

# 'For the first time all are talking about cities, housing, low-income homes'



He heads one of India's largest architectural firms, employing more than 550 including architects, urban and town planners, interior designers, landscape artists, civil engineers, CAD operators and 3D and graphic designers.

Architect Hafeez Contractor (AHC), India's leading architectural design consultancy, and headed by Contractor, has to its credit over 2,500 clients and 7.2 billion sq ft of ongoing projects in 100 cities across five countries.

Contractor completed his architectural studies from the Academy of Architecture in Mumbai and graduated from Columbia University in New York.

Speaking to *Urban Vaastu*, he opens up on why vaastu after all is so important

WORDS: KOMAL RAO AND TILLANA DESAI



MIAL T-1c



Infosys - Sdb-park-4-Mysore

**H**ave we paid any attention to our cities since Independence? Our main focus was to grow food, build dams, roads, and railways, supply water to villages and electricity. Then came the rush for telephones.

It is just over the last less than a decade that cities have come into focus and especially after the current BJP-led government came to power. Today everyone has realised that a huge mass of people are heading towards cities from villages.

So now for the first time everybody is talking about cities, housing and

low income group housing. The government also has surplus funds, so it can start investing in housing. In the past, there was shortage of funding and there were so many other priorities.

Just think about what Delhi was 20 years back? There were few buses and taxis, hardly any restaurants. In the last few years everything has changed. What was Hyderabad? Twenty years back it was like road number 1 and road number 2 and the whole story ended. Today there are 180 km of ring roads and the roads are as good as anywhere in the world. It's completely transformed.

Another thing which one should understand is when our cities were built the government was not increasing FSI. It was thought that FSI was a tool for people to make money. And they thought that builders are making a lot of money.

Yes, they are definitely making a lot of money because when things get restricted somebody gets a favour, he earns a lot of money.

And that's how they kept on curbing FSI. By doing so, they did not think it in a larger frame. They just thought the builder is making a profit. But when there is a famine, there are so many people wanting houses that they never thought of that. They just saw one guy making money so let us not increase FSI.

We haven't done anything for so many years and suddenly the influx is coming. Now what are our cities going to do? Because what they did not do for so many years they have to do it overnight. And that is not possible.

### **BIG INFLUX INTO CITIES**

Our cities are going to have a big influx of people for which there is no appropriate housing. Every city is going to be full of slums. That is a bigger problem. You are talking about growth,



## ARCHITECTURE



Infosys Pune, SDB-3 SDB-5

I am talking about what the future is going to be.

Now where are all these people going to stay? This is one part. Now we are making new laws and suddenly taxes in urban areas are being increased. Civic bodies also want to earn from additional FSI. The result – housing, which is needed at an economical rate will become more expensive.

In the olden days, we never increased the FSI so housing costs went up. It's like you want to eat two rotis, but are given only half. You will be hungry and will be willing to pay any price to anyone who is giving you more rotis.

For something that costs four annas, you are willing to pay four rupees. This is the way housing prices have risen all over India.

The backlog is already high. Now the municipalities are increasing FSI but they have also become like businessmen because as every civic body wants to make more money. Housing which was expensive has become even more dearer.

### RAISING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Another issue is that suddenly everything is related to the environment. It's a good word, but how are you using it? Cities have development plans (DPs) and builders have to submit plans to the authorities for environmental approval.

But there are no permanent environmental committees – they are there for just six months. Just imagine

the backlog. I do not know why we have created such problems.

Why have environmental committees for cities? If I want to develop 100 acres near Panvel by the side of a nice river, then approval from such committees makes sense. But in Mumbai, where there are plenty of buildings, if I want to replace an old mill, where is the question of getting an environmental clearance.

I feel we are going through difficult times. Everyone is changing laws in cities. Some say all laws are rubbish and we have to change them. It makes sense to change laws that are not appropriate, but why change all? When laws are scrapped, the new ones would take months to be ready. So there will be delays and projects get stuck.

This has been happening in Mumbai for the past four years. Just imagine what will be the fate of builders who have bought large plots, gone in for borrowings and are paying hefty interest rates.

### HOMES FOR ALL

A person who migrates from a village to a city like Mumbai can afford to pay less than a million rupees for a flat. But in Mumbai you won't get anything for that price. It is not that such cheap homes cannot be built in the city.

I have a scheme where homes in Mumbai can be built for between ₹500,000 and ₹1 million, provided the government has the will to implement the plan. But in the present scenario it cannot happen.

Why are only roads and railways considered as infrastructure, why

not housing, which is a much bigger infrastructure. The government acquires land for roads and charges tolls. Why can't land be acquired for housing? The government can construct homes and give it to the poor at affordable rates.

Ahmedabad, where the Sabarmati riverfront was developed, has been a different case. It was the pet project of Narendra Modi. If you have somebody like him heading all the states, India will become a different country. Unfortunately, we have just one Mr Modi and now he is in Delhi.

We need a very powerful person to do all these things; then everything is possible in India.

### BUILDING HOMES FOR THE POOR

The major problem is that there are huge slums in Indian cities. A lot of cities do not have rules to ensure construction of small houses for the poor.

