

The Art of Urbanization

Indian Architect Blends Old and New

BY SUSMITA GHOSH

With a name
echoing his
work,
*architect Hafeez
Contractor has
harmoniously fused art,
technology, and tradition
in a wide variety of
stunning structures.*

Utilizing modern technology, today's architecture can create structures ranging in appearance from cultural artifact to art form. Yet at its essence, architecture is a lyrical fusion of art and technology. Every art and craft may reflect a contemporary school of thought, but architecture is the perfect barometer for monitoring common belief.

Pastiche is a technique used in all forms of art and literature. In the case of architecture, it is

the combination of many architectural elements drawn from diverse sources of architectural history and style. The acclaimed Indian architect Hafeez Contractor chooses this process, which involves blending different styles and results in the creation of an illusory environment appropriate to the specifics of its site.

For Contractor, book-knowledge architecture differs from architecture meant to please. Pleasing is an art, and he is proficient at it. He could be called a calligrapher, specifically, an architectural calligrapher.

Indeed, Contractor has become a brand name in the industry, probably accumulating the majority of commissions in India. With no scruples when it comes to pursuing his own architectural style, he has been winning applause from India's general public, developers, and other architects.

In fact, he has become an icon of contemporary architecture in India. Architecture in the subcontinent has gone through a

transformation in the past decade in the name of globalization, which, interestingly, is now being used as an excuse to complain about the state of architecture today.

Unflinchingly, Contractor has taken up the lead in the globalization process. Architectural projects are not just designed in his office but manufactured, advertised, and promoted. He has bravely reacted to the pulse of the times, utilizing high technology and newer materials to make landmark statements. Having romanticized modern architecture, Contractor has embodied an internationally informed style in Indian architecture, which has the sagacity to encourage creativity.

Above all, Contractor sells dreams. He sells sand castles and dollhouses—different, fantastic, or unreal—to dreamers who can pay for them. He paints, packages, and glamorizes, according to the demand for something like Disneyland, for example. A self-confessed builder's architect, he

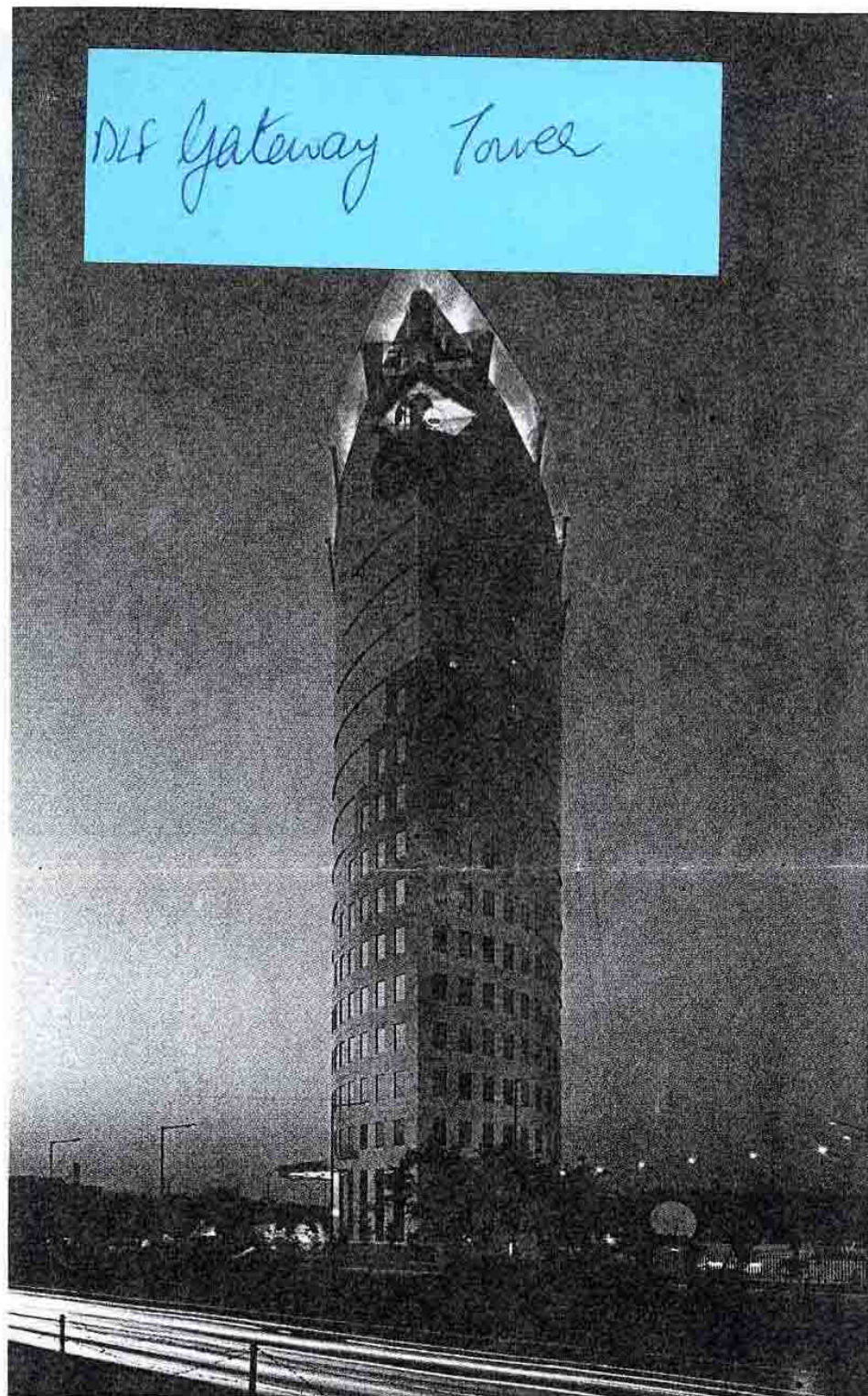
■ DLF Gateway Tower at Gurgaon, Delhi.

