

FOLIO 7 THE DESIGNS WE SEEK

inscape

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The cover sketch by Bijoy Ramachandran captures the spirit of Neev Academy as more than a building, it is a living idea. The lines stretch outward like scaffolds of possibility, hinting at spaces yet to be imagined. Just as the folio questions whom we include, whom we forget, and how we build spaces of belonging, the sketch captures a vision of possibility; a school where the central yard connects voices, levels, and dreams. It reflects design as an act of inclusion, empathy, and openness. It is a space shaped not by walls, but by community.

The
Designs
We
Seek

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Foreword

Design is not just what we make. It is what we include.

As the Indian Institute of Interior Designers marks its Golden Jubilee year, we are reminded that design excellence must go hand in hand with design empathy. In this final edition of the Inscape Rainbow Series, *The Designs We Seek*, we turn the spotlight on a subject that speaks to the heart of our times, inclusivity.

Inclusivity in design is no longer a special requirement, it is a fundamental responsibility. This folio prompts us to consider who we design for. And more importantly, who we might be leaving out. Whether it's age, gender, mobility, neurodiversity, or cultural access, true design excellence lies in creating spaces that welcome and empower all.

At the same time, *The Designs We Seek* expands the idea of inclusion to the design ecosystem itself. Today's design challenges demand not just singular solutions, but interdisciplinary synergy, between architects, interior designers, urbanists, engineers, product innovators, digital thinkers, and policy makers. This folio champions the belief that our future depends on working together, across boundaries.

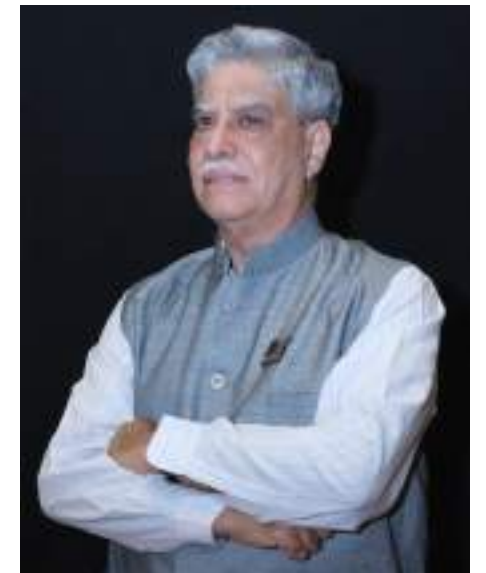
In our Golden Jubilee year, this message could not be more timely. From the National Convention to the Awards platform, IIID has been forging connections across regions and disciplines. But the Inscape series stands apart as a deeply reflective, world-class publication that will remain a lasting legacy of this term.

The Designs We Seek brings together some of the brightest minds in the field, designers and thought leaders who have not only pushed the boundaries of their practice but done so with purpose and compassion. The editorial team has, yet again, done a remarkable job in crafting a folio that is as profound as it is relevant.

As President of IIID, I believe this is the kind of design conversation we must nurture going forward, one that celebrates plurality, responsibility, and shared intent.

Let this folio serve as both mirror and map, for a profession that is ready to grow not just bigger, but wider, deeper, and fairer.

May the designs we seek always include everyone.



AR. SAROSH WADIA
PRESIDENT - IIID

Editor's Note



JABEEN ZACHARIAS
EDITOR, IIID INSCAPE

THE SHAPE OF US

It's been a long journey. From the space we shaped to the roof we raised, each folio in this Rainbow Series has captured a layer of living, floor by floor, wall by wall, yard by yard, frame by frame.

Now, we arrive not at a new addition, but a return. To the centre. To the Core. Because design, if it is true, is not just what we make. It is what we mean. And the designs we seek are not about just form or function. They are about inclusion. About belonging.

Design, if it is real, does not exclude. It does not ask for credentials. It does not check for ability or identity before opening its doors. It does not wait to be applauded for adding a ramp. Or praised for remembering Braille. It simply does what is right.

I remember once being invited to speak at a college. A student had asked: "What makes a design successful?" I didn't have a grand answer. But what I remember saying was this, "A design is successful when it lets everyone in. Into the space. Into the experience. Into the dignity of being counted."

This folio does not look for tokenism. It does not celebrate ramps as afterthoughts or braille as a bonus. It questions the brief and blueprint itself. Whom was it made for? Who was missing from our thoughts when the idea was curated? Who was missing at the table when the plan was drawn, when such expertise was called for? Did we even look beyond the obvious, to seek who might be missing??

Design must see 'who' is unseen. It must hear 'who' is unheard. It must sense 'who' has been left out of the sensing. It must be remembered that access and inclusion are not an option. It is a right. It is a demand for vision. Design that is not open, equal, and empathetic is not just incomplete. It is incorrect.

From the textures we choose, to the thresholds we set, to the systems we map, we shape not just function, but identity, dignity, and participation. And this is a bit away from the normal, but seeking a new normal needs careful consideration from trained experts from all related disciplines of Design. It cannot be a mindless gesture.

Happiness, wellness, health, and well-being are critical, and increasingly elusive, thanks to rapid lifestyle changes and rising, conscious demands. Furniture, product, lighting, graphic, styling... these are not just fragments, but the many thriving branches of the vast tree of Design. Each holds its unique merit. Each contributes a distinct voice. To gather these voices, to bring them into conversation, not competition, is the path forward.



Design is an archive of stories which are layered, lived, and shared. Every book, every image, every voice on these shelves reminds us that inclusion begins by making space for all narratives, equally heard and deeply seen.

This seventh folio, The Designs We Seek, is not the end of the series. It is the beginning of an audit. Of every line we draw or erase. Every door we open or close. Every choice we make or don't make ... and of the past, present and future we shape.

Folio 7 is not a collection. It is a constellation. Each contributor is a star in their own right, collectively shaping a new firmament of design thought and action.

Prem Chandavarkar brings the kind of quiet, unsettling wisdom that doesn't just inform- it transforms. Sonam Ambe enters like a storm of metaphors, challenging the linearity of logic with the force of feeling. Rishav Jain brings rigour, an academic lens that sharpens context and asks harder questions. The voice of Geetu Gangadharan carries the hunger and urgency of the next generation, bold,

aware, and deeply rooted. While Swati Janu promptly grounds us through participation and Inclusion, and in the sacred silences of Bijoy Ramachandran's sketches, we discover that the most powerful interventions often whisper rather than shout. Bose Krishnamachari, with his kinetic energy across disciplines, offers a walk through thought itself; art, architecture, culture, and curation merging like pigments on an evolving canvas.

But no folio on inclusion would be complete without the voices beyond architecture. The ones who work with their hands, not just their words. The ones who read material like memory, and space like spirit. This volume welcomes them, thinkers, craftsmen, makers, doers. Those at the edge of the circle, now brought to its centre.

Together, they don't just illustrate a theme. They ignite a vision. A vision where Design becomes more than beauty or function-

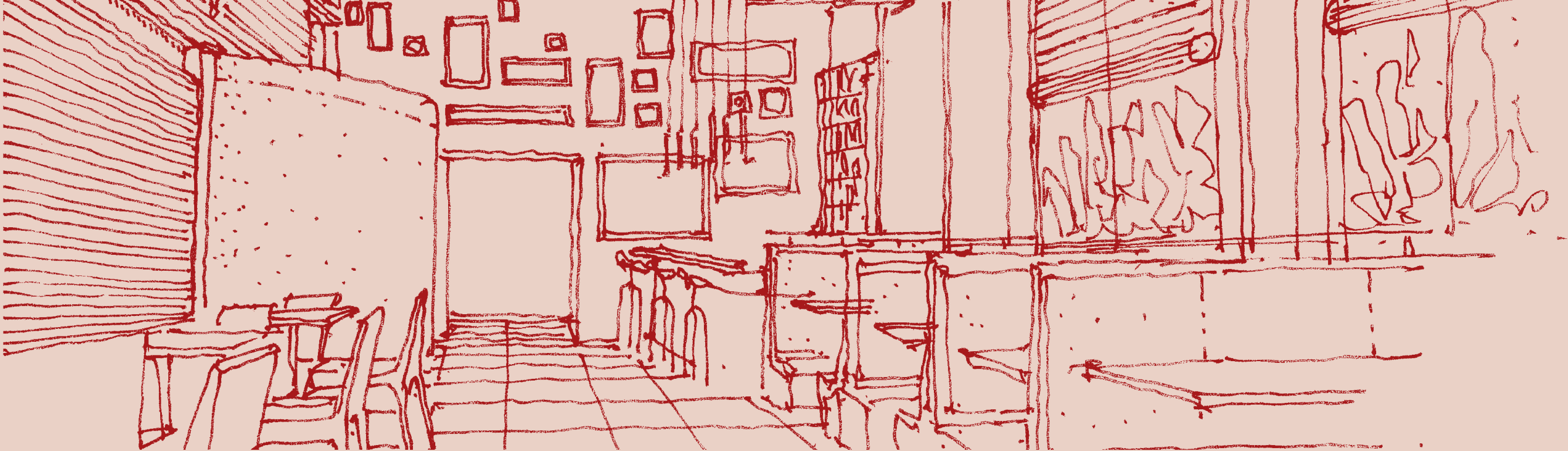
It becomes present.
It becomes a voice.
It becomes dignity made visible.

When done right, Design is not an exercise in Art or Science. It is a declaration of inclusion, of justice, of shared humanity.

It is compassion with a blueprint, empathy with a form, love with a language.

Let us seek what the world truly deserves: Designs that leave no one out.

When done right, Design is not an exercise in Art or Science. It is a declaration of inclusion, of justice, of shared humanity.



Sketch by Bijoy Ramachandran

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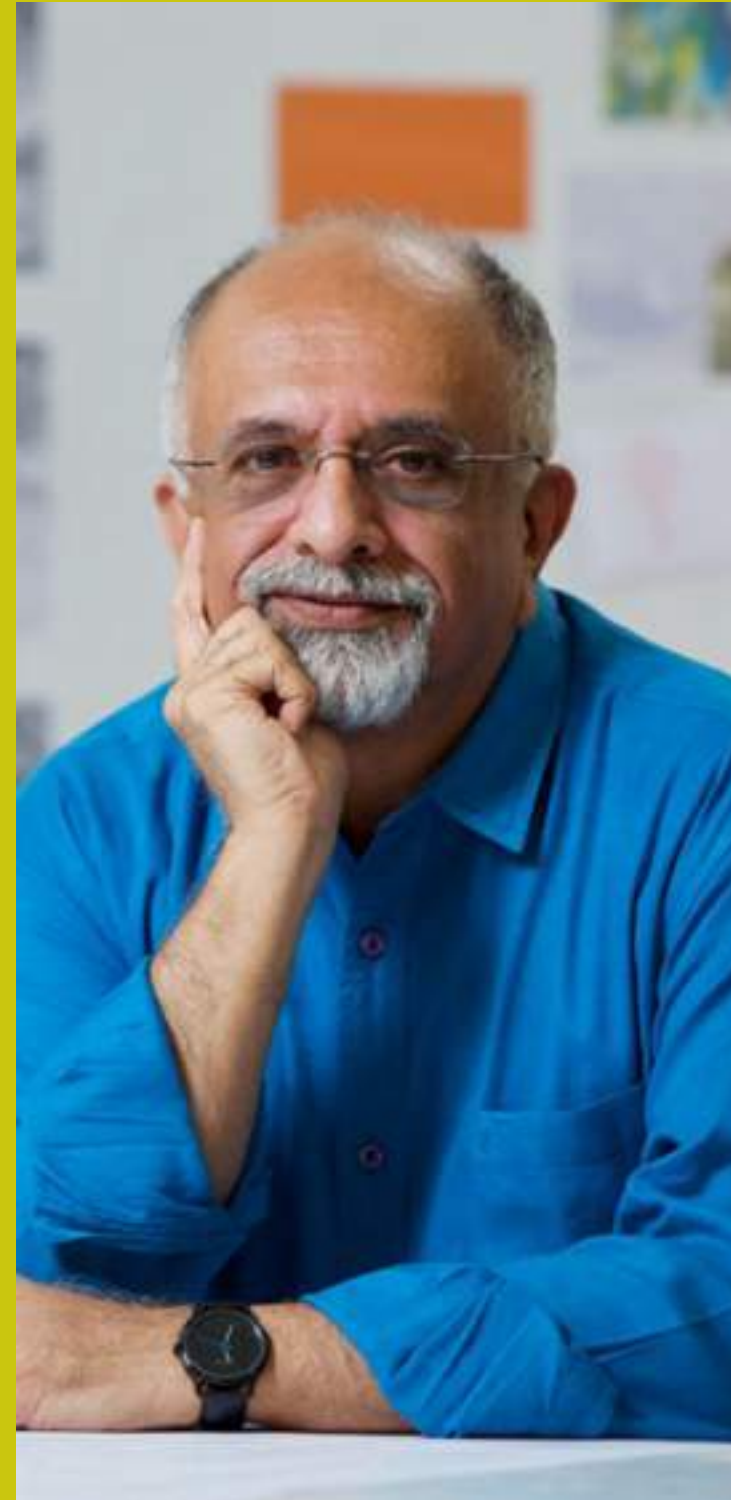
From cave hearths to smart homes, a timeline of interiors that shaped empathy, equity, and shared humanity.

Designing for Belonging

From Constraint to Compassion with
Prem Chandavarkar

**A CONVERSATION BETWEEN PREM CHANDAVARKAR (PC)
AND JABEEN ZACHARIAS (JZ), EDITOR- IIID INSCAPE ON
19 JULY 2025**

In this intimate and wide-ranging conversation, Prem Chandavarkar reflects on the deeper purpose of design, not as a spectacle of form, but as a quiet act of empathy, memory, and belonging. In dialogue with IIID Inscape editor Jabeen Zacharias, he speaks of verandas from his childhood, the values instilled by his mother, and how architecture must be shaped not by ego but by ethical consciousness. Drawing from decades of practice, Chandavarkar shares a vision for design that is deeply inclusive, not through checklists, but through attentiveness to life, relationships, and the invisible forces that bind us.



