

Manifestations of Vernacular Socio-Cultural Characteristics in the Architects' Design Philosophies and their Design Studios: Insights from Maharashtra, India

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Received	Reviewed	Revised	Published
18.05.2023	21.06.2023	28.06.2023	31.06.2023

Abstract

An architect's studio is a reflection of his values, beliefs, sensibility and also the compromises and concessions made along the way. In that, the studio becomes a statement of an architect's self-assessment too. This study investigates the process that defines the design thinking for an architect's own studio emerged from the understanding of the regional landscape, vernacular architecture, social beliefs and community living patterns as an integrated whole.

It employs phenomenology as a research methodology with a case study approach. The findings are structured in the form of an experiential narrative constructed through immersive engagement of all senses, participatory and non-participatory observations and by generating dialogues with the designers and users.

The qualitative enquiry follows two parameters: the sensitive response and the creative statement. The 'responsive' gesture is essentially focused on design attributes that are derived from the physical and cultural setting thus resonating the context. To understand the 'creative statements', the study examines associative values and intuitive decisions. This narrative looks into five architectural studios from Nashik city, Maharashtra, India. They are distinct in physical settings and scale, placed apart in a timeline and represents diverse expressions based on interpretations of one paradigm.

The paper concludes with a conceptual framework to study the manifestations of vernacular socio-cultural characteristics in the architects' design philosophies and their design studios. It presents the case studies from the city of Nashik located amidst the cultural landscape of Western Ghats near the origin of River Godavari in Maharashtra, India.

Keywords: Context, Ideology, Design process, Vernacular architecture, Environmental response.

Introduction

Design theory has been a topic of discussion, debate, exploration and evolution for decades. Its primary function of planning activities on land and crafting volumes of spaces serves the essential purpose. This entire process derives its meaning with a constant search for the semblance of order progressing towards chaos (Shaheer, 2004). It provides an order to the environment synchronizing the rhythm between self and the surroundings. These ideas go some way to explain why anthropological impact upon the land has been immense. While dealing with the natural environment, the order gets redefined reflecting the changing aspirations of human-nature relationship.

At this premise, the architectural ideologies and practices derive a symphony of character, expression and lifestyle as an artistic response. Looking at the evolution of contemporary architectural practices, one can observe a peculiar character with an essence of sensitivity rendered with an artistic touch. This redefines the representative architecture of the region. With a closer look at some of the notable work, one can wonder about the composition of the people who crafted these trends: the architectural practices. As stated by Victor Delaqua, Architects' own design studios are places where they design and work for themselves. Thus, its experience and expression both become a crucial concern of discussion.

There, one finds the idea of this narrative. A studio space can be seen through several layers and lenses. The study makes an attempt to elaborate on two aspects to look at the studio spaces; sensitive response and creative statements. The 'responsive' gestures essentially talk about the design attributes that are derived from the physical and cultural setting and thus defines the collective identity of the architecture of the region. With the layer of 'statements', one would be talking about the peculiarity of each workplace. When setting and function becomes the common ground for all these places, there is an opportunity to question the degree of difference. This layer would be an inquiry to look for the source of creative standpoints and identity. The study aims to generate some discussion on the design process with the possibility of exploring diversity in approaching architectural design and the individuality in its expression based on the interpretation of a common paradigm.

Emerging out of the complex matrix of geographical features, the settlement of Nashik can be read through three representative characteristic features marking its identity viz. peculiar landscape setting, built character of the old core and the socio-cultural expressions embedded in the belief system. The physiographic components of the context comprise of Sahyadri, Salberri and the Dolberri hill range crafting river basins of Godavari, Girna and Darna. The endemic and regional flora and fauna and thus the resulting climatic conditions encourage outdoor living. The montage of landscapes is composed of grasslands, wetlands, forest cover, serene meadows, meandering rivers and streams rendered by the majestic waterfalls, hills and basaltic plateaus that have engaged people since the pre-historic times.

This landscape has been venerated by communities and groups for ages as they gave meaning to their habitat. The wealth of natural resources and aesthetic values have further helped the evolution of the distinct agricultural patterns of rice, millets and grape vines as notable ones. There have been significant trade routes both regional and international which have enhanced cultural exchange and economic development of the region. Several dynasties and rulers have marked their imprints in the forms of caves, temples, forts, water features, memorials and residential colonies which have added to the cultural diversity of the place. Shared spaces for community living is inherent in the parameters defining the sense of place.

The architectural character thus evolves with the elements of social interface as the core component of almost every built space irrespective of scale, typology and ownership. Temple complexes carry spaces for the pilgrims and devotees as lodging facilities as well as for the celebration of festivities occasionally. Versatility and multifunctional are other significant attributes of the living environments. When the entire life cycle revolves around Nature and physiography, the transition becomes a journey, may it be moving from the indoor to the outdoor or from the public to the private. Entangled with beliefs and associative values, this landscape is a carrier of cultural continuity in the form of several stories and rituals which give meaning to the human-Nature interlinks. May it be the universal connect of *Kumbha*, the exile

of the lord Ram, legends of Shiva and Ganga or the sacred bathing at the *tirtha*, the landscape and its association with people resonate through the settlement pattern, streetscape, elements and components of living spaces, iconography, frescos, choice of material and almost each and every tangible and intangible aspect of life.

The natural growth of the settlement is in response to the topography and the climate that informs the alignment of the primary streets parallel to the river, predominantly North-South and the narrow lanes perpendicular to the river in the East-West orientation. Shaded verandas, projecting balconies, courtyards and well-crafted openings in response to the views, lights and wind are layered spaces of the residential, commercial, mixed-used, religious and public buildings too. The open space structure and the topography guides the settlement pattern with the balance in privacy and participation that encourages the communal spirit.

Derivation of material and construction systems with solid, thick masonry walls, brick patterns and stone carvings, as well as the fresco paintings all together animate the entire streetscape. Scale and proportions, together with the tactile and visual composition is evident of the human centric design vocabulary that has evolved over time. The settlement can also be appreciated of its embedded intangibility in the form of legends, stories and narratives that have created and maintained the spirit of the place and ingenuity of the communities, city dwellers as well as visitors and pilgrims.

The form and fabric of the settlement undergo transformation with the changing needs, technology and aspirations of the communities. Yet, vernacular architecture serves as a repository of resources to study environmental responses, innovative gestures and evocative experiences. Indeed, this serves as a relevant paradigm for the new development and informs the thoughts and works of the contemporary architects from the region.



Fig. 1: The sensitive imprints of human and graceful acceptance by nature expressed through vernacular architecture of the region. (Left to right - Ankai caves, Anjaneri group of temples, Wada temple at Dubere, Wall painting panel at Saykheda, Nashik District)

Source: Authors

In this context, the study considers five architects from the city of Nashik, Maharashtra, shaping the new skyline and the imprints. The inquiry reviews their own studio designs that are distinct in location, placed apart in a timeline and represents diverse expressions. The methodology here takes a critical appraisal approach with parameters of response to context and cultural continuity as a link connecting them to the larger geo-cultural setting. Organizing the studios in a chronological order is preferred as there are influences and interconnections. The objectives of the study are:

- To study the vernacular architecture paradigm at global and Indian context with understanding of regional identity, socio-cultural process and environmental response through derivation of architecture
- To understand the manifestation of socio-cultural characteristics of vernacular in contemporary architectural practices with reference to context.
- To derive parameters to understand the design process and the ideologies of architectural practices reflected through their studio spaces.