has set the trend for architectural packaging. Contractor comes across loud and clear as having a philosophy that can be loosely termed as consumer architecture, which means streamlined packaging, marketing, and selling in the relentless world of consumerism.

Contrary to his media image as flamboyant and aloof, he has a sincere openness and a communicative directness, which is reflected in his body language and the manner in which he conducts his business. His favorite childhood pastime was to design forts, arms, ammunition, dams, bikes, and so forth; his notebooks were filled with sketches instead of writing. One of his teachers saw his drawings and proclaimed that Contractor would become a famous architect. "I was not really interested in studies, but I remembered what my teacher had said to me and unconsciously I pursued this dream," he recalls.

Achieving an architecture degree from the School of Architecture at India's Mumbai University, Contractor later graduated in architecture from Columbia University. After working with private firms in Mumbai for nine years, he embarked upon an associate partnership with India's Khareghat and Associates for thirteen years and in 1982 struck out on his own. Today, he has over 150 architects in his employ.

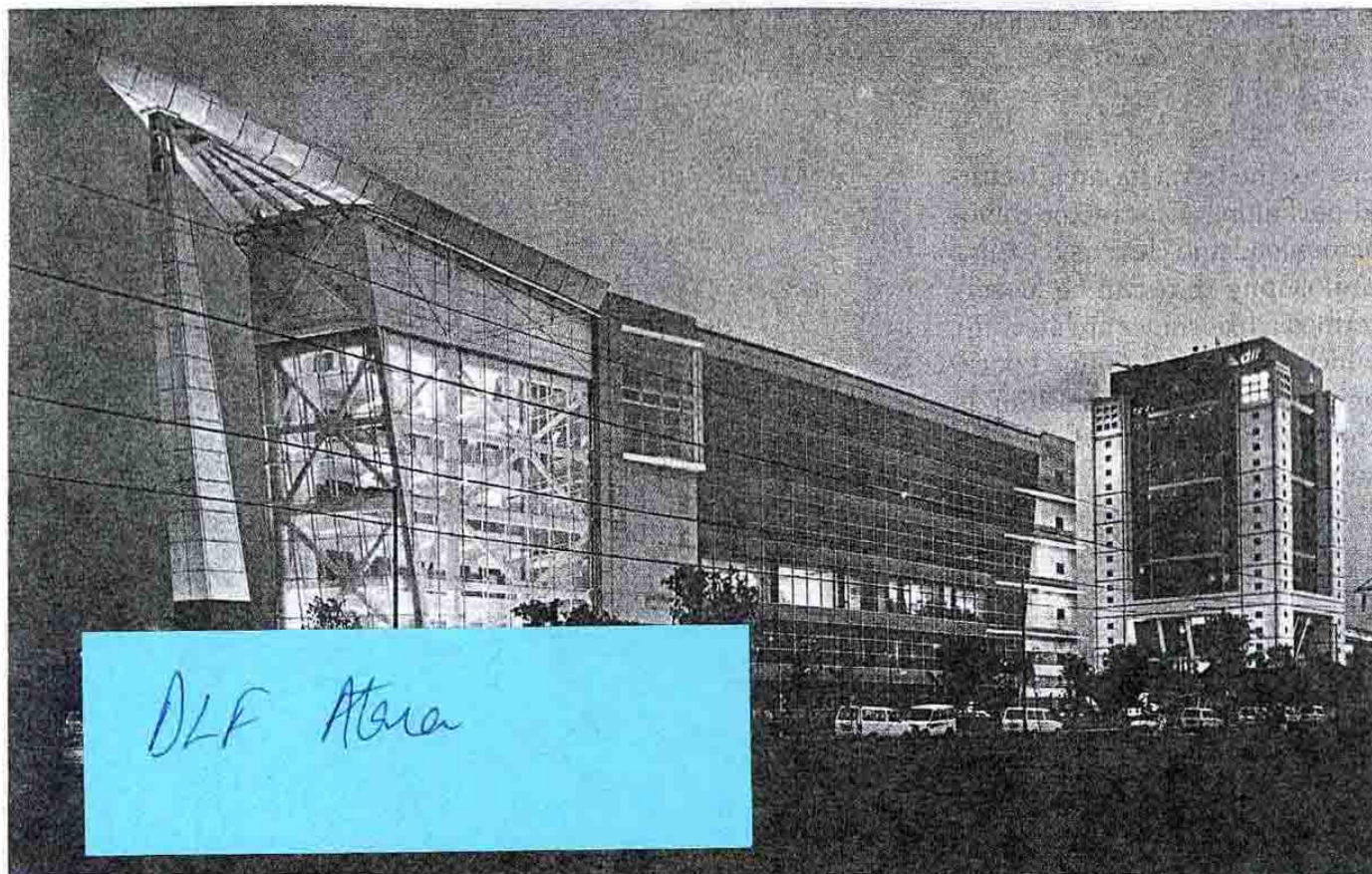
A recipient of the CM Mas-



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF HAFEZ CONTRACTOR

ters Design Award (1975), the *Accommodation Times* Award for Architect of the Year (1991), and the Priyadarshini Award for Excellence in Architecture (1998), Contractor seems to have made his mark. Handling large num-

