



ART

BUILDING CHARACTER

Reinvented by AD 50 architect Ambrish Arora, founder of Lotus, the Delhi-based design studio, the independent artist-driven body, Khoj Studios has inherited a structure that reflects its character, and its raison d'être—its soul—to perfection

WRITER RAJNI GEORGE · PHOTOGRAPHER AMIT MEHRA

There's a spectacularly white new building in the middle of a hoary Delhi village that has gathered art from around the world. Entering it one winter afternoon, several levels of play appear at once: a mosaic courtyard below, full of men setting up the evening's preview of manifestos and sipping tea around a tree that reaches for the terrace. Two levels above; at mid-level, several beatific-looking young women exit discreet offices and glide up and down the staircases that align and unite the building; to the left, a freelancer lounges on a green sofa at Three Windows Café, flipping through a book by Pushpamala N and eyeing the four studios around her.

This is prime artistic territory. If, like me, you have come late to this institution's reincarnation, you might wonder where chaotic old Khoj is. Remember that wild, wonderfully unbridled edifice made up of two joint buildings—an architect's home office and a residence, respectively—in unpaved Khirki village, inviting seasonal visitors who poured in to see major and emerging artists, making amused attempts at parking? The bumpy journeys continue, as do the shows—but this is Khoj 2.0, completed by the end of 2012.

(Clockwise from the left)

SEARCH FOR CHANGE

Pooja Sood, director of Khoj, outside her office. The entrance to the organization. The mosaic-floored courtyard with spaces occupied by artists to the left and right.





(Clockwise from top left)

ART IN RESIDENCE

The lounge for resident artists, which is right by their rooms. A work of art displayed at Khoj. One of the new offices as seen from the staircase. The art on display at the Three Windows Café.

TRANSFORMATIVE ART

An exploratory (*khoj* means search), incubatory arts space created by artists like Bharti Kher, Subodh Gupta, Anita Dube and Amar Kanwar in 1997, the Khoj International Artists' Association's pioneering initiative comprises residencies, workshops, community projects and more. In January, it launched the Delhi phase of a major collaboration with the Tate Modern, London, which just finished showing the contents of its contemporary art exhibition, 'Word. Sound. Power'.

It all began with a nice room photographer Pablo Bartholomew offered them here, recalls director Pooja Sood; it was close to home and they expanded their operations as finances allowed. This new building, the product of considerable fund-raising since 2007, is "as good as it gets," says Sood, who sought more space for a prolific programme that has featured 200 Indian and 400 international artists as part of what she calls a "ripple" →



(Clockwise from this picture)

ROOM TO SPARE

The Khoj studio space on the ground floor. A place to sit by the café. A resident artist's room at Khoj.



effect. We wanted reusable materials, good wiring, plumbing and the best-quality pumps; these were priorities."

Most old-timers appreciate that the new Khoj retains much of the old—literally; almost 80 doors and windows, mostly arched, have been treated and reused, as have the old staircases. But now, residents' rooms and a lounge receive visitors, and a new archival library space steadily fills up. Also, the building has been designed to be sustainable, and there is rainwater harvesting in the lower studio, along with a lift and ramps for the handicapped. The space has been amplified, filling out accordion-like.

STRUCTURED CHANGE

"How do you retain memory in space? Our main conversation was about making Khoj reflect the role of Khoj," says the building's reinventor and AD 50 architect, Ambrish Arora, who started out as a boat designer and heads Lotus, a design firm which, since 2001, has created modern Indian properties like Raas Jodhpur, Goodearth and the Devi Art Foundation. "But the project was not about the building; the whole point of the frame is to create a skeleton which fits over the building. The useable area, including the rooftop, has almost doubled.

The result? "A building that rivals any similar space in southeast Asia," says artist Vishal K Dar, a regular who often visits both formally and informally (in fact, some Delhi-based artists, like him, have worked here during the day and returned home).

Some of it came at a cost. The breaking of the old building's dome, Sood recalls, was a tough decision. "But it was the right move to break it. That and the bridge!"

Earlier the centrifugal hang-out spot, the bridge enabled—and impeded. "It didn't allow for larger congregations of 100-odd people," says Arora. "Its essence has been retained in this form. Khoj is a tapestry of things that came together over different periods of time, a 3D canvas for artists to explore."

The bridge was replaced by a single circulation device; this single circulation spine, inserted in the form of metal girders,



staircases, bridges, slim sliding and folding doors opening into verandahs and courtyards, replaced the earlier form, he explains. "We wanted to create different scales of space for different kinds of activities. The challenge was to free up space for activity, rather than using it for circulation." Other impediments? "Two old load-bearing buildings to work on without drawings, decisions taken at the site—it was challenging but fulfilling."

Also, there wasn't enough brick. "It's all patchwork, plaster over brick, stone, etc; we painted over it, so that nothing was superfluous." This is how the ubiquitous white came.

Little details, like the gorgeous granite sinks sourced from a local guy in Ghitorni (who, in turn, sourced it from Rajasthan), complete a fairly spare aesthetic. "The idiom seems very contemporary but the materials are local," says Arora. "There is an attempt to engage with artisans—not traditional craftspeople, but carpenters. If you ask me to choose between a khadi shirt and a polyester kurta, I'd choose the shirt; it's what's in the soul."

CHAOS THEORY

Today's version of multicultural 13th-century Khirki village (a large African presence is seen in the art and graffiti on the neighbourhood walls) is a complement to Khoj's appeal, as is immediately evident. Competing with its white canvas is a topsy-turvy house opposite, beginning that sharp trajectory of demolition that is the story of modern Delhi's gentrification. With the facade stripped off so its one-time warren of domestic activity is laid bare, the house is a savaged nest; a bed plunges through one of its floors, arrested at such a perfect point between staying and falling it might have been positioned just so. The village's approximation of installation might seem like artifice, but it's the thin line negotiated everywhere.

"Most interesting is that they chose to locate Khoj in an urban village, and not one of the cool, aspirational ones like Lado Sarai," says Arora. "It's a space surrounded by lower-income, marginalized groups. Allowing yourself to be seen—what does



(Clockwise from the left)
WHITE SPACE
Seating arrangement at the Three Windows Café. The new library area. The kitchen and the entrance to a room by the residents' lounge.

this mean for everyday people? Is this space just for art connoisseurs? This space goes right into the heart of everything that's wrong and everything that's right about this city."

The team sought to open the building out to the community and show there was nothing to hide, he explains, but also to keep private space without walling it up. Khoj has always planned activities involving the local community and they have been invited to participate; only once was there an incident, involving someone who entered drunk and armed with a gun.

There were interesting solutions; one studio opens out onto the street and, as all the doors fold and open up, the artist decides how much to engage and allow passers-by to engage with the art. And the building remains open, appearing to be safe for the women working here (often late), though it is unguarded except for members of the staff who live here.

"These are brave women; there are no grills here," says Arora. "But really, what is there to steal?" ♦