Literature Review

Architecture was shaped and crafted by masons, carpenters and craftsman till the Middle Ages while the period of Renaissance introduced the formal class of architects who then got engaged in the search of order, proportions, symmetry, geometry and other known design principles (Zabalbeascoa, 1996). Private offices were established during the 18th century while borrowed their primary language from the character of a library in a residence. With the humanization of workplaces towards the 19th century, the cooperate architecture image was seen, as the study builds further on then evolutionary journey of Architecture profession, mentioned in the book 'The Architect's Office'.

The book carries a survey of 38 studios showcasing notable global practices. With the advent of technology, the workspaces of architects have transformed from the drawing boards to computers and after the impact of the covid 19 pandemic, the idea of 'home office' has added comfort and convenience to the studio space (Ranade, 2023). Though there is a major ambiguity in defining a typology as office, studio, workshop or retreat, these workplaces are expressions of their creativity and work culture (Zabalbeascoa, 1996) thus seeking identity.

Philosophies during the modern movement advocated characteristically as open plans, uninterrupted yet engaging spaces with clearing allusions of precedents from the past. The design of Johnson's wax headquarters encouraged a sense of community with a major innovation in the image of workplace (Storrer, 2017). Richard Meier transformed an old warehouse to a rectangular space, organized with pristine order, low separators, unobstructed layout and built-in furniture at his New York office in 1986 (Zabalbeascoa, 1996). Frank O. Gehry introduced a tangential way of approaching a design brief that imparted sculptural form with a display of architecture as a piece of art (Dal Co & Forster, 2003). By refurbishing an old building with a straightforward open studio and rationale space, he expressed a pragmatic attitude which can be read as a structure enclosed in another structure (1988).

Norman Foster's iconic building highlighted the individualized identity addressing changing needs and aspirations of the profession (Sudjic, 2010). Expressed through boldness and simplicity, Forster chose to occupy the ground floor of a multi-storied, mixed-use building with a panoramic river view, for his London office (1990). The large glass façade on the North included the scenic water in the premises of workplace where he designed each and every piece of furniture to every level of detail that speaks for his ideology. This expression stands on its own with reference to his body of work. Mario Botta's circular building at the outskirts of Lugano makes a striking appearance in the residential suburb. The exposed brick envelope stands in contrast to the buildings in the premises. Set up on the top floor of this mixed-use, multi-storied building, the workspace (1990) takes an experimental approach (Sakellaridou, 2001). Sheer planes, concrete structure and crafted light defines Tadao Ando's workplace (1991) in Osaka. Planned around a central atrium, the compact spaces find expansion towards courtyards and balconies. An expansive library covers the planes in interiors and the mutli-levels are interconnected through a dramatic staircase (Furuyama, 2020;Griffiths, 2016).

Steep slopes and panoramic views mark the setting for Ricardo Legorreta's office (1966) at Mexico. Varying levels, solid screens and punctured openings choreograph the movement and visual composition. Peaceful ambience form the core working space (Arquitectos,n.d.;Zabalbeascoa,1996). Renzo piano's studio (1994) in the outskirts of Genoa cascades down the hill slopes and is enveloped by thick foliage, woods and grasses. The sleek structure sits lightly on the terrain and the transparent surfaces look out to the sea (Jodidio, 2021).

With an extensive understanding of architecture rooted in culture and a deep consciousness for perception of space, Geoffrey Bawa is notable for forging a native

architectural character in contemporary realm. His studio and No.11 (1989) in Colombo with the body of his work are synchronized with the influence from socio-cultural and natural heritage of the island (Robson, 2007). Coming to Indian geography, Curtis (2014) connotes Sangath (1981) as ‘*an emblem of Doshi’s philosophy*’. This studio in Ahmedabad is a mosaic of memories that reflects several layers from context to the early days of architect Doshi at atelier. In the premises, a missing tree and several shadows find their presence in the pavement of experience with a time travel (Curtis, 2014).

In his expert lecture on ‘*Craft and Design Practice: Who has more to learn from the other?*’ Prem Chandavarkar presents a comparative appraisal from both the fields. The idea highlights the personality-oriented design approach of architects in contrast to the anonymity of the traditional craftsmen. He also deliberates on the concept of ‘extreme originality’ as a major goal in design verses ‘incremental adaption’ as a natural process in craft creation (Chandavarkar, 2020). Yet another well established and extensively explored term of vernacular architecture derives its reference from the local craftsmanship and traditional knowledge system. The community architectural character evolved in response to the tried and tested results from experimentation of ages is representative of regional identity (Asquith & Vellinga, 2006). Grounded to these theories, the various initiatives by Hunnarshala Foundation makes a remarkable contribution in bridging the gap between professional imprints and community gestures by facilitating participatory involvement of craftsmen. The presence of craftsmen is not only limited to their skills but involves their heart and mind (Virmani, 2020). The approach is well illustrated through the work and character of the Hunnarshala Foundation campus. As the paradigm evolves, the expanding and multi-faceted role of the architect gets acknowledged in the form of an academic, researcher, traveler, photographer, painter, filmmaker or any other artistic role. Considering conversations, dialogues and deliberations as a significant medium for the exchange of knowledge, a workspace design ideology needs to be derived from a matrix. It is an extension of the persona (Shankar, 2020). The work and workspace of ideologies discussed above, serves as a foundation and represent a school of thought. The stories and buildings are inspirational for the researchers, professionals, students, artists, travelers and the users.