bers of projects ranging from residential and recreational complexes to corporate plazas, he has built some 186 residential buildings, 77 commercial complexes, 55 recreational and sports-facility buildings, 15 hotels and



Reflecting on Success

Author Susmita Ghosh recently interviewed architect Hafeez Contractor in his Mumbai office.

THE WORLD & I: Did you visualize yourself to be so successful as an architect?

Contractor: *Even when I was in college, I always dreamed of having my own practice. I remember how my friends laughed at me when I expressed my desire of working in one shift from ten to six, another one from six to twelve, and again from twelve to six in the morning. And today the system in my office extends beyond the normal times because of the quantity of work.*

W&I: So right from those days, there has been a strong passion for architecture. Let's talk about your design methodology.

Contractor: *I always go about my work very mathematically. Firstly, I try to analyze the functions and requirements involved to satisfy my con-*

science. Thereafter I visualize the construction. This often puts things in a different perspective. I look at the construction costs and how practical the project would be. It works accordingly and is compartmentalized, which gives the plan a finite structure. Then the structure gets converted into a system of construction and into an aesthetic.

W&I: Do you think the job of a builder is like walking on a tightrope?

Contractor: *Yes, it is. I used to do a lot of residential architecture. Residential architecture is governed by builders and has a certain kind of norm—carpet to built-up-area ratio and cutthroat rates. The builder fraternity goes for the cheapest and the fastest way of building. Yet the best judge for anybody's work is when a client approaches you a second time. It's the profit statistics of the buildings I design that make the clients believe in my way of working.*

■ **Opposite:** Office complex at Gurgaon, Delhi. **Right:** Architect Hafeez Contractor in his Mumbai office.

resorts, many hospitals, and assorted other structures. Tackling ventures at various levels and scales, he ensures a novel sculpture for the building, which invariably catches a passerby's attention at the first glance. His work has no one particular style; each assignment deals with a different treatment, indicating the underlying balance, form, and function that greatly explain his success. Even though Parsi tradition values maintaining old, beautiful furniture, Contractor has no sentimental attachments to old furniture, or old things whatsoever. If it is beautiful, he

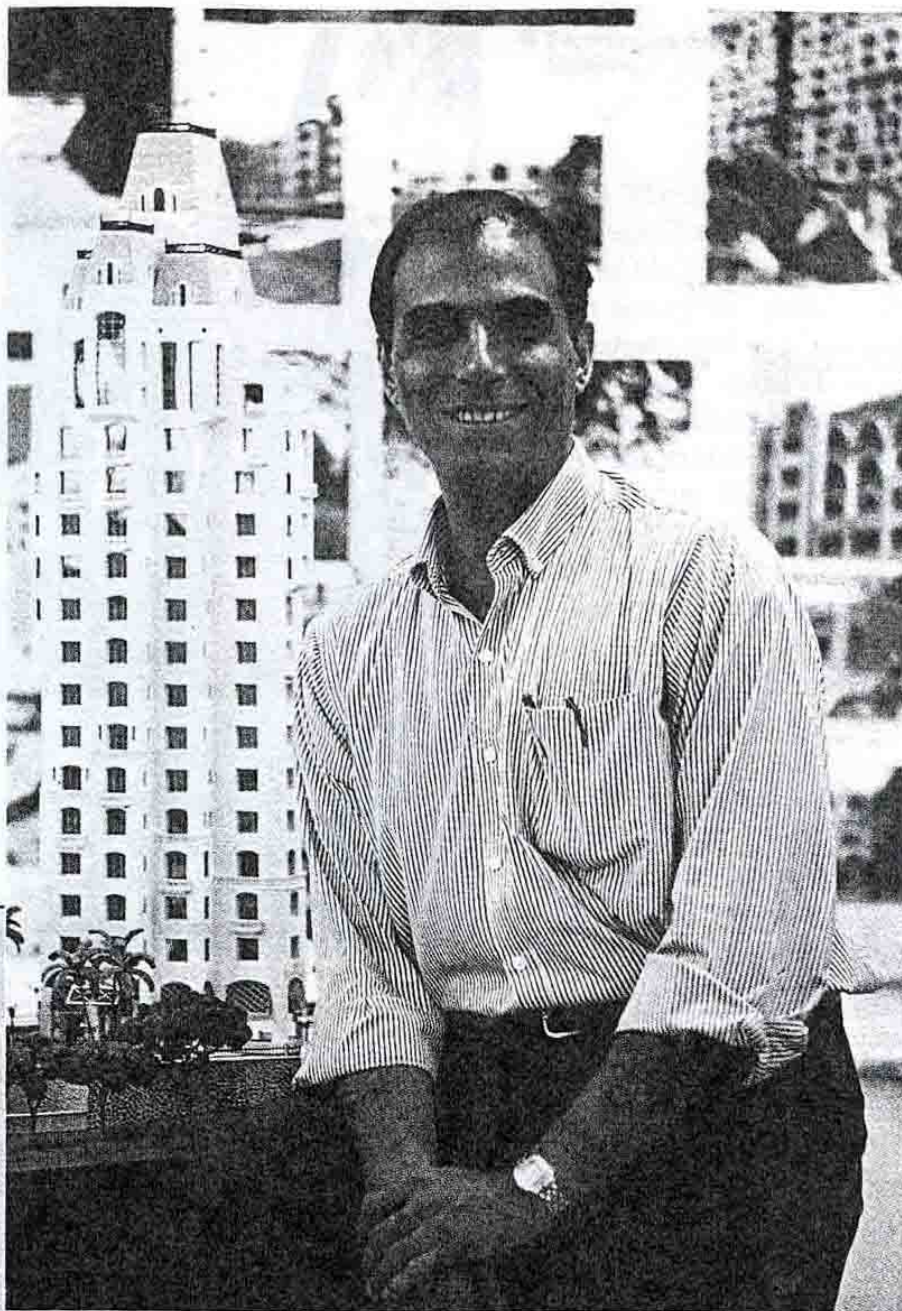
Even today for a builder, speed and economy have to go hand in hand. My critics should analyze my work under these circumstances. Maybe they will learn something and come out of their stereotyped image of my work.

