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Samuel Barclay and his partner Anne Geenen at the school site they're designing for an NGO in Pune

JOURNEYS

A passage to India

The real estate boom has got dynamic talent to Indian shores. And over time, the joy of working here has overshadowed the challenges. It's the heritage architecture, the everyday learning experiences and the centuries-old way of creating customised pieces that make their ride special, five expatriate architects tell RACHANA NAKRA

"You can find all the latest technology in India, but you can also choose to do things the way they were done a thousand years ago"

—SAMUEL BARCLAY

"I LOVE THAT DETAILS ARE SO IMPORTANT HERE"

SAMUEL BARCLAY, 38, CASE DESIGN

As a student of M.Arch at the Southern California Institute of Architecture (SCI-Arc) in Los Angeles, Samuel Barclay had an opportunity to move to India as part of an exchange programme in 2004. He found himself for the first time in Mumbai at the Kamla Raheja Vidyani-dhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies, where Bijoy Jain was co-teaching with his SCI-Arc professor Robert Mangurian. "The first time I saw Bijoy's workshop, I knew I wanted to be a part of that," he says about Jain's Alibaug-based design firm Studio Mumbai. He volunteered as an intern and was eventually offered a full-time job in 2006, when he moved to India with his wife Erica.

With Jain, he had the opportunity to work on a number of exquisite properties in Alibaug. "Palmyra House was special for me because it was one of the first projects where I was able to experience the entire process from start to finish. Bijoy and I waded into monsoon flooding on the site when it was an undisturbed coconut wadi and to watch it transform into the landscape that it has become is something I will always appreciate," he says. Another highlight for him was their installation for the exhibition 1:1—Architects Build Small Spaces at the V&A Museum in London (in collaboration with Michael Anastassiades and Kate Dineen).

In 2013, Barclay ventured out on his own, starting with a project for a friend who was building a school in Pune. Soon, Anne Geenen, who is from the Netherlands, joined him and

Case Design came into being. “Since then we’ve grown into an office of seven architects and have worked on projects ranging from furniture design to going up to the scale of this school,” he says. They have done interiors in Mumbai, exhibitions in Milan and Abu Dhabi, a landscape project in Dubai and are currently working on a rammed earth house in the mountains between Dubai and Oman, an exhibition for the London Design Biennale and a collection of guest houses in Zanzibar. Case Design is also getting ready to launch Casegoods, an independent line of furniture and lighting.

What Barclay loves most about building and creating in India is the people’s deep involvement in details. “For example, in other countries I will go to a timber yard to source a particular kind of wood. In India, I might have to go select the tree. Here you can even make your own paint, plaster and work with the carpenters to create something completely non-standard. You can find all the latest technology here, but can also choose to do things the way they were done a thousand years ago,” he adds.

MY DREAM PROJECT IN INDIA

“Rajasthan would be an amazing place to build because of the vast depth of knowledge and skill with materials like stone, timber and lime

that still survive to this day. That, coupled with the beauty of its rugged landscape, would be an incredible starting point for a project.”

“IT WAS DIFFICULT AS A WOMAN, INITIALLY” MARÍA ISABEL JIMÉNEZ LEÓN, 34, SHROFFLEÓN

María León is particularly proud of a construction she and her partner Kayzad Shroff completed last year. The Orange Extension is a project for a collector of super luxury cars, built as an extension to a large 60-year-old family home in Bandra, Mumbai. “It is a series of canopies built to shelter the cars and an exterior elevator shaft in a bungalow in Pali Hill, where we utilised a rustic palette of weathering steel and IPE wood cladding to merge with the pre-existing architecture. The geometry of the canopies derived from existing site lines are revealed through illuminated grooves, that double up to channel rain water into the nearby planters,” she describes.

With the level of customisation that these kinds of projects require, León loves the freedom to be able to work hand in hand with her karigars. “Abroad, there is such a distance between the designer and the worker and everything is automated. Here, they are like >

“Abroad, there is such a distance between the designer and the worker and everything is automated. Here, they are like artists”

—MARÍA LEÓN



María León at a weekend home called House Under a Pool she designed in Katalpada, Alibaug



Robert Verrijt at The Riparian House, a holiday home near the Magic Bus campus in Karjat

“As a woman on the ground, if I gave any instructions to the men, they would look at my partner for a go-ahead. But, of course, that changed gradually”

—MARÍA LEÓN

artists, with a craft passed on over generations. It is so interesting for me to sit with them and learn from them, work with new materials—a whole new universe opens up for me,” she says. Besides residential properties in Mumbai and Alibaug, the firm has also worked on other hospitality projects like The Nest in Goa.

