. All the diverse works, approval and working in a large government set up was handled professionally to complete a mega project of Rs 2105 crores, and a covered area of more than 2 million square foot within a period of 40 months.



Chennai Airport

What/ who inspires you?

The great masters like Ar. A.P Kanvinde, Ar. M. M. Rana, Ar. J.R. Bhatta, Ar. Laurie Baker, Ar. Rusy Khambatta and Ar. Habib Rehman gave me insight into the profession and were a great inspiring source in the professional scene.

I was shy for someone to have seen me perform successfully in my profession, even inviting from my peers wonder given my inherent nature and abilities.

"The Ignited Minds" by Dr. Abdul Kalam has been an inspiration, "Dream, Dream, Dream, Dream transform into thoughts and thoughts result in action..." my career has been a dream envisioned through an ignited mind through the various stages of my life... seeing the dream turn into reality is professionally very satisfying.

Sir, has been your biggest challenge so far ?

During the course of my initial practice, I faced a lot of resistance from established big players as well as professional issues with relation to the architectural practice. We started interacting with these bigger architects for proper status for younger budding architects.

I established the Guild of Practicing Architects (GPA) in 1976 and was appointed as the founder general secretary. We, as a young group took GPA a long way, propagating the profession through various seminars, conferences, exhibitions and print media etc. Slowly, the group expanded and positioned themselves in COA as well as in IIA and other professional bodies.

Tell us about the Architect Hand Book, when did that come about?

The passion towards writing developed within me around the time GPA was beginning to reach out to these organizations. I worked towards the publication of my book, Architect Hand Book in 1996 also during the SAARCH conference in New Delhi. Thereafter I authored a series of books on the various other allied subjects of applied architecture. I wished to collectively do some contribution towards the upliftment of architectural profession, being elected as the chairman of the Indian Institute of Architects, (NE) and chairman of SAARCH 1996, as also a professional advisor to various other organizations.

You have been an academician lending your services to prominent architecture establishments like the Vastu Kala Academy, SPA and Jamia Millia Islamia in the country. What are your insights about the present educational curriculum?

I am afraid that we need to redefine our methodology of architecture teaching. From a single window delivery, we need to inculcate finance and project management. We also need to give proper attention to various other elements of applied architecture to generate leadership qualities in students.

It is also during my teaching at SPA, Vastu Kala Academy and Dept. of Architecture in Jamia Millia, that I learned that students neglect these aspects, limiting to few age old books like Building Construction by Macay, Mitchell and Building Materials of books by Prof. Deshpandey as per the present curriculum and methodology.

COA must develop this aspect sensitively to develop books on some very important subjects of architecture and identify young authors with a bend towards writing.

The 400 odd schools of architecture have an intake of roughly 25,000 per year. A short term refresher course too must be introduced for the faculty to constantly update their knowledge.

You have worked actively in the field of environmental sustainability for over 4 decades now, kindly tell us more.

Since the inception of my firm, I have been very conscious in my designs to be sustainable and respect Mother Earth. During my interaction with the pioneers and great masters of architecture, the concept of sustainability particularly through passive strategies became my mission.

I am able to understand and work ambitiously towards net zero. We at Creative Group along with Gurpreet S. Shah, Prabhpreet S. Shah and passionate team of the young Creative Group family, Rahul, Abhishek, Megha, Roshani, Pankaj, Jitendra, Indubhusan, Abhinav, Akaniksha and others have been groomed to deliver any project of any magnitude.

My industrial project, [Amudham Dairy](#), Erode was adjudged and selected as a suitable project having "Romance in Construction" and received a lot of media coverage. [Golden Huts Resort](#) is another sustainable project which follows geometry based on courtyard planning and buttresses emerging of landscape. The design is flexible and expandable with a hierarchy of courtyards.

Do you feel architects and designers in India should be/are concerned about environmental sustainability? How is Environmental Sustainability approached at Creative Group?