Architect, academic, and writer, Prem Chandavarkar, is the managing partner of CnT Architects – an award-winning and widely published architectural practice based in Bangalore, India. Prem received his training at SPA, New Delhi, and the University of Oregon, USA. He is a former Executive Director of Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design & Technology in Bangalore, and currently a member of the board of the Architecture, Culture & Spirituality Forum, USA. He serves as an academic advisor and guest faculty member at Indian and international colleges of architecture. Besides his design practice at CnT, he writes, lectures and blogs on architecture, urbanism, philosophy, politics, education, environment, art, and cultural studies.

All Images and Drawings courtesy: Prem Chandavarkar

JZ: When you hear the word inclusivity, what comes to your mind? It may not even be in the architectural or design context. What does inclusivity as a word mean to you?

PC: Inclusivity, to me, has two equally important dimensions. One is social, thinking of society as a whole and acknowledging that design has often catered to the elite. To be inclusive is to ask how design can serve everyone, not just a privileged few.

The second is more intimate, tied to practice. Many designers assume meaning comes from their intention, but with architecture and interiors, meaning is generated through inhabitation. People occupy spaces, build memories, and over time, that creates meaning.

So inclusivity also demands empathy, thinking deeply about who will inhabit the space, which requires an inclusive mindset, one that goes beyond aesthetic control to embrace how people live, remember, and make meaning. Rather than self-referential architecture, we need to design with an openness to allow spaces to be completed by their users. That's real inclusivity.



An atrium that belongs to everyone, open steps doubling as seating, barrier-free circulation, natural light for well-being, and flexible furniture clusters that invite collaboration at the Corporate Office, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories, Hyderabad

JZ: Do you recall any childhood moment when you felt included or excluded, something that shaped your understanding of space and belonging?

PC: What comes to mind immediately is my grandparents' farmhouse in Mangalore. We visited every summer, and that rhythm of returning to the same place year after year was deeply formative. Over time, I began to see how architecture holds memory, how a space, simply by being lived in, becomes layered with meaning.

There was a veranda there where everyone gathered after dinner to talk and enjoy the breeze. One night, we children were accidentally allowed to stay up late. Nothing profound was said, but that moment, being quietly included in the adult world, stayed with me. The next summer, that veranda felt transformed. It now held a story. A memory. That's when I realised architecture isn't just about form, it's about what spaces come to mean over time.

Even our own home in Bangalore had a large living room designed for family gatherings and live music. It wasn't just shelter; it held culture, joy, and togetherness.

Those early experiences shaped my perspective on architecture. Many think of it as performance, something dramatic. I see it as something that deepens over time. A space becomes truly meaningful when someone can look back and say, "This space holds my life."

JZ: It's beautiful to picture those verandahs, the rhythm of gathering, the quiet inclusion across generations, even music weaving people together. Was architecture always your path, or did you find your way to it over time?

PC: That rhythm spanned three generations. I grew up seeing how space held people, conversations, and memories. Architecture was always present in my life. My father had started one of Bangalore's first private practices in 1950, but he passed away very young. My mother, Tara Chandavarkar, who wasn't formally trained, chose not to let the work and vision fade. She brought in

Mr. Pesi Thacker as a partner and kept the practice alive. So architecture was all around me, but because it was so strongly present, I felt the need to test whether I really wanted it. In school, I declared I'd pursue structural engineering instead. I even registered for the IIT entrance exam. "But as the exam drew near, I could sense it wasn't where my heart lay. My interest faded, and with that came clarity that I needed to choose my path consciously. Architecture couldn't be something I drifted into; it had to be mine by choice. And once I made that choice, it truly became my own."



At the Crèche, Mindtree Global Village, Bengaluru, design speaks the language of all ages, with gentle curves, cheerful colours, and playful pathways creating a safe, inclusive world for the youngest minds to thrive.

JZ: It makes me proud to know that a woman was the force behind sustaining such a legacy. When you look at your practice today, is there a shared approach among your team, something that guides how you engage with clients or approach each design?

PC: I've taken a fairly unconventional approach. Though it's a legacy firm, I came into full leadership only in 2004, and that's when I began rethinking what architectural practice actually means. While it's the primary vehicle for architecture, the idea of practice itself hasn't been deeply examined. Most firms lean into one of two models: the business-oriented practice or the creative personality-led studio. I've found both lacking. The former drifts too far from design; the latter, while producing some remarkable work, often breeds a culture of heroes and followers, not deep and widespread reflection. I wanted something else: a design-centric model that isn't personality-centric.

JZ: Where does inclusivity fit into your process? Is it something you pause to address at a particular stage, or is it always present from the start? Can you share an example where this thinking shaped the design?

PC: It's always present, not something we pause to insert. Inclusivity isn't a checklist; it's a mindset that runs through the entire process. Today, meeting accessibility standards, ramps, tactile paths, all of that, is expected. But real inclusivity is deeper. It's about asking: who inhabits this space, and how? What does their body, their role, their experience demand?

For example, when we were designing a crèche, we were acutely aware that the users were under six years old. Their eye level is different, their sense of scale is different. So, we avoided a high plinth, because for a child, that could be alienating. Design had to begin from their point of view.

In another project, a factory, we noticed the management and shop floor were completely disconnected. The manager hadn't been to the floor in two years. So, we designed a single shared entrance. Whether you're the CEO or the cleaner, you enter through the same door. After that, you diverge. That one decision transformed the social fabric of the workplace.



A space where openness meets accessibility, fluid circulation, modular meeting pods, and inviting lounges that welcome collaboration across communities. Experience Centre, Baashyaam Crown Residences, Chennai.

JZ: True inclusivity goes far beyond ramps and graphics, norms and approvals; it's about how people relate to space and each other with dignity. Yet many still see it as a nuisance to live with. How do we shift that mindset, not just as designers, but as people?

PC: We have to stop seeing constraints as obstacles and start viewing them as opportunities. A ramp or a tree or even a boulder in the middle of a site, you can either treat it as something to remove, or as something to work with, to celebrate. That shift in attitude transforms design. But more than anything, it begins with remembering that we are human beings before we are architects. Too often, we see the world only through a professional lens, concerned with rules, aesthetics, and efficiency. But real design must begin with empathy, with asking: what kind of human am I being through my work? That internal reckoning, of values, ethics, and humility, is what shapes how we engage with our profession. I was fortunate to inherit a practice where humanity was already part of the culture. It still guides us.

JZ: You spoke earlier about the values that shaped your practice, this quiet foundation of ethics and empathy. Could you share how that culture was built, and how it played out in everyday life, even in the smallest gestures?

PC: There was a very strong culture, and much of it came from my mother. It was built not through grand declarations, but through small, consistent acts that carried deep meaning. For instance,



Seamless indoor-outdoor transitions and barrier-free layouts create a home that welcomes all ages and abilities with comfort and elegance. House in Nelamangala, Bengaluru

she taught us that when you're presenting to a client, never begin with "I think." Instead, say, "Don't you think?" It's subtle, but powerful; the first makes it your position; the second invites shared ownership.

We were taught to acknowledge everyone, not just the people in the boardroom. Whether it's the security guard, the receptionist, or the person serving coffee, each one plays a role in making a meeting happen. A smile, a thank you, those courtesies were never optional; they were part of being human. These things may seem small, but they shape the atmosphere of a practice. They remind you that before you're an architect, you're a person. And that understanding, of respect, humility, and grace, must guide how we design, how we build, and how we work with others.

JZ: As the boundaries between design disciplines, architecture, interiors, landscape, lighting, and furniture continue to blur, do you see true collaboration happening in practice? And how do you build that kind of interdisciplinary inclusivity into your design process?

PC: Across the board, we follow a four-stage design approach to make this kind of integration more systematic. It begins with framing the brief, not just as a list of requirements, but a discussion around aspirations, values, and experiences we want to enable. Then we move into a broad concept design phase, followed by a preliminary schematic where the architectural language begins to take shape, often in conversation with landscape ideas.

The fourth stage, which we call integrated schematic, is critical. That's where we actively bring in inputs from other disciplines, structure, MEP, lighting, landscape, sometimes even interiors, and test how they all align. It doesn't always get into detailed drawings at that point, but it sets the tone for coordination. It helps ensure that different disciplines are not responding to a finished form, but shaping it together. That's where the inclusivity truly begins to show, not just in outcome, but in process.

JZ: Have there been projects where another discipline, like interior design, needed to lead the process? Given that IIID places strong emphasis on interiors, I'm curious, how central is interior design in your practice? Do you have a dedicated team, or is it integrated differently?

PC: We did attempt a dedicated studio for interior design some years ago, but it didn't quite work. While we handle a fair volume of projects, not all of them involve interiors in a significant way. Also, because we're known primarily as an architectural practice, many of the people who join us are drawn to



core architectural work and tend to be less inclined toward interiors. So eventually, we decided not to separate the two. Instead, we've made sure that each of our studios is equipped to handle interior work as and when required.

For instance, in our apartment projects, we handle the interiors of lobbies and shared spaces in-house, and we begin considering them right from the schematic stage. We've also done a few office interiors as standalone projects. But when it comes to more intensive interior design, like hotels or private homes, we encourage the client to bring in a dedicated interior designer from the very beginning. We're working on a residence right now where we had to convince the client to involve the interior designer early on. It makes a huge difference when that collaboration begins at the schematic level rather than being added later. In our view, architecture and interiors must speak to each other from the start, not follow one another as separate layers.

A soaring atrium at the Mindtree, East Campus, Bengaluru, where natural light, greenery, and open circulation converge to create a space that fosters accessibility, collaboration, and a sense of belonging.

JZ: You've spoken about meaning emerging over time, through inhabitation and memory. In a world where fixed identities feel increasingly fragile and threatened, can design offer a space to rediscover shared, intangible values like beauty, joy, or wonder? Is this what led you to favour a collaborative practice over a personality-driven one?

PC: Yes, I believe we make a mistake when we treat identity as something fixed, because such identities are fragile. And when the world isn't sympathetic to preserving them, the instinct is to defend them, sometimes even violently. That's the crisis we see around us.

This connects deeply to why we work collaboratively. Many of the things we hold most important, love, joy, wonder, beauty, can't be described in words. But they are real. You know them when you feel them. And when someone else affirms that feeling, say, when their eyes light up at the same moment, it becomes a shared reality.

So much of design is about making space for that kind of discovery. And that's why we prefer a collaborative practice, because meaning doesn't come from one individual's vision. It emerges from relationships, from conversations, from co-inhabiting a question. That's where humanity enters the process.

JZ: As we reflect on the idea of inclusivity, I'd also like to bring in the theme of this folio, "The Designs We Seek." What does that evoke for you? As architects, what kind of designs should we be seeking today? What should be our deeper goal or dream as a design community?

PC: Perhaps the more important question is: What are the designs that seek us? Too often, design is driven by ambition; scale, novelty, innovation. But if we turn inward, the designs worth seeking are those that resonate with the core of being human, not just our functional needs, but our capacity to love, to transcend, to feel.

I once sat with the classical musician Pandit Dinkar Kaikini, who said something that has stayed with me. In music, the raag is not the emotion, it only defines the space. The emotion arises from how you inhabit that space: do you walk, do you dance, do you glide? The divisions dissolve in those small changes that govern every moment, such as in the meend, the glide between one note and the other, including all the microtones; and the laya, the interval between one



Verandas that blur boundaries, green courts that invite gathering, and shaded pathways that ensure comfort for all, design as a dialogue between people and nature at the Tata-Dhan Academy, Madurai.

note and the other. Infinity is not a grand concept; it is found in what is immediately adjacent and intimate.

If we want to translate this into architecture or interior design, we must start seeing spaces we design in terms of experiences rather than functions. Instead of labelling spaces as "living room" or "dining room," can we begin to see them as spaces of gathering, solitude, nourishment, and memory? If you get into that fine grain of reality, then you're getting into the core of existence. So then it's the design that seeks us. You're opening yourself up to that, not the designs. Because when we begin to design from that grain, sensitive to the micro-movements of life, we stop chasing designs and begin receiving them. It's no longer about the intention we impose, but the meaning that emerges. At its best, design is not about imposition. It's about discovery.

JZ: I don't have words to express how profound that was. Before we close, is there anything you'd like to say to the design fraternity, students, or anyone who might be reading this? It needn't stay within the bounds of what we discussed.

PC: I'd just say, slow down. We often ask young people what they want to do, not who they want to become. So we begin to define ourselves by jobs, roles, achievements, but forget the wonder of simply being.

Look within. You are a miracle. Every atom in your body follows the laws of physics, yet somehow, you laugh, dream, and love. That's sacred. And through slow, dedicated practice, what our traditions call sadhana, you begin to touch deeper truths. As Kumar Gandharva's teacher said, "Begin with one note, and the octave will reveal itself." So depend on yourself, not on external expectations or borrowed ideas. Give yourself the time and space to let that miracle within you breathe.

Through this conversation, Prem Chandavarkar leaves us with a profound reminder that good design does not assert itself; it listens, holds, and reveals. In a world fractured by identities and speed, he urges us to slow down, to design from the grain of life, and to honour the shared humanity that resides in every space. Inclusivity, in his view, is not a feature to be added but a way of being, where architecture emerges from compassion, not control. As we reflect on "The Designs We Seek," perhaps the real calling is to allow the designs that seek us to find their way in.

Conscious Design Woven from Lived Experience

SONAM AMBE



Sonam Ambe is the Research and Content Head at IIID Inscape and was the editor of the Design Tips Handbook for IIID. She is also the author of four books on design, art, and architecture and the founder of Local Gyan, an initiative dedicated to amplifying awareness of local contexts, design thinking, and lived experiences for school children. An architect by training, she graduated from Sir JJ College of Architecture and was awarded the Institute Silver Medal from IIT Bombay for her Master's in Planning and Development, where she focused on incrementality in informal urban segments. Since 2013, she has seamlessly blended research, practice, and pedagogy, teaching across formal academic settings and online platforms.