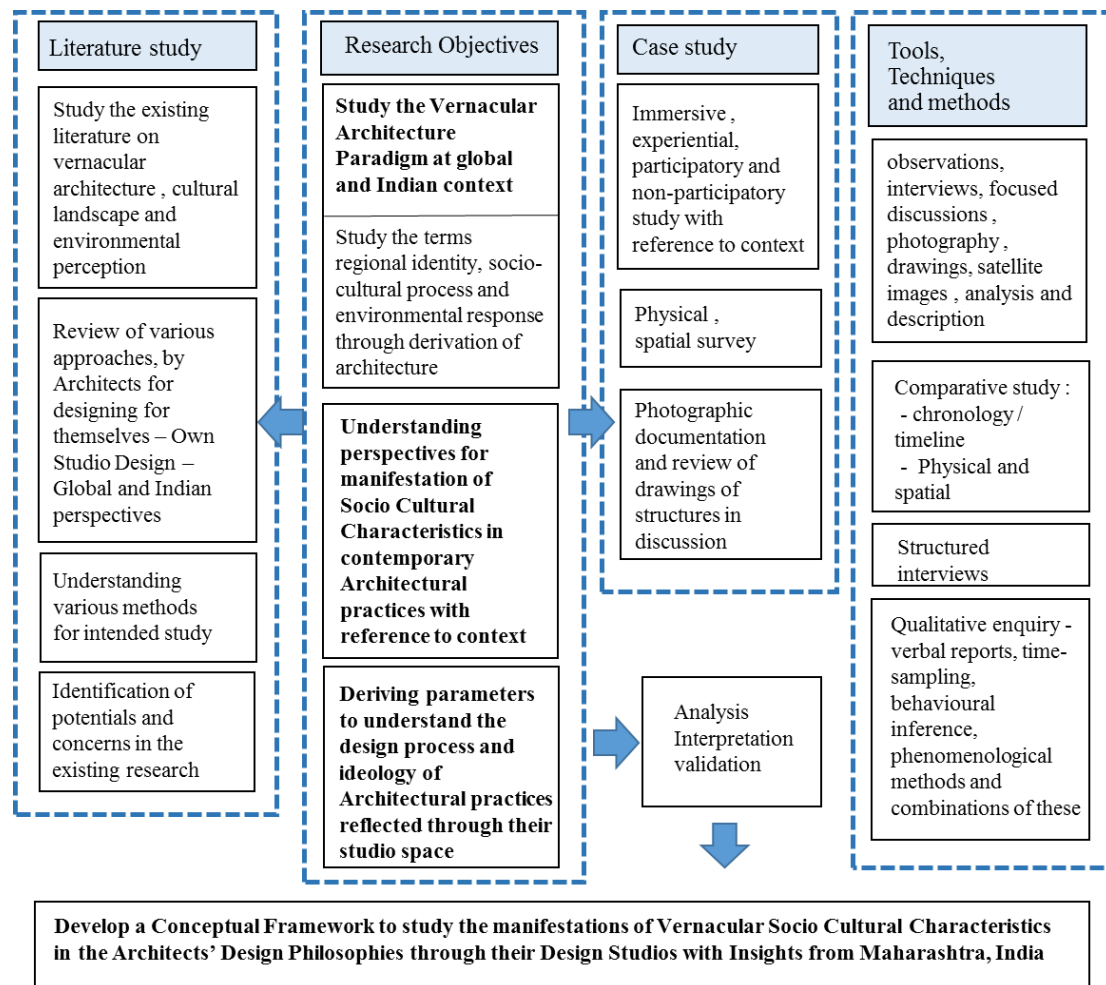
As quoted in the White Book (1968), “*a building can only be understood by moving around and through it*”. The experiential quality in deriving a space and crafting of form thus becomes the core component of design theory. Where does one find the appropriate path to seek the desired quality of timeless continuum? Sense of place refers to a phenomenon which establishes an inseparable bond between people and Nature (Seamon, 2017). The interconnection is existential for its geographic and ecological value. This relationship dwells on the meaning through spiritual association. This entire interactive process gets manifested through various forms of cultural landscapes. The term is believed to be initiated by the German cultural geographer Carl Sauer (1927) in response to the growing concern towards interlinks of culture, development and environment.

The discussion thus gathers some points to ponder around understanding the context with reference to space and time. Space on ground is revealed through counter lines. Lateral space reads as foliage and woods while the sky arrives in the form of eternal constant also perceived with its metaphoric presence. The life that happens in and around these layers is governed largely by the intangibles in the form of ideas and beliefs. An architect thus searches for a meaningful location in this multi-dimensional space and architecture represents the gesture of this relationship between part and the whole.

Design theory is predominantly a process or borrowing from all dimensions of existence. The question arises—how much to borrow? At one extreme, it becomes

reproduction and on the other, its refusal. The question is: what is relevant and how does one search it?

Research Methodology



The studios are selected from the same city, Nashik, which sets a common context for all the architects in terms of socio-cultural, climatic and larger geographical setting. Each studio is built on an independent piece of land or floor plate conceptualized and crafted by the architect's design ideology. The studios are built with aspirations during the course of practice and are not their first place of work. Thus, the place marks a significant phase in each practice. The five studios are diverse in terms of location, expression and spread across a timeline of two decades to understand the influences, inspirations and interconnections. Moreover, the architects are connected to each other at various professional platforms and personal grounds with active participation in dialogues, activities, sharing of thoughts, seeking advice and providing assistance.

Each studio space is examined in terms of the following aspects in consideration. Findings are structured in the form of experiential narratives based on phenomenological methods:

- Geographical location, surroundings and access.
- Elements and principles of composition, visual attributes: scale, geometry, proportions, non-visual attributes: tactile surfaces, temperature, wind, sounds and smell.
- Organization of space, derivation of volume and development of form.

- Choice of material palate, construction systems and crafting of details.
- User behavior.
- Relationship of indoor-outdoor and negotiation of levels.

Discussion and the Findings

STUDIO 1

Architect Sanjay Patil belongs to a farmer's family and thus comes his love for the land. This fascination about Nature and the exposure within the picturesque region has kept him rooted to his native village, in spite of being formally educated in Mumbai. He is a passionate traveler with several notable tours across India and abroad. He is a social person and groomed in joint family. Learning through conversations, travel and sharing of experiences is a part of his persona which further gets extended through his work. The reflection of his personality and preferences manifest in his studio where humility can clearly be seen in the relationship of the built with the ground and the landscape: the way a building is approached, the kind of things that one would like to see in sequence and that is something which represents the primary focus of his thought process. At this place, his approach to craft an environment has expressed the ability to integrate landscape, symbolizing Nature with the built environment, which amalgamates interior and exterior to create a series of interactive spaces. The building is really like pavilions where he further includes courts, verandas and deep shaded areas, pools of water, earth, sky, pitched roofs, combinations of thick and regular masonry, as well as vegetation to form an integral component of design.

Design word has a meaning of relationship and it has gone deeper and further deeper and more profound as one visits the studio of Environ Planners as expressed by Pritzker Laurette Doshi (2015). Located in the developing residential premises of Nashik city, the studio space is planned in two primary zones, the landscape outdoor for arrival, traverse, and informal interactions and built space for work and at the rear zone of the plot. There were no external views that could be borrowed and consequently the space is focused inwards. From the entry level, the building remains hidden, characterized by the lawn mound rising from the ground with a sculptural gesture. However, the inside reveals as an element of surprise. Transcending over a water body, the deliberate non-axial access leads to another entrance. The pitched roof structure of the studio is planned across two volumes overlooking the floor plates. The visual and physical permeability of the façade makes an inseparable bond between shelter and landscape. The brick paving for outdoors carries visual texture and a rhythmic pattern orienting the movement in space. The Jaisalmer stone flooring for the indoors brings in warmth and a tactile feel. White painted vertical planes with openings frame the view of the landscape. The sound of water pouring through black basaltic piece of gargoyle keeps the presence of life fluid lingering in the mind.

'Habitat' is commonly connoted as the natural environment or the physical surround inhabited by a particular living species. Crafting spaces to articulate environments conducive for human use thus becomes the prime concern for the very need for architecture as Vellinga (2015) argues. Deeply connected to these roots, the vernacular architectural work, in specific to rural context, studied and stated by Apak (2015), serves as a subtle transition between Nature within and Nature surround. This 'in between' is the direct interface sharing a strong link with both the worlds; indoors and outdoors and thus this architecture stands as a unique creation that belongs to its setting. That means, when architecture is in discussion with Chavan & Chandar (2022), it together addresses the concerns of the built and the associated open spaces together to form a 'living environment'. The essential concept based on this approach reflects the way in which this architect looks at the architectural practice.

The philosophy derives the interpretation from the coherent fusion of such vernacular values and the dynamics of contemporary spirit with reference to the concern raised by Hameed & Alanizi (2023) through the idea of 'time trilogy'. Communicating spaces fosters the user's aspirations as mentioned by de Silva (2023). The expression of this aesthetics is adorned with simplicity through a limited range of materials used and minimal details. Color and light is integrated to intensify the ambience. Spaces are woven with the context to make an

undistinguished whole while the introduction of the designed landscape finds a new room to live in.

