

**M.F. HUSAIN:  
BIOGRAPHY  
BATTLES**

**MTNL  
OVERBILLING:  
KILLING  
EXCESSES**

**COMPULSORY  
HELMETS:**

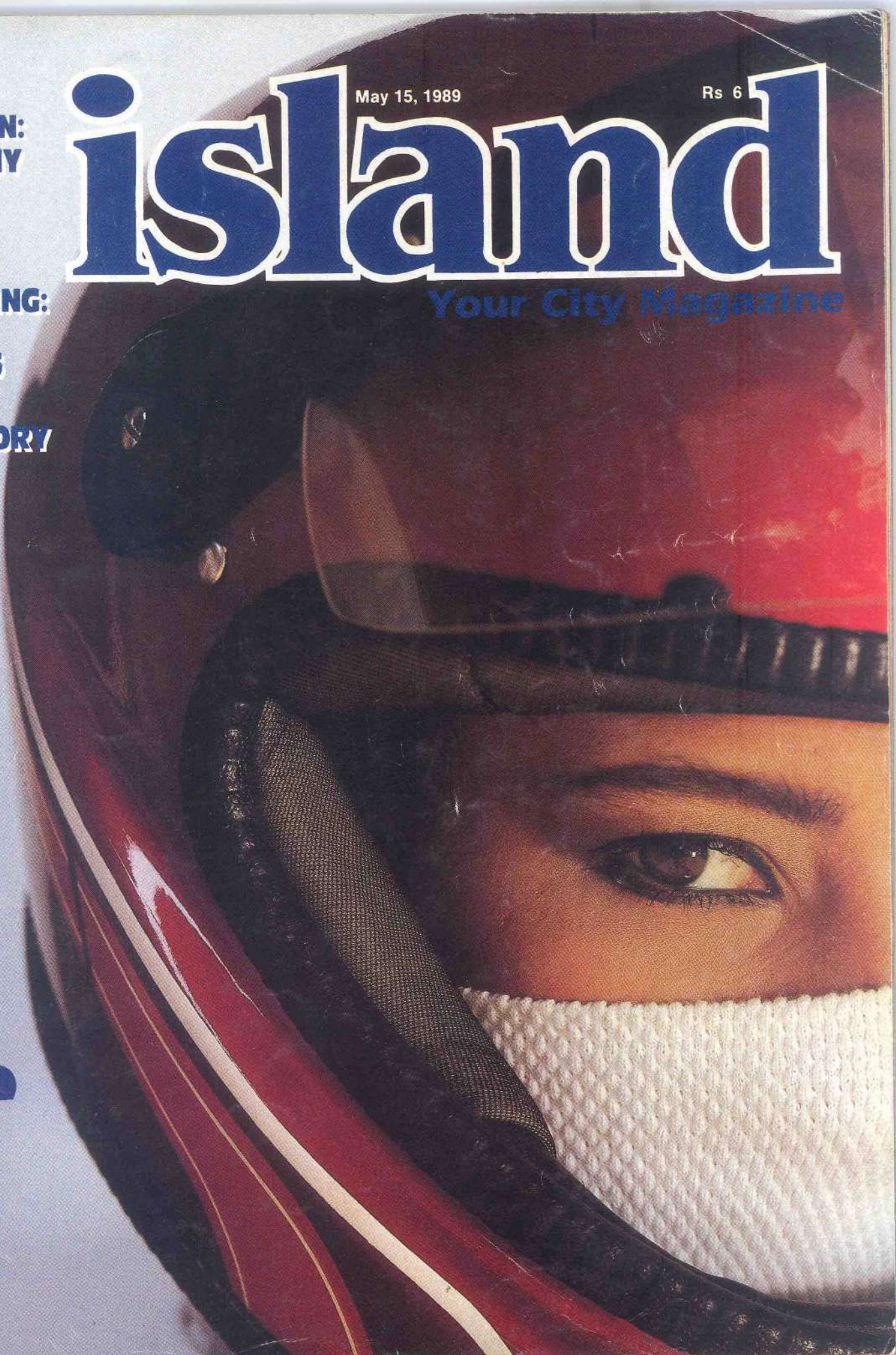
**Headguard Headaches**

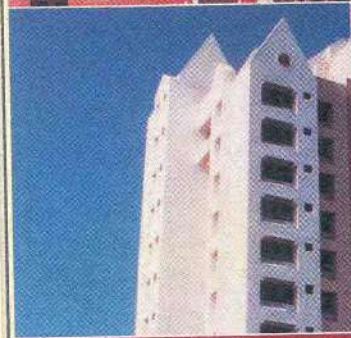