W&I: Do you think it hampers your creativity?

Contractor: *If any architect says that a client's requirement cramps or hampers his style of work, then his approach to architecture is not right. I have never let any kind of eventuality restrict my style. In fact, I thrive on the challenges posed. I take it as an architectural element I have never used before and look for ways to turn it into an advantage, to make the building better.*

W&I: Which is your favorite project?

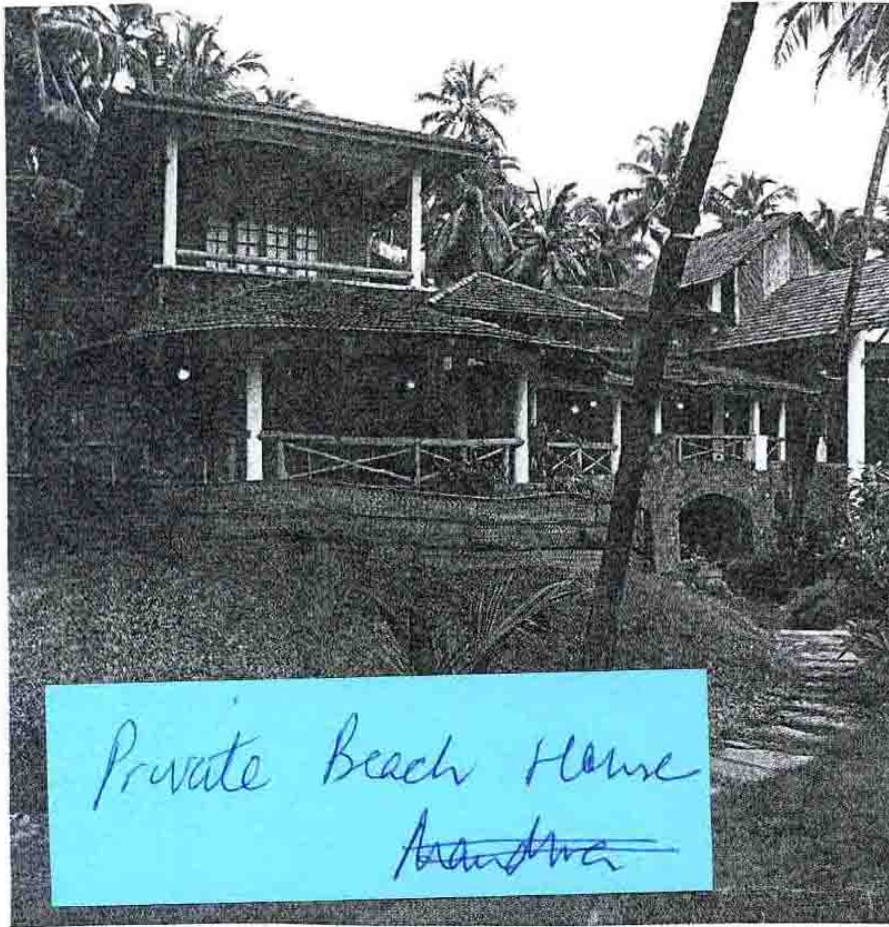
Contractor: *That is just like asking someone, "Which is your favorite child?" Every project is a*



challenge in itself, so I cannot pinpoint any particular one. But I enjoyed doing the Osho Commune buildings—all in black—since my style is one of using shocking colors. Often Rajneesh used to send me little notes directing the proceedings of his desire. I somehow enjoyed this part; doing it that way was a challenge in itself.

W&I: What do you place a higher priority upon—aesthetics or technology?

Contractor: *Aesthetics, technology, and*



■ Farmhouse on the outskirts of Mumbai.

likes it. The fact that it is old is irrelevant. Fulfilling the aspirations of his clients, Contractor works according to their beliefs and budgets, and he never imposes his own ideas over the demands of the society.