As a part of the IIID Inscape editorial board, alongside editor Jabeen Zacharias, an immersive field visit to Dharavi, which profoundly shaped the final segment of this Rainbow Series of Inscape, was undertaken. This section honours the ingenuity of design without designers, celebrates the resourcefulness of jugaad, and uncovers the everyday creativity embedded in lived environments. It confronts provocative questions: Is design inherently elitist? How can it truly embrace inclusivity? Through these reflections, the board presents a shared vision of an India that draws strength from its heritage, both built and unbuilt, and champions the potential of design to empower, connect, and transform communities.

Spaces are not always drawn on paper. Sometimes they emerge organically, silently, in the rhythm of daily life, growing and adapting with human hands and imagination. In these spaces, design is both improvisation and intention, a choreography of resilience that balances aspiration with limitation. The walls, alleys, and courtyards of such neighbourhoods carry the memory of countless decisions made in real time, shaping experiences that are intimate yet communal. These are environments where design is less about spectacle and more about subtle negotiation, where the ordinary gestures of living create extraordinary spatial poetry. It is in these neighbourhoods that one discovers the middle ground, the fragile equilibrium between the planned and the improvised, between vision and reality. Dharavi, in Mumbai, is perhaps the most compelling embodiment of this phenomenon, a living laboratory of human ingenuity, constraint, and resourcefulness. Here, design exists in a continuous dialogue between the people who inhabit it and the environment that surrounds them.

Understanding Dharavi or any other informal universe of India requires a shift in perspective. Frugal solutions emerge not merely from lack, but from lived necessity. Yet, the line between frugality and ad hoc improvisation, and jugaad, is delicate. While the ingenuity of residents transforms scarcity into functional systems, unregulated improvisation can exacerbate vulnerability and compromise safety. True inclusivity in design begins with the recognition that solutions must respect both human resourcefulness and environmental limits. Designers entering such spaces must understand not only material and spatial constraints but also the social, cultural, and financial realities that govern everyday decisions. Inclusive design is therefore not about imposing elegant solutions from the outside but about co-creating with those who inhabit and sustain the space. It is a dialogue, a shared act of imagining what could be, tempered by the understanding of what already is.



Every inch is alive with purpose, women gather, chat, and navigate with ease, even as ideas of comfort and well-being, from a designer's perspective, appear compromised. Photo by Jabeen Zacharias

These are environments where design is less about spectacle and more about subtle negotiation, where the ordinary gestures of living create extraordinary spatial poetry.



Is there an Order in the chaos of choices and directions? Photo by Jabeen Zacharias

The process of learning from lived environments requires a different kind of expertise, one that bridges imagination and execution. Diving into the insights from our previous folios, Sandeep Khosla reminds us that the careful selection and contextual application of materials can transform ordinary elements into powerful agents of spatial storytelling. In Dharavi, stone, timber, and even repurposed metal serve functional roles, but they also become carriers of memory and identity when placed thoughtfully. Similarly, Parul Zaveri's reflections on roofs reveal that architecture is inseparable from climate, culture, and craft. In Dharavi, informal dwellings negotiate sunlight, ventilation, and rain in remarkably sophisticated ways, often instinctively achieving the passive environmental strategies that architects spend years theorising. These micro-strategies highlight the latent intelligence embedded in communities, waiting to be recognised, refined, and elevated through thoughtful interventions.

Openings, as explored by Habeeb Khan, are not merely voids in a wall but portals of transition, connection, and engagement. In Dharavi, apertures in homes and workshops mediate not just light and air but social interactions, safety, and privacy. They are simultaneously functional, symbolic, and social thresholds, mediating relationships between public and private, interior and exterior. Designers can work with these subtle spatial cues to enhance dignity, comfort, and well-being without erasing the improvisational ingenuity that residents have developed over decades. Small interventions, carefully placed shading devices, improved ventilation channels, or community-accessible courtyards, can amplify quality of life while respecting the existing spatial logic.

The interplay between finance and inclusivity cannot be overstated. Frugal solutions that ignore financial constraints or fail to engage with the realities of income, tenure, and access risk alienating those they intend to serve. Conversely, solutions that are visually elegant but economically inaccessible become aspirational yet unattainable, widening existing inequities. True inclusive design in densely inhabited neighbourhoods like Dharavi must operate within financial limitations, translating visionary ideas into pragmatic, scalable, and context-sensitive interventions. This requires designers to understand budgeting and incrementality not as a secondary concern but as a core aspect of the design process. Design without this awareness risks becoming aestheticised abstraction, divorced from the lived realities of the community.

Inclusivity is equally about participation and recognition. Local knowledge, whether in the form of material improvisation, informal construction techniques, or neighbourhood governance, carries critical design intelligence. The skill of a local carpenter, the ingenuity of a resident repurposing scrap materials, or the tacit logic

behind spatial arrangements all contain design insights that formal education often overlooks. Engaging with these practices respectfully allows architects to co-create solutions that are culturally resonant, materially sustainable, and socially just. The act of building thus becomes a collaborative pedagogy, a dialogue that extends from conceptual sketches to the hands that lay bricks and pour concrete.

Material experimentation, as discussed in the craft-focused essays, offers another layer of insight. Local materials in Dharavi, whether salvaged timber, bricks, or repurposed metal, carry ecological and economic advantages that formalised supply chains often overlook. Thoughtful guidance from designers can elevate these materials into more resilient, durable, and aesthetically coherent applications without losing the improvisational intelligence embedded in their use. For instance, simple interventions like guiding alignment, joint detailing, or waterproofing can transform temporary measures into long-lasting infrastructure, bridging the gap between ingenuity and reliability.



Layers of materiality, incrementality, stories, and experiences encapsulate the richness of lived spaces where every element carries meaning. Photo by Sonam Ambe



Levels become a gesture of harmony, splitting the space so two owners enjoy their own distinct entrances while sharing a unified home. Photo by Jabeen Zacharias

Frugality, when properly guided, becomes a discipline of resourcefulness rather than a compromise of safety or dignity. The IIID Design Tips Handbook serves as a practical companion in this journey, offering actionable insights on scalable, context-sensitive design solutions, from spatial layouts to material selection, from water and waste management to lighting and ventilation. It encourages designers to think relationally: how each intervention interacts with the wider community, the environment, and the socioeconomic landscape. Applied in neighbourhoods like Dharavi, these principles translate into interventions that respect existing improvisation while enhancing safety, efficiency, and quality of life.

Bridging knowledge between designers and builders is paramount. From the tactile elegance of Kota stone to the rhythm of roofs that mediate light and air, to the archetypal significance of openings, the essence of architecture lies in translation, from concept to reality, from vision to execution.

In Dharavi, this translation becomes a collaborative practice. Masons, carpenters, and residents themselves become co-authors of the built environment, integrating both traditional wisdom and contemporary design insights. The role of the designer is to guide, translate, and amplify without overriding the intelligence already present.

In essence, the architecture of Dharavi is a profound lesson in humility, inclusivity, and responsibility. It is a place where everyday improvisation becomes a form of design, where residents navigate constraints with ingenuity, and where interventions, if applied with respect and understanding, can transform not just spaces but lives. It reminds us that architecture is not solely the product of grand gestures, but the culmination of small, careful, and contextually sensitive decisions. It is in these details, the alignment of walls, the placement of openings, the choice of materials, the negotiation of financial limits, that inclusive design finds its truest expression.



Frugality and Jugaad speak for themselves in this home. Photo by Jabeen Zacharias



Every alley tells a story of lived expertise, where local knowledge shapes the paths and spaces around us. Photo by Jabeen Zacharias.



design is not solely the product of grand gestures, but the culmination of small, careful, and contextually sensitive decisions

True design in such contexts is invisible yet transformative. It does not announce itself with monumental forms but grows quietly through guidance, dialogue, and co-creation. It embraces frugality without falling into improvisational chaos. It honours local intelligence while integrating expert insight. It respects financial realities while elevating dignity and quality of life. And it ensures that lessons, whether from craft traditions, material experiments, or architectural theory, are translated into practical, actionable interventions. The IIID Design Tips Handbook becomes both a tool and a symbol of this ethos, reminding designers that guidance, empathy, and inclusivity are as essential as form, material, or proportion.



The IIID Design Tips Handbook transforms theory into practice, offering actionable insights for inclusive, context-sensitive, and resilient design across diverse environments. Scan the QR code to access the Handbook.



Residents of Dharavi seamlessly blend work and living spaces, creating a dynamic balance that is also rooted in traditional art. Photo by Avinash Narnaware

The informal teaches that design is ultimately a shared endeavour.

The informal teaches that design is ultimately a shared endeavour. It is not merely about buildings, walls, or roofs, but about relationships, resilience, and the ability to listen and respond. Designers become translators of experience, facilitators of insight, and mentors in a collective process that bridges imagination and execution. Every intervention, every subtle suggestion, every shared lesson becomes part of the invisible architecture that shapes daily life. By embracing inclusivity, understanding constraints, and amplifying local ingenuity, architecture ceases to be a top-down imposition and becomes a collaborative act of hope, creativity, and care.

In reflecting on Dharavi, we come to understand that design is never a solitary act of authorship. It is a living dialogue, a negotiation between vision and reality, expertise and improvisation, intention and necessity. The lessons of this neighbourhood compel us to see design not as an elite abstraction, but as a deeply human practice, one that listens, observes, and responds. True inclusivity emerges when we honour the knowledge embedded in daily life, when we translate inspiration into guidance without erasing the ingenuity of those who inhabit and shape their spaces. In these subtle gestures, aligned walls, thoughtful apertures, resilient materials, and mindful interventions, architecture becomes both invisible and transformative. It is a shared craft, a collective intelligence, a testament to resilience, creativity, and care. Our country's Informal wealth reminds us that every hand, every eye, every idea matters; that design, at its most profound, is an act of connection, respect, and empowerment. It is here, in this delicate balance of co-creation, that the soul of spatial design truly resides.



The IIDD Inscape editorial team on their field visit to Dharavi, engaging with local residents and practitioners of everyday design. Inset (from left): Fahim Vora, Sonam Ambe, Jabeen Zacharias, and Waris from Be the Local

Gita Balakrishnan

Jenny Pinto

Vikram Goyal

Design as Care: Expanding the Gallery

Sahil Tanveer

soft-geometry

Sunela Jayewardene

Arjun Rathi

In the earlier editions of the Golden Jubilee Rainbow Series, the Gallery has been imagined as a visual narrative, a space where form, material, and context quietly conversed through images. For this final folio, however, the Gallery evolves into something more layered: a collaboration of skills, ideas, and disciplines.

We bring together seven diverse designers whose practices question conventions and extend the boundaries of what design can be. While their mediums and methods differ, spanning glass, metal, textiles, paper, landscape, AI, craft, and social responsibility, what

unites them is a deeply intentional approach. Each practice engages with culture, context, and community, demonstrating that design today thrives at the intersections, where disciplines overlap and perspectives converge.

Through botanical glass sculptures, speculative AI explorations, environmental storytelling, reimagined waste, architectural empathy, and sculptural repoussé, the Gallery becomes a site of dialogue rather than display. It invites us to pause, to question, and to listen to the materials, the processes, and the larger systems they belong to.

At its heart, this collection redefines the Gallery as more than a space to showcase objects. It is a space of inquiry, one that asks who we design for, why we create, and how design can hold meaning in a fragile, rapidly shifting world. In these works, design is not decoration; design is care.

This is not a conclusion but an invitation to seek the designs we need, the futures we hope to shape, and the values we choose to preserve.

Arjun Rathi

Arjun Rathi is a Mumbai-based architect running a multi-disciplinary studio working across Lighting Design called Arjun Rathi Design founded in 2012. Through his studio's work, he interprets space through the lens of lighting, designs fixtures and installations that can capture our imagination and can inspire us in these spaces. He is also the co-founder of the Rural Modern Glass Studio in Mumbai in 2021, which is India's first art-glass studio exploring hand-blown glass across glass-art, home accessories, objects and tableware. He has also co-founded Design Democracy in 2023, a platform for indigenous brands across the interior and lifestyle space.

The Vanaspati Collection: Presented by Rural Modern Glass Studio in collaboration with Tejas Thackeray.

Rooted in the lush biodiversity of the Indian subcontinent, Vanaspati is a botanical-inspired lighting collection that brings together the disciplines of art, ecology, and craftsmanship. A collaboration between Rural Modern Glass Studio and Mumbai-based artist and naturalist Tejas Thackeray, the collection transforms rare and endangered flora into hyper-real lighting sculptures - a celebration of form, fragility, and the natural world. Each piece is handcrafted in limited

editions using the ancient craft of blown glass, interpreted through a contemporary lens:

Chandeliers bloom with elements drawn from wild orchids and the pitcher plant, creating immersive, suspended gardens of light.

At the heart of Vanaspati is a reverence for the wild - a luminous tribute to India's native plant life, interpreted through the poetic alchemy of fire, glass, and collaboration.



Art direction : Aarshi Lagarkha Rathi, Photography : Dwij Adhwaryu

Sahil Tanveer

Sahil Tanveer, founder of RBDS and RBDS AI Lab, weaves architecture, art, and AI into living narratives. Architect, Author, filmmaker, and storyteller, he has delivered 50+ talks globally, including keynotes in Russia and Qatar, inspiring designers to think deeply, build wisely, and reimagine the world through philosophy, culture, and innovation. He lives in Dharwad.

Speculative Currents: When AI and Design Flow Together. Architecture, art, and AI are not compartments in our practice; they are currents in the same river. At RBDS AI Lab, we begin not with a pencil, but with a pause. In an era where design has

become a race to produce, buildings sprouting like weeds across digital and physical landscapes, we ask a different question: Must everything imagined be built?

The first image is our quiet protest: beauty replicated without thought, form without reason. We believe in designing with restraint, creating only when the world genuinely needs more. Sometimes, that means transforming the old into something new; sometimes, it means creating worlds that exist only as stories.

AI is our constant collaborator, Skye, our digital counterpart, joins us in the earliest conversations. Together, we navigate ideas before they become

material. This has shifted our work from pure architecture toward art, speculative spaces, and public discourse.

Speculative architecture is not escapism; it's a mirror. It allows us to imagine futures that inform the present. In the second image, architecture invites the gaze, but it is the unseen human presence, the woman, her journey, that gives the space its soul.

