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THE MASTER BUILDER

Architect Ayan Sen is committed to pushing the boundaries of design and innovation

Interview by: Seema Sreedharan



After studying architecture at CEPT, I went on to pursue master's in urban design from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA. I worked with some cutting-edge Indian practices at Ahmedabad and New Delhi, and in urban design and architecture firms in Washington DC and Pittsburgh, USA, where I was entrusted with large scale architectural and master planning projects.

Early Inspirations: People, Places and Ideologies

"My career has been shaped by the guidance and mentorship of some of the most iconic figures in Indian architecture. I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn from and work alongside legends such as BV Doshi, Bimal Patel, and Charles Correa, whose collective influence has had a profound impact on my design philosophy and approach."

"I can't not mention architect Leo Pereira whose work deeply influenced me. At MIT, Charles Correa was my tutor, and Rahul Mahendra was my thesis guide. All these great minds of architecture have shaped my design philosophy and have had a profound impact on the way I approach architecture and design."



Architect, academician, researcher, and author, Ayan Sen is multi-hyphenate. With an enviable portfolio that spans institutions, mixed-use developments, social and cultural spaces, Ayan's work embodies a unique blend of functionality, aesthetics and social responsibility. He believes in the premise that "Locally sensitive regional thinking can get integrated with the best of international practices and systems" and this belief has been the founding pillar of his eponymous practice. Ayan Sen Architects Urban Designers and Planners (ASAUDP) was started with the thought of providing collaborative, creative and international professional systems in the growing architectural environs of emerging India.

The Beginning: A Tryst with Architecture

"My mother was a historian, and my father, a renowned lawyer in Kolkata. We used to travel a lot, and I think visiting multiple cities and historic sites instilled in me the desire to transform buildings and transform cities. I also grew up in a house that dated back to the 40s. I think the love for buildings, and the desire to transform them became a part of my DNA. By the time I was 18, I was convinced that architecture is my calling. I knew that designing spaces, cities, was something I could do for the rest of my life. In fact, I vividly remember telling my friends that I will build their homes when I grow up. And this was when I was in class Xth. In that sense I have a lot of homes to build. So, I guess I always aspired to be an architect."



The Architect's Identity: Design Philosophy & Approach

"As a theoretical practitioner, I have questioned this very intensely. I would call myself a critical regionalist, which means that I appreciate the context of the city, and here again, there are two aspects – the unbuilt and the built context. The unbuilt context is kind of created by the blue-green system of Kolkata. If you observe the map of Kolkata, it's replete with water bodies. So, by default there is a lot of intensity in which one would respond to the blue-green system typologically. But in terms of the built context, I'm exploring two genres. One is a tropical modern character which is reminiscent of a translated local language, and then there is contemporary classical which picks up from the colonial tonalities."

"Our architectural design philosophy helps us to create spaces which respect the context, and functionally tangible and viable. As an architectural firm our values talk about sustainability and its interaction with external services. Ideas here in our office is generated in reply to the existing tropical architecture present in the context with an amalgamation of the fundamentals from the site. While it is equally important that the project must sit in the urban context and connects with the larger value system."

Shaping the Built Environment: Projects that made an Impact

"Let me name five projects from diverse typologies. The first project that comes to my mind is the architecture for Nirvana service apartments which was envisioned as a minimal expression of contemporary tropical vernacular. The other project that garnered a lot of accolades and numerous awards was the revitalization of the Bengal Rowing Club. The

Club had lost its charm physically due to the years of dilapidation and we were entrusted the task of transforming it so that it honours its legacy while it appeals to the younger demographic. The combination of part restoration and redesign of the dilapidated edges allowed us to explore the facade so that it tunes in with the tropical character of the city."

"Yet another challenging project was the revitalization of the Gloster Mill Complex, which spans across more than 100 acres and involves all possible typologies – industrial, residential, affordable housing and commercial. It's the perfect example of incremental urban design."

Design Ambitions: New Experiments and Aspirations

"There are five projects which are my prime goals for the next five years. I'm doing a very large housing project which is for a developer. And the design is both commercial and sensitive. I want to prove that good design is good business and that theoretically sound design is also good business, it's not a dichotomy; it's a natural progression. The second, I'm working on a large master plan for a 100-villa community where the landscape will play an equally important part in the design. The third project is still in its concept stage. It's a design proposal for the new crematorium of Kolkata. The intent is to create a space where people would have some honorable place to contemplate and grieve. The fourth thing is to be able to translate some of my research into design practice with respect to large waterfronts in the country. And the last one is not necessarily a design idea, but I'm trying to collaborate with many schools to work with each other. I'm on the advisory panel of the MIT India Lab which I set up in MIT, and lab would promote exchanges between MIT and other Indian colleges."