

---

## The Building Trade In India

The building trade in India has vastly remained a fragmented industry, and architecture a marginalized profession. Today, an isolated practice is likely to endanger the profession with irrelevance. Contemporary practices in India need to be more inclusive, diverse and delimiting. Collaboration in architecture maybe perceived as a potential testing lab for creative and critical ideas, whilst at the same time helping to nurture fundamental skills. Sometimes a project may see innovation that could prove efficient and benefit the whole industry. Unfortunately, the skill-set is lost or remains dormant once a project is complete. At a time when majority of architects continue to see themselves as central to the decision-making process of a project, it is imperative to decentralize this system.

With blurring of roles and responsibilities the architect must assume the role of a process facilitator, and a co-creator. Encouraging an individual of expertise to develop their own response to social, physical, and environmental contexts and concerns; the two featured projects- Book Building and Play Room designed by Chennai-based Madras Office for Architects & Designers (MOAD); discuss the merit in the process of collaboration and a successive change in the role of the professional architect. "I think we gave Mahesh a fairly impossible brief to begin with. What Mahesh has captured for us is the process- the way we work has been translated into a building", recalls Gita Wolf, Lead Designer & Co-Founder, Tara Books.

The Book Building sits on a corner plot with all the proposed infrastructure- commercial, private, accommodation, offices, parking, and space for future expansion. Overall it was an ambitious, and sufficiently complex brief. On his first meeting with the client, Architect Mahesh Radhakrishnan vividly describes, "I think we had our first meeting in the client's previous studio, beside a well in the outdoors on a cudappah slab. I presented an initial model to them in that setting. From there on I began observing their way of working."

The clients imagined the Book Building as a contemporary space that would represent how they design books- keeping certain traditions alive or extracting inspiration to recreate an identity. It is a unique collaboration they have with each of their artists. As a graphic designer Gita adds how, "One of the first conversations we had was about visualisation. I can think in terms of graphic design. If somebody comes to me with an idea about a book, I can visualise almost exactly how it could turn out. But I do not have that thing with space. We enjoy it when our collaborators take us to places we have never seen before."

Architecture has been intentionally kept light in the making; it takes a backseat and lets the user and process shine. By not designing individual spaces for a specific function, one moves organically through the architecture. If the design of walls and spaces infuses a certain openness, art infuses the whole building with a creative energy befitting a studio. The captivating tree mural by Bhajju Shyam, a gond artist who works out of Bhopal makes the court on the ground floor seem complete. A distinct assemblage and compilation of a façade with window grills was a challenge the architect took up in the attempt to explore a traditional architectural vocabulary that could reflect the uniqueness in the artistic identity of Tara Books.

---

“It is quite interesting to realise that not many people who visit us know that an architect was involved in the design of this building. They don’t know how to place it. It is a place full of light and air and creativity, and people are really happy working here. That is fundamental.”, Gita Wolf mentions on the Book Building post-occupancy. Although paradoxically the building itself has a very strong identity, it is an extension of Tara Books as independent publishers of handmade books. On the outside, it resembles a stark white box capped with a cluster of red sloping roofs that do not reveal themselves entirely at first. In time the Book Building has become much less of a building, and more of a space for people and sounds in an atmosphere of engagement.

When architects work with architects from specialized areas of expertise, the design process can be exhilarating. Describing this association for the Play Room project Mahesh recalls how, “It helped a great deal when all the collaborators performing different roles were architects. Their knowledge of 3-dimensionality of space and its response to the end user is evident in the way they contributed to the project.” This mutual knowledge was crucial as the project’s concept revolved around establishing order in the existing space.

Tucked away in a residential neighbourhood, Play Room is a child activity centre situated in the heart of Chennai. What once was a traditional courtyard house, was now a degenerated space owing to several ad hoc changes. The court was found to be covered by a roof above, rendering it unfit for domestic use. The site had to undergo a drastic transformation. The primary challenge was two-fold: reimagining an intuitive place for kids, and establishing a narrative in a space that did not exist before. When MOAD began work on retracing an existing, hidden layout on-site; collaboration with Bangalore-based Lighting Designer Anusha from Lighting Spaces and Artist Marcos happened incidentally. A limited budget allowed the architect to explore color as an organizer and light as a material that could define both space and its quality.

On brainstorming with MOAD, Anusha mentions how, “It involved not just the virtual simulation but in-reality experiencing and studying the raw volume and transitions at site. During the colour coordination and painting process, Lighting Spaces came on board so that the resultant effect of application of colour to the volume (i.e., fluorescence, blur, hue, saturation) could be understood before deciding on the technique of lighting.” The chosen diffused lighting technique provides flexible, configurable and usable light at the same time such that each volume is readable as a distinct configuration. The graphic work by Marcos eventually unifies the space by breaking the rigidity of the volumes, rendering it like a carefully curated landscape through a playful use of characters that communicate the intent of space. The transformation is visible, it is simultaneously bold and elegant.

Of all the trends impacting the industry today, complexity and speed influence the practice significantly. In the face of an increased pace of project execution, architects are often tempted to slow down in order to make holistically informed decisions. Engaging with professionals creatively remains a less-explored territory, but one that can enrich the profession. Patronage in collaboration is no more a mere transaction between an architect and a client, or the architect and collaborator- it is a relationship that is made of mutually enriching dialogues involving knowledge sharing and innovation, and extends well beyond the completion of a project. While this fundamental change of perception in practice is still in its infancy, there is much that could be learnt from contemporary practices that foreground a process over an outcome.