We are a small team, yet we operate across design, research, and teaching. AI allows us to think far beyond our scale, making each project not just a building or a visual, but a living narrative.



The Search © RBDS AI Lab on Midjourney



Photo credit: Rahula Perera



Sunela Jayewardene

Sunela Jayewardene is recognised as 'Sri Lanka's leading environmental architect' (Time, March 2007; India Today, 2008). Her work has been recognised by many organisations and listed by Echelon as, '50 Most Powerful Women in Sri Lanka'. She is the author of two highly acclaimed books, Ravana's Lanka, The Landscape of a Lost Kingdom (Penguin India 2024) and The Line of Lanka (Penguin India 2025). Now retired from architecture, she travels widely to speak on conservation and design and returns to her remote, rewilded forest in Sri Lanka, where she lives.

When I first started practising in the 90s, concern for the environment was non-existent. Then, to express

my design ethic of prioritising the natural environment, I used to call myself an 'Environmental' Architect. I believe the time for that prefix has passed, and today, all practices should be prioritising the environment... or run the risk of being noted as 'outdated'.

I have found that working with natural elements such as native foliage, water, wind and light, despite often being misinterpreted as luxuries, only eases the burdens of design. Using these elements as an integral part of a design automatically reduces material and energy consumption through passive lighting, ventilation and sound-proofing. Further, the inclusion of these same elements magically enhances serenity and harmony, which have become rare

and sought-after commodities in global societies.

Now, it is evident that the Western ethic, of humans who dominate the environment and live in silos that seal us from the natural environment, is a failed model. In this era, traditional design, which effortlessly dovetails the built and unbuilt spaces, is the template to tweak with modern technological advances. Revisiting the original building systems of our own societies, and regenerating environments that we have unwittingly destroyed, is the only future. Therefore, I believe that today, contextually correct design that addresses its natural environment and returns as much as it extracts is the responsibility of all architects.



Gita with community members, opening conversations on design as a universal right. Courtesy: Ethos, March 2022, Jharkhand

Gita Balakrishnan

Gita Balakrishnan is an architect, educator, and social advocate who founded Ethos, the Ethos Foundation, and Acedge. Through initiatives like Walk for Arcause, she champions inclusive, empathetic design, blending local wisdom with contemporary practice to create spaces that serve communities, inspire dialogue, and transform how we experience the built environment.

Arcause by Ethos Foundation:

I have always believed that the power to design comes with great responsibility, and that access to design should not be a privilege but a right. What we create must serve more than a client or a brief; it must engage with society and the

environment. My journey with Ethos began by opening pathways for young designers through extracurricular learning opportunities outside the classroom. The Walk for Arcause deepened this pursuit, allowing me to engage directly with communities and places, each step reinforcing the need to nurture voices and widen horizons.

Through Ethos, bridges are built, not structures, linking talent to opportunities and ideas to impact. For me, design is a medium to advance social and environmental justice, grounded in the belief that decisions made on site ripple far beyond it, shaping lives and ecosystems. If architects and designers hold the power to set trends, we must use it not to mirror the market

but to redefine it, towards equity, sustainability, and purpose.

The wisdom embedded in everyday life continues to guide me, whether in the climate responsiveness of a shaded courtyard or the social choreography of a village square. These lessons remind us that design is not invention alone, but attention.

Ultimately, I seek transformation, of places, of thought, and of possibility. When design prompts us to pause, reflect, and reimagine how we live, it transcends form and becomes a force for shaping just and hopeful futures.

Values that guide my practice: responsibility, justice, sustainability, equity, and transformation.

soft-geometry

soft-geometry, established in 2019 by Indian designers Uthara L. Zacharias and Palaash Chaudhary, creates collectible furniture and objects that serve as poignant reflections on the universal yearning for softness in an often harsh world. With the narrative backdrop of Zacharias and Chaudhary's own experiences of living and working between cultures in India and the US, soft-geometry's objects explore the suspension between contemporary geometries and ritualistic hand-building inspired by Indian craft traditions.

Not a material- or media-specific practice, soft-geometry approaches design as a way to transcend utility and achieve poetry, celebrating the intricate nuance, layers, and

imperfections of being human over machined efficiencies. The studio's work is a channel for experimentation and learning, grounded in care and curiosity. This philosophy is shaped by observations and lessons from life in India, where expression, craft, and storytelling are often prioritized over functionality or restraint. "We dream of soft, handcrafted futurism in contemporary design."

Their latest release, titled "**Long-Haired Sconces,**" continues this exploration. Sculptural, lighted portraits, in between object and body, they trace soft domestic rituals of adornment and care. The series emerges from shared memories: of slow and sacred

Sunday afternoons, mothers and sisters lined up, oiling, massaging, combing, and braiding hair. Of Monday mornings that followed, a hurried, disciplined weaving for school. And of repeating these same rituals for each other now, as two long-haired adults far from home, a quiet choreography passed down through hands. Each sconce features a hand-blown glass orb, crowned with cascading braids in varying lengths and formations.

The braids are cast in a hemp-lime composite, a sustainable, carbon-negative material more often used in architecture than in the decorative arts. Here, soft-geometry reimagines it at an intimate, tactile scale—transforming memory into object, and ritual into light.



Photos by soft-geometry

Jenny Pinto

Jenny Pinto is the founder of Oorjaa, one of India's first paper design studios, based in Bangalore since 1998. Oorjaa is today a frontrunner in sustainable lighting products. Before that, she was a TV commercial producer and director in Bombay. She has also published a children's book, 'The Magical Everything', on climate change, told through the wonderful complexities of nature.

Many of the world's problems, ecosystem decline, pollution, waste, and climate change, are partly the responsibility of design. The harm was never deliberate but the unintended result of underestimating design's power and impact.

Yes, design is part of the problem, but it can also be part of the solution. This belief shapes Oorjaa's ethos. When I began in 1998, my question was: how do I contribute to India's design landscape without adding to its waste? The answer lay in addressing this at the design stage. Natural materials became an obvious choice. Handmade paper drew me in, leading to a fascinating journey of setting up a paper-making studio, sourcing agri-waste, collaborating with rural artisans, and pushing the limits of paper.

Lighting felt like the natural next step, given my two decades as an ad filmmaker. Transitioning from big budgets to a handmade process was challenging but deeply rewarding.

Along the way, we innovated, creating Wabi Sabi, a lighting collection using quarry dust and waste paper, combining raw beauty with sustainability.

Then came Lantana. ATREE, an environmental institute, introduced us to this invasive weed and its potential for design. Inspired by The Real Elephant Collective's work, we transformed Lantana into lighting accessories, adding another chapter to our material explorations.

From 3 artisans in 1998 to 70 today, our mission remains constant: to craft lighting that minimises waste and illuminates spaces with warmth and purpose.



Image credits: Crew cat studio.



Photo credit: Rahula Perera



Vikram Goyal

Vikram Goyal is a multidisciplinary designer known for his mastery of metalwork, particularly repoussé. Founder of VIYA, he bridges traditional Indian craft and contemporary design, creating sculptural and functional works, from murals and furnishings to decorative objects. His practice blends heritage, material exploration, and conceptual storytelling for global audiences.

I have always been fascinated by the dialogue between material and form, by the way a sheet of metal, under careful hands, can take on life, texture, and narrative. My design journey was not instinctive; it began as curiosity, a fascination with India's rich crafts and design heritage, from

the domes and finials of Delhi to the intricate Pichwais of Rajasthan. Over the years, repoussé has become my voice, my language of expression, allowing me to translate surreal inspirations, architectural forms, and cultural memory onto metal.

From a child's pillow to a gilded console, from murals to delicate inlays, every piece is an attempt to bridge the traditional and the contemporary, the local and the global. I work with a team of artisans, many from intergenerational lineages, whose hands carry centuries of knowledge; together we celebrate craft while pushing its boundaries.

At the heart of our work is a search for ideas that merge concept with experience, that make the ordinary

feel magical and the familiar unfamiliar. Each design begins with observation of the world, of nature, of everyday rhythms, and grows into forms that are both functional and poetic, where surfaces, light, and texture engage the senses and the mind. The goal is not merely to craft objects, but to create moments that provoke curiosity, wonder, and a sense of connection between material, idea, and human experience.

India's Art Renaissance Begins at Home

JAMBUDWEEP TRANSFORMS HOW WE SEE, VALUE, AND LIVE WITH ART.

Long before modern maps existed Jambudvīpa, an ancient cradle of culture, was under the reign of Ashoka the Great. It was the cosmological centre of existence; the realm where life, culture and wisdom converged. It was here that the Buddha walked, taught and inspired. Here, artists carved poetry, painted philosophies and lived through their hands. Jambudvīpa was where art and cultural soul intertwined seamlessly with our identity.

Centuries later, that ancient spirit stirs again through the Jambudweep Art Collective, a living movement, an evolving art ecosystem. Here, India's grassroots artists find their long-awaited voice, and authentic fine art returns to its rightful place, not locked in galleries or palaces, but alive in the heart of every home.



Jambudweep
Art Collective

Reviving an artistic heritage that thrived on expression, connection, and conversation.

A place where contemporary talent isn't doomed to a life of being unknown just because they don't know the right people or hashtags.

The silent walls of India: Why original art struggles to belong
India's artistic heritage is unparalleled, yet most Indian homes remain bare of original works. Scratch the surface of the Indian homeowner's psyche, and a clearer picture emerges. Art is often perceived as an elite indulgence due to the history of galleries and auctions catering only to the privileged. Adding to this is the cultural perception that art has traditionally belonged to temples and palaces, not our humble abodes. Together, these factors create the illusion that owning art is a pretentious luxury, not a soul-enriching expression.

Practical barriers deepen this divide. Art evaluation is not a widely held skill, and the lack of it creates hesitation in recognising value. And finally, limited access to affordable, original works and promising artists makes discovery harder.

As a result, the mass-produced decor market booms, while real artists remain unseen, undervalued and unsupported.

A new canvas for Indian Art: Connecting creators, collectors, and homes

Jambudweep recognises the invisible strength of India's grassroots and upcoming artists, the creators from various corners of India, who have yet to find a place in the mainstream art circuit. By building a network of curators, branding experts and art patrons, Jambudweep turns the spotlight on their creations through a dedicated online platform for both first-time art buyers and seasoned collectors. A model where artists earn with dignity and patrons relish the joy of owning authentic, affordable fine art. Jambudweep closes this gap between artists and patrons with a set of operational innovations:

Personal virtual galleries

Each artist gets a gallery of their own, so their work isn't lost in the crowd.

World-class branding

Make their presence felt with branding and storytelling that does justice to their craft.

Institutional tie-ups

Partnership with designers, corporates and collectors to generate steady demand.

Fair pricing

With 80% of the works priced under ₹1,00,000, art becomes accessible to a wide audience.

Curating the Jambudweep network

Jambudweep is a curated cultural ecosystem reshaping the art-buying experience. Through themed exhibitions, it opens fresh pathways of engagement, while workshops, masterclasses, and forums create spaces where artists and collectors connect through shared learning. Podcasts, vlogs, and case studies unveil the stories behind the art, revealing the human spirit at work. With artist upskilling and collector subscriptions, Jambudweep nurtures lasting relationships, fostering a culture of patronage that transcends a single purchase.

'Bouyant' 50"x37" Acrylic Aneesh Vini





Curating the Jambudweep patronage

As India's middle class grows design-conscious and the diaspora seeks deeper cultural roots, Jambudweep emerges as a gateway to authentic Indian fine art, giving artists the visibility they deserve on a global stage. Through data-enabled catalogues, international buyers can effortlessly explore India's creative wealth. Upcoming innovations like AI-powered auction services will spotlight rare works, while personalised concierge programmes cater to institutional and global collectors. In doing so, Jambudweep transforms Indian fine art into a passport, carrying promising artists from local studios to walls across the world.

A collective for cultural fabric

Jambudweep finds its true purpose in threading the cultural fabric of tomorrow. By opening sustainable avenues of income, this movement empowers underrepresented artists to establish themselves with dignity. When these artists flourish, it establishes India not only as the land of heritage crafts but as a home of contemporary fine art.

The most pivotal step towards this goal lies in making art ownership a shared act of patronage that's accessible to ordinary Indians, rather than a distant indulgence. And on the global stage, Jambudweep takes India's fresh creative minds to places where they are seen, heard and celebrated.

'Stormy Night' 24"x36" Mixed Media Anusha Adbala



Chinese Ink-pen work on paper, Mohammed Rizwan



The Jambudweep Gallery, Mohammed Rizwan and Anusha Adbala

The Indian palette of cultural renaissance

India, whose artistic expression adorns temple walls, animates folk traditions, and flows through miniature paintings and modern masters, is ready to usher in the next chapter of its legacy. This time, it won't be written in galleries or at auctions. It will come alive in millions of homes, where art belongs to inspire, nurture and share human emotions.

Like Jambudvipa once stood at the centre of human culture, Jambudweep now carries that spirit forward for modern India, making art once again accessible, sustainable and celebrated.

And as we collaborate with the IIID community, we eagerly await the chance to breathe this vision into real spaces. The works are pre-curated, transparently priced and crafted to create long-term value. And the artists bring stories worth savouring, told in ways only their hands could narrate.

We invite you to leverage this opportunity to bring original fine art into interior spaces, inspiring a home-grown revolution in the way India experiences and celebrates creativity.

EXPLORE THE JAMBUDWEEP COLLECTION ONLINE



CRAFT AS INCLUSION: THE DESIGN WE MUST SEEK

RISHAV JAIN

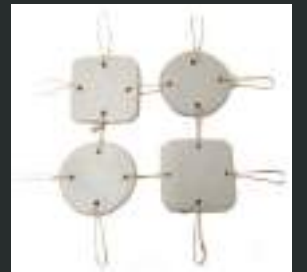


“Design, if it is to be ecologically responsible and socially responsive, must be revolutionary and radical,” wrote Victor Papanek in *Design for the Real World* (1971), one of the most influential critiques of modern design practice. Papanek’s central concern was clear: too much of design serves commerce, not community; fashion, not function; aesthetics, not ethics. More than five decades later, his warning feels even more urgent. In a world confronting

Rishav Jain is an educator and cultural practitioner currently working with CEPT University, Ahmedabad. His work spans craft futures, contemporary design, and 21st-century design education. As a craft futurist and visual thinker, he has led international research projects, developed conceptual frameworks and toolkits, and written for national and international publications. An author and curator, he enjoys creating graphics and exploring visual and food cultures.