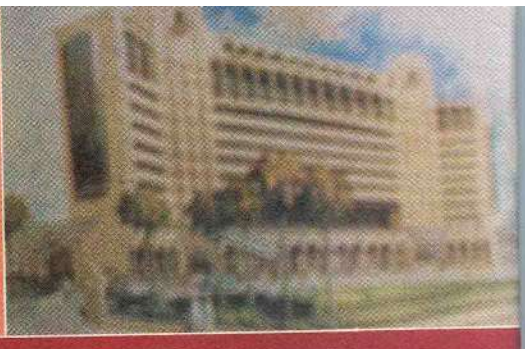
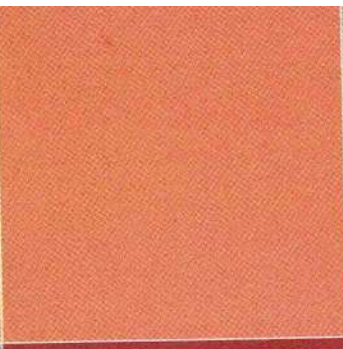
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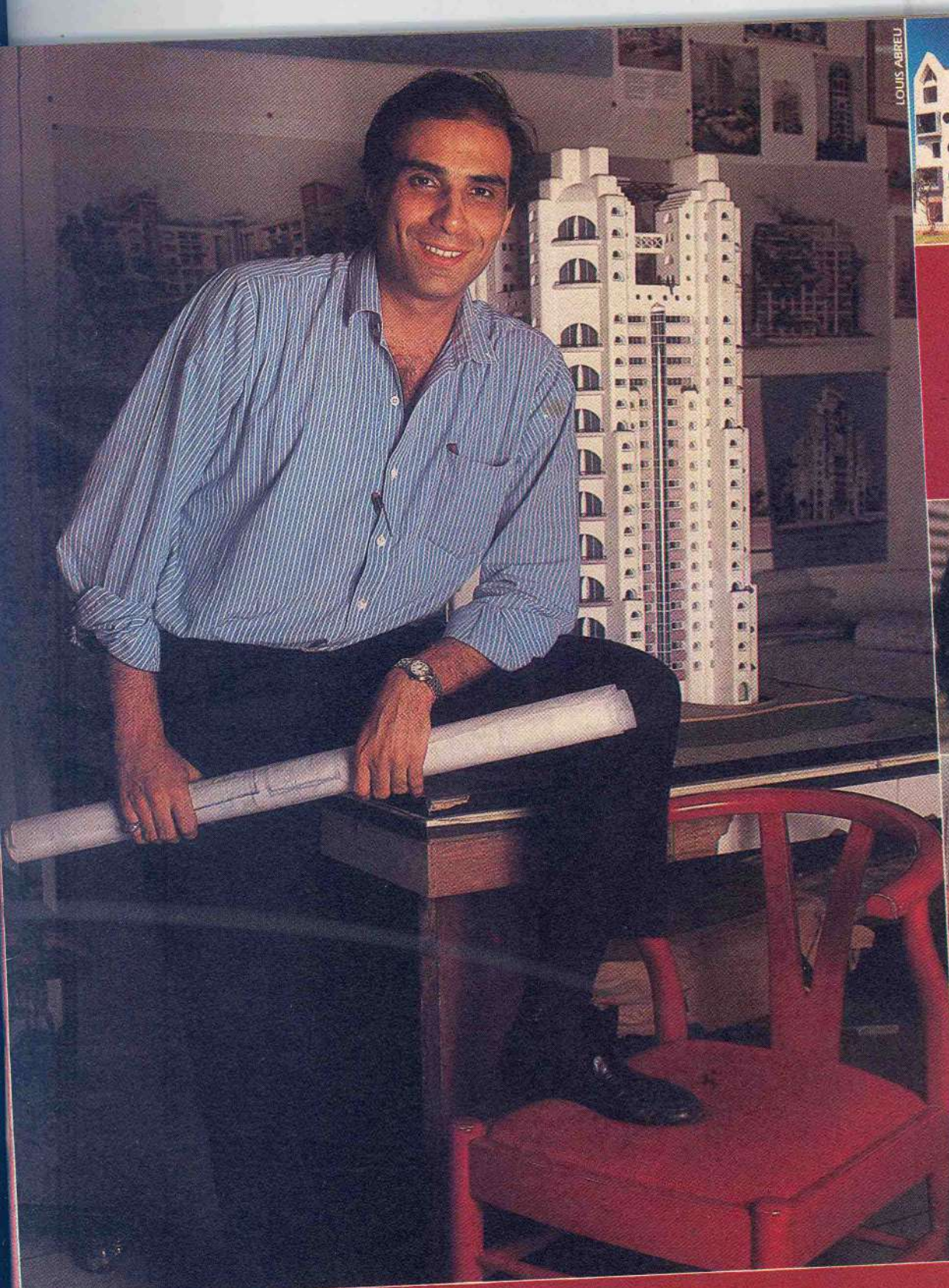