Noida, for instance, is an altogether different world. I cannot build 300 sq ft houses; the minimum number of units in an acre does not allow such homes to be built.

I have time and again said that the government should not give free homes to ministers and bureaucrats and many have felt bad because of my statements. But they do not know how difficult it is for an individual to buy a home.

When a bureaucrat is transferred and allotted a home, he pays low rents for the house. And when he retires, he is allotted a house in a society.

Every student must learn Vaastu, which has to be taught the right way. I studied Vaastu in 1976 or 1977. I studied the offices of people who were doing well, and they were designed as per Vaastu rules.

Minerva



Mr Modi has done a very good thing by removing red lights from the vehicles of most top people. Roads will improve now as the 'VIPs' will realise how difficult it is to travel from one part of a city to the other.

When I plan to take a flight, I have to plan my journey to the airport hours in advance. A minister will reach the airport in minutes.

### **EMPLOYMENT POTENTIAL**

It is necessary to provide hype by using words like 'smart' or 'digital.' People come to cities in search of jobs. A smart city without employment potential won't make any sense. A lot of infrastructure will be developed when a large number of people are employed at smart cities.

There will be an abundant supply of electricity, many roads and railway lines at these smart cities, but the most important thing to be considered is: where is the water?

It is important to identify where water is available in abundance in India. With the population increasing, it is important to ensure there is abundant availability of water. I would plan smart cities in places with a lot of water.

A few smart cities with a large population will ensure mass transit and jobs. There are a few mega cities where there is abundant availability of water and electricity and fantastic infrastructure can be created. For instance, both in Bhubaneswar and Patna there is a lot of land and water, but they remain untapped.

Ahmedabad too has water now because Mr Modi brought it from the Narmada river.

### **RAISE FLOOR SPACE INDEX**

When Manohar Joshi was the chief minister of Maharashtra, I told him to raise the FSI to 8 to eradicate slums in Mumbai. He was shocked. For a family with four kids, you need at least four beds in the house.

Once at a housing committee meeting, everyone suggested an FSI of 2. I asked them for the basis of getting the FSI without calculating the amount of land.

Cities need land, infrastructure and water. Mumbai was once a big city because we had power, but foolish laws were brought in. This saw small places such as Bangalore, Delhi and



Land is the most precious commodity, but misusing it and constructing a building and calling it green is not correct. As India's population increases, there is more misuse of land.

Hyderabad emerge as alternative cities.

If you have four kids and just one bedroom, you cannot afford to have a nice lounge or veranda in your house. In a city like Mumbai, public space is getting eaten up. But when you want to create something new you need bold ideas.

Ahmedabad, whose riverfront provides it with large space, was lucky to have Mr Modi at the helm of the state.

I had given a plan to create public space in the western part of Mumbai, with 500 acres of green spaces and many nice plazas. But everyone started criticising me, accusing me of being against the coastal regulation zone (CRZ).

In Singapore, land has been reclaimed from the sea and everyone admires it. But when somebody wants to do it in Mumbai, everybody opposes it. Marina bay in Singapore is reclaimed land, Marine Drive in Mumbai is reclaimed.

Today, on a five-acre plot in Mumbai, I can make 5,000 houses, or just four houses as per green norms. I will get a platinum rating of green. But that is not the right way to use the plot. The demand is to make more homes.

**LAND: MOST PRECIOUS COMMODITY**

Land is the most precious commodity, but misusing it and constructing a building and calling it green is not correct. As India's population increases, there is more wastage of land.

The real issue is how cities are going to be developed. The future is in having layered cities.

Our population is young and increasing. We have to think about how we are going to make smart and green cities, how we are going to preserve land so there is enough water and food and to keep the surface of the earth greener and to prevent global warming.

India did not have big cities in the past, but there were many small villages. In the past, all houses had courtyards. Now they say place the kitchen in the south-east or north-west. Why? To stop houses catching fire due to winds from the north-east.

But now bedrooms have air-conditioners. Vaastu rules were formulated when there were no multiple floors, no lifts, etc. But it is now getting commercialised.

**STUDENTS MUST LEARN VAASTU**

Every student must learn Vaastu, which has to be taught the right way. I

studied Vaastu in 1976 or 1977. I studied the offices of people who were doing well, and they were designed as per Vaastu rules.

I feel we are at a crossroad. So many new methods and materials are entering the sector. In the olden days your grandparents might have been rich, but had just one bedroom. Today, we need to have master bedrooms.

When I was young I never had a room to myself. Today, children need their own rooms – bedrooms, computer rooms, music rooms.

You have to think about the mess we are creating, the forests that we are destroying. We need new construction material. How much mess are we creating? How many forests are we destroying? We need new material to construct.

You will need air, water everything that you have to preserve. And look at the Earth's population - it has increased so much in the last so many years. Where will we be going in the next 50 years? Where are the resources?

Architecture could be the biggest profession to build and make new habitation or there will be no profession and it will be taken over by completely mechanical ways.

You may have water coming to your home through antennas on your roofs and there won't be anything like piping. Electricity too could become wireless. You could fly into Mumbai from Matheran in your car. Only the rich will be able to stay on land as everyone else will be living in the air.

Somebody will invent or discover a new gas by which heavy things can be uplifted. Imagine the kind of city with great views.