

Design Digest

Ashok B. Lall has made a habit of winning prizes in architectural competitions. His design for the S.P.

Jain Centre at the South Campus, University of Delhi won the first prize in a national competition; that for the Indian Institute of Health Management Research (IIHMR) campus in Jaipur came first in another; that for the Vittal Mallya Convention Centre, University of Bangalore, bagged a commendation prize; and, the design for the Gujarat Energy Development Agency campus, on which he worked with Naveen Kulshreshtha, won the second prize. Two of these projects, the IIHMR campus and the Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) campus, were nominated for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in '95. And all this he has achieved in the space of just a decade and a half.

Ashok set up his own firm in Delhi in '80. But before that he had varied experience, having worked in Singapore for three years with Design Partnership, which he describes as a dynamic firm, and then with Stein, Doshi and Bhalla from '73-80. Talking about his work in Singapore he says, "This was the era of the first building boom there and so I got to work on a range of projects including housing and community development ones. This was good professional experience as I had to shoulder a lot of responsibility."

It was around this time that he met Joseph Stein and asked for permission to work with him. While in Singapore Ashok gained experience on large scale projects; the discipline and economy that are the hallmarks of his architecture today, he ascribes to his stint with Stein. "I learnt the discipline of construction from the conceptual stage to the preparation of documents and drawings to control in construction and implementation from Stein. In fact, many of the design values I uphold I learnt from him," he says. Stein's commitment to basic human values and his desire to share his value for beauty with others was a source of inspiration to the young architect. Along with Stein, Ashok worked on the Citibank interiors and the US Embassy in Delhi and a five-star hotel on the Dal Lake in Srinagar.

In the '80s, when Ashok had left Stein and had begun teaching and working on his own, he also started looking at the issues of energy and environment more seriously. "I became very conscious of the fact that good design meant application of simple methods to construction," he says. This consciousness was heightened through his experience with the first big project that he handled on his own, the S.P. Jain Centre. "It was a very complicated building because of the way the various architectural elements had been related to each other and the design was difficult to execute," he recalls. To top it, there was a bad contractor, which ultimately led to the building being left incomplete to this day.

However, Ashok considers the project an important learning experience as it led him to discover that an institution has to work as a community and one of the ways to do this is to group all interrelated activities around significant spaces. "And if you can cross this idea with the qualities of the site then it somehow recovers the notion of an institution, appropriating a place to mark its own presence," he says. Topographically the site was very interesting because of huge rocks and a pit full of water. Initially Ashok intended to turn the pit into a pool of water at the foot of a series of cascading terraces. However, doubts about maintenance led him to modify his design and turn the pit into an amphitheatre. But not completing the project has meant that though the terraces have been built, the stage has not. The result is the building looks like a ruin today, he adds.

The experience with an incompetent contractor and the financial constraints that Ashok faced in the construction of S.P. Jain Centre led him to be very careful while designing the 6,000 sq.m campus for the IIHMR in Jaipur built a decade later in '95. "Using my ideas about energy efficiency and local materials I tried to devise simple ways of building, ways that were systematic and provided both richness to the fabric of the building and a flexibility in the use of spaces," he explains. The design was such that even a contractor with no extraordinary skills could create the building. But he had very good contractors and the success of the IIHMR building, he says reminds him of one of Stein's sayings that where the designer, the builder and the owner are all interested in the same objective, you have a formula for success. And if one of them fails to live up to the objective, you have a formula for failure.

The IIHMR campus comprises a series of courtyard buildings constructed using load-bearing stone masonry. Ashok used local stone for the structure and concrete jalis as shading devices for windows and for parapets and railings. "There is no ostentation, glitz or glamour. On the other hand there is simplicity, grace and care," he says. There are only four or five RCC columns in the entire complex. The buildings have been designed in such a way that every space is brightly lit with natural light. The buildings have a special relationship with the landscape as there is a gradation from small garden courts to larger orchards and afforested areas, which cut the main buildings off from the harsh western winds. The campus has solar heating systems and Ashok also incorporated an evaporative water cooling system through built-in ducts. His attempt here was to try and find an architecture based on his own awareness. "I was not trying to mimic local architecture. I was only trying to devise a plan which was appropriate. But without any kind of replication or copying of the architecture of Jaipur you still feel the building belongs to the city," he says. Good maintenance has meant that the building looks good even today despite the first phase having been built almost three years ago.