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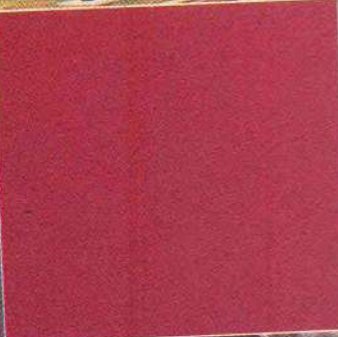


**Hafeez Contractor:  
Of Nests  
With A  
Difference**





LOUIS ABIREU



Some call him the “genius architect” of Bombay. Others squirm at the sight of his buildings and query, “What the hell does he think he’s doing?” Which essentially means that both groups of people are talking about Hafeez Contractor, the man whose buildings have become as desirable as land to developers. And to home-buyers sick of nondescript box buildings, Hafeez Contractor comes as a messiah of change. Even if you are not on the look-out for your nest-with-a-difference, you will have noticed the huge advertisements for Hafeez Contractor’s buildings

(for instance, currently the Lok Group project in Thane)— they run across newspapers ear-to-ear, are painted on the behinds of buses, and the insides of train compartments. And if you happen to be in Worli or Versova or even Pune, look for a building that stands out—chances are it's a Contractor "baby".

Whatever else they maybe, Contractor's buildings follow the high-visibility strategy. The more modest ones are only technicoloured, have sloping roofs and an amalgam of window shapes, with an arch thrown in here or some free-standing columns there. But then there are the high-rises, shaped like a cluster of sausages sliced lengthwise, or space ships not meant to take off. Others styled for grandeur have mirrored walls, an atrium, a canopy which rises to the second floor level, and facades cut like a precious stone. The liberal splash of variety, the leaping ahead while drawing from the past, the futuristic yet fairy-tale castle quality of these buildings leave one with mixed emotions. Originality? Certainly. But almost too much to absorb.

Yet it's unlikely that Hafeez Contractor—who has an impeccable academic record (first in all his seven years at college, post-graduation from Columbia University) and winner of several awards—considers such random eclecticism as his goal. True—and he does not deny it—practicality is the 'A' factor, as is money right now. But he's also determined to make it big in a way he hasn't so far. Until then, survival and experimentation continue to be the motive behind his hard-sell game. (Though he certainly doesn't experiment and goes back to the "tame" for public sector buildings like the Bharat Petroleum complex at Sion as also some "elegant" interiors like those of the Khyber Restaurant and the 'Times of India' building's advertisement centre.)

Now to this thirty nine-year-old bachelor-architect's philosophy—nothing high-falutin. In the following bit of advice delivered to one of his 70 employees, Hafeez Contractor reveals himself: "*Higgle, haggle tow kame ka hai, thoda hasne ka, thoda rone ka; aisa, aisa kar ke kaam kar lena ka!*" Certainly a go-getter who grabs it by releasing doses of his overbearing confidence on the one hand, and plenty of charm on the other.

