

MOHAMMAD SHAHEER

Photo credit: Aurelien Albert



Mohammad Shaheer is one of the most eminent and respected landscape architects and academicians in the country today. He has been associated with the Department of Landscape Architecture, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi for more than thirty years, formerly as faculty member and later as Head of Department, from where he has guided and taught an entire generation of landscape architects. He is also a member of Delhi Urban Art Commission. An ardent thinker and philosopher, his professional practice includes many prestigious projects of varied scales and nature including Vir Bhumi, New Delhi, Memorial to Rajiv Gandhi at Sriperumbudur, Sanskriti Kala Kendra, New Delhi, and, Revitalization of the Gardens of Humayun's Tomb, New Delhi and Rehabilitation of Bagh-e-Babur, Kabul – both for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

Here, M. Shaheer reflects on the landscapes, mentors, and academic environs that influenced his thinking in the early years.

Delhi, Landscape c.1965-72

In Delhi even as long ago as the 60's, and earlier as well, landscape wasn't quite unknown. New Delhi could be recognised as a baroque landscape pattern transformed into a city plan, its Central Vista a neoclassical composition in the 'Grand Manner' – recalling Versailles, and also more urban boulevards – but it was seen as an architectural conception, which indeed it was, the idea of landscape at that time being constrained largely within horticultural limits.

Or again the design of the Lady Willingdon Park (Lodhi Gardens), now known worldwide courtesy Time magazine.¹ Here was a landscape surprisingly close to its English original, complete with a breadth of gently contoured lawns, clumps, groves and woods, and most triumphantly, picturesquely situated archaeological monuments – the genuine article, rather than the sometimes ridiculous follies and fake temples of its provenance. And in a last fine concurrence, the widening of a storm water channel to create a more substantial lake (perhaps suggestive of Capability Brown's work at Blenheim?), only in this case the bridge is not Palladian, but Delhi Sultanate.

So there was this landscape, a landscape of landscapes, so to speak, and next door, in the shape of the Delhi Golf Club, the expansive grounds of an English country manor in Surrey (or Sussex?) transported to the heat and dust of the North-Indian plains. These examples were fine adaptations of landscape ideas whose aesthetic basis could be traced not just to 18th century English landscapes, but even further, perhaps another two thousand

years or more, to European antiquity – alien imports without local precedent, but enticingly pretty nevertheless, and inviting, indeed encouraging imitation by their deceptively simple, soothing spatial arrangements.

The earliest local efforts towards this new kind of park – Buddha Jayanti Gardens on the Ridge and the park (now Samta Sthal) stretching eastwards from Delhi Gate to a large area around Raj Ghat, to name a couple from the 50's and early 60's – represent what, for their architects must at that time have been a venture virtually into the unknown. Consequently the results were insubstantive and sketchy at best. In landscape design it is very easy to mistake the conventions of architectural rendering – employed only as a graphic technique to make a site plan drawing appear legible and also attractive – as capable of being transformed into a landscape in three dimension; closer study may reveal the presence of this error in these early forays into the Delhi version of the *jardin anglais*.

But Shanti Van, Jawaharlal Nehru's *samadhi* (Mansinh M Rana's design), a bit later around this time is an elegant expression in the same idiom of gentle undulations and shady forest like groves (of Kusum, *Schleichera* species). Nearby, but in a completely different mode, is Habib Rehman's masterful exercise in urban landscape – for that is what best describes this composition – of the gracefully proportioned gleaming white arches of the Maulana Azad Memorial, perfectly set off in discreetly contemporary counterpoint against the monumental red sandstone mass of the Jama Masjid and the Red Fort. From the time I saw it first, this struck me as fine way of successfully inserting

a modern architectural sensibility into a historical environment of immense strength – without detracting from it or in any way disturbing it – in fact achieving quite the opposite. I don't think it is farfetched to see it in the same light as the later, more recent and of course more famous glass pyramid at the Louvre.

At the time the late respected Patwant Singh's professional journal *Design* was the pioneering and only indigenous window to architecture and design and remained so for many years. That was where the fresh work of a new generation of architects was first noticed, and where landscape as a subject of design first received attention – in Delhi, at least – in the documentation of Joseph Stein's work, for instance. I can still recall the clarity of the sketches accompanying an article on Ram Sharma's design for Nehru Park, especially the subtlety of the boundary detail, and the simplicity and logic of the signage. That it all got a bit mangled later on, something not entirely unknown in municipal enterprises of this kind, is another story.