All photos are courtesy of the author unless mentioned otherwise.

social inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural homogenisation, design has often remained preoccupied with surfaces, spectacle, and speed. It risks becoming an exclusive language, spoken fluently only by those with the means and power to shape environments, systems, and objects on behalf of others.



Exploring craft futures: student-led material experiments in ceramics, metal, textiles, paper, and beyond, in collaboration with skilled craftspeople.

Today, as design spreads across disciplines: interface, system, speculative, service, it risks becoming detached from the real world that Papanek championed: a world of lived experience, of dignity, of participation. In this moment, the question is not simply what design looks like, but who it includes, who it listens to, and whose knowledge it values. Inclusion, therefore, is not a stylistic gesture or a well-meaning intention it is the ethical bedrock of design. And for Indian design, that ethic lies not in importing new vocabularies, but in recognising and reactivating the deep histories of making that have always existed here.

In India, design has long existed under a different name: *kala*. The term encompasses much more than the English words “art” or “craft”; it refers to skilled, sensorial, contextualised knowledge rooted in life, nature, and community. *Kala* refuses to separate thinking from doing, or the designer from the maker. It is participatory, relational, and situated. It is not post-rationalised in drawings, but embodied in rhythm, gesture, and repetition. When Kumar Vyas spoke of “design from within,” and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay advocated for the dignity of craft, they were not simply defending tradition; they were articulating a vision for Indian design that is both inclusive and contemporary. They were asking us to look inward, not backwards, and to build design cultures that emerge from our ground realities.



Material experiments by students envisioning craft futures, blending traditional and modern kala. Outcomes from the studio Craft + Future: Speculative Design Practices, CEPT University.

This essay argues that the future of Indian design lies not in catching up with global paradigms, but in embracing kala as method, as ethic, and as speculative imagination. It is through kala that we arrive at a design that does not ask who deserves to participate; it begins with participation. A design that does not add inclusion after the blueprint, it draws the blueprint collectively. A design that does not merely accommodate difference, it emerges from difference.

Recalling Indian Design's Inclusive Core

To speak of inclusive design today is often to speak of a belated correction: the addition of ramps, the integration of braille, the occasional consultation with users at the margins. These are not unimportant gestures, but they often come after the design has already taken form, and as such, they reflect the limits of a model that begins with exclusion and adds inclusion later. What is needed instead is a design consciousness that begins with interdependence, where the idea of inclusion is not a measure of generosity, but a structural condition of the design process itself.



Learning from the makers: engaging with craftspeople to uncover the context, culture, and stories behind their craft.

Historically, kala represented just such a consciousness. In Indian pre-industrial making cultures, design was not a singular act but a collective unfolding through guilds, families, and communities whose knowledge evolved through dialogue, experimentation, and transmission across generations. Craft was not a category separate from architecture, nor was it ornamentation; it was the very mode through which space was imagined and realised. The concept of authorship was diffused, the process was incremental, and value was generated through use, adaptability, and situatedness. In kala, the object is not the centre, the relationships around it are.

This holistic understanding of design did not survive unscathed through colonial and industrial modernity. With the introduction of European design pedagogy and industrial aesthetics, the designer was reimagined as an individual author, a figure of detached rationality

and conceptual mastery. The body was replaced by the drawing. The process was divided between thinking and doing. And the craftspeople, once central to the act of shaping space and material, became auxiliary, sometimes even invisible.

Kumar Vyas's writings offer an early and foundational critique of this shift. He warned against an externally imposed design logic that failed to see the complex embeddedness of Indian practices. His idea of "design from within" called not for protectionism, but for grounded innovation, for systems of design education and practice that emerged from Indian realities and valued both intellectual and manual ways of knowing. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay similarly saw kala not as a backwards tradition, but as a socially relevant and economically vital future. For her, preserving the dignity of craft was inseparable from preserving the integrity of Indian life.

“-they often come after the design has already taken form, and as such, they reflect the limits of a model that begins with exclusion and adds inclusion later. What is needed instead is a design consciousness that begins with interdependence, where the idea of inclusion is not a measure of generosity, but a structural condition of the design process itself.”

Design as a Collective Ethic

In contemporary design discourse, inclusion is often framed as an obligation or a checklist. But when seen through the lens of *kala*, inclusion is a precondition. One cannot design without others; there is no “user” who arrives after the design is done. The space, the object, the tool, all emerge through negotiated relationships between people, materials, rituals, and time. This model is deeply interdisciplinary, though it does not use that word. In *kala*, the potter is also an engineer, the weaver a colour theorist, the builder a spatial thinker. The divisions that design education today struggles to bridge between disciplines, between head and hand, between theory and practice, are absent here.

It is this ethic of participation that was explored in the design studio *Craft + Future: Speculative Interior Practices*, conducted at CEPT University. Students were asked not to treat craft as an aesthetic to be applied to interior design, but as a way of thinking and collaborating. They worked with craftspeople to co-develop systems, rituals, and spatial interventions that speculated on futures grounded in material intelligence and mutual authorship. These engagements were slow, imperfect, and at times difficult, but they surfaced an essential insight: that the future of Indian design is not in speed or novelty, but in returning to processes that already hold inclusion, equity, and relevance at their core.



Craftivism: a means of rebellion against mass manufacturing, an emerging craft guild space in the old Parliament Building, a project by Ritika Bidari for Craft + Future: Speculative Design Practices. Tutor: Rishav Jain · T.A.: Alagappan S.



Craft as a catalyst for mass customisation, embracing individuality across spaces a project by Tanusree Arya for Craft + Future: Speculative Design Practices. Tutor: Rishav Jain · T.A.: Alagappan S.

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Exhibition of discourses from Craft+ Future at the RAW Collaborative in Alembic City, Baroda

From Inclusion to Belonging

Design that is inclusive must go beyond accommodation; it must move toward belonging. And belonging cannot be retrofitted into a system that was not built to hold it. What is needed is not more inclusive products but more inclusive processes: processes that begin in dialogue, that honour multiple forms of knowledge, and that distribute authorship across collaborators.

The folio asks us to reflect not only on the future of design, but on every line we have ever drawn. It asks: Who was absent when we first sketched that plan? Whose insight did we forget to seek? Whose labour did we fail to name? In India, we have answers to these questions: not in the form of new technologies or new frameworks, but in the deeply layered systems of kala that have long prioritised inclusion, dignity, and co-creation.

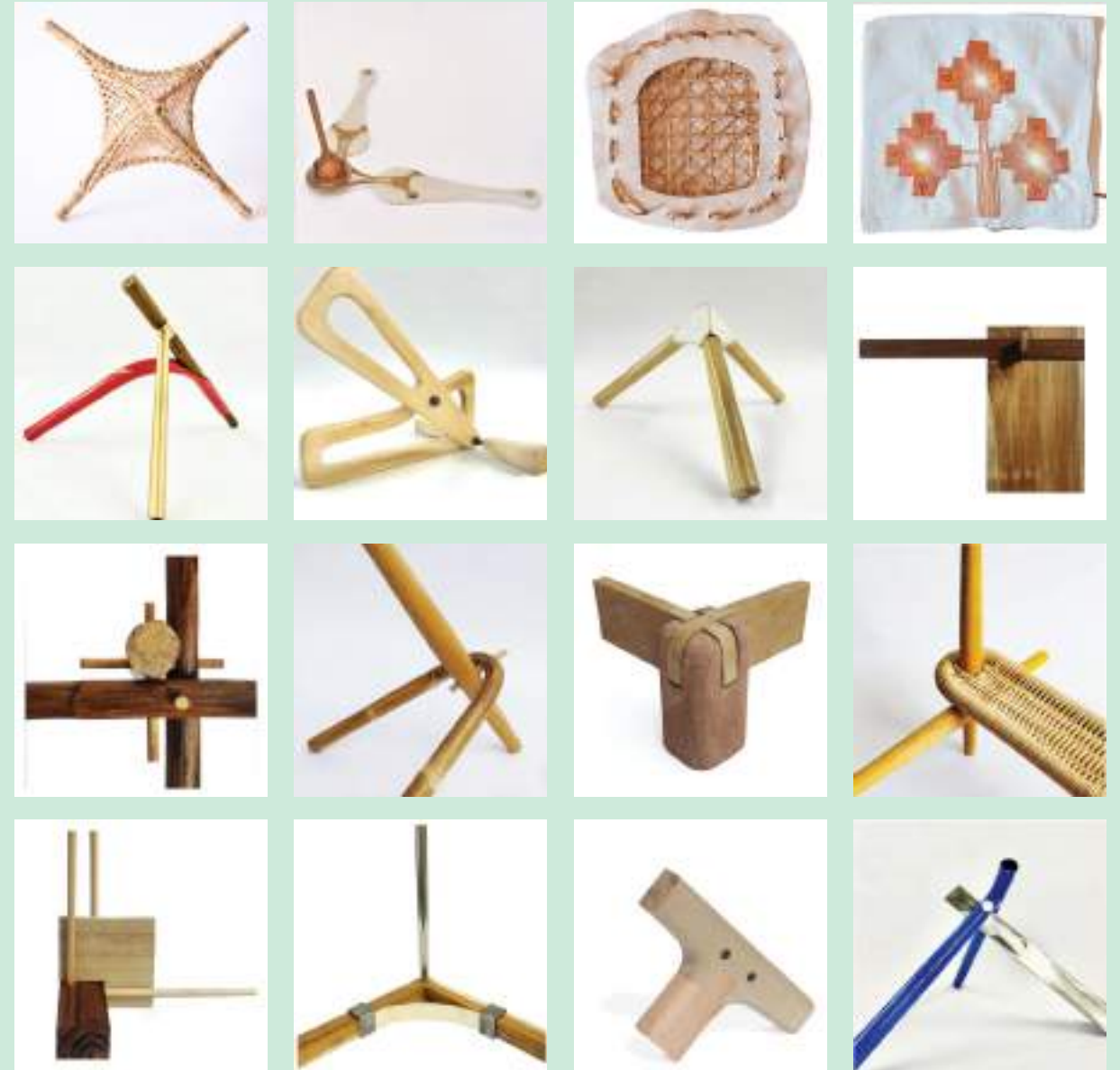
To embrace kala is not to reject progress: it is to redefine what progress means. It is to imagine a design practice that does not celebrate genius, but care; not detachment, but interdependence. In a time when design education and industry alike are grappling with the call for decolonisation, localisation, and sustainability, kala offers not a thematic add-on but a structural reorientation. It reminds us that design was always plural, always negotiated, and always about life, not just form.

The Designs We Must Seek

As the final folio in this series returns to the core of our discipline, it does not ask for a new typology. It asks for an audit. It asks us to look again at our methods, our collaborators, our omissions, and to begin anew. The designs we must seek do not begin with exclusion and end in apology. They begin in relation. They are not corrective gestures. They are foundational shifts.

Projects imagined interior practices that shifted with seasons and festivals, weaving social rhythms into spatial organisation. Others proposed mobile craft infrastructures that enabled making to happen in urban thresholds, where public and domestic life meet. None of these were finished solutions. They were, instead, propositions, rooted, responsive, and open-ended.

For Indian design, the way forward may not lie ahead, but beneath. In kala, we have a design philosophy that is inherently inclusive, radically collaborative, and profoundly local. It teaches us that inclusion is not an outcome: it is a condition of truth. And any design that claims to be true must begin from there.



Material experiments by various students exploring the idea of craft futures in collaboration with craftspeople. Outcomes as part of the studio Craft + Future: Speculative Design Practices, CEPT University. Tutor: Rishav Jain

ROOMS OF EPHEMERALITY

There are hundreds of biennales and triennales around the world, each with its models and traditions. Venice remains the great referent, Havana and São Paulo brought different energies, Sharjah, Istanbul, Sydney, Lyon, and Gwangju all shaped distinct vocabularies. Kochi did not replicate them. We learned from them, but what emerged here had to be something else.

William Kentridge's More Sweetly Play the Dance at Kochi Biennale 2018 turned shadow and rhythm into an interior of memory and movement.

Reflections on the Kochi-Muziris Biennale

BOSE KRISHNAMACHARI

On December 12, 2012 (12-12-12), something quietly radical unfolded on the Malabar Coast. A city long known for its layered histories of trade and migration opened its doors to the world in a new way. Warehouses that once stored spices became chambers of imagination. Godowns that had fallen silent spoke again through voices of art. Courtyards that held memories of domestic life became theatres of encounter. The first Kochi-Muziris Biennale did not simply arrive as an exhibition. It entered Kochi as an atmosphere, transforming the city into living, breathing spaces of dialogue.

Design here begins where certainty ends. It is not the arrangement of bricks or the weight of concrete that shapes experience, but the atmosphere between them. The Biennale inhabits structures already weathered by salt, monsoon, and time. These are not neutral shells; they are spaces already thick with life. What we seek in design is not to erase these textures but to let them speak. The peeling walls, the smell of dampness, the uneven floors, these are not defects but conditions for art to take root. They become part of the design, shaping how a viewer lingers, how light bends, how sound reverberates.

Bose Krishnamachari is a renowned Indian artist, curator, scenographer, and cultural activist. He is the co-founder and President of the Kochi Biennale Foundation and co-curator of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which he has led to global acclaim. A graduate of Sir J.J. School of Art with an MFA from Goldsmiths, London, he has exhibited globally in museums and galleries. His projects include Bombay Maximum City, The Shape That Is, Indian Highway, and Gateway Bombay. He has curated Bombay Boys, Double-Enders and the Indian Pavilion at ARCO Madrid. Co-founder of the Gallery DTALE ARCHIST, his many honors include the Asia Society Game Changer, 'Fellow' at LKA and ArtReview's Power 100.



