

Apprentice to Architect: Finding one's Voice

In conversation with
Girish Doshi

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Girish Doshi is the principal at *Navakar Architects*, Pune and also a much loved teacher of architecture. He graduated from BKPS School of Architecture, Pune and apprenticed with Balkrishna Doshi at Sangath for seven years. He began his independent practice in 1987, which is responsible for a wide range of projects- private houses, schools and institutions and public buildings. He is a recipient of the J.K. Cement Architect of the Year Award in 1994 and AESA- Kumar Architect of the Year Award in 1995.

He recently put together an exhibition of his work titled, “**Construction of Space and Place**” portraying a journey of a practice for 30 years. It emerges out of a simple realisation that architecture is not a simple manipulation of forms and materials, but is about construction of space and place; and in this, light plays a decisive role in design. In all this, there is a conviction that the aesthetic truth of these ideas will in some measure contribute toward a dignifying human existence. The exhibition was shown as a public display at MES Pillai College of Architecture, Navi Mumbai.

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Girish Doshi in his three decades of acclaimed practice has to his credit a niche body of work, at the heart of which is a negotiation between traditional and modern forms and values. He describes his work as “Traditionally Contemporary”. He is known for innovations in use of materials and construction technology to achieve economy and delight in his buildings. His influences are firmly modernist, they manifest in his works as a pragmatic way to achieve an end- to mitigate harsh sun or rain, to bring in light or to meet his client’s budget. Doshi is not a man of many words as mostly he prefers his work to speak and express itself. In this conversation, he opens up about his life as a student, an apprentice and an architect trying to shape his client’s dreams. We get a glimpse of the architect as a person whose life story is not removed from his work.

DALVI

Tell us something about your formative years, your experiences of working with Balkrishna Doshi and Anant Raje.

DOSHI

After joining Architecture in Pune Government School (now BKPS) in 1974, I failed in my very first year in the subject of theory of structure- just by two marks! If I look back now, it became an opportunity more than a failure as I found “*Oeuvre Complete*” – a set of books containing complete works of Le Corbusier. The impact of his work, the plans and sections was so great, even with my limited knowledge of English, it completely amazed me.

The next five years in the school passed like a dream, and then by chance I happened to see Balkrishna Doshi at Ahmedabad NASA.¹ I was intrigued by his attire and personality. Someone suggested I visit his studio ‘Sangath’ in the same city, which was about to be completed. The partially underground building with white china mosaic vaulted roof and red oxide flooring possessed me. Over the years, this building has become quite well-known but for me at that time, I found my guru whose guru was Le Corbusier. After completing my studies at Pune, very next day I boarded a train to Ahmedabad with a singular aim of working with

¹NASA stands for National Association of Students of Architecture in India. It holds national and regional conventions every year where delegates come from all over the country to participate in keenly contested competitions and events.

Balkrishna Doshi, without knowing that it won't be that simple. It took me five months and that too working in Sangath at night without his knowledge to convince him and join officially. That day and now, thirty seven years later if I look back, I cannot imagine my life without him. During those seven years (1980-1987), I worked for him with unconditional faith; learning not only about architecture, but also of music, painting and life. Whenever he came back from his trip abroad, he would narrate stories and gave us an insight on the world. Students from all over the world were part of the Sangath family and learning was a wholesome experience.

Bhimsen Joshi, Paolo Soleri, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Nari Gandhi and likes of them were regular visitors to the studio. For a Pune boy, it was quite a learning.

My association with Anant Raje came much later in 2007-08. It came as another blessing, to learn from him discipline, hand drawn sketches and profound thinking. He was a great architect and a lovable person.

DALVI

Tell us about other influences that have a bearing on your practice.

DOSHI

I must speak about my other guru V.D. Joshi, a renowned structural engineer who was working with Joseph Allen Stein in New Delhi. Without mentioning him, my story of formative years would be incomplete. During my apprenticeship at Sangath, in 1982, I got this great opportunity to assist V.D. Joshi in his ferro-cement workshop at Pen near Mumbai. Through a grant by Khadi Gram Udyog,² he had organised a workshop for masons who came from all over India. The workshop went on

² The Khadi and Village Industries Commission is a statutory body formed by the Government of India in 1956 based on Mahatma Gandhi's principles of self reliance.