Through structuring of spaces and surfaces, the entire journey to and through the studio tells this interesting story with the interplay of conceal and the reveal. This approach essentially highlights the spaces evolved for living, learning, work and community, by celebrating the presence of people as an integral part of Nature within and around.

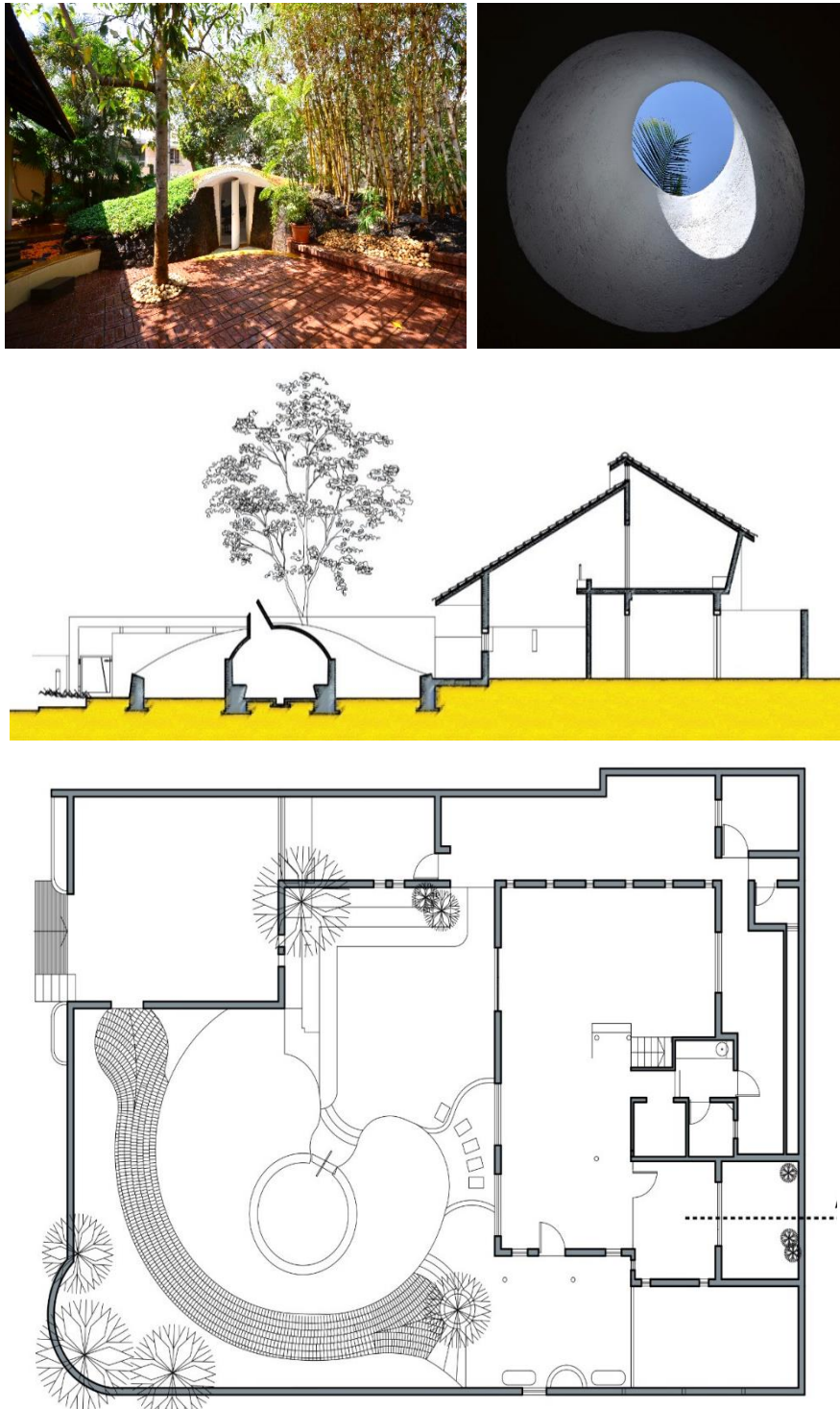


Fig. 1: The Courtyard and cave serves as informal interactive spaces (left), skylight in cave (right), the volumetric composition – section (center), the ground floor plan (bottom)

Source: Studio Environ Planners

STUDIO 2

Surrounded by the bold expression of colonial architecture, somebody can see the modest bird's nest. Navigating ways through, avenues and vistas on the one hand and crowd, informal settlements and linear connects on the other, someone aspires to trace the contours. Amidst the sounds of engines and horns, one could still hear the rustling of leaves. Finding place in the crowds and looking for space within the limits and boundaries, someone chooses to live with the infinite sky and the ocean. With early years of life based in Mumbai, Apeksha Shah studied her school lessons in her native language, Gujrati that kept her rooted to the indigenous culture and the beliefs.

Running across the open grounds, sleeping under the sky, gazing the horizon to greet the sun every morning and evening, roaming through the shades of dense trees, celebrating blossoms, winds and rains, rolling on the lush green carpets and whispering to hear echo was a part of life in those days. Groomed up with the pitched roof, overhangs and deep verandas, textures of robust basalt and large windows, Nitin Kute was a bright child with a playful charm. Loved walking with life as it comes, his childhood and adolescence has been quite an interesting and thrilling tale.

Though the further journey of the two marks their way together, yet both of them are gradually, gracefully and creatively shaping their thoughts, essentially for self. While Apeksha was getting more engaged with land, perceptions and the environment, Nitin was grooming the composition and the craft of structures. With teachings of college days, and a brief work experience, Origin Architects has been established.

Revisiting the idea of ornamentation and exploring minimalism, contemporary theory has become the single-most language or philosophy of design and architecture of the 20th and 21st centuries. It was academically associated with an analytical approach oriented towards the functions of buildings, rational use of preferably new materials and structural innovations defined by the Merriam Webster dictionary (2023). The theory is prevalent in the post-independence architecture in the Indian context while most of the architectural practices make this as the basis to derive their design approach and thinking philosophy. Discouraging ornamentation highlight the art of simplicity in architectural design. A lot of emphasis has been on the functional aspect of design, compositional values with the use of clean straight lines and the geometrical forms with reference to the study by Devadas (2022).

Simplicity represents purity in expression, clarity of thought and derives space using minimalistic elements showcased in their honest form as per the theory of Ching (2015). The approach may seem methodical or scientific, yet some of the most creative people like Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright too participated in the ideation process and followed the same through their work.

In the serene, developing residential zone of the Nashik city, the workspace spreads across the lower two levels, while the upper floors are occupied as the family residence. (First floor and part of ground floor while the second and top floors are occupied as their residence). The layout is supportive to the idea of segregating the access to office and residence while organization of functions assured the required privacy of both the functions. Land is blessed by the neighborhood open space, covered with large canopies of trees that render a feel of urban woods around. As one enters the narrow path highlighting the axis, the visual boundary terminates. The pause point marks an arrival with a green canopy and a water-wall. The experiencing body makes a sharp turn and enters a double volume space where the eye travels upwards and captures the wooden bridge. At the next instance, a doorway on the right invites a pavilion space with landscape wrapped around the physical and the visual edge. The staircase leads to the bridge and we meet the foliage of the urban wood through framed view. The work stations in the studio at this floor are oriented around this volume. Here, the indoors are tied up with the outdoors with a profound connection making the two inseparable. The contrast complements both the worlds through several designs of fenestrations, terraces and balconies, crafted edges and simple pockets of green inside. Small areas bring in large spaces. Urban setting feels like the forest trail, demarcated by the strong boundaries yet connected to the dynamics.

