

The Goan blueprint

Architect Raya Shankhwalker on the art of restoring Indo-Portuguese homes and his love for reviving age-old crafts

BY NIDHI ADLAKHA

My early years, growing up in the *parijat*-strewn courtyard of our 300-year-old ancestral house in Panjim influenced me a lot. The house is a stunning example of a Hindu-Goan house – an under-celebrated aspect of Goan architecture. The courtyard was not only a fabulous climatic adaptation, but also an ideal private living space. I still carry vivid memories of the warmth of the space and the smell of flowers and beaten earth. These memories instilled a strong sense of belonging, which later kindled a desire to conserve this unique heritage.

My tryst with conservation began during my college days in Goa. As part of my architecture curriculum, I covered many assignments on Goan heritage and was fascinated by its sheer volume. It challenged my imagination and inspired me to research on the subject. Also, as one of the founding members of the Goa Heritage Action Group (1999), it got me involved in the field further.

First steps

Working with architect Sarto Almeida, to restore the façades of the Custom House and the Police headquarters – two prominent public buildings of historical importance – instilled a liking for conservation. I worked on several similar urban conservation initiatives before I took up my first residential project at Siolim village – converting a 150-year-old house into a guest house.

The challenge was maintaining the home's old characteristics and combining it with urban needs. A fairly low-budget project, we kept the purity of the spaces intact, retaining the old walls and accommodating the large bathrooms within the home's existing framework. The original flooring was preserved as well and we used recycled wood for the doors.

British vs Portuguese

While British colonial architecture in India evolved over time – adapting to local tastes and climate – Portuguese architecture did not do so. The blueprint for Indo-Portuguese homes was borrowed from homes in North Portugal, where they had harsh winters. So a typical home was linear, with a foyer that leads to two halls on either side, which then splits into rooms.

But tropical living calls for semi-open spaces. In the 18th century, the architecture evolved and new additions were made. One of the key ones was the wrap-around veranda and the *balcão* or the entrance portico. We introduced



Remains of the day Soro - The Village Pub is a tavern conceptualised within the ruins of an old corner store with bold graphic cement tiles (below) Renovated rooms at the Assagao villa

such spaces in our project at Assagao, which was a renovation and extension of an old Goan house. The villa is cocooned by paddy fields; thus a seamless connection between the landscape and the interiors became a key design driver.

Key influences

Travel is a strong inspiration for me. My earlier trips to Portugal were a redefining experience and helped develop my approach to conservation. In India, most interventions are replicated from the past, but in Portugal, conservation is looked at with a modern perspective. I believe that not all buildings need to be restored; a few need to be evolved.

Preservation and conservation

Preservation refers to structures with historical and cultural value, while conservation refers to homes that need not hold historical importance. When we take up a restoration project, we assess the home and add suitable elements.

new wing. The exterior was meticulously restored, involving extensive research on the building style of the period. For the flooring, I used terrazzo – chips of marble or granite set in concrete, which is sensitive to insulation.

Rather than emulating the design style of the original villa for the new wing, it follows a contemporary design language that introduces lightness and modernity. The intent was to create an interesting aesthetic, juxtaposing the new against the old.

Lost heritage

Building technologies and materials used in the Portuguese era were distinctive, but unfortunately, most have been lost. For example, stucco (the application of lime plaster on exteriors that prevented water seepage) is a technique that has been forgotten. Similarly, the use of broken China mosaic is a traditional element that one can't find today.

Several similar techniques have been lost, as they weren't documented. In our projects, we try to understand such methods and how they were used. If elements of historical importance are present in a home, we restore them.

Portuguese connect

Colour played a significant part in Indo-Portuguese architecture. They used three primary colours – red, yellow, and blue – made with naturally-available pigments. We don't use natural pigments today, so look for the closest shade in the commercially-available brands.

Buying local crafts and artefacts from Goa will add authenticity to the look. Goan homes are embellished with rich elements such as chandeliers and China vases. Goa has a few crafts, too, which are dying art forms now, such as terracotta and cane.

Using them in your décor will not only add to the aesthetics, but also help in their revival and conservation.

For instance, I have used the hand-woven baskets unique to Goa, as a lighting installation, in one of our commercial projects, the SinQ Beach Club.

We approach each project on individual merit.

The Villa Ribander, located on the banks of the Mandovi, was originally built in the early 19th century. During its restoration, we retained its character and added a

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RAYA SHANKHWALKER



Call for conservation

Heritage conservation holds immense tourism potential. The restoration of Indo-Portuguese homes has given the city character – not just the built environment, but in terms of natural beauty, too. Before people started buying and restoring these homes, they were depleted of their historical value. We believe conservation extends beyond homes and impacts the region's local art and culture.

Smart route to space

Here's how Ooty's Cosmic Ray Lab uses recycled steel pipes in an ingenious fashion



BY SOUTIK BISWAS

What does a sensational scientific discovery about a solar storm in the Earth's magnetic field have to do with old, recycled steel pipes that have been buried for more than a decade under a now-defunct gold mine in India? Almost everything.

What's unearthed is as precious as gold because 3,700 such pipes are at the heart of a significant scientific finding that has been revealed in a recently-published paper by a team of Indian and Japanese scientists. The paper recorded the events that unfolded after a breach in the Earth's magnetic shield. The scientists used the GRAPES-3 muon (a subatomic particle) telescope made using recycled pipes – the world's largest of its kind – at the Cosmic Ray Laboratory in Ooty. They recorded a two-hour burst of galactic cosmic rays that invaded the atmosphere in June last year.

Dr Sunil Gupta, one of the scientists leading the research, says, "Solar storms of such high magnitudes can knock out satellites and aircraft autopilots, cause catastrophic power outages, and can take us 'back to the Stone Age'."

Recycled solutions

"Indian scientists have mastered the art of recycling and coming up with their own inexpensive solutions," says Pallava Bagla of *Science* magazine.

The telescope in Ooty is the perfect example. It's made using four-decade-old recycled zinc-coated steel pipes. Atul Jain, a scientist at the facility, says 10 such pipes are recycled every day for experiments. "The plan was to make very sensitive sensors to detect



Telescope at Ooty

the weakest of signals. We wanted to measure cosmic rays with higher sensitivity than ever done before."

Work on recording cosmic rays in Ooty began in earnest in 1998, when scientists began making muon sensors from discarded pipes to research high-energy cosmic rays. Today, 3,712 steel tubes, stacked up against layers of concrete, are housed across four brown-and-white buildings, home to the world's largest muon telescope.

Home-grown innovation

A majority of the electronic equipment is designed, assembled and manufactured in-house. The software for the computer programs is also locally made. The raw data that the lab generates every day is stored and processed by a cluster of computers, which has been largely assembled in-house, cutting costs and saving hefty maintenance fees. Old computers are stripped for parts. A locally-developed cooling system using fans saves electricity, too.



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