Some experiments with ferrocement

for a month, where he taught them new techniques of making shelters, gobar-gas plants, grain stores, water storage tanks, manholes etc. using ferro-cement technology.

I was fortunate to receive this training in the techniques of ferrocement, poured rubble masonry, ferrogami etc. first hand. I suddenly realised that then that I was equipped with knowledge of light-space-people-architecture. Knowledge of ‘design’ from Master Doshi and knowledge of ‘build’ from Master Joshi. So this is the story of how I was initiated in the ‘design and build’ model.

DALVI

When you set up your own practice in late 80s, there was a certain prevailing discourse in Indian architecture. Many people were talking about going back to the roots or ideas like mandala and vastu had gained a currency. Search for vernacular in the way we should build was also evident. How did you decide to chart a path for yourself? Did young practices have much choice about what they wanted to do?

DOSHI

I started my practice under the name ‘Navkar Architects’ in Pune in 1987 upon my return from Ahmedabad. Luckily, in the beginning of my practice, though I was aware of Vastu-



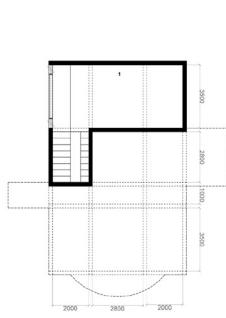
Mukesh Dedhiya House

Mandla concepts, my search for my own expression led me to contemporary vernacular. Architecture concerned with domestic and functional rather than public or monumental buildings. My upbringing in Pune and my vacations in Rajkot -my native place in Gujarat, as also my joint family of four brothers was a backdrop for my architecture. My area of interest was the domestic and functional, rather than the monumental, and my search naturally lead me to an exploration of “contemporary vernacular”.

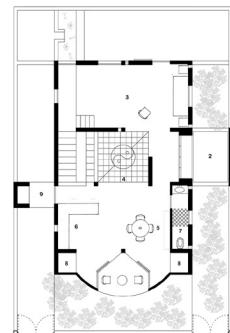
My practice as young architect didn't have much choice but I was lucky to build my first house for my dear childhood friend Mukesh Dedhia and roots of my ‘design and build’ model of practice started right away with this project with guidance from V.D. Joshi. For this project, I eventually received JK Cement award. More than the award itself, I cherish Charles Correa telling me his experience as a jury member and how he was impressed by my project and convinced other members of the jury in favour of it. To my pleasant surprise, I was sharing stage with Balkrishna Doshi at the award ceremony as he was being awarded the ‘Master Architect Award’. Life had come full circle.

DALVI

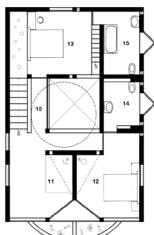
You have designed and worked on a large number of private houses. It is always challenging to fulfil someone else's dreams. What have been your experiences? Who does the house represent according to you- the client or the architect?



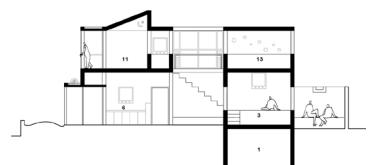
Basement plan



Ground floor plan



First floor plan



Longitudinal section

Mukesh Dedhiya House 2

DOSHI

If we take the *Wada* as an example, who does the *Wada* represent according to you, the client or the architect? It is important to mould someone else's dreams into architecture with continuous search of timelessness. Like what they did with *Wada* in recent past, and surprisingly *Wada* typology represent middle class to rich class keeping same plan essentially with central courtyard, but changing the size of foot print. To me you are successful if you can merge a client's aspiration and architect's integrity with space, material and contemporary mood, like what Villa Savoye represented in 1928. But I must confess this path was difficult as one is searching for soul of architecture and not how building will look from outside.



Khadke House

DALVI

You have also experimented a lot with construction techniques. Your practice follows a design-build model as you have said. Tell us more about such a mode of practicing architecture.

DOSHI

Why did I choose design and build? As I said before, I believe that architecture should be accessible to everyone. V.D. Joshi had taught me various cost-effective techniques that would allow me to build beautiful spaces within the most meagre budget, the primary among these being '*Vishnu Padhat*', which employs modular hollow concrete blocks for fast and inexpensive load bearing construction.