From the outset, this was an artist-led initiative, imagined, curated and presented by artists themselves. That was the only way to let spaces speak in their cadence, unmediated by market logic or bureaucratic prescription. The Government of Kerala became our principal supporter, but never dictated the artistic core. That autonomy mattered.

What we were making was not a white cube. It was a constellation of spaces in dialogue with each other and with the world. Each site held not only the art but also its own time, its humidity, its acoustics, its scars of history. Walking from a colonial hall to a courtyard, from a derelict godown to a restored residence, one experienced not only works of art but a shifting architecture of moods. It was never a neutral frame. It was a charged interiority, where memory and imagination folded into one another.

This is why the Kochi-Muziris Biennale has often been called the People's Biennale. The city itself became the beat of the exhibition. Volunteers carried projectors to villages, explaining what a biennale is. Theatre practitioners translated the unfamiliar language of contemporary art into performance and song. Auto drivers, homestay owners, and tea vendors became participants, not by visiting, but by hosting conversations and guiding visitors. There was a sense of belonging, as if the Biennale was not installed in Kochi but grown from it. Spaces like Pepper House and David Hall, supported by patrons who believed in the vision, became anchors, places where art and community could meet without hierarchy.



Anish Kapoor's *Descension* at Kochi Biennale 2014 opened the floor into a spinning void of gravity and silence.



Tony Joseph's pavilion of sarees at Kochi Biennale 2016 stretched fabric into an enigma of colour, memory, and shared belonging.

The depth we seek in design is not in decoration but in resonance. How does a space make us feel weightless or anchored? How does it allow us to forget time or confront history? At its best, design unsettles us just enough to create awareness, of the material, of the body, of the world. The Biennale insists on this awareness. It is not an exhibition but an unfolding, where each threshold leads to another layer of perception.

The Biennale has also been a space of revival. Forgotten forms like Chavittu Natakam, Kolkali or shadow puppetry have returned to life within their historical interiors, presented not as ethnographic curiosities but as living traditions in dialogue with contemporary practice. Workshops in clay, weaving and storytelling became another kind of architecture, one of hands and memory. The name itself, Kochi-Muziris, insists that what is submerged or forgotten can surface again, that heritage is not a monument but a rhythm that continues when given space.



Samira Rathod's *Container of Hope* at Kochi Biennale 2022 turned debris into memory, shaping meaning, reuse, and resonance.



Aleš Šteger's *Pyramid of Exiled Poets* at KMB 2016 transformed darkness into a sanctuary of voices, a fleeting design that gives form to exile, memory, and the invisible architecture of diaspora.

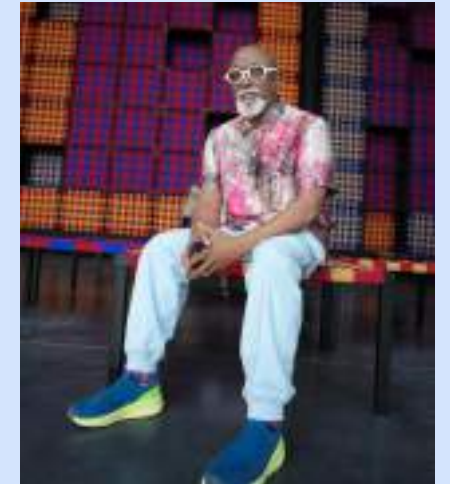


Raúl Zurita's *In a Sea of Pain* at Kochi Biennale 2016 transformed the floor into water and words, creating a space of collective grief that immerses memory, loss, and urgent witnessing.

We do not build monuments here. We create moments. And within those moments, Kochi itself becomes a vast ephemeral architecture where art, memory and community meet. It is here, in this temporary unfolding, that we glimpse the possibility of cultural regeneration, not as a dream for the future but as a practice of the present.

What lingers are not objects but atmospheres. A shaft of light across a rough wall. The echo of footsteps in a cavernous hall. The hush that falls when strangers stand together before an image. These are designs that cannot be drawn or manufactured; they must be experienced, and once experienced, they cannot be forgotten.

In the end, the Biennale is a reminder that the deepest spatial intent is not rooms but states of being. It offers us a chance to enter spaces where art and life blur, where design is not measured in structure but in presence. To seek such a design is to believe that spaces, however temporary, can hold eternity in the thickness of a moment.



Bose Krishnamachari

Each edition has been alive with urgency. Artists have addressed questions of caste, gender, migration, ecology and politics of labour through installations, performances and soundscapes that resonate inside these charged spaces. For students and young practitioners, the Biennale has been an education in itself, the Students' Biennale and Art by Children opening new spaces for expression and encounter. For many, stepping into these transformed rooms was the first experience of international contemporary art not mediated by a textbook or a screen, but lived in real time.

The timing of the Biennale is deliberate. December is the season when Kerala's diaspora returns, bringing with them remittances, memories and perspectives from across the world. The Biennale turns this return into more than a ritual of family. It becomes a cultural reunion. Kochi is filled with conversations not only among artists and visitors but among returning nurses, engineers, labourers, and professionals who find in the Biennale a space to engage with Kerala's evolving identity. The city becomes a bridge between elsewhere and here, between departure and homecoming.

In its material sense, the Biennale is impermanent. Temporary walls are dismantled, courtyards return to their quiet rhythms, and the city resumes its daily life. But what remains is more enduring. Artists launch new trajectories. Communities reclaim forgotten traditions. Young people discover possibilities. Visitors leave with altered perceptions of what art and space can mean. The Biennale proves that what is temporary can leave the most permanent impressions.

As we move towards the sixth edition, curated by Nikhil Chopra with HH Art Spaces, I return to the same questions that have guided us from the beginning. Who is missing from our imagination? Whose voices remain unheard? How do we open the embrace wider? The Kochi-Muziris Biennale was never intended as a finished structure. It is a living process, an unfolding interior that belongs to everyone who enters it.



A Generational Shift Towards Belonging



GEETHU GANGADHARAN

Geethu Gangadharan is the Founder and Principal Architect of Fellow Yellow Design Studio, established on December 1, 2021, at a personal turning point, becoming a mother. Believing life and work are inseparable, she leads her practice with empathy and purpose. With prior experience at RSP Architects, Praxis Inc., and Wilson Associates, a career-defining moment came in 2016 during the Amaravati Capital City project with Foster + Partners and Hafeez Contractor. At Fellow Yellow, she leads a multidisciplinary team across diverse sectors, exploring architecture, lighting, products, and craft. Geethu champions inclusive leadership and designs spaces where people, culture, and everyday life deeply connect.

Design today is no longer solely about form or function; it is a dialogue with the lives it touches. Across the world, we are witnessing a generational shift in the way design is approached: from statements of identity to gestures of empathy, from monuments to communities to spaces that listen. The role of the designer is changing, from author to observer, from maker to mediator. What matters most is not what a building looks like, but how it is inhabited, felt, and remembered.

All photos are courtesy of the author unless mentioned otherwise.



Heritages like this Chettinad bungalow of Kanadukathan are spaces of memory, craftsmanship, and culture, while embracing technology and global perspectives, shaping our sense of responsibility.

And so we pause (mid-sketch, mid-site, mid-mood board) to ask a quiet but urgent question, “Who are we forgetting?”

And so we pause (mid-sketch, mid-site, mid-mood board) to ask a quiet but urgent question, “Who are we forgetting?”

It is a haunting inquiry, yet a necessary one. For too long, design has celebrated the seen, the able, the affluent, and the articulate. But what about those who move differently, speak softly, or don't fit the expected picture?

Spaces that speak to all

Inclusivity in design is no longer a checklist of compliance. It's a conscious shift in how we shape the spaces we inhabit. As the built environment evolves, we see inclusivity as an empathetic response to the rich diversity of human experience. It's about designing with intention, spaces that not only accommodate but truly resonate with people of varied backgrounds, abilities, identities, and cultures.

For our generation, inclusivity would also mean humanising design. It's not just about ramps and regulations, but about creating environments that feel welcoming, equitable, and emotionally intelligent. It's a value-driven approach that sees design as a tool for connection and community, where every detail, from layout to materiality, contributes to a deeper sense of belonging and well-being.

Design bridging legacies

Growing up amidst the enduring value of heritage, we have witnessed spaces layered with memory and craftsmanship that carry stories, and environments shaped by culture and community. At the same time, we have embraced the opportunities brought forth by technology, accessibility, adaptability, and global perspectives that redefine the way we live, work, and create.

It is at this confluence of tradition and modernity that a new design ethos emerges, one that honours memory while welcoming innovation, balancing preservation with progress. For this generation, design is not simply about form or function; it is about responsibility. It reflects an awareness of history, an openness to change, and a commitment to shaping environments that carry the richness of the past into the possibilities of the future.

Inclusivity is more than a design principle; it is a mindset. It reflects an awareness of the past without being constrained by it and an openness to the future without losing sight of its roots. It is about creating spaces that embrace diverse voices: those that shaped the foundations of how we live and those that will carry these stories forward.

Design, in this sense, becomes a bridge rather than a break. Its task is not only to equip the next generation with tools and technologies but also to nurture the sensitivity to value what came before: the context, the culture, and the canvas. Only when design honours continuity as much as innovation can it be truly inclusive, timeless, and deeply human.

This is not nostalgia. It is an understanding of value, of a time when attention was undivided, when depth mattered more than display. It is this belief in layered, meaningful engagement that shapes a design philosophy grounded as much in memory as in possibility, carrying heritage forward while reimagining its relevance for a connected, evolving world. These values have transcended our projects, shaping not only the spaces we design but also the relationships we build and the narratives we choose to honour.



An intimate dining alcove anchored by sacred grandeur, where every table gazes upon a kakathiya architecture-inspired sculptural core, celebrating craftsmanship and culture in every detail. Photo by Hansoga Photography



(Above) The central pillar and the lotus-inspired ceiling installation at Telusa echo the spirit of Kakathiya architecture, reimagined through a lens of contemporary dining. Photo by Hansoga Photography

A bar that blends tradition with trend, crowned by oversized lanterns in a rich kalamkari motif. Photo by Hansoga Photography

Design that belongs

The intent is not merely to create environments but to craft experiences that feel inevitable and intuitive, spaces that resonate deeply with those who inhabit them, even if they have never seen a single drawing. Every brief opens with a simple but essential question: What does this place need, and what does it already offer? The answers emerge gradually, by tuning into the site's rhythms, its silences, and its stories. Insights come from conversations with clients and communities, but also from quieter acts of noticing, how people naturally gather, move, pause, or seek comfort within a space.



Design that emerges through collaboration

In the hospitality project Telusa, the studio's process began with listening, understanding context, aspirations, and cultural nuances. It became clear that the heart of this project lay in collaboration. For the studio, timeless design emerges not from singular authorship but from shared ideas, open dialogue, and collective intent. Inclusivity means engaging diverse voices, not just designing for them.

Rooted in Telugu culture, Telusa brought together regional artisans, artists, and storytellers, weaving their knowledge into the design. The material palette drew from cultural familiarity rather than trends, using textures and tones that evoke memory. Telusa reflects an ethos where design becomes a conversation between context, craft, and community.



A curated corridor of culture, long-table dining under a sculptural chandelier, set against a vibrant tapestry of Cheriyal artwork that narrates stories of the past through collaboration. Photo by Hansoga Photography



Rooted in tradition, the vibrant green façade and colonial-Andhra architectural elements reflect the ethos of Krishna's Back Roots Organic Farm Store, where heritage meets conscious living. Photo by Avenue Studio.

We had the privilege of collaborating with two renowned national awardees, Mr. Rakesh Varma and Dr. Dalavai Kullayappa, whose dedication to their craft brought a distinct soul to the project. Their passion for Telugu art and tradition enriched the design process in profound ways, transforming the space into more than just architecture. It became a layered narrative of culture, memory, and craftsmanship. Through a thoughtful interplay of art and material, the project celebrates the richness of Telugu heritage, each detail contributing to a larger story of identity, belonging, and place.

we aspired to keep the essence of the past alive, while shaping environments that are inclusive, emotionally intelligent, and rooted in shared memory.

Design through the lens of cultural responsibility

In Krishna Farms, a retail store rooted in the agricultural and cultural ethos of Andhra, we saw an opportunity to embody empathy, equity, and a conscious effort to preserve and evolve cultural narratives. The space pays homage to heritage, not through imitation, but through intentional design choices: a bright green collonaded verandah echoing traditional homes, a material palette chosen for cultural familiarity, and handcrafted details that celebrate the region's artisanal legacy.

This approach goes beyond aesthetics. It reflects a commitment to creating spaces that resonate across generations, communities, and abilities. Through Krishna Farms, we aspired to keep the essence of the past alive, while shaping environments that are inclusive, emotionally intelligent, and rooted in shared memory.

Krishna Farms allowed us to go beyond the conventional idea of a retail space. At its core, the vision was rooted in community-building and inclusivity. More than a place for commerce, the project was conceived as a platform to support and uplift small-scale farmers, offering them a dedicated space to share their produce and stories. The design also integrates areas for collaborative workshops, encouraging dialogue, learning, and exchange. It reflects a humble yet powerful intent from the client: to create a space that gives back to society, fosters connection, and nurtures a more equitable ecosystem through design.



A fresh take on tradition, where charming Andhra details meet organic living. Photo by Avenue Studio.

Adapting global design language

In today's interconnected world, design inevitably draws from a global vocabulary. But true inclusivity lies in how we adapt, not adopt. For us, embracing global design language means interpreting it through a local lens, ensuring it resonates with cultural, climatic, and emotional contexts.

It's not about imposing a universal aesthetic, but about finding common ground between global innovation and regional identity. When thoughtfully adapted, global elements can coexist with local materials, crafts, and narrative, creating spaces that feel both contemporary and rooted.

In our Pan-Asian restaurant project, inclusivity took the form of embracing a global design language with deep cultural respect. Drawing inspiration from the traditional Kigumi wooden joinery technique of Japan, we sought to reinterpret this intricate craftsmanship within a new context. Rather than replicating its aesthetic superficially, we integrated its logic and elegance throughout the space, from the ceiling framework to custom lighting and spatial partitions.