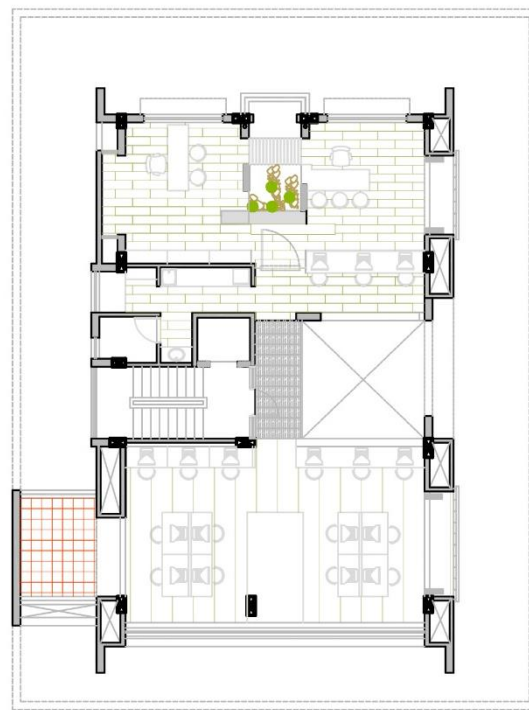
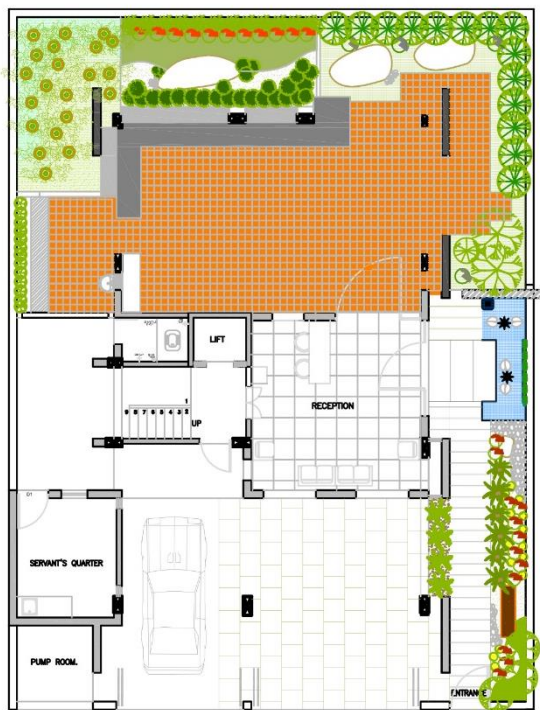
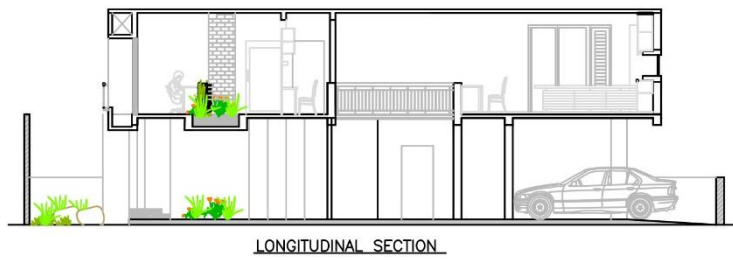


Fig. 2: Studio: ground floor – the pavilion space wrapped by landscape (left), first floor – the bridge and the framed view of woods at neighborhood open space (right)
Source: Studio Origin Architects

STUDIO 3

Shailesh's hometown is Nashik. While recalling the days of his early childhood, he primarily carries several memories of people and relationships from the joint family around, festivals and celebrations from the religious town and various confronts with Nature from the abode of *mythscaapes*. For him, one of the most remarkable interactions with Nature is trekking. Climbing hills and sleeping under the sky fascinates him the most. The stories and symbols from the cultural setting takes him to a wonderland. Interactions with people and life on the streets keep him engaged for hours. Vibrant rituals and celebrations are something he is always looking forward to. Yet, inquisitiveness is a synonym for him. An introvert and peace loving person is in search of tranquility. Meditating on the 'purpose of life on earth' is an ongoing enquiry in the backdrop of his activities while engagement in discourses related to spirituality is what he is actively involved with. Constant exploration and pushing the boundaries of comfort is what he aspires for, through his work, yet retrospection is an inseparable part of his being.

Amidst the developing urban fabric of the city, SPANDAN studio occupies the top floor of a four storied building. Devoid of fascinating views of a natural setting, the space prefers to look inwards. As one makes an attempt to perceive and understand this architecture as a reflection of the architect's temperament, the space marks a point in Shailesh's life where he is constantly engrossed with several enquires and probably this studio turns out to be that experimentation lab through which he would try and seek some answers.

Meandering through the geometrical yet undulating terrain, the space sequentially unfolds through several frames. Walls are the intermittent surfaces standing at a distance while the roof doesn't even make its appearance. Once inside this unknown territory, one is engrossed in a strong sense of illusion. Spontaneously, there is a dialogue generated between the visitor and the space and soon the child within you is awakened, with curiosity and ecstasy. The studio is a space perceived as an open-plan with predominantly communal areas that are important to facilitating collaboration between the innovators (Architects workspace on the upper level) and investors (Financial planner, Mrs. Devi, on the lower level). The library area at the lower level serves as an entrance court giving way to ascend through the set of stairs. Transcending these levels is like negotiating between the two plinth levels. The complete journey of arrival seems like walking through a vibrant Indian street with overlooking spaces, interactive facades, varied plinths, staggered lines of movement, pause points, courtyards and one of the most interesting components making its appearance at the climax of the ascend, the bridge.

When creativity demands innovation, we tend to look for the source of inspiration and access memories sometimes. Then, one can wonder how these memories are formed? They may go an interesting scientific read to seek this answer but extracting relevance to the discussion here, we understand a simple phenomenon that 'memory is formed through experience!' then, what is experience? As one may gather, 'Occurrence which leaves an impression', states Dengle (2020) which is perceived through senses and involves emotional interface. Thus, the whole idea may lead us to find connections of emotions, experience and memory!

Designed for versatility and growth, all areas are scalable from an individual to a small gathering. The core is a two-level volume connected by a sculptural staircase designed for bringing the whole community together. Communal areas are versatile in order to accommodate a variety of events and needs, bringing together the entire workspace into a single, contemporary space. The feel of gravity keeps the user connected to the ground. Sun enters and lives here from dawn to dusk in the form of diffused light while it's a play space for the soothing breeze all through the day and night. Sky peeps in through the openings and assure for its eternal presence while the plants from multiple terraces and tiny courts co-exist with cheer. The enclosing planes and fenestrations together form a canvas to showcase the dynamic art curated by these various elements of Nature. Deceptive depths and blurring sense of boundary further evokes the mystic character. If perceived at a metaphorical plane, the space is a place to connect with the infinity and to nurture energy.