While many architects are educated in the traditional polemics of their craft, Contractor's methodology has been firmly anchored in commercial and practical issues. Thus, he has been able to quickly expand his work and reputation in India's ever-developing urban areas.

"My work itself is relaxing," he says jovially. "I don't consider my work taxing at all because I enjoy it. I get enough time to be with my family and enjoy my

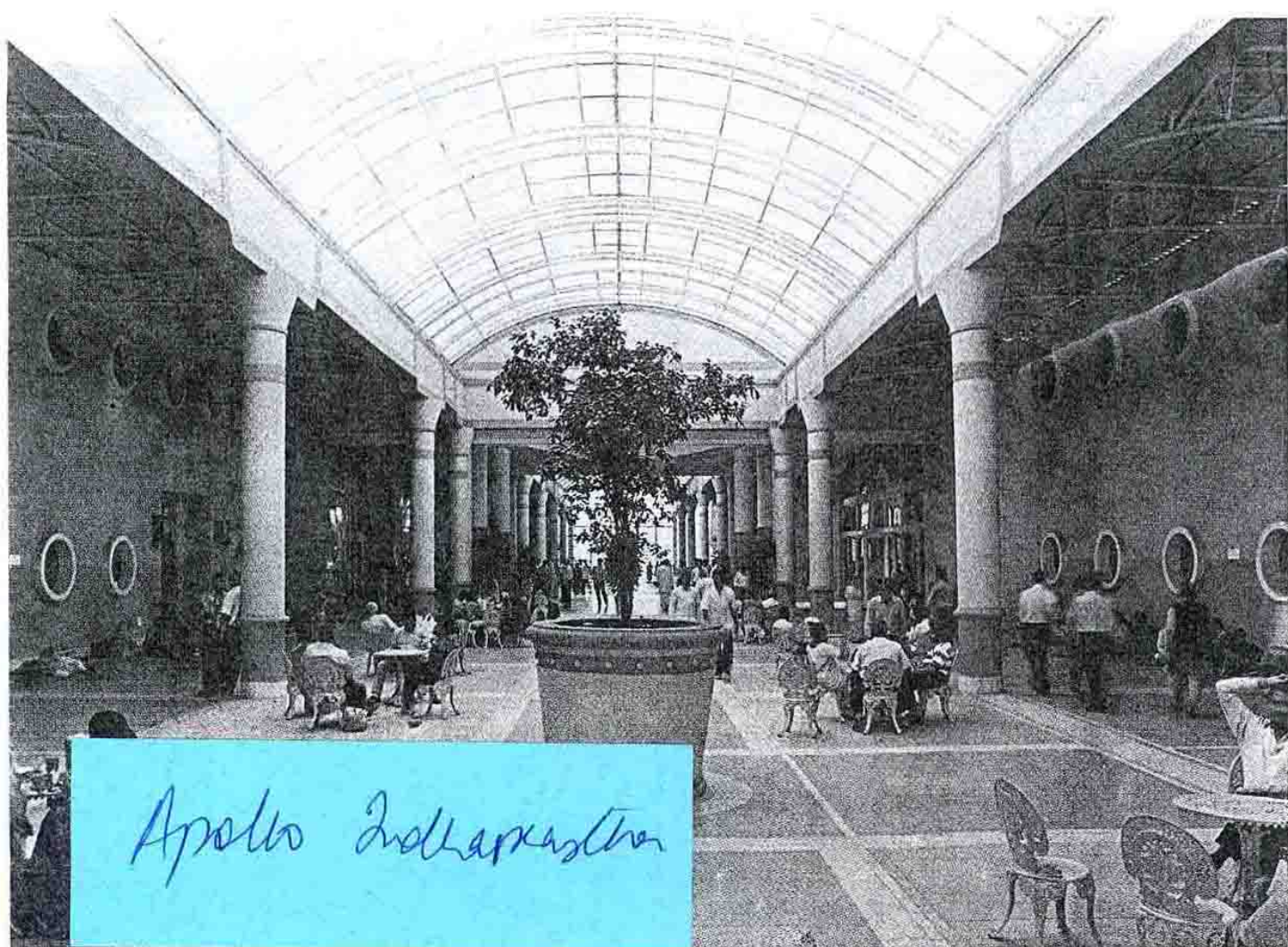
functionality all go hand to hand. Nothing too technological, too user-friendly, or too practical wins the game.

W&I: Workmanship and craftsmanship were Indian architecture's forte once. Today it is just the opposite. However, in your buildings, details and workmanship are on a good level. How do you achieve this?

Contractor: *I would like to do more detailing, but I can't afford to do it. It boils down to finance. When I detail curtain walls, by the time it gets translated into final drawings and the costing comes, everything gets watered down. I feel that my buildings still don't have the kind of detailing I aspire for—the main reasons being cost and time. What's more, people want things done faster today, which takes the toll on the time spent by an architect in detailing. But I believe my forms are so powerful that the building still looks detailed, and that is the success.*

W&I: And a word for the upcoming architect.