Adapting global traditions like Kigumi with care allows us to create spaces that feel connected across cultures, yet sensitive to their surroundings. It's a celebration of shared craftsmanship, where design becomes a bridge between disciplines, geographies, and generations.

Rethinking the design practice

Our generation values flexibility, flat hierarchies, and emotional intelligence. We understand that talent doesn't always come with years of experience, and in the age of AI, it doesn't have to. Knowledge is free. The speed of learning is high. And younger designers arrive with tools we ourselves had to acquire mid-career. As millennial leaders, our job is no longer to gatekeep but to guide.

In the era of open-source learning, inclusivity means trusting curiosity over credentials. It means building studios that feel safe for questions, experiments, and even failure.

We are unlearning the idea of competition within teams. We don't define professionalism by silence or rigidity. We measure it by care, clarity, and the ability to make room for newer ideas, newer voices, and newer ways of working.

Together, these projects taught us that inclusion doesn't always announce itself. Sometimes it's the quietest gestures, a softened corner, a shift in threshold height, a pause in a sequence, that make people feel truly seen. As young designers, we've learned that good design doesn't just answer a brief. It rewrites the question.

The designs we seek

The future of design isn't dominated. It's in empathy. It's in design that dares to listen before it leads, that centres people over pattern, and that doesn't fear change because it learns from context. We don't know all the answers. But we're here for the long questions. Because the designs we seek!

They don't demand to be seen. They simply allow others to be.



The dining space draws from Japanese sensibilities, where timber grids echo craftsmanship, and nature becomes a quiet companion to the meal. Photo by Syam Sreesylam



Framed in timber and light, every step through Osaka follows a quiet current. Photo by Syam Sreesylam

The future of design isn't dominated. It's in empathy. It's in design that dares to listen before it leads, that centres people over pattern, and that doesn't fear change because it learns from context.

BEYOND BLUEPRINTS

SWATI JANU



Swati Janu is an architect and artist dedicated to working on issues of social justice, ranging from housing rights to participatory planning. Awarded the Moira Gemmill Prize for Emerging Architecture in 2022, she believes in the importance of combining grassroots engagement with policy advocacy for long term impact. She is the founder of Social Design Collaborative – a community-driven art and architectural practice that focuses on inclusion in the built environment, making planning and public policies accessible to underrepresented communities. The studio also supports self-organised communities through the design and building of urban commons such as schools, libraries, day care centres, and community centres.

If history is said to be written by victors, we can understand maps to be made by those in power. Just like there are multiple narratives of what took place historically, a map is also a storytelling tool, one way of seeing our world. Understanding who makes official maps and who is left out of them can reveal the inequalities within our societies and built environment.

Such is the case with our contemporary cities, where maps and development plans are made by authorities but often leave out self-organised and transient communities. These are neighbourhoods which are home to our street vendors, waste pickers, construction workers, rickshaw pullers,

home-based workers, and daily wage workers, who run our cities and are our service providers. But because their livelihoods are informal or their homes are built in informal settlements that fall outside the purview of planning processes, they exist in a constant state of precarity. Due to the absence of formal land tenure, many of them are deemed illegal, and their homes are at constant threat of forced evictions. Consequently, they are also largely rendered invisible in our architectural education and practice.



Map of villages on the Yamuna floodplains stitched by farmers



Counter-mapping: using cartography to challenge dominant narratives and highlight the presence of Delhi's farmers and fisherfolk along the Yamuna.

Whose stories are told in our cities and whose stories go unheard?

Social Design Collaborative started as an inquiry and continues to raise questions. It emerged from an acute need for a hands-on practice that could bring together people from diverse backgrounds to work together with under-resourced communities not visible on official maps.

There is a city that exists in time but is not always spatially static or fixed. It is made of weekly markets that pop up on different days of the week. It is made of transient communities whose livelihoods might be perambulatory

or whose homes might have to shift or rebuild every few years or even months. What one might casually refer to as a “slum” might look temporary, but might have existed there for decades. Unable to build permanently, they exist in a state of ephemerality. What is more permanent - a slum built in bamboo and plastic that has existed in that transient state for three decades? Or the metro line or a flyover built over them just a few years ago?

If temporality is a constant state of housing in our cities, what is permanent?

This is where counter-mapping became an effective tool for us to represent communities that are not on the map and might be living in constant threat of demolitions. Counter-mapping is cartography that challenges dominant power narratives, and we used this approach for the representation and recognition of the farmers and fisherfolk in Delhi along the river Yamuna.

For decades, farmers along the river Yamuna have been producing food for the city and nursery plants. However, over the past decade, they have been facing constant demolition drives as parks and jogging/cycling tracks have been planned there by the development authorities, without a participatory process of riverfront development. Large parts of the riverfront maps made by the planning authorities in Delhi simply show blank white space where farming villages have existed for decades. It is easy to demolish neighbourhoods if you can show that there is nothing there



A walk led by farmers to reclaim their land from blank spaces on official maps and share their story with the world.

Therefore, our collective efforts with the farmers became centred on creating alternative maps with them through an on-ground mapping of their villages along the stretch of 12km of the river in the city over 2021 and 2022. By co-opting the latest data collection processes at a grassroots level, we worked to help the farmers gain legitimacy in the eyes of the planning authorities. The counter-maps produced in the process mapped over 9000 households along the river and were publicly launched in March 2022 in collaboration with the grassroots organisation Basti Suraksha Manch. The maps were also used in the High Court by human rights lawyers to advocate for the rights of the farmers.

This relationship of ours with the farmers had begun in 2016-17 with the design and rebuilding of a school for their children that had been demolished by the planning authorities in one of the demolition drives. Over the years, it grew organically into a pan-Yamuna initiative advocating for their housing rights and right to livelihoods.



Our collaboration with the farmers began in 2016-17, designing and rebuilding a school using local materials for their children after it was demolished by the planning authorities.

In 2017, with my colleague Nidhi Sohane and the guidance of international networks of support such as Architecture in Development, I had mobilised an on-ground team of builders made up of not just the local community members but also students and young professionals - architects, journalists, teachers, designers, and engineers - who heard about the initiative. As more people joined hands in building the school, the initiative snowballed into a new practice, providing a template for hands-on work and bringing different people together. Social Design Collaborative came to be founded as a studio in this process. Formally registered in 2019, the practice exists today as a small team made of architects, sociologists, social workers, activists and designers based in Delhi.

Over time, the studio has come to engage with local communities through a diversity of approaches, including public art. We worked with women farmers in one village along the river to help spread public awareness on their contribution to the city in terms of food security, with the support of the experimental arts organisation Khoj Studios. Through public walks led by the farmers to a collective map-stitching process that showcased their own neighbourhood as they saw it, this process lay at an intersection between activism, artistic practice and community engagement.

How can the city in the Plan reconcile with the city on the ground?

A map or a plan is more than lines on paper when they pass through people's homes on the ground, leading to their forced eviction. Master Plans have recently come to dictate development and displacement in our cities that exist as layers of histories and people's stories, which have been built over and often forgotten. How can we question these technocratic drawings through alternative modes of representations of equitable and humane cities? Where there is adequate housing for all and not erasure of livelihoods and homes.



The 'Kaun hai Master?, Kya hai Plan?' toolkit.

How can we create feminist, inclusive and intersectional visions going beyond technical blueprints?

Through interdisciplinary collaborations, the team has been working with underrepresented communities left out of development processes by making planning and public policy accessible to them. One such process was the design of a toolbox titled 'Kaun Hai Master? Kya Hai Plan?' (Hindi for "Who is the Master? What is the Plan?") to make Delhi's Master Plan accessible. It was developed as a part of the Main Bhi Dilli (Hindi for 'I'm Delhi too') Campaign - a civic society campaign in Delhi formed from 2019-2022 to inclusively reimagine the latest Master Plan for Delhi 2041, which was being developed by the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).



Mobilising Delhi's communities beyond digital barriers: 25,000 voices shaped the Master Plan through on-ground engagement.



The community is exploring the toolkit

In early 2021, the studio designed the interactive map-based toolkit for the Campaign to facilitate workshops across Delhi in order to help underrepresented communities understand what a Master Plan is, how it impacts them directly in their daily life, and how they could engage with the feedback process. It deconstructed the technocratic documents that represent Delhi's Master Plans to present a more inclusive version. The toolkit itself was developed through an iterative design process based on feedback through multiple pilots held in different informal settlements across Delhi.

The on-ground interactions conducted by the campaign allowed thousands of residents in Delhi to understand and engage with the Master Plan. The online website, which was set up by DDA, could gather only around 5,000 registrations as recorded on the last day of the feedback period of 3 months. The online registration also required the residents to have an email ID, which presented a huge digital barrier. The physical interactions facilitated by the Campaign,

despite the COVID-19 pandemic, became instrumental in mobilising marginalised communities across Delhi in filing objections and sharing their suggestions on the Master Plan. Over 25,000 feedback forms were filed through the combined efforts of the Campaign.

How can architects help co-create commons that strengthen communities from within?

Since the school we built with the Yamuna farmers in 2017, we have worked towards creating more such educational spaces in informal settlements. We have recently been building 'anganwadis' - early childhood education and day care centres - across Delhi as part of a project titled 'Banao' (Hindi for "let's build"). Anganwadis act as critical commons in informal settlements, wherein they not only provide access to services such as health, education and nutrition for children and mothers, but can also become much-needed community spaces. At a systemic level,

the project aims to leverage the formal address that anganwadis help provide through a welfare scheme by the government, helping pave the way for incremental access to other services in the neighbourhood.

The anganwadis are being designed through months of on-ground consultations with the local communities, as well as liaising with the government departments. Supported by the Danish philanthropic organisation Re: arc Institute, we are in the process of developing multiple pilots across the city for varying contexts - from self-organised neighbourhoods built by waste pickers in bamboo and tarpaulin to those built in brick and concrete in neighbourhoods with relatively less precarious land tenures. Diverse building technologies are being developed for the adoption of safer and more sustainable building practices by communities living here, who are currently prone to fire hazards and climate change-related risks such as flooding.



Building spaces where little minds can grow: 'Banao', our initiative to create anganwadis across Delhi, blending care, learning, and community

The larger, long term hope is influencing the adaptation of these modular designs for the creation of more sustainable spaces with adequate light, ventilation and stronger structures - thereby building the resilience of informal settlements towards natural disasters, climate change or demolitions, while also shifting the dialogue further towards the right to shelter, right to the city for everyone.

Participatory design process through on-ground engagement



25 MOMENTS THAT REDEFINED BELONGING



True design is never neutral. It holds space for the powerful and the powerless, the visible and the forgotten. But real inclusivity goes beyond accessibility. It embraces all kinds of presence: children and elders, pets and plants, strangers and neighbours, migrants and makers. It asks not just "Who belongs here?" but, more boldly, "Does everyone belong, one and all?"

From ancient wells where women and priests drew water side by side, to co-living hubs where engineers and artists sketch on the same board, inclusive design is a story of empathy and encounter. It's where architecture meets care, collaboration, and difference. These 25 moments remind us that interiors are not just about usability, but about humanity, shared thresholds, hybrid uses, interwoven disciplines, and the dignity of being seen.

01 20,000 BCE

Communal Cave Hearths France

Circle of Warmth

Deep in Palaeolithic caves, hearths glowed at the centre of gathering spaces. Hunters, elders, and children all circled the flickering fire, their stories dancing on walls painted with bison and horses. This was humankind's first communal 'interior': an inclusive room without walls, where heat, light, and narrative belonged to everyone equally. The fire's placement made architecture democratic; no owner, no front row. This primal circle seeded today's living rooms and shared hearths, proving that spatial design took shape so as to address the human need to connect, share, and belong.



Reconstruction of Lazaret Cave, France

De Lumley, M. A. . néandertalisation (pp. 664-p)

02 1000 CE

Step-wells India

Descending into Community

Carved deep into the earth, step-wells provided reliable water while creating layered spaces for social and ritual interaction. Their descending galleries, often adorned with intricate sculpture, offered shelter from heat and a place for reflection and gathering. People from different social groups would use these wells, though access could be influenced by local customs and caste. Step-wells were simultaneously practical and ceremonial, architecture that combined resource, artistry, and community, demonstrating how thoughtful design can shape shared life.



Stepwell of Hampi

Naveekadam photography



Chand Baori at Abhaneri

Chetan

03 1200 CE

Hospices of the Knights Hospitaller Greece

Sanctuary for Strangers

The Hospitaller order built some of the world's first hospitals and inns for pilgrims. Their vaulted dormitories, refectories, and infirmaries offered free beds, warm food, and medical care to the sick and poor. Interiors used simple stone halls lined with cots and communal tables, making shelter a right, not a privilege. These spaces remind us that design for care is design for all.



St John's Commandery around 1807

Courtesy of English-heritage.org



The East end of the Chapel in 1927

Courtesy of English-heritage.org

04 1600 CE

Golden Temple India

Dining Without Distinction

At the heart of Sikhism is Langar, the tradition of free communal meals for all. Inside the Golden Temple's vast dining halls, thousands sit cross-legged on the floor, sharing food and space equally. Rich or poor, all are fed the same meal in the same line. These interiors erase status through humble design of open floors, rows of mats, and endless plates of dal, teaching that inclusion can be as simple as breaking bread together.



Passage towards the Golden Temple

Bernard Gagnon



Large halls for prayer and dining

Aleksandr Zykov

05 1854 CE

Florence Nightingale's Wards Turkey

Air, Light, Dignity

Nightingale's war hospital pioneered humane interiors for care. She redesigned dark, cramped wards into clean, well-ventilated spaces with wide windows, bright walls, and orderly beds. The layout lets fresh air and sunlight heal bodies. This simple rethinking of interior planning saved lives and set new standards for hospitals, proving that inclusive design is health design.