If architecture is perceived as the realm between the real and the imagined, the workspace of an architect is sacred. As Ajay Kulkarni mentions through his talk, ‘Architects are divine beings’, so is their connection with the supreme power. The source of inspiration and creativity lays in the other world and an architect accesses that other world to extract ideas, narrates Rao (2017). Following the preaching from his Guru, Shailesh believes that life and work cannot exist in isolation; neither are they separated (Pritzker Laurette Doshi, 2010). At this instance, the thought process is essentially a journey. Thus, the path is evolutionary and unpredictable as if there is no end or rather one is not really looking forward to acquire any highlights (Malik, 1995). This architecture can be perceived as layered composition:

- The geometric space: enclosed in a structure with form and stability.
- The artistic space: expressed as an abstract art form that engages senses and emotions.
- The sacred space: experienced to question the notions.

Addressing this layer gives meaning to the studio space here which further connects, relates, communicates and becomes part of memory.



Fig. 3: The bridge and the stairs (left), working space (right), Organization of space and volumetric composition (floor plans and sections)
Source: Studio Within-Without (SPANDAN)

STUDIO 4

Architect Dhananjay Shinde's childhood is rooted to Nashik. He lived in the Gole colony, when it was considered to be outskirts of Nashik, for most part of his life. He studied architecture from Rachana Sansad's Academy of Architecture, Mumbai. Coming back to home town after graduation, he started practicing in the city with a partner for initial years till he established DSDS. A number of his projects have received appreciation and renown. For several years, he lived and worked from various parts of developing the urban fabric of the city while the memories from his earlier life have been inseparable to him. Deriving the approach of design rooted in the regional context, the expression finds its base in regional identity. With landscape and setting taking up the prime leadership, the concepts generate space structure with a clean, minimal, yet vibrant design.

As a seamless blend of the global language and a local touch, the approach fuses two cultures. From the entrance, the roof form defines the sky line while the structure remains hidden. A Nature-walk leads towards the entrance area with a sculptural roof. Composed like a group of pavilions set up in a farm land, the studio space is integrated and inseparable from its immediate and larger context. Blurring the line between work and leisure, the design embraces versatility and flexibility of working, much needed for creative thinking. Nature surrounds the entire space, scoops in from courts, creeps on surfaces, peeps from openings, greets at decks and connects through walkways, in various forms. The distant view of hills occupies various visual frames. Patterns from the immediate green setting becomes extended foreground. The presence of infinite sky is a constant experience. The reflecting pool brings in the component of water.

Memories serve as a repository of images and associative emotions from the past and can work as a source of reference when accessed. As people interact with their settings, the relationship evolves in response to the changing times. The values can continue as constants while the expressions can take up different forms, underlines Thakur (2010), while discussing the Indian way of associating heritage. Thus, interpretation plays a key role in the process while questioning relevance becomes a matter of search.

Indian culture is based predominantly on continuity than preservation (Malik 1995). Study of past essentially highlight 'traditions' of art, craft, architecture and other material as well as intangible assets (Thakur 2010). For several years, the knowledge system worked though transmitting information and skills from one generation to the other (Chandawarkar 2020). Festivals and associated celebrations too occur in cyclic way synchronized with the seasonal variations (Pandya 2018). From the primitive culture to the established civilizations, Nature is an integral or inseparable part of human life at physical, metaphorical and spiritual levels (Singh, 2017). Nature is revered through worship, celebrated through various art forms and acknowledged by built footprints as well. The studio is a story that would deliberate on an idea of 'conserving continuity' as argued by Satyaprakash Varanasi (2005). The idea is about walking the pathway to access the memories of land and culture. Trying to reinterpret the ethos from 'then and there', bring them to 'here and now'. The values to adore can continue to live as a part of everyday experience.

Maneuvering through the textured basalt, being under the deep overhangs of the roof, gathering around the 'kund' court all serves as reminders of vernacular gesture. Clean glass and sleek sections of steel, polished concrete surfaces acknowledge the contemporary technological advancements. Space is rendered with several sculptures and art forms revealing another overwhelming layer. Once again, sun-rise is about chirping of birds, serene noon times and mesmerizing evenings. Life is weaved through textures and shades. Raindrops are rolling down from the deep overhangs. The pavilions are spaces with different sizes, scales and forms housing several activities independently yet are connected through a link of streets and nodes blurring the boundaries of functional ownership. Community spaces are celebrated, and the interactive hubs are live. Wind, sun, water, plants, and every element of Nature is freely allowed to trespass. The ground and the sky make their presence feel dressed up in all the new attire each day. The place celebrates essence of life in the memory with a spatial expression reconfirming the validity of nurtured values.