Contractor: *Don't get into architecture unless you love the subject. A lot of people get into architecture thinking they want to be architects but do not really love it. You have to be passionate about it. Recently, someone asked me if there is scope in architecture. I feel the moment you question scope, it disappears. But if you have the courage to make changes in the field, the world is there, full of challenges for you. It all depends on how you perceive things. When I started practicing with Tehmasp Khareghat, I remember that architects lamented that the architectural world had deteriorated in quality. One has to look at the profession with a positive point of view and make the most of the existing circumstances. The restrictions should not be the deterrent but a challenge, which propels you to make a mark in the field.*



Apollo Indraprastha

■ Interior of Apollo Hospital, Mumbai.

leisure hours. In fact, I watch a movie every single day!”

After altering the skyline of Mumbai, he has singlehandedly defined the transglobal and multinational image of Gurgaon, a satellite city at the southwest fringe of India’s sprawling Delhi that is devoid of any urban context except its close vicinity to the capital. His army of impressively designed structures forms nodes and generate context for the new corporate settlement to come.

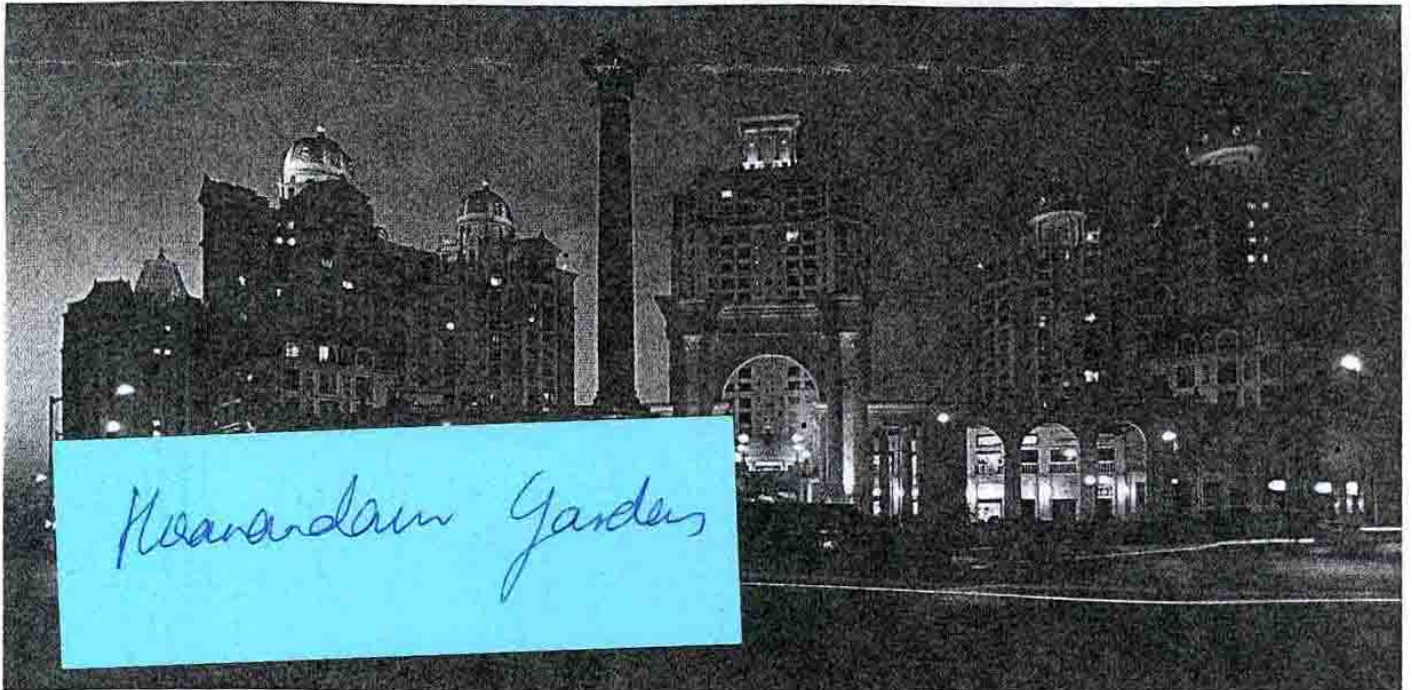
His bold yet intriguing DLF Gateway Tower of Gurgaon achieves this well. The sixteen-story structure appears to be a compressed cylinder when

viewed from the front or rear but looks like a regular cylinder when seen from its sides. In the Gurgaon complex, all the services are state of the art. Contractor has used a dense juxtaposition of Gothic columns, arches, and decorative entablature for most of the residential schemes.

About his influences, he says, “A definite refinement has come in my work due to experience and inspiration from different people at different times. In college I was moved by the great work of Le Corbusier and Charles Correa, and later was influenced greatly by Tehmasp Khareghat.”

Hafeez’s design work has

three distinct motifs: *neoclassical/pseudohistorical*, seen in apartment projects like Beverly Park at Gurgaon, a 108-apartment complex with balconies, ample recreational spaces, and unique, sloping red roofs; *hi-tech imaginary*, reflected in corporate offices like Gateway Tower, a twenty-two-story high-rise employing reflective glass in stark, geometric shapes; and *repose*, dominant in the Apollo Hospital, a 650-bed, multispecialty facility located in Sarita



Vihar, New Delhi.