One of the wards in the hospital at Scutari

William Simpson



M.Soyer's kitchen at Scutari Barracks

The Illustrated London News

06 1923 CE

Vienna Gemeindebauten Austria

Design as Social Shelter

These vast social housing blocks offered light, air, and dignity to the working class. Courtyards invited children and the corridors echoed with shared futures. Interiors once denied to the poor became beautifully ordinary, clean, efficient and human scaled. Architecture refused excess but embraced grace. This was democracy in brick and plaster, architecture for the people, by the people. These homes reshaped the idea of city dwelling with equality at heart.



Vienna residential building

Peter Haas

07 2010 CE

Khoo Teck Puat Hospital Singapore

Healing with Nature

Gardens spill into patient rooms, open-air walkways bring breeze and light; this hospital breathes wellness. Interiors blur the line between care and environment. Greenery is not an add-on but integral to recovery. Courtyards and terraces let patients, staff, and visitors heal in fresh air. This biophilic design reimagines the hospital as a garden and life-giver, showing that nature is often the best medicine in a built world.



Biophilic healing design of KTPH

KTPH

View from the basement

Munhuiyee

08

2020 CE

COVID Emergency Shelters Global

Design in Crisis, Care in Action

When the world shut down in fear, design opened up in urgency. Across cities, schools became quarantine wards, bus depots turned into triage centres, and rail coaches into isolation cabins. One prototype, built in a coastal neighbourhood, used fabric partitions, ventilated roofing, and repurposed scaffolding to create safe, flexible spaces. In India, IIID's 'Karana Kuch' initiative called upon architects and designers to imagine emergency solutions, from converting buses into mobile rooms to rethinking public infrastructure for health. These structures of compassion prove that, in moments of crisis, design can be fast, frugal, and profoundly human.



Construction of quarantine camp in Shijiazhuang, China

Ren Qunjun

09

1960 CE

Ed Roberts Campus USA

Nothing About Us Without Us

A hub for disability rights, this campus was designed by and for people with disabilities. Every interior detail, like ramps, tactile flooring, and talking elevators, prioritises mobility and sensory needs. This building is a manifesto that access isn't charity but a design justice.



Ramp prioritising circulation
Tim Griffith

Ed Roberts Campus

Tim Griffith

11

1971 CE

Marc Harrison Universal House USA

Design for All

Marc Harrison reimagined the home as an accessible haven. Countertops were lowered, hallways widened, and switches were made reachable for wheelchair users. This was not charity but foresight, domestic design born from empathy. Harrison's prototype expanded the idea that a home must adapt to its residents, not the other way around. It showed that thoughtful design multiplies independence and preserves dignity in daily life.



Prototype of prefabricated housing
Tony Luong for The New York Times

House designed like a Lego toy

Tony Luong for The New York Times

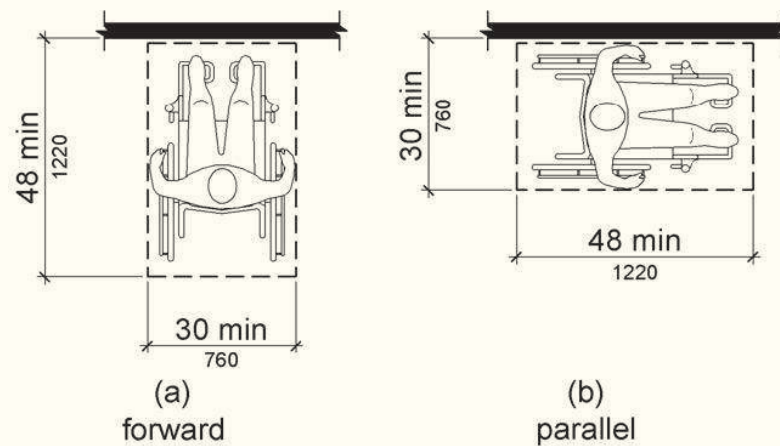
10

1960 CE

Universal Design Standards – ANSI/ADA USA

Code of Equity

From tactile strips to bathroom grab bars, these standards made accessibility the rule, not the exception. Legal frameworks turned inclusive design into a civil right. The interior now answered to everybody, every need. What was once optional became essential. Equity found its blueprint in codes, signs, slopes, and clearances. Universal design became the quiet hero behind doorways, sidewalks, and everyday dignity.



Standard for Clear floor space

Courtesy of the United States Department of Justice

12

2005 CE

DeafSpace – Heathlands School UK

Design That Listens

Wide corridors, soft edges, visual sightlines, every inch shaped by deaf experience. Sound is replaced by light, movement, and clarity. This space hears without hearing, speaks through its walls and windows. Its language is visual, its rhythm silent, yet full of connection. DeafSpace design shows that interiors can respond to bodies, senses, and cultures often overlooked, proving that inclusive design is not style but substance.



DeafSpace, Heathlands School

Rachel Ferriman

13

1407 CE

Medieval Guild Halls Europe

Crafted Commons

Timber-framed guild halls housed work, debate, and mutual learning. The interiors were open, with long tables, vaulted beams, and central hearths. Light filtered through leaded glass onto tools and parchment. These halls embodied collective dignity and craft. They were arenas of apprenticeship and fellowship. Mastery took shape not just in wood and metal, but in camaraderie and civic trust. Knowledge was transmitted in the room, from hand to hand. These were precursors to today's co-creation studios, where design is born of community and continuity.



The Cloth Hall, Ypres



Finnesloftet, Voss, Norway; A medieval Guild Hall from about 1295.

PerPlex

James Kerr-Lawson

14

1571 CE

Diwan-i-Aam India

The People's Throne Room

Fatehpur Sikri's Diwan-i-Aam was an open hall of red sandstone where the emperor sat not above, but among his people. The elevated marble platform had no walls but only columns. Petitioners, merchants, and villagers could gather beneath a shared canopy of governance. The architecture staged justice as a public act. In its openness and scale, it suggested that power must be seen, heard, and shared, a civic interior centuries ahead of its time.



Diwan-i-Aam of Agra Fort with marble inlay



Diwan-i-Aam of Red Fort with columnnade

Ashwin Kumar

Danish971

15

1897 CE

Glasgow School of Art Scotland

Modernism with Equality

When Charles Rennie Mackintosh designed the Glasgow School of Art, he reimagined interiors as calm, functional, and radically modern. White walls, linear woodwork, and custom furniture replaced Victorian clutter. Light flooded in through tall windows, illuminating clean lines and handcrafted details. Every chair, lamp, and railing was part of an artistic whole, an early vision of interior minimalism. Mackintosh's interiors bridged Art Nouveau and Modernism, showing that design could be simple yet poetic. It became a model for egalitarian learning environments where material honesty met poetic form.



First floor corridor of Glasgow School of Art



Courtesy of Glasgow School of Art

"The Hen Run", glazed passageway of Glasgow School of Art

Courtesy of Glasgow School of Art

16

1920 CE

Bauhaus & The Design Collaborative Germany

Interiors Made Together

At the Bauhaus; artists, architects, typographers, and furniture makers shared the same studio tables. They believed no one discipline could master form alone. This spirit of inclusion birthed the 'design collective', where plumbing met poetry, and craftspeople shaped modernism. Interiors became laboratories, merging tools and ideas. From door handles to living rooms, everything was co-designed. The Bauhaus showed that collaboration was the foundation of radical simplicity and shared authorship.



Bauhaus building in Dessau-Roßlau, Germany

A.Savin

17

1985 CE

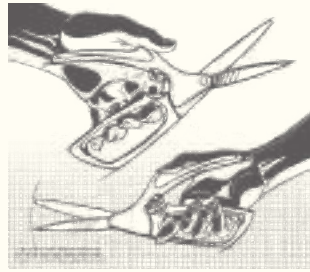
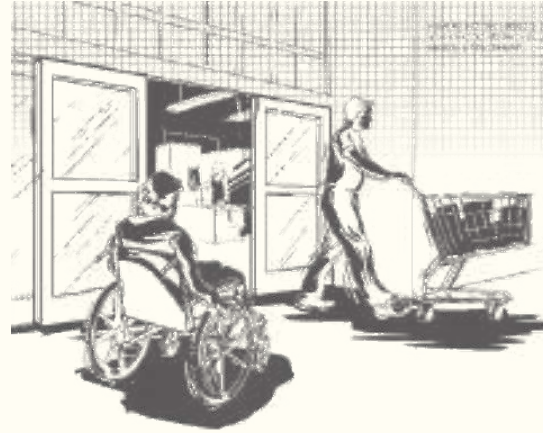
Ron Mace's Principles of Universal Design North Carolina, USA

From Barrier-Free to Universal Architect Ron Mace, who used a wheelchair, pioneered a shift from 'handicapped access' to design for all. The Centre for Universal Design became a think-tank and lab where engineers, designers, and people with disabilities co-created standards that today shape building codes worldwide. Their interiors with ramps, lever handles

and wide doorways spoke quietly but radically. The message: good design includes everyone from the start. Mace turned accommodation into aspiration.

1. Equitable use:

The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.



2. Flexibility in use:

The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.



3. Simple and intuitive use:

Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.



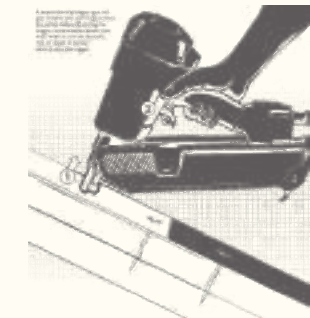
4. Perceptible information:

The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.



7. Size and space for approach and use:

Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility.



5. Tolerance for error:

The design minimises hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.



6. Low physical effort:

The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with minimum fatigue.

Images courtesy: udinstitute.org

18

1977 CE

Pompidou Centre France

Structure Made Visible

Designed by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, the Pompidou turned architecture inside out. Pipes, ducts, and escalators, all once hidden, became part of the façade. Inside, floors were open, walls movable, functions fluid. Art, books, cinema, and dialogue coexisted under one adaptable roof. It invited the public not into a building, but into a working engine of culture. Pompidou proved that transparency, in structure and purpose, could democratise space and turn buildings into urban lungs.



Front view of Pompidou Centre

Amelie-Dupont



Interiors of Pompidou Centre

Helena Ariza

19

2010 CE

Co-working & Third Places Global

Interiors for Connection

From libraries to cafes to shared workspaces, the rise of the 'third place' redefined the boundary between private and public. These are spaces built not just for output, but for serendipity, where strangers meet, collaborate, and coexist. Interiors here flex: soft sofas, bar-height tables, charging docks, and glass pods. The furniture is fluid, the ethos open. It's not about ownership but access; A new inclusivity that designs for gathering without gatekeeping.



Interiors of Openspace WAO Coworking

Openspace wao coworking



A cubicle at co-working space

Sintegrity

20 100 BCE

Baths of Caracalla Italy

Bathing in Equality

Grand arches, heated pools, mosaic corridors, this was where senators and slaves once soaked side by side. The Roman bathhouse was a rare space of bodily democracy. Interiors were civic: water, heat, and light distributed equally. These spaces remind us that true luxury lies in shared wellness, not private indulgence.



Baths of Caracalla

Paul VanDerWerf

22 1948 CE

UN General Assembly Hall USA

Room for the World

In this vast amphitheatre, no nation sits above another. Each country has a seat, a mic, a vote. The layout itself, circular, radial, equidistant, encodes the principle of equality. Its interior diplomacy speaks through proportion: balanced acoustics, shared sightlines, and careful neutrality. This room is not just for speaking, but also designed for listening. In a fractured world, it remains a space committed to plural voices.



United Nations General Assembly Hall in New York City

Patrick Gruban

21 300 CE

Roman Insulae Italy

Stacked Lives

In the bustling Roman Empire, insulae rose as multi-family apartments of stone and wood. Interiors were compact, shared, and often precarious. Yet they marked a shift, private space became social, urban, and accessible to the many, not just the elite. These blocks brought the complexities of vertical living into the empire's heart. Stairs creaked with traffic, walls echoed with communal life. Each level marked a social divide, yet together they wove a new urban fabric for cities to come.



Roman insulae in Ostia Antica

Charles Gardner

Insulae of Albintimilium

Patafisik

23 2018 CE

Oodi Library Finland

Library for All

A library without silence, Oodi has recording studios, gaming lounges, strollers, knitting corners, and language help desks. Its interiors are designed for immigrants, teenagers, elders, and artists alike. Reading here is not solitary; It's shared. Books are the least of what's exchanged. It's a temple of plurality in the guise of a civic building.



Exterior view

Tuomas Uusheimo

Interiors of Oodi Library

Tuomas Uusheimo

Belonging by Design

Public spaces are recognising the diversity of those who use them, across species, identities, and needs. Parks with water bowls, cafes with leash hooks, trains with pet compartments, the design is beginning to welcome not just people but their companions. Cafés and coworking spaces now welcome pets with feeding stations and textured flooring.



*Unleashed dog park
MChE Lee unsplashed*

Alongside this warmth comes another quiet transformation: gender-neutral restrooms, inclusive changing rooms, and adaptable seating make interiors free from boundaries of identity. These interventions reflect a quiet revolution in empathy, making our shared environments gentler for everyone.



*Dog pods in a Co-Working space
Courtesy of Spacestor*



*Gender neutral washroom in a school
Courtesy of Soderstrom*

Interfaces that Listen

In 2007, the iPhone's multitouch gestures like pinch, swipe and tap replaced buttons and menus with instinctive movement. A smooth sheet of glass became a living surface, shrinking the world's maps, cameras, and conversations into the palm. It became a new language for how humans shape technology.



A smart home that controls temperature and light using AI

Courtesy of Rawpixel.com

*First Generation iPhone
Carl Berkeley from Riverside, California*

Eighteen years later, that language has left the screen and entered the room. In 2025, interiors listen, learn, and adapt. AI draws from wearables, sensors, and voice to adjust light, temperature, sound, and air as naturally as a friend might. Bedrooms wake you gently, bathrooms recall your comfort, and living rooms quiet your stress with multisensory care, with aroma, colour and acoustics. For the elderly or differently abled, floors, light paths and counters lower at a touch. What began with a swipe now surrounds us, proving design's greatest leap: from controlling objects to shaping worlds that care back.



Internet of Things (IoT) devices in Smart homes

Elif Ayse Sen for Illustrarch.com

inscape

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