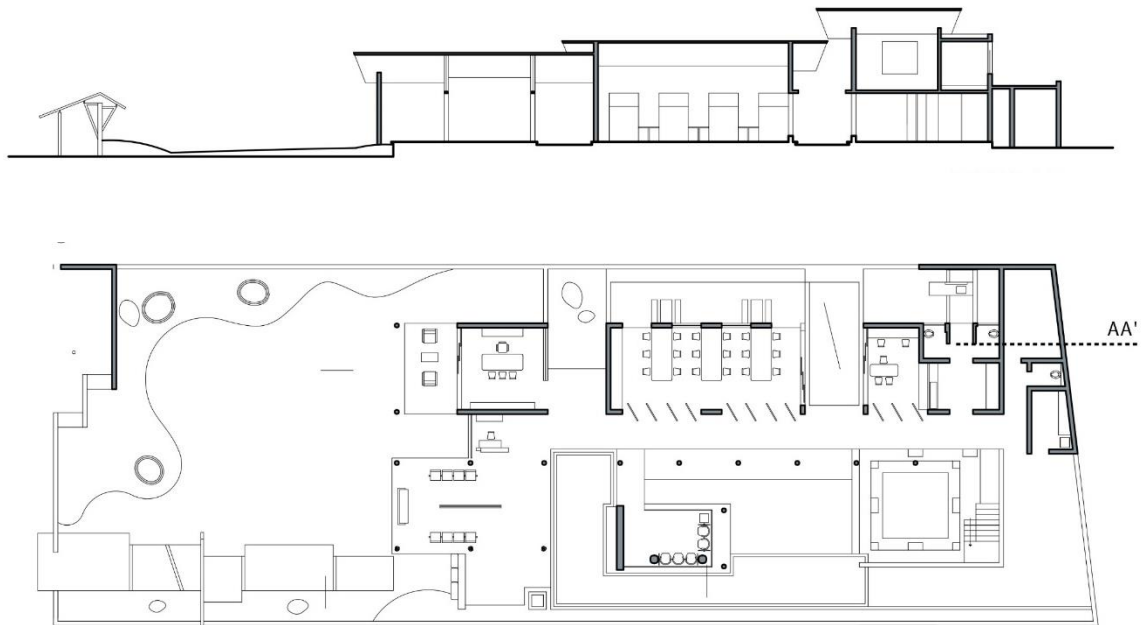
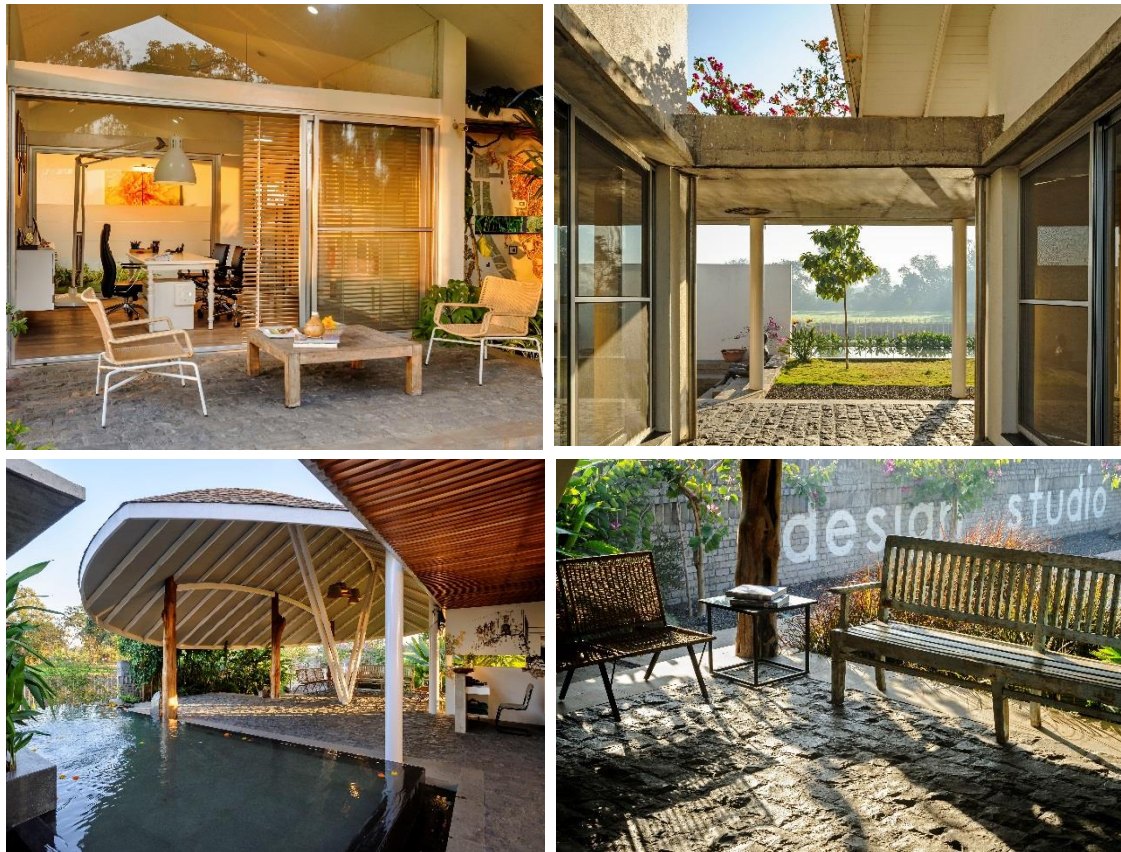


Fig. 4: Shaded veranda for the studio (top left), the street overlooking farmlands (top right)
The water court (center left), arrival and waiting (center right)
The volumetric organization – section, the integrated layout (bottom)
Source: Dhananjay Shinde Design Studio

STUDIO 5

Towards the fringe of Nashik city, demarcating the edge of the green zone, A for Architecture Studio space marks its presence in a corner plot abutting a residential set up. The space conceptualized by partners Ajay with wife Monali Sonar stands as a representative example of emerging architectural sensibilities from the region and generation. Aspiring for evolving education, the partner-couple adopted travelling as one of the ways of learning. Exposure to diverse geographies, cultures, histories and people have helped in understanding the changing human-Nature relationships. Visit to the projects by master architects becomes an experience to formulate statements that further shape up their own design theory. The travelogue of Europe, U. S, Australia and Sri Lanka works like a repository that can be accessed anytime to seek reference. Though the international grounds turned out to be a rich collection of resources, there is something more special for the couple to rejoice and cherish; the native place Banaras.

“The way life happens at Banaras is beyond comprehension. We are never over with the place” Ajay recalls fondly. “The spirit of the place is magical and we are spell bound. That’s the most frequently visited place on the globe and still there is so much to look for” as Monali adds up. The divinity of this sacred geography and associated culture makes them feel the connection with the supreme power where they try and relate the association of mortals with the immortal, questions the co-existence of the tangibles and the intangibles.

At this premise, setting up the studio marks a significant place in their life as they decide to settle in their home-town at a really early age. The approach to design gets expressed like a paradox when every project seems institutively crafted like a piece of art, yet, it has evolved through a process of dissertation. The professional endeavors come through the academic process of questioning the fundamentals of typology, context, users, the brief and most importantly, the statement that one can make through architectural expression and experience. The studio, for them, is a statement which highlights their evolving journey from space making to place making; a gesture that truly reflects their attitude and belief on what they gather from the classrooms and beyond.

Inspiration is a continuous process of life, so does the dynamics of Nature. The natural world has been a source of inspiration for the designers for centuries. Throughout the evolutionary history of the mankind, there have been attempts to explore Nature in the form of a sacred totality (Turner 2011). Sky and earth has been perceived as sacred realms, forces or processes. The gods from heaven are often viewed as dynamic father figures of the family. The earth is represented as a goddess with reference to several cultures thus referred as the mother spirit. Worship and divinity is always perceived as the experience connecting these two components. Throughout history, humans have created a space for the divine. The entire process of building temples is thus not considered just as an art form but shares its expanse to math and science (Barth 1969). Essentially, places of worship have been designed to be spaces where the mind spontaneously moves within and meditation happens effortlessly.

In the recent past, Jay Appleton deliberates on the theories associated with Man and Nature relationship with an inquiry, “How do actual ingredients of landscape operate on the aesthetic sense”, while he also questions the relationship of beauty, behavior, and the environmental perception of order in Nature. His book ‘The experience of landscape’, primarily investigates the people’s irresistible craving for Nature. It looks at the nomadic way of life where people do not live continually at the same place, thus venerating new landscapes, while the pastoral settlers were associated with the cyclic way of nature’s expressions. This paradoxical realm underlines the new basis to understand Nature-human relationships and thus one seeks for innovation through dynamism without compromising the attributes of assurance and security associated with the constants. This studio is a story to experience the state of subtle balance of being in the two worlds at the same time.

The place is to be discovered by traversing several levels and layers. Reaching the place is the first level of challenge through the quizzical maze of road network in the neighborhood. Once arrived at a kind of roundabout, the façade appears with a glimpse with an otherwise camouflaged form in the setting. The single volume space is illusive as one moves through the

sequentially unfolding of various spaces. The nostalgic fervor offers a warm welcome and comfort yet the mind is overcrowded with numerous questions. Soon, one becomes the component of space and unknowingly, the dialogue is already set.

The studio is located inside the compound of a residential building. It is like a growing hub being a design studio for the young professionals. Modest interiors weave around social spaces hosting work and interactive zones, complemented by splashes of diffuse light across the walls and the furniture. A courtyard at the heart features a ‘community core’, connecting all the spaces otherwise in compartments. The architects think of this space as a place to foster new interactions and working relationships.