The School of Planning and Architecture

Back in those days it was the Department (the Department of Architecture), or sometimes the School, hardly ever 'SPA', as it is so well known now. In 1965, the building was brand new, freshly finished – and this may come as a bit of a surprise – at the time perceived as a quite radical and modern work of architecture, though definitely not as well-conceived and articulated as the building down the road occupied by Planning departments.²

one learnt to respect the minutiae, even the arcana of how building details are put together...

Not many architects of that generation would disagree that there was more to the School than classrooms and learning about Architecture. It was the period when the first post-independence generation of architects was beginning to find its stride.

Professor T. J. Manickam who had founded the School, was Director and Professor C. S. H. Jhabvala was looking after the Department of Architecture. Between them, probably by force of character and reputation, they were able to manage what most teaching establishments strive for but hardly ever achieve: to identify, and then persuade the brightest young professionals to spend a considerable amount of time teaching at the School.

The professional credibility enjoyed by its faculty amongst students gave the School its unique personality; at the time we took it for granted, we imagined most schools were like that – but in hindsight it was a rare and precious thing. Arrayed for our benefit were young architects who even then at this early stage enjoyed a reputation; people like Raj Rewal, who with Kuldip Singh had just won the R.K. Puram District Centre competition (Bhikaji Cama Place, to be built 20 years later in a severely curtailed format, its concept probably outdated by then), also present were all of the Design Group (Ranjit Sabikhi, Morad Chowdhury, Ajoy Chowdhury) whose neo-brutalist work on the YMCA residential complex (vaguely reminiscent of Stirling

and Gowan's Ham Common³ project) was something of a reference; examples of its working drawings were admired and served as benchmarks for our own efforts.

Professor Jhabvala taught Building Construction in the particularly effective way that no one who has been lucky enough to experience can ever forget. One learnt to respect the minutiae, even the arcana of how building details are put together – just for example, the particular secrets of balance and counterbalance involved in stone *chhajjas* of historical Mughal and Rajput buildings.

And here was Krishen Khanna, already eminent, visiting faculty in the Art studio on one of the rare occasions when he deigned to demonstrate an expressionistic sketch of a chair from life on some fortunate girl's drawing board: "I'm an artist, not a carpenter..." which as an insight has remained with me since then: that you interpret the world according to your particular perspective or interest.

Professor Jhabvala

It was August 1970, and for us callow graduates, the main event of the time was the architectural competition for the 1000 acre Jawaharlal Nehru University campus, with which almost everyone seemed to be involved. What I remember are the three very large ink perspectives which I drew for C. P. Kukreja's first prize winning scheme,

while working and pretending to study Urban Design at the same time. Now that was quite a confidence-boosting professional success!

One day in early 1972 Prof Jhabvala called me to his room, and in an interrogative tone: "Do you want to go abroad? To study?" as if this was some distasteful task and he would be amazed if anyone actually was willing to do it, but that's the way he spoke then, and was loved for it.

The beginning of the 70's was not a very good period in general. Since 1962 till then it had been just one war after another (China-1962, Pakistan-1965, Pakistan-1971), there was hardly any development, and things looked quite slow and bleak.

Naturally: "Yes, sir".

Then: "But you'll have to study landscape!". Why not, I thought, unable for a bit to really believe my great good fortune.

"Yes, yes, sir".

Finally, as a kind of climax: "And you'll have to come back and teach here!", as if that was the worst thing that could ever happen, which is not what he really meant, obviously.

It was more or less settled after that; all this led to a Ford Foundation fellowship, and I was glad that uncertainty had departed from my life, for the next

"do you want to go abroad? to study?... you'll have to study landscape!... and you'll have to come back and teach here!"



ABOVE | Aastha Kunj, New Delhi

Credit: Perspective rendering by Shree Naik

The project won the first prize in an open competition sponsored by the Delhi Development Authority in 2002. It extends over 200 acres in the heart of the city of Delhi. The design was a demonstration of landscape urbanism and centred around water conservation and responded to various urban requirements imposed by the surroundings, especially the use of the open space as a connector. The winning scheme was not implemented and the DDA has been doing the work departmentally for the last seven years.

RIGHT | HCL, Noida

Corporate landscape for one of India's premier computer and software companies at its new centre at Noida (completed 2008).



...as my friend the celebrated energy architect Dr Vinod Gupta says, he teaches to learn, if the class also gains something, all the better



teaching presupposes that knowledge or skills are being communicated verbally, through language



two years at least (that was the length of the Master's course at Sheffield). Four years later, I was happy and excited to be back, after two extra years spent working as a landscape architect with the Department of Environment in the lushly verdant countryside of Northern Ireland where they were kind enough to trust me with the design of a 200 acre park in the new town of Craigavon, and having also received in the process Associate membership of the Institute of Landscape Architects (as it was known then).

