

# A Woman of Alternative Substance

Architect **Revathi Kamath** in conversation with **Mitali Saran**—who finds her to be a woman to reckon with.

**R**amour paints her as an open-haired Kali figure with kajal-lined eyes and attitude, but Revathi Kamath does not easily lend herself to such simplification. Sitting down to a conversation in the filtered sunlight of her mud-walled office, she presents herself well: a refreshingly balanced, self-assured woman with an intelligent and deeply humane philosophy. She peppers her observations with a quick, wry humour, and her exceptionally precise and evocative language betrays the poet in her (a hunch which she confirmed, although she is not interested in being published).

In another life she might have pursued her interest in physics, she might have written seriously, she might have dedicated her intellect entirely to academia; but the thrust of this life's work has always been to participate in building her physical universe. "There was never any question of being anything (other than an architect)," she says. "You are interested in certain aspects of life around you, and for me there was always

the act of building, and the way people live. It's more than the material object of architecture - there's also the variety of architecture, the depth of culture that one is exposed to."

## Varied Influences

The daughter of an engineer, 41-year old Kamath was born in Bhubaneswar and schooled in several places including Bangalore and Delhi. She drew her professional inspiration directly from the fascinating interaction between buildings, culture, and activity. "Part of my childhood was spent in the tribal areas of Orissa," she says, "so one has seen forests, tribal cultures, and traditional lifestyles, as well as rural areas around Bangalore, the agriculture commu-

nity, the urban community, the market..." She describes growing up in Bangalore and her experience of the street which her family owned and upon which they traded and lived. "There was this territory, containing an entire variety of people's inner core and pursuits, and there resulted a variety of objects and spaces that each of these people commanded. The quality of life which accompanied these various manifestations always interested me."

Her career benefited from an early tailwind. As a child she was fully encouraged to pursue her goals, and in the first few years of her practice, "one was trying to discover oneself and what was possible in the space around, to creatively work with all these systems which already existed." It was relatively plain sailing because, "one was not threatening anybody." She worked in the mainstream on a small scale for a while, until the raw consumerism of the eighties and nineties fueled her emerging interest in, "something other than concrete and mindless brick walls." Today, she lives with the

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double whammy of being a female professional in a male-dominated field, as well as a proponent of alternative building technologies (largely mud), challenging the fundamental premises of the industry.

But she is not one to beat her breast or weep over the hardship of it all. "Of course, people try to mould you," she says. "Nobody gives you space. But space is a question of how you perceive the world. It is absolutely true that there is space for you, if you make space for yourself. It's a matter of, let us say, Brahmin open mindedness or refinement, in which - whether you're a boy or a girl, a man or a woman - if you are thinking and if you really pursue it, then the entire structure supports your mind and being."

## One with Nature

In her space, Kamath has successfully defined and expressed her own philosophical aesthetic. "Just because you want to make a tall building, you don't have to destroy acres of land to draw its materials, and in such a way that nature can never regain its cycle," says she. "Architecture is a response to a social and a cultural need, besides an economic one, so I think that today's structure is valid for its day and age - but it is destructive. I understand it, but I don't accept it as a longterm solution or evolutionary plan. It's a divergence, in my opinion: it has to evolve into something far more sustainable." Conventional tall buildings per se do not bother her, as long as they are not utterly introverted. By sustainable architecture she means that which is executed in its own tiny time frame, but the design and being of which acknowledges a much, much larger ecological time-frame. "I

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do not preclude the desire (of architects) to show off," she says. "You can't work without that. So let us work with those desires; but let us produce forms which also have deeper resonances and more meaning in terms of sustainable ecology."

Kamath seeks to retrieve in her work what she believes is dying around her: the fundamental element of compassion, for the environment, for the builders, and for the people who inhabit her buildings. She is fascinated by the quality of compassion inherent in the buildings of earlier times, such as those constructed during famines to enable people to feed themselves. She abhors what she terms the 'Shahjahan model' of present-day architecture, a reference to the fact that the hands of the workers who built the Taj Mahal were cut off by order of the Emperor. "They (the architects) think that they have to kill to occupy a space." A fair amount of male architecture, she says, stakes out territory, creates impressive structures, and rests on its laurels "without taking into account the rest of humanity."