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Can Hafeez Contractor himself define his current style of architecture?

See, Bombay architecture is quite different from architecture all over the world. It's even very different from any other place in India, take Madras, Delhi anywhere. You can just call it the Bombay style. There are such strict restrictions in this city that there is little you can do. So my style of architecture is a mixture of modern, neo-classic and classical styles. I deal with such a spectrum of people that my buildings must

**"In every city  
the rich move  
out of their areas  
after 30 years."**



tackle what would appeal to them. I mean, of course, my residential buildings.

**Yes, but what are you trying to project?**

Nothing, I am not trying to project anything. I am an architect, I am into architecture, it's a way of life. I just do work for my clients, I am living upto their needs.

**What according to you are the most important elements of architecture? And how are your buildings meeting them?**

Nothing like elements. It is the totality that makes a building. Unless everything is in proportion, everything goes with the other, the buildings won't look good. Aesthetics, etc, are important for architecture but it has to be sold. In Delhi it is different. In Delhi it's *baap ka paisa*, it's government money, nobody is responsible for it. You can do what you want. Here the builder will be sitting on your head, if one square inch is lost he will literally eat you up.

**Other than money does your design consider other factors, like the weather for instance?**

In the modern system of construction the weather does play an important part. In Bombay rain is the chief factor, it rains a lot, that's why we have systems of double walling, that's why the pitch roof (sloping) started—I had the rainfall in mind because flat roofs invariably end up leaking. But people have started copying me all over town in a very stupid way. They put the pitch in front but at the back it is flat. Write about this, about their stupidity. The other day I saw a building like this in Chembur, it looked so stupid!

**Some of your buildings are outrageously coloured. Why?**

Doesn't a woman wear clothes of different colours to look attractive? Why doesn't she wear just white or black? I like bright colours. I want my buildings to be noticed.

**Mainly which strata of society is choosing your buildings to live in?**

I do work for the poorest of the poor, and richest of the rich.

**What do you mean by poor?**

Well, I don't mean *jhopadpattis*. I mean some spaces are very small. Like I have made flats which are only 250 sq ft. Lots of people think my buildings are very expensive. But take an example of a painting. The main cost is of the canvas, right? It's the same with buildings. The main cost is for the structure though when the work is finished you can't see it. Now, back to the painting. If there are some special touches or strokes on it, the price goes up. The same thing happens with my buildings. Mine may cost lakhs, while the other buildings only thousands. I give my buildings nice colours, form, shape and they stand out. So they are in demand.

**But where does that leave you with people who believe in the use of local elements, especially ethnic concepts?**

I, too, can do that kind of work. But who uses local elements?

Say, Uttam Jain.

If I get that kind of work, that kind of sprawling land, I can do it too. See, what's the quantum of Uttam Jain's architecture? What work has he done in Bombay except the Indira Gandhi Institute? I'm not an ethnic architect, I am a practical man. What appeals to me economically, aesthetically, I do that. You may draw one line, then give meaning to it and write paras after paras about it. I'm not into all that. The man on the street should be able to understand what he sees. I want to create a first impression.

**Supposing you were given a role in urban planning, what would you like to make out of Bombay?**

It is the laws which really affect new buildings. But what is a building? Even a simple *dabba* will look beautiful in the middle of a park. I ardently believe this. There's all this talk about housing for the poor but mud housing is not the solution. You will only make the poor feel poorer. See, invariably what happens is that we do not understand the basic laws of life. We say, "Provide housing for the poor in Thane and Badlapur and elsewhere, decentralise the city, let New Bombay grow." But the city is not going to get decentralised unless the rich are forced to go out. But then again, rich can't be forced, you have to lure them. In every city the rich move out of their areas after 30 years. In Delhi people have moved out of Chandni Chowk to South Delhi. Everywhere else there's this cycle as well. But the movement of the rich hasn't happened in Bombay because of poor planning. There's all this talk about housing the poor but the master has to eat first and only then can the servants eat. Have you heard anywhere the master tell his servant, "First you eat, then I will eat"?