The student dormitories at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Mumbai reflect the dynamism and the vibrancy of their inhabitants. Bright colors and a fifty-foot-high sky bridge form a composition of voids, openings, and color that, when combined with the curved roof, make the overall expression interesting. Apollo Hospital achieves another objective: through his use of bright and lively colors and patterns, Hafeez has effectively deinstitutionalized the hospital and added liveliness to counteract its morose associations.

The Osho Commune, tucked away in the beautiful green city of Pune, propagates the teachings of Bhagwan Rajneesh. Contractor's black pyramids here are radically different from anything he previously built. In the simple cluster of four buildings, the design philosophy centers on black, which is supposed to

embody all colors, harness cosmic energy, and provide a stable and enduring form. The blue-tinted glass windows and skylights offer a sense of enlightenment.

For a long time, Indian architecture has been performing a balancing act between the traditional and the modern. Contractor's architecture has chosen the latter. Some of his recent projects display a keen sense of experimentation. He is more inspired by Western architecture than by Indian but recognizes that they operate at different levels altogether.

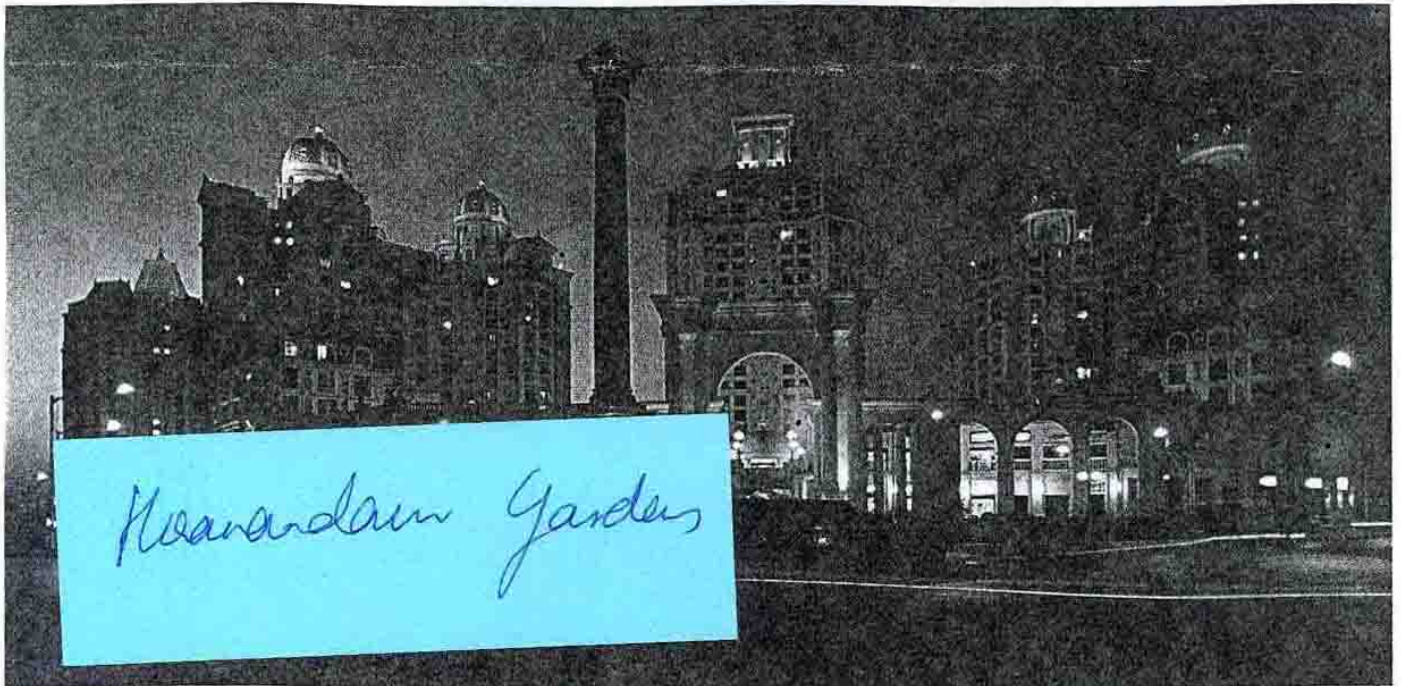
Although embracing the postmodern style, Contractor is aware of its limitations. In the way of everything fashionable and stylish, his architectural styling becomes obsolete quickly. Thus his ability to transform and evolve new strategy is not only an asset but also a necessity for his "brand" to survive in the market. His architecture reinforces the

■ Hiranandani Gardens at Powai, Mumbai.

logic of consumer capitalism, where new types of consumption, planned obsolescence, rapid rhythm of fashion, and styling changes occur incessantly. Hence buildings are advertised, packaged, and sold to prospective clients just as any other market products. Corporate offices wear a steel-and-glass contemporary look, similar to those in modern Western cities; residential apartments, however, wear a historical mask, with elements from different places and periods of history.

But Contractor's architecture is not merely pattern based. It is also daring at times, challenging the very notion of what is embedded and tickling the nerve endings of our aesthetic sensibilities, while compelling reexamination of what architecture is.