She characterises this as a difference between male and female ways of building. "Just today, when we were driving down the street, I was talking about the fact that the facade or the front is all male space. All the men who occupy the street front have their shops there - and it is filthy. One guy ate a banana and just chucked the skin, one guy was

degreasing his truck... the difference is that there is no sense of nurturing, no sense that space has to be maintained as well." She respects and admires the work of many male architects all over the country, but she finds that in India, generally speaking, 'men have a king or emperor complex. They build as if nothing else exists.

Every space has this great centre, it's very axial, everything around it is subsidiary; and then there is a gate. And a guard."

At the same time, she feels that most architects who oppose this extremely self-involved architecture tend to swing the other way into extreme denial, leaving "no scope for other human realities. Accumulation, display of wealth, power - you have to learn to work with allowing them as a passing aspect of building. It exists, but does not assume the entire power of the building. So, you may have a gate, as long as that symbolises continuity as well. It has to receive, besides warding off."

## Passion Prevails

Heels dug in against the extremes, Kamath tries to take into account the rest of the community when she builds. Her work is well-known and documented: Nalin Tomar's house in Hauz Khas and Akshay Pratishan School in Delhi; the Community Centre in Maheshwar, MP, the tourist complex at Mandawa in Rajasthan. Her mud-buildings are not only eco-friendly, but also structures of beauty, the tourist complex in Rajasthan being a case in point. Kamath is a powerfully self-conscious designer who imbues her buildings with warmth and passion. In conversation, she often subsumes those aspects of herself to the very cerebral; but although she is in with contemporary jargon, almost drawing it across her-

self like a veil, her tone colours even as dry a word as 'deconstruct.'

One would imagine that her aesthetics and operational style lend themselves to smaller, thoroughly crafted buildings, but she does not shy away from taking on projects for huge corporate groups and hotels (she is currently working on two hotels in Jaisalmer and Lonavala, as well as a school in Maheshwar.) "They come because they like the images, right?" reasons Kamath, "if they like the images they've got to take the philosophy with it." Part of the philosophy is a high level of commitment to the work; she is willing to be driven to the brink of penury during the project span. "I'm not greedy," she smiles. "As long as I am reasonably sustained economically, I am patient and willing to see the project through, despite the odds. I feel its part of my commitment as an architect to see that the project is as complete as possible. Most men cannot afford this patience; their wives are demanding, they feel the pressure to be wage-earners, and to display an image of well-being through material displays of wealth."

One feels that in Kamath's eyes the client is one more fundamental element which must be harmoniously incorporated into the building and its environment. She gauges her success and failures by how closely her vision of the building meshes with that of the client. "When people begin to use my buildings in their own way, it brings me great joy. But when I am asked to paint something pink and I don't like it, or when I find some disagreeable object in the house - it may be too decadent, misaligned, overdone, or irrelevant - I see it as a failure that the building has not

inspired the person to put all the right things in it. You expect the environment you create to create a certain aura, to exude its being and therefore guide certain activities within that space in a reasonably graceful fashion."

She is a driven perfectionist in her attention to detail and in her assembly of a project. "You have to deconstruct constantly what you have constructed. One tap may be out of the sync (sic) so you have to work on the client and say that if the tap had such and such qualities and attributes, it would result in a more harmonious space. And I take it upon myself to do that. Most people don't care; but the point is that even if they don't care, I care, even if I don't inhabit that space." She strongly refutes the criticism that she overdesigns, in her attempt to translate her vision to reality. "In the end it may appear that way," she says, "because I have integrated every input possible. I don't give clients a ready-made vision. I encourage a total articulation of their needs throughout the project. The module of their time spent on the project is allowed to penetrate the organisation of the building."

#### Eclectic Associations

Perhaps because she has been a educator at the School of Planning and Architecture, Kamath is sensitive to the process of self-discovery that clients undergo. "The client may

feel very exposed - they have to be. I find that when asked what objects they like, ninety percent of time people don't know. When one starts to build, the client starts to look around. Over the project span, you allow the person to educate themselves - besides, I don't think anybody can educate anybody else."