**Would you like to emulate any architect, Indian or**

**"People have started copying me all over town in a stupid way."**

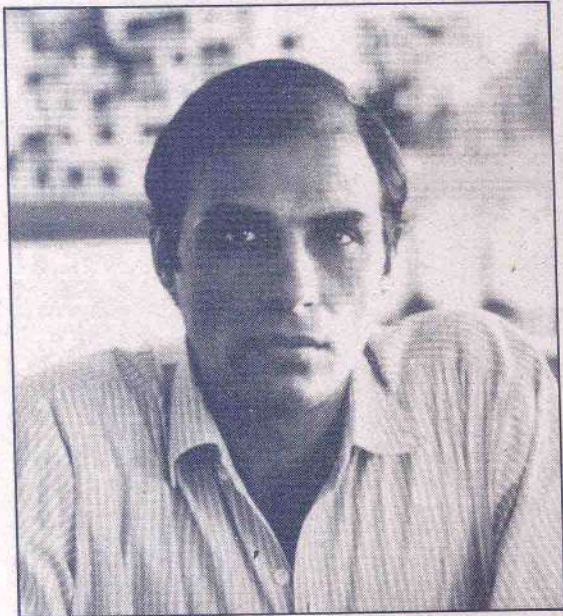


foreign?

There are lots of Indian architects whose work I like, Stein, Correa, Kahn. Foreign, Paul Rudolph, Phillip Johnson, Michael Graves...so many. Consciously or unconsciously, anything about their work which one likes enters one's buildings. It's like anger or passion—somewhere or the other it comes out.

**Do you think you'll be remembered alongside other famed Indian architects?**

That's not for me to say. I'd like to be. I wish I'll be. I think I'll be. For it's my aim in life. Otherwise, what am I wasting all this time for?



**What's your life-style like? Modest? High-flying?**

Nothing like modest. Nothing like high-flying. I'm just living.

**Most of your work seems to be with developers, not individuals. How come?**

I have also done a lot of work with individuals and private companies like UTI, DBI, LIC, Central Railways and I'll be working for the Rajneesh people as well. But my work with developers overshadows the rest.

**Abroad there is a move to form companies of architects, builders and contractors. Here it's considered unethical for architects to do so. How do you feel about this?**

I wouldn't like to comment on this because it would hurt a lot of people's feelings.

**Whose feelings, why?**

See, for instance, I'm told by the Indian Institute of Architects that I shouldn't take less than (the

stipulated) four percent from builders. But the quanta have changed. Architects can give discounts, everyone else does. Don't the newspapers give their advertisers discounts? So why not us?

**That's very practical thinking.**

One has to be practical. Once you get a kick on your backside you start learning. If you make a stupid plan, you learn soon. Initially, I worked in an office for 11 to 12 years, so I learned from mistakes.

**Mistakes? Like what?**

Others made the mistakes, I learned from them.

Recently it was suggested in the 'Inside Outside' magazine that you are a better interior designer than an architect.

Let them think what they want. I am an architect, I'll do architecture. The interior design magazines will say I am a better interior designer, the architecture magazines will say I am a better architect. Good show!

**Any of your work you are particularly proud of?**

I haven't yet done any work I'd be particularly proud of. I would like to do something though. Now I am starting to get some good jobs. As an architect I am like a mother whose one child is sometimes not as good as her other children. And sometimes even though she puts in no effort in one child he turns out better than the ones on whom she has worked very hard. It's the same with my buildings.

**One of your works opposite Pune Club (Konark buildings) is visibly disproportionate—the pitched roofs seem too large for the rest of the building.**

Yes, that's right. What happened with those buildings is that I designed them to be a long row but the road in front of it is very narrow. As an architect I should have realised that. But from inside it's very nice! Anyway the man on the street does not notice (the fault)!

**They do, I did.**

(Smiles)

**How come you're not married as yet, especially since among your Parsi community you are considered quite a catch?**

(Laughs) I'm waiting.

**For the kind of woman who will fit into your ideas of lines and curves on a structure?**

(Laughs loudly) I'm just waiting.



**"As an architect I am like a mother whose one child is sometimes not as good as her other children."**

Vibha Vasi