The design approach here is to set a harmony between human habitation and the natural world. Every room hosts Nature that is present here in several different forms incorporating living matter into structure. The relation of this architecture to the surroundings make the space feels like ‘building in Nature’ by capturing the ray of light, frame of sky, sight of woods, sound of wind, touch of stone and the feel of water. Enhancing the feeling of arrived through a series of courtyards, the journey takes you to a space where one feels like standing on a forest floor while the personal working carries a contemplative aura which takes one back to the era of dwelling in caves. One is engaged in thinking of this space more like an interface. A human footprint in Nature’s setting; a journey that traverses from architecture towards landscape, from confines to infinity with a constant flux between static building components and dynamism is experienced through temporality.



Fig. 5: The entrance wall (left), water court (center), entrance door and passageway (right)
Source: Studio A for Architecture

Conclusion

Optimizing connections with Nature permeates the design of peaceful sprawling spaces in the picturesque setting. The legacy of context essentially highlights the character of spaces informed by engagement of all human senses, which is further seen to be the experience in the studio spaces explored through the narrative. Sharing and social life becomes a significant component in the design brief of all the projects stated here. Moreover, people groomed with mythology, epics and legends associated to spaces and places seem to have learned the art of storytelling. When everyone gets a rectangular piece of land or floor plate for a studio site, as a blank canvas, each one chooses to paint their own reflection as a well-crafted and engaging journey.

Year 2000, STUDIO ENVIRON PLANNERS of Architect Sanjay Patil, can be considered as the trailblazer being the first one to refute the typecast by challenging the notions around design of a workspace for Architects. The modest and informal character of space carries a nostalgic feel which connects one to the early human life at the stage of evolution emphasizing the profound human-Nature relation. With the adventure of cave dwelling and strolling through the forest trails, the security and safety of modest shelter has been enhanced with the living courtyards. Marking this as a start point on the timeline for reference, the place and the person both has been an inspiration for several professionals and students across generations. Together, this goes a long way to sensitize the users as well.

Year 2006, STUDIO ORIGIN ARCHITECTS by Apeksha and Nitin Kute demonstrates the idea of composite design with the juxtaposition of residence and the studio space. The compact form provides efficient spaces inside. The connection with the ground could be celebrated from elevated floors. Nature is invited and nurtured amidst the dense urban setup. Simple clean lines make strong yet subtle statements. The modernist theory of minimalism gets contextualized in the regional setting. Both the principal architects extend a platform of inclusion with their warm gestures and so does the space. A true reflection of their personality, the studio is a social hub and an institutional set up.

Year 2010, SPANDAN STUDIO by Shailesh Devi marks an effort to interpret emotions and experience as a base to derive concepts of space. Thus, the studio is a metaphoric representation of his memories from the land. The thought process supports the idea that all the creativity belongs to a spiritual realm and one can find that world following the path of curiosity. His constant search for reaching out to the inner peace and silence becomes the philosophy for this workplace. Living each moment with spontaneity of every heartbeat, SPANDAN Studio derives its expression from an intuitive reflex manifested through minimal materials and abstract forms. An inquiry towards timeless character and universal connect lays the storyboard of this place where every crazy thought is nurtured.

Year 2013, DHANANJAY SHINDE DESIGN STUDIO, brings in the charm of Nature to celebrate the landscape setting and social life integrated into the workspace. As a true reflection of his persona, the place flourishes with vibrancy brought by Nature and rendered with art forms. When the urban fabric is sprawling gradually over the agricultural fields and wooded wilds, this studio carves its niche with an utmost modest expression. Like a community of early settlers, the studio is a hamlet abutting the agricultural fields. Architecture works like a group of pavilions allowing the tress passing of winds maximizing the visual connect. With this studio, the principal architect has evidently taken a remarkably different approach.

Year 2017, STUDIO A for ARCHITECTURE by Architects Ajay and Monali Sonar, is the last one in the chronological sequence and coincidentally the youngest ones of the group. As an emerging practice from the town, the studio space displays a striking blend of sensitivity and maturity in the design approach. While all the other studios borrow or derive their philosophies from memories and retrospection, this studio primarily celebrates futuristic aspirations and innovatory spirit. Their attitude is suggestive towards adventure and rigorous questioning yet their constant search for poetic experiences in the process of design is notable. Versatility of space character and transformation of space with the changing activities is what the studio derives from the cultural influences of the place. The monolith feel, cozy space, low

ceiling and attempts to integrate immediate landscape are the derivations from the physical context.

The study is notable for several dimensions underlined as the manifestation of cultural landscape and social life from the region.

Studio 1 has derived its inspiration, form and expression from the pastoral landscape, agrarian way of life where work and living is integrated and synchronized with the elements of Nature, seasonal dynamics and temporality.

Studio 2 marks the life in a mixed-use space with residence and workspace seamlessly organized as a component of vernacular settlement in the old core of the Nashik. It is characterized by high boundary walls, multiple courtyards in various forms, deliberately worked permeability, segregation of public and private spaces, open plan, living areas structured around a core double volume space, layers of indoors and outdoors with choreographed movement patterns.

Studio 3 celebrates the sacred geography lived through abstract forms. The meandering paths, pauses, grasslands, ascend–elevations–plateaus of black basalt, bridges, valleys, panoramas, and vistas reach out to the sky. The spiritual association experienced through participatory consciousness is the intangible fervor around meditative space for self-discovery.

Studio 4 portrays the ethos of community living through the composition of streetscapes, clusters, ponds, courtyards, shared spaces, deep shades, modest shelters, all rendered with several textures and volumes. It represents a hamlet positioned as an interface overlooking farmlands taking refuge in a woody forest on the other edge.

Studio 5 is a cave dwelling as experience, set up in wilderness. Conceptualized on the idea of extraction of space is characterized by a single surface finish spread across the floor, walls, and ceiling. Light in varied forms, framed views, reflecting water pools, ever-changing sky, flora and fauna are other elements of composition to accentuate the experience.

The evolving philosophies and emerging sensibility stand as the trustee of regional identity, unfolding various layers of the context. The study conceptualizes some of the significant parameters of consideration to develop an experiential framework to understand the manifestations of vernacular socio-cultural characteristics in the design philosophies of architects through an exploration of five architect's offices in Maharashtra, India.

Parameters	Design brief	Attributes
Borrowed landscape: Interconnection between site and setting, to achieve harmony and timeless feel	The private space is positioned at the climax of a journey, deep inside the layered composition of spaces and volumes	Relationship with the ground, sky and surrounding views
Cultural continuity : Maintaining interlinkages, encouraging interactions, repository of knowledge system, and values	Landscape and elements of nature, as an essential component of space planning with blurring boundaries between indoor and outdoor	Access : sequential unfolding – conceal and reveal, journey with pauses
Embedded Stories : Spatial narrative, continuous interaction between people and places, encoding tales in artistic and abstract form	Multi-functional spaces with informal character intended to maximize interactions	Deep shaded semi-open spaces as climate, social and landscape response
	Experiential quality to encourage engagement through all senses, the sense of depth and bringing light in varied form	Minimal material palate, natural material and local craftsmanship
	Temporality : Diurnal, seasonal, incremental	Versatility – in scale and space usage for various activities
	Overlooking volumes, transition through interface and overlapping spaces	Crafting of surfaces and ground plane to accommodate storage spaces and shape seating areas

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