In my first project of Mukesh Dedhia House, I planned it as a load bearing house using hollow concrete blocks (200x200x400) for walls and hollow concrete blocks (150x200x400) for filler slabs. I realised that convincing local masons and centring contractors to adopt this unconventional method was so difficult that the purpose of making the construction simple, modular and cost effective would have been lost. Hence, I had to become a contractor myself out of compulsion so that I could put in practice many innovations. Because of Design-build module, I can



Khadke House

use *ferrogami* for toilet walls, sunk slabs, toilet pipe covers, manholes etc. Also for staircases, window chajja or weather shades, cupboards, kitchen platform and many such elements.

DAVI

After about three decades of practice, how would you describe guiding principles of your work?

DOSHI

After about three decades of practice one can talk a lot about one's work, but what I believe to be of greater importance is the guiding principle one chooses for one's life as a whole. In my life I have upheld *shraddha* and *saburi*- faith and patience, the dual qualities extolled by Sai Baba of Shirdi. I believe that well designed spaces should be accessible to everyone. Working with clients who have little exposure to architecture and limited resources, but have aspirations for a good life, I became a mediator, with faith in my ability to deliver and lots of patience. Architects such as Louis Barragan and Alvaro Siza have been an inspiration in this regard, in terms what they contributed to Mexico and Portugal through their understanding of the vernacular and the utter simplicity with which they implemented it in project after project.



BRICK School of architecture, Pune

Besides this my guiding principles are quite basic. I believe that architecture is not a mere manipulation of forms, but is about construction of space and creation of place. Light plays a decisive role in my designs, as do authentic use of material, pure geometry and nature. Words such as Beauty, Inspiration, and Joy, as well as concepts of serenity, silence, solitude;these are important to me.

DALVI

What is your opinion about “Green Architecture”? Has it been just a slogan or lip service for the profession or have we faced the issue more seriously?

DOSHI

Mud high rises of Sana in Yemen, Naturally cooled houses in the cities of Sind with their famous wind catchers, stone *jaalis* of Mughal buildings, *Wada* with central courtyard in Maharashtra or for that matter, Charles Correa using summer and winter section in his Parekh house, Ahmedabad and many more such examples by architects conscious of prevailing climate prove that Green Architecture always existed. But now if some corporate and manufacturing companies want to sell expensive glass in the name of Green Architecture, to simply gain some form of rating, that is not acceptable.



BRICK School of Architecture, Pune

DALVI

What have been your experiences of being associated with founding a school of architecture in Pune? How do you view the role of a teacher in architecture when clearly we are in an era of mass production of architects?

DOSHI

Initially, I was appointed as the architect to design a building for the BRICK School of Architecture, but in due course my discussions with the client shifted to architectural education, and eventually my role was extended to that of Design Chair of the institute.

Here, and during my association with other schools, my question has remained the same: can one really teach design? I see my role to be that of inspiring students and exposing them to good architecture. I take them on site visits, engage them in informal discussions outside the classroom, encourage them to visit various places in their free time or to work with architects during their vacations, push them to improve their drafting and sketching skills; the rest depends on their interest and ability.

DALVI

What would be your advice for a young graduate in architecture about to enter the profession?

DOSHI

I would advise a young graduate to do their apprenticeship with a meaningful architecture firm for at least five years. Also acquiring technical knowledge for specialized buildings is very important. ■



Smita Dalvi is a founding faculty of MES Pillai College of Architecture, Navi Mumbai and the editor of Tekton. She has been teaching architecture and aesthetics in Navi Mumbai and Mumbai. Her area of special interest is Islamic architecture and aesthetics. She has lectured on these topics extensively in India as well as in some foreign universities and cultural centres. In 2007, she was awarded the fellowship of 'Fulbright Visiting Specialist: Direct Access to the Muslim world'.

Her research areas are in Architecture, History of Art & Culture, Urban Heritage and has read and published papers and essays in conferences and several architectural and cultural journals. In her research, she explores syncretism and inter-sections in art, architecture and society. She is an avid traveller and photographer.

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