While his clients expect



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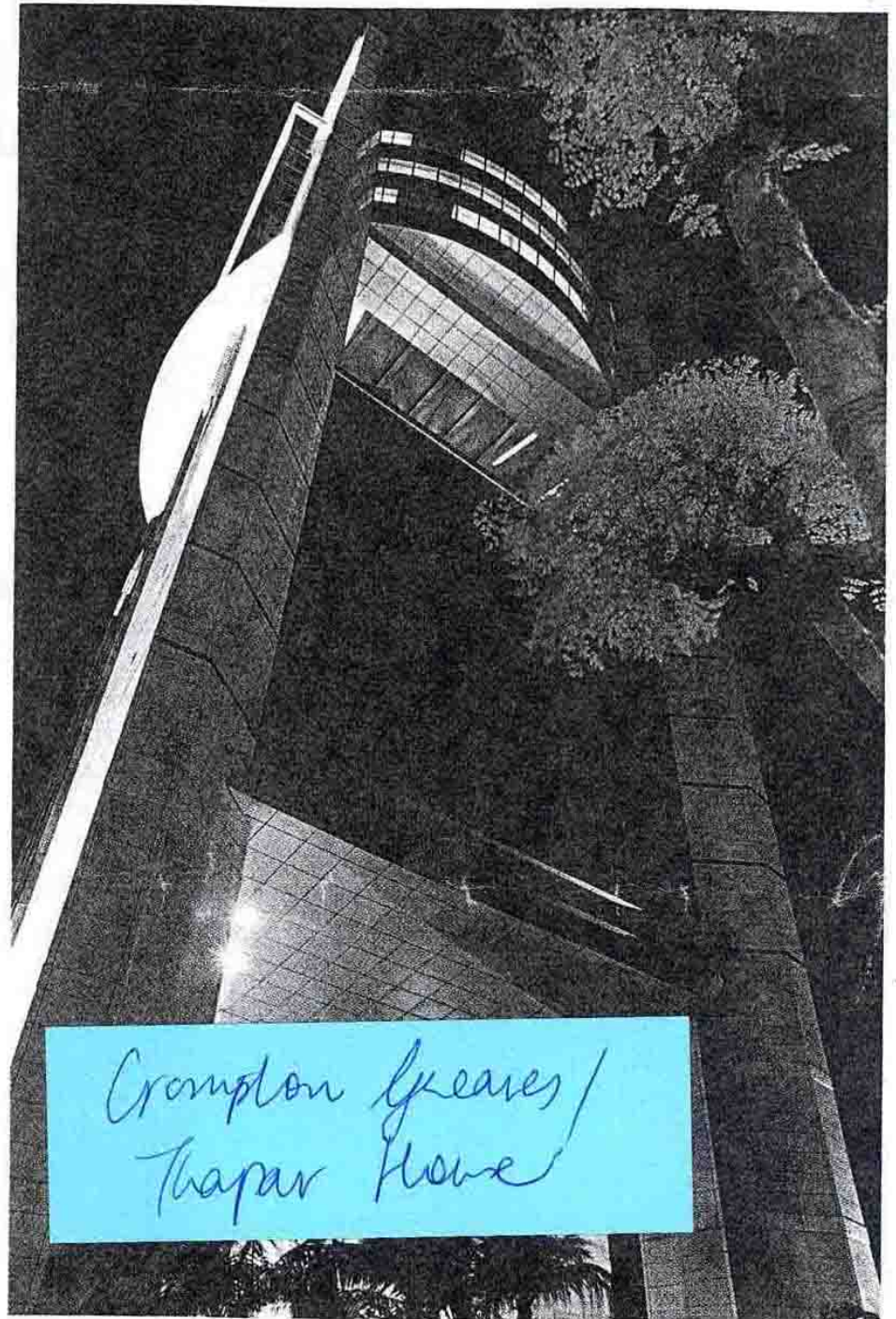
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■ CG House, Mumbai.

Contractor to play a role in the upkeep of his buildings (a traditional amenity supplied by Indian builders), the architect has chosen instead to create maintenance-free structures of granite or other heavy stone-clad facings. By exploiting such modern materials and forms in his structures, Contractor has won clients over by the novelty, practicality, and intelligence of his work.

Architecture has been an underdeveloped profession in India. For nonarchitects, architecture is what gets added on to the structure, a facade in its literal sense. A lot of Contractor's work is very strong in its vertical qualities, supplying a novelty and an aesthetics that India has never experienced before. His architectural vocabulary showcases influences from the Western world, thus creating a simulacrum in India for the masses that want French villas, Spanish haciendas, and the global look. Contractor's success can be read as a parable whose moral is left to us individually to decipher and accept or refuse in the search for our own identity as architects.

Bold is the word that describes him. His defiant structures of chrome and glass rise to reflect India's changing social and political circumstances. His lavish Doric columns, oversized doughnut balconies, sky courts, unusually pitched roofs, asymmetrical towers, and bright colors have become trademarks of his flamboyant style. It is no wonder



that Contractor is surrounded by a band of young associates who are inspired by such bold statements and a genuine openness to the craft.

The architect's courage and ability to "shout out" his statements, denying all that is sacred to the intellectual and architectural elite, is to be admired. His

appeal transcends all boundaries. His buildings remain extremely popular, inspiring numerous Contractor copyists in India. Simply put, Contractor came, he saw, he designed, and he conquered. ■

Susmita Ghosh, currently based in New Delhi, is a freelance journalist who writes on art and culture.