Ashok believes that maintenance of a building depends on how it has been designed. "I think a building can be designed so that it invites the user's indulgence, care and maintenance," he says. He quotes the example of a small girls' hostel he designed in the Churu district of Rajasthan. "Quite an inexpensive project which we did about four years ago, the buildings seem to actually improve with age. And I think this is because it was built systematically using very simple ways of building," he avers. If a building is able to command affection, it gets love and care. "When buildings are built as commodities for sale or with similar motives in mind, there is a tendency on the part of the buyer to use it according to his definition of a commodity, which is rentable space. He is not investing in architecture and he has no relationship with it," he adds.

He, however, points out that in the case of upmarket properties, because of competition, the promoters are now selling architecture and design. "In fact, the higher price is because of what they call design," he says. Here there is a chance that the architecture can hardly be said to be integral to the life of the users," he adds.

As intrinsic value is what Ashok aimed at in his plan for the campus for the Tata Energy Research Institute, spread over 25 hectares of land on the Gurgaon-Faridabad road in Haryana. He tried to find a congruence between the nature of the site, the campus constituents and the principles of ecology to generate hospitable surroundings. "I tried to devise a pattern of relationship between land forms, vegetation and buildings, which is a composite integration of the nature of the institute and its community," he explains. So a forest guards the buildings against hot and cold winds while the open gardens and fields meant for experimental crop cultivation have been placed to the south.

Similarly, for the Tissue Culture Pilot Plant, which Ashok designed along with the water tank, the requirement was for an industrial building with a highly controlled internal environment. So he used load-bearing brickwork and provided a second roof for extra insulation. Free-standing terracotta jali walls on the eastern and western sides of the building act as screens against the sun's heat while adding to the architectural beauty of the structure as they glow in the morning and evening sunlight. "I try to find an evocative presence in the architectural object or place by thinking on the qualities which must materialise from the response of the building to nature," he says.

The same terracotta jali he used to clad the water tank, which is a totemic structure on the campus. The terracotta panels are interspersed with windows at regular intervals looking out in the four directions. Specific views are seen from each window as one goes up the spiral stairs and this becomes a way of integrating the horizontal and vertical elevations of the whole campus. The tapering shape with a wide base hints at the Qutub Minar.

Though architectural masterpieces abound in Ashok's portfolio, he has done a number of interiors as well which too bear his stamp of creating modern design with links to the past. One example is the interior of the corporate office of Bennett, Coleman and Company in Delhi, publishers of *The Times of India*. The brief was that a number of pieces of art that the owners possessed had to be incorporated into the interior. Ashok's attempt here was to deliberately stay away from copying any traditional design and yet infuse the high performance interior with a sense of traditional craft, art and architecture. "The quality of colour, the textiles, the light patterns, all project a richness associated with traditional architecture," he says. What he did was to provide a rich elegant backdrop using white walls, a patterned granite floor and a ceiling covered with woven raw silk, which could accept all sorts of artefacts.

Another interior which Ashok did a long time ago is for the Export-Import Bank of India in Delhi. Designed in '89, here Ashok went in for a more modern interior incorporating sophisticated systems for high performance and flexibility.

What marks all Ashok's work is the amount of thought that goes into each design. The result is thus a structure that is uniquely Indian, designed for the Indian user, hinting at Indian tradition, and all this without any sort of copying or duplication.

The discipline and economy that are the hallmarks of his architecture today and many of the design values he upholds, Ashok ascribes to his stint with Stein.

"I tried to devise a pattern of relationship between land forms, vegetation and buildings," he says about the TERI campus design.