The true job of an architect and a designer is to envision a city, mould it in a manner suitable for the surrounding environment and its user. Create spaces unusual, traditional yet contemporary. And the initial stage of designing any project shall start by understanding the locale of the place.

Architecture presents a unique challenge in the field of sustainability. Construction projects typically consume large amounts of materials, produce tons of waste, and often involve weighing the preservation of buildings that have historical significance against the desire for the development of newer, more modern designs.

Sustainable construction is defined as "the creation and responsible management of a healthy built environment based on resource efficient and ecological principles". Sustainably designed buildings aim to lessen their impact on our environment through energy and resource efficiency.

Creative Group since its inception four Decades ago has had the passion and vigor to continuously deliver Living Structures which are – Self Sustainable, Energy Efficient – designed to stay in harmony with the Existent Nature, respecting Mother Earth.

Creative Group has had a major advantage in that environmentally responsive design was embedded in our methodologies long before it became an imperative. From our Residence Designs to Mega Infrastructure Projects of Chennai Airport and [Metro](#) Rail Designs, we sought to create inherently sustainable built environments.

Stepping forward 25 years, Creative Group has developed strategies and technologies which inform our design work from the beginning of the process. Understanding the Environment and Building for the Nature rather than Building against it has been CREATIVE's approach since as long as Architecture practice began many years ago.

Our methodologies have meant adhering to the ECBC Codes and LEED Rating Systems. Our passion for Sustainability has further expanded through our continuous and Positive contribution through Indian Green Building Council (IGBC).

We understand that sustainability encompasses the economic affordability compared to the return over time from life cycle efficiency. We understand that sustainable places are socially inclusive, culturally diverse and therefore optimized in use.

From this point, engaging with our clients and consultants, our methodology encompasses the following:

- Energy strategies for either or both optimized conventional systems and alternative energy potentials
- Waste management from construction to operation
- Materials ranging from recycled to recyclable, and to new materials technologies
- Day lighting and air quality optimization – Maximizing Daylight and Minimizing Heat Gain.
- Efficient Material Utilisation
- Transport and alternative transport facilities

Are there any challenges that you continue to face today? If yes, what is your strategy to tackle them?

There is a big question after being involved into all types of practice for the last four decades or so. In today's global knit context, is the architect to lead or to be lead?

The role of architect needs to be redefined. All of us need to re look and penetrate into various aspects of challenges which the profession is facing. The overlapping roles, professional clashes between architects and engineers in understanding and visualization need to be addressed.

Architect being the team leader, mostly faces a lot of professional issues in any project, which he/she designs and for the successful execution of any project, one comes across a lot of challenges and hurdles, which to my mind need to be addressed holistically with proper professional understanding.

What drives you?

Every time is a learning and ongoing experience and I wish to learn more and more so that I am able to deliver the best to the world. What drives me the most is how successfully one can cross the high tides in one's professional career through an in depth understanding of architecture?

I take the progressive chart of career as a circle. There is no low or high graph. The progressive performance keeps the wheel moving and generates energy to learn more from the ocean of knowledge. I live with thy's grace and it is His will which will make me sail, through the low and high tides of life's circle.

Any words of wisdom for youngsters starting out today.

Sometimes certain targets look impossible to the mind, they might even be difficult to achieve but definitely are not impossible. During my own professional journey, it might be my pure confidence that gave me varied opportunities. I can humbly conclude that every stage of life with its various challenges is a step towards learning and experiencing the fundamental of allied concerns, which when tackled professionally, leads to excellence and perfection. Also I have always expressed that it has never been a planned professional journey for me, one should look at it the way it comes. Moreover importantly it is your attitude towards the deliverable which slowly and gradually grows into your aptitude.

The righteous attitude results into excellence. I would rather frankly state if there is a will there is a way.

Visit works of Prof. Shah and his firm, Creative Group at profile, [Prof. Chamanil S. Shah](#)

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