Kamath is willing to work with an entire range of people and environments, not just with the arty types. "I'm ready to work with business people and the poor and rich and in-betweens. When you don't draw lines in terms of accepting jobs, you learn to cope with a variety of people, productively and creatively. Then, you are constantly capable of spontaneity and adaptation." She is surrounded, at all times, by an eclectic assortment of people with whom she must evolve relationships, since her professional and personal lives form 'one big continuum.'

Indeed, that is the keynote of her concept of a successfully built environment. She is fully in favour of pursuing an urbane quality of life in a city with opportunities - a space with a concentration of creativity interaction and intelligence, "where your mind is alive and active, and there are similarly, other minds, and you actually interact spontaneously instead of assuming that fossilized social groups and repetitive interactive patterns constitute social and cultural life." Her architecture seeks to facilitate just this.

#### Patterns in Experimenting

Her expectations of her own work are sometimes unrealistically high, and she relentlessly challenges her own creativity. "You have to be some what discontent, because if you are too content,

you can't move," she says. An avid and deeply investigative reader, she is fond of Indian writers in English because the familiarity and accessibility of their state of mind is swaddled in freshness.

She searches for the same thing in her work: "One is trying to see and understand a continuity of traditional patterns, interesting because it takes some time for you to realise where you've seen that new pattern before in the past, and also what has led to its evolution. You have a theory of knowledge which exists and which you play with, but you are always seeking new colours in your palette, new materials in your work. That is the thrust of my work - the constant perception and evolution of new patterns."

In today's building industry, those patterns are a new evolution. Kamath claims that she has nothing against the present norms of architecture; she simply chooses not to do it that way. At the same time, she is encouraged by the fact that her architecture draws a certain following of those who can penetrate its philosophy. "But the fact that people copy is very positive - that when you draw or make patterns or organise systems, people around you emulate that, or are inspired by it, or even consider it for a short time. That she is no zealous proselytiser is clear from the fact that she and her husband Vasant, with whom she shares office space, work in a perfect supportive and amicable live-and-let-live relationship.

#### Tough Lady

Of course, not everyone is supportive. The male bias in the industry makes it extremely hard on women,

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by relegating them to being decorators, says Kamath. "You're there to organise things and make them pleasant for everybody. They really see your role as that, particularly as an architect. You're supposed to make things sweet and pleasant." She dismisses her own fierce and radical image with something like a yawn: "Well, people object to any strong woman; they don't want to see anything but the stereotype; it's so standard and it's so boring, I couldn't care less." She laughs.

On the other hand, people find her intimidating and abrasive, and she inspires awe or fear in others. Her office has a notoriously high turnover of staff. She reacts noncommittally: "There are times when I appear to be an ogress because I just have to get what I want done in a particular way. It's not easy. You have to have energy, and you have to speak your mind, if you are to pursue that particular vision which is my commitment to the client. It is part of the professional, which also happens to be contradictory to the image of a gentle, benign woman, producing sweet little romantic spaces. Those sweet little romantic spaces or qualities come only through power, which has to be exercised. I am not frightened to exercise power."

Kamath is able to say, so far, that she has not felt the need to compromise her principles in order to be

successful. "I have not succumbed," she says. Although she strongly advises that no female newcomer should have any illusions about how tough it is, she does not believe in whimpering. "Don't think anybody's going to give you a good time. But it's so easy to complain. If you begin to complain and whine, you are

not building your universe. Complaining is a kind of western attitude to feminism. You don't really question the entire structure in your mind. You have to exist in your own space, that is very clear. You have to be holistic in your mental and spiritual being." She is keen to let her technicalities of her work take a back seat here because the opportunity to speak as a woman, rather than as an architect, comes by infrequently, and she doesn't see a great deal of organised support in India. "I wouldn't bother to characterise Indian feminism, because Indian feminism as I see it, at this point of time, doesn't even exist. I believe in common consciousness; I believe all minds are interconnected in that sense. Whatever you're thinking and doing has an implication on the whole - it will, it does. I have experienced that constantly."

She has a dream, which one imagines shining in her mind's kohlrilled eye: she dreams of a city in a forest. "I want to design this," she says. "A city in a forest, which can sustain itself and which is aware of its own totality." Whether or not Revathi Kamath can translate that dream into her waking life will be a challenge to herself; in the meantime, she says, the insuperable worst bane of her life is that she cannot reconcile herself to daily grocery shopping. □



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