Born and raised in Spain, León completed her undergraduate degree from Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Sevilla and continued to work in the country designing high-end homes. She was awarded a scholarship and went to Cornell University in New York to obtain a Masters in Architecture. This is where she met Shroff, her classmate at university and now her husband. Upon graduation, they both worked for two years in Manhattan. “But both Kayzad and I knew we wanted to be our own bosses and do our own thing. We felt that Mumbai would be the

perfect place for us to do that,” she says. In 2010, they moved to India and ShroffLeón was born.

Their first job was designing Chez Vous, a French restaurant in South Mumbai (it shut in 2012). “It was quite hard. We were new to it and I was used to everything being more organised. It was also a completely new learning experience,” she says.

Although they “got lucky with very good projects very soon”, navigating the field was not easy. She didn’t know the local languages and couldn’t understand why people didn’t make it to meetings on time. There was also the added issue of facing prejudice as a woman. “As a woman on the ground, if I gave any instructions to the men, they would look at my partner for a go-ahead. But, of course, that changed gradually. And now I am also taking Hindi lessons,” she smiles.

MY DREAM PROJECT IN INDIA

"I recently travelled to Sikkim and came back fascinated with how gentle the relationship between nature and humans (leaving aside, of course, uncontrolled development) is in the countryside. I would love to work with the challenge of such responsibility."

"IT'S EASIER TO BREAK RULES AS AN OUTSIDER"

ROBERT VERRIJT, 38, ARCHITECTURE BRIO

"We have worked on properties on the river, a beach, near the stream, and in the hills in Uttarakhand. The diverse landscape is one of the nicest things about India. If I were working in Holland pretty much every site would be the same," says Robert Verrijt, who founded his firm Architecture Brio in 2006 with his wife Shefali Balwani. The firm has featured twice in *Architectural Digest* India's list of the 50 most influential designers in India. Verrijt himself has been awarded the second prize in the Dutch Archiprix 2004 for his design of an Asylum Seekers Centre in Maastricht, Netherlands.

Born in the Netherlands, Verrijt studied architecture in

Delft where Balwani was attending university as an exchange student from CEPT in Ahmedabad. When Verrijt got an opportunity to visit the same school in Gujarat on exchange, he was introduced to Balwani, the only Indian in town. "I met her for the first time to learn about India. Eventually she became my wife," he smiles. Later, they travelled together from Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Hampi to Chandigarh, Rajasthan and Varanasi "discovering the amazing landscape and palaces".

India was always on his mind, but after finishing his education, Verrijt first moved to Sri Lanka to work with Channa Daswatte, one of renowned architect Geoffrey Bawa's protégés. "In 2005, we decided to move to Mumbai because we had more opportunities to set up our own practice here," he says. One of their first projects was designing the campus for Magic Bus in Karjat, on the outskirts of Mumbai.

The challenge of working near water bodies seems to be a special attraction for him. In Karjat itself the firm has designed a beautiful holiday home, The Riparian House, placed below the crest of a hillock at the foothills of the ghats near a river. At present, they are busy working on a resort in Vengurla in Maharashtra. Strengthening the existing ecosystem, the design of the property recreates a waterscape with interconnected ponds and water bodies, around which are stilted villas. "These kind of projects don't usually happen in India, but I come from a country that is half on the water and we have done all sorts of things with it," he smiles. The waterscape surrounding the creek will be a living ecosystem and promote a riparian habitat for migrating birds and endangered wildlife.

A decade later, India is still a difficult terrain to navigate sometimes, but as an "outsider" there are a few things he can get away with more easily. "We have mostly had very collaborative clients, but as a non-native it is easier to break conventions and open up possibilities," he says. "You can often be blunt and then pretend that you don't know."

MY DREAM PROJECT IN INDIA

"My adopted hometown Mumbai is struggling daily with imminent lack of public space. A vertically layered landscape of public space, a sewage treatment plant, sport courts, gardens and energy generators in one of Mumbai's most dense neighbourhoods like Mankhurd or Ghatkopar would have a major positive impact."

