

Both rooted and free (Clockwise from below) Kapadia with Louis Kahn; the architect at NID; the book cover; Gujarat Research Society in Mumbai and Broker House in Pune. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)



KAPADIA AND A TALE OF 5 CITIES

The architect's new book explores seminal projects and contemporary design, from Bombay to New York



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Sen Kapadia, an architect rooted in modernism (while also critical of it), belongs to the generation that left a mark on contemporary Indian architecture. He worked with American architect Louis Kahn in Philadelphia and in India on buildings for IIM-Ahmedabad before setting up his architectural practice in 1977. In his long career, he has contributed to the discourse as a practitioner, a theorist, and an academic. His designs include the postgraduate campus of the National Institute of Design, the Computer Management Centre in Hyderabad, and a Buddhist pilgrimage centre in Kushinagar. Kapadia's architecture departs from the normative through a rigorous process of disassembly. He loves the departure from the tangible – his buildings are brought together as places of activity, creating new narratives out of space, light, and context, that are rooted in the experiential. In doing so, his designs critique both precedent

and the present, making them relevant in an increasingly non-linear world. Early this year, his book, *Sen Kapadia: In Pursuance of Meanings* (CEPT University Press) – a collaboration with architect Pinkish Shah (as editor) – was released on the grounds of the CSMVS in Mumbai. Edited excerpts from an interview with Shah:

Question: How did the book come to be?

Answer: A book was in the works for a considerable period of time, since Sen retired a few years back. Then the pandemic struck and, egged on by his wife, he took it on himself to try and express his search and philosophy in his own words. In June 2021, Sen invited me to work on it. It was important to bring the work and his ideas to the fore again, to allow us to reassess its relevance then and its meaning for contemporary times. Through the course of several 'Saturdays with Sen', the format of the book came to light quite naturally. It was not meant or ever imagined as a monograph but a first-person

account of an architect's search, practice and influences.

Q: When Kapadia develops concepts for projects, there is a great relevance on the exploratory image. How does he use this as a means to create buildings?

A: We must not mistake it for a



The book is a first-person account by the architect, now 're-looking' at his practice of more than 40 years through a selection of eight seminal projects

PINKISH SHAH
architect-editor

'diagram' as we normally understand it [reductive/essential/abstract/organisational]; it is a search for the 'generative image' of the building. A poetic drawing that encapsulates the story of what the building is about, or what it can become. It has oscillated from both the compositional and painterly, to the technical. Over the course of his practice, Sen has used various devices like collages of Indian miniatures, serigraphs, flat projections, axonometrics, colour blocking, early wire frame computer models, three dimensional renders, and combinations thereof, in the unwavering search for alternate conceptions of space and form.

Q: Take us through the choices of cities that form the spine of this book.

Essence of a place

For Sen Kapadia, the pursuance of meanings has been an ongoing quest. In an email interaction, he clarifies: "Without fear, one should search for meanings of the inner essence of things. That is what I learnt from the work of Le Corbusier and Kahn. That architecture spoke of place rather than a space, one that is deeply rooted in the psyche of the user." The conception of 'place' holds a central location in Kapadia's vision for design. "Though place holds a key position in a composition, its true essence is not understood till we are moved by its quality of other-worldliness," he says.

A: The device was conceptualised as a means for readers to informally engage with another facet of Sen's persona, besides acting as a sidebar to the main texts and projects. Sen has reflected upon five cities that have had a deep impact on his growth: Bombay, for the fearlessness of growing up in a joint family in Girgaon amidst a rapidly transforming city; Nathdwara, for his deep roots and search for Indianness; Ahmedabad, for the freedom that came from his love of flying kites in the dense inner-city *pols* [housing clusters]; Pondicherry, for his spiritual awakening and a search for higher meaning; and finally New York, for transforming him into the modern man he likes to think he is. Sen's ability to draw from his environments is due to his sensibility to simultaneously immerse and engage, but also to detach and distance, bringing perspective and reflection along with felt experience.

The writer is Professor of Architecture at Sir JJ College of Architecture, Mumbai.

Pick your collectible

Sculptural chairs and Darth Vader lamps, ideas from India Design ID

Georgina Maddox

Last month, the 11th edition of the India Design ID hosted its very first ID Collectibles Pavilion. Concentrating largely on Indian designers and brands, it curated pieces that spoke to the environment as much as to the aesthetic senses. For instance, Klove Studio, which was in the news recently for the limited edition lighting sculptures they created for Vermelho, Christian Louboutin's new hotel in Portugal, brought their distinct light fixtures; and Bengaluru-based Oorjaa showed their experiments with lights and sustainable materials such as reeds and *lakta* fibre paper. A few others to collect:



Celebrating the artisan
Atelier - Ashiesh Shah showcased a creative assemblage of design that integrated experimentation, craftsmanship and technique. Empowering the *karigar*, the Atelier works alongside master craftsmen from around the country to create design objects such as copper stools inspired by *damrus* (Lord Shiva's favourite musical instrument), and terracotta and aluminium totem consoles that can be disassembled into perch stools and tables.

TAKE that

TAKE Editions – handcrafted artworks commissioned for TAKE on Art magazine – spotlighted works by artists such as Ayesha Singh, Dhruvi Acharya, and G.R. Iranna. "Editions have made it possible for artworks to reach the homes of a large community of art enthusiasts, even when they may not necessarily identify as art collectors," says Bhavna Kakar, the founding director. Singh's sculpture was a playful take on how architectural forms can be layered; Acharya's work had bobble heads orchestrated to show emotions; while Iranna's contemporary sculpture of Buddhist *padukas* (slippers) indicated a journey towards creating intentions.



Seated power

The line of chairs by luxury furniture brand Wriwer synergised craftsmanship and material with innovation. Then there were the many lifestyle products rolled out by Chennai-based BeatRoot Co, among which 'That Chair' – a sculptural design that 'blurs the boundaries between space and utility' – stood out. And Bengaluru-based Phantom Hands, which paid homage to the legacy of past artisans with their sculptural minimalism.



Bring home Vader home

Not only did Innovative Lighting Designs Limited (ILD) light up the fairground, but it also offered delightful collectibles. Such as a lamp shade that resembles Darth Vader's helmet. "We had Star Wars in mind when we came up with this design, but 'Mona', the hand-blown glass shade, is a peaceful interpretation of it," says Andre Rabell, the deputy director of Czech lighting brand Brokis that collaborated with ILDL to bring the design to India. The booth also showcased marble countertops that light up. "With each design, we aim to metamorphose spaces and celebrate the dynamism of light," adds Vikram Jain, the director of ILDL.



The writer is a critic-curator by day, and a visual artist by night.

MODERN TIMES

In pursuit of everything

Any lessons we learnt from life during the lockdowns have been forgotten three years on

This week marks three years since India, and more or less the rest of the world, locked down because of COVID-19. On Facebook and Twitter, memes went around, asking people to share how their lives have changed in the last three years. Some of the replies were startling. People moved out of cities, some lost jobs but found better ones, some met the love of their lives, some walked out of existing relationships, and quite a few used this time for gender transitions. But, absent in all of these recollections is an account of how the lockdown itself felt.

Perhaps because my life did not change in a significant way in the last three years, that first lockdown is frozen in my memory as time that was suspended in itself. It felt like all the rules we had lived by were rendered irrelevant and we had to figure out new ways of doing everything, especially everyday things, on the fly. For a generation that was spoiled by search engines, where every question came with a possible answer that someone somewhere had conceived and recorded, the lockdown was a frustratingly puzzling time. We had to think on our feet while not knowing how



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any of these parameters were going to play out? How did we do that?

When our issues seemed small
We did that by writing in new rules on the mundane aspects. We left our packages untouched for three days. We washed the plastic bags our groceries were wrapped in. We masked and bathed and

used our elbows to push the buttons on elevators. For the more significant aspects, we threw the rulebook out altogether. In my case, my daughter moved back home from boarding school and my former spouse and I decided to throw our lot in together to take this new enemy on. In a callback to an earlier life, we split our chores, divided television time, and went out

of our way to try and not annoy the other person. To be honest, it was one of the best "family times" we had ever experienced. News about the pandemic was so scary and sources of verified information so scarce that it was best to unite our forces against this common enemy than train our guns on one another. It was also a time when we couldn't ignore the

reality of our own mortality, and all our issues seemed small when cast in, quite literally, a life and death question. New traditions began, most prominently that of Zoom calls. Family calls, cousin calls, friends from the first job calls. Everyone, it seemed, was reaching out to everyone they knew, trying to cram everything they had always been meaning to do, but had never gotten around to.

Then we came back, angrier, greedier
For those of us privileged enough to have a place to live and a job to do, the early days of the lockdown brought a childlike quality with it, like pizzas for breakfast or sleepover with friends, it seemed like the time when all rules were suspended, our priorities shifted and we began to think about the small things that made us happy. Air pollution reduced, news reports talked about spotting dolphins in the Bosphorus and cougars wandering around Santiago. Nature is healing, we giggled to

ourselves, and we should too. All this was even more fascinating because there was the perceived temporariness of it, and perhaps a realisation that either we would be dead or we would have to go back to our previous "normal" lives. Now, three years on, we are still on the 'revenge' tour. Revenge travel, revenge weddings, revenge dining. It's as though the minute we were let out of our cages, we ran for everything we felt we were denied. Not for us the small joys of living in the moment, of being able to appreciate what we have. At best, some of those Zoom calls have survived past year two of the pandemic. For the rest, we are back, greedy as ever, angry as ever, trying to do everything and finding happiness in nothing. For a minute there, nature might have healed, but us, we managed to escape. Phew!



Veena Venugopal is the author of Independence Day: A People's History.