"HERITAGE HERE IS MAGICAL AND AUTHENTIC"

NIELS SCHOENFELDER, 39, MANCINI DESIGN

Niels Schoenfelder fell in love with India and in India, making it a very easy decision to set up business and home here. In 2002, while at his first job at an architecture firm in Paris, German-born Schoenfelder received an offer to move to Puducherry for a few months. The project involved converting an 18th century villa into a small heritage hotel called Le Dupleix. This allowed him the opportunity to travel and explore India extensively. He was "enchanted" by the country and people's approach to work. "In Europe, there is a can't-do attitude. But people here are open to trying new things and, therefore, you never get bored. You keep challenging yourself and others. Also, fairly early on I met my now wife (Mallika Sivakumar) and it was another very compelling reason to stay back," says the Chennai-based architect.

Schoenfelder founded Mancini Design in >

"As a non-native, it is easier to open up possibilities. You can often be blunt and then pretend that you don't know"

—ROBERT VERRIJT



Niels Schoenfelder
at his weekend home
at East Coast Road
near Chennai

“It excites me to make places through which the owners discover that the environment can have a huge impact on their life”

—NIELS SCHOENFELDER

2004 with a team from India and has designed landscapes, homes, furniture and hospitality projects, including the Tanjore Hi Hotel in Thanjavur district and The Park Hotel in Kerala. He says his work is about “the search for coherence. It excites me to find out the best solutions and provide context, and make places through which the owners discover that the environment can have a huge impact on their life.”

Schoenfelder, who has featured twice in *Architectural Digest* India’s list of 50 most influential names in architecture and design, is

involved with a number of private projects. But his work for the crematorium in Coimbatore has been most rewarding because it is available to the public. A very important aspect of working in India for him is restoration because “heritage here is not preserved, pretentious and precious like in Europe, but something you can stumble on to and remains magical in its authenticity”. Although the unpredictability of working on the ground in India is a constant challenge, and trying to match client aspirations to practical reality and come up with a mutually feasible solution is hard at times, Sch-



Giuseppe Marchese, who has spent two decades working in Auroville, at a private residence he designed in the township

oenfelder wouldn't have it any other way. "At least here you are never in the state of ennui, and that is a life well-lived."

MY DREAM PROJECT IN INDIA

"In German, to tell someone to go 'where the pepper grows' means wishing that person would get lost, be far away. We are currently designing a house for friends on a pepper estate in the Western ghats with one of the most beautiful views in South India. There's not a house or any other man-made structure in sight—we could not be happier with that site."

"ASIA AND INDIA ARE BOOMING" GIUSEPPE MARCHESE, 58, CASTELINO & MARCHESE

Giuseppe Marchese was 38 and had been working in Florence, Italy, as an architect for 15 years when he heard about Auroville for the first time. This year, the architect, product designer and photographer, will celebrate his 20th anniversary of being a part of this township near Puducherry. With no connection to the country before he came here in 1996, how and why he made the decision to come to India is still a mystery. "India had always been in my heart, a dream since childhood. But I really don't know why," says Marchese.

Although he first visited India as a tourist, Marchese soon started his own firm. Soon, he

got an opportunity to work with the late Roger Anger, one of the most prolific French architects who, as the chief architect, conceptualised the master plan of Auroville. From 1998 to 2007, Marchese worked in close association with Anger on various projects.

His first projects included private residences, a school and a factory. "All of them were designed with a cost-effective, alternative and Zen minimalist approach. Rather than making strong architectural statements, I really like to work on public buildings and private houses that have a low ecological footprint and a timeless style," he says. While working in India, it is most important to keep in mind the "challenging Indian climate and not blindly ape the West".

Marchese's vision is to make buildings as energy efficient as possible, with the right orientation, fenestration, and controlled use of certain materials. "I have learned so much working in this country. In Italy, it is a bit depressing; most of my colleagues are without work. But Asia is booming and the kind of projects I have done here I would not have the opportunity to do anywhere else."

MY DREAM PROJECT IN INDIA

"I would like to build schools using bamboo technology in the North East of India, in places like Nagaland or Arunachal Pradesh, incorporating the modern with the traditional." ■

"The kind of projects I have done here I would not have the opportunity to do anywhere else"

—GIUSEPPE MARCHESE