Learning

Someone said that he wasn't quite sure if architecture could be taught, but that

it could definitely be learnt, implying that as with many other skills and crafts, motivation and observation are fundamental. For instance, the idea of learning design skills presupposes a curiosity and interest about how objects are made, what it takes to put them together and how to recognise the process as a sequence of decisions and not usually as an instantaneous act of creative inspiration.

In the same way, interest and curiosity about what you are supposed to teach is important; as my friend the celebrated energy architect Dr Vinod Gupta says, he teaches to learn, if the class also gains something, all the better. Because

talking about things, just like writing about them, is a way of understanding them. The challenge of doing this again and again without succumbing to the boredom-inducing trap of verbatim repetition is the classic challenge for any teacher, and has to be met by finding ways of explaining the same thing with variations and in a different, even better way every time. That's just to keep your interest alive; because if you are bored, there's no way your listeners are not going to fall asleep. And as time passes your grasp increases in refinement, and after many years the whole process of talking and explaining comes with such ease that one does it with enthusiasm and pleasure.

It's self-evident: Teaching presupposes that knowledge or skills are being communicated verbally, through language. Success can only come from strength in all three areas: without knowledge there is nothing, and if you are teaching design, then you've got to have those skills – there must be something to give; and you have to know something of the techniques of communication and holding people's attention in a classroom situation; you have to have a liking, even a love for explaining things – first to yourself, then to your audience. Lastly, command over language, sufficient to overcome and rectify weaknesses and gaps often found even in graduate students. That is quite a daunting list of requirements.

Can we learn something from an analogy between classroom and theatre? This definitely – to think of teaching as a performance is to immediately conjure up an audience of spectators (not participants) looking for diversion and entertainment, which is exactly what you don't want. On the other hand, if you consider the demanding, but also artistically compelling theatrical technique of improvisation (when actors create a story by unrehearsed impromptu responses to each other in a live situation), then the comparison is quite apt. It encourages participation and spontaneity – 'one of the most important of the rules that make improv[isation] possible... is the idea of agreement, the notion that' ⁴ a narrative can be taken

FACING & THIS PAGE [3 Images]
Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Memorial Park, Lucknow Memorial Park to Dr Ram Manohar Lohia – an Indian freedom fighter and a socialist political leader, the project was completed between 2004 and 2006. This is a major new park in Lucknow, comprising the statue (by sculptor Shri Ram Sutar) and Memorial, a pedestrian promenade, lakes and special gardens. The Memorial, a composition of four triangular prisms symbolizing Dr Lohia's four pillars of democracy (M. Shaheer, Architect). Access to the park is through four separate gate complexes (M. Shaheer, Architect). Associate Landscape Architect: Sachin Jain

THIS PAGE | BELOW RIGHT
Coronation Park, Delhi
Shaheer Associates are consultants to INTACH who have been appointed for the design of this park to be developed by the DDA around the Coronation Memorial, which is also the site of the Delhi Durbar of 1911. This view shows the proposed Independence Plaza with the Coronation Pillar in the foreground.

can we learn something from an analogy between classroom and theatre?

engaging with creative opportunities wherever they arise irrespective of material result is not usually a losing proposition, indeed it can be the key to professional success



forward by acceptance, by saying ‘yes’ to whatever happens. In a classroom situation, ‘yes’ opens a door to the next constructive question, ‘no’ closes the discussion. Or, in the words of George Gershwin, “Life is a lot like jazz. It is best when you improvise”.

There is always something to be learnt from observing experts at work – whether its an artist laying paint on canvas with a palette knife or a brick-layer spreading mortar with a practised instinct about consistency and thickness, there is a quietly meditative quality about how an adept goes about his craft. It is a lesson in itself to observe the master carpenter setting out his tools at the start of the working day, sharpening each individual tooth of the saw with a file, adjusting the blade of the plane, and so on, and then the confident strength in the carrying out

of the actual work – the deft construction and fitting of joints, the perfect angle of the mitre etc., or the earnest concentration of the stone craftsman as he gently taps stone slabs to snug fitting ‘hairline joints’; to observe all this is to learn of the craftsman’s pride and to put into properly respectful perspective the professional continuum of skills and process which result in a finished building or landscape.

Working

Sanskriti Kendra, a ten acre development on the Delhi side of the Delhi – Gurgaon border has been well known for quite a while as an active cultural centre with three museums, exhibition spaces, an open air-theatre, artists’ studios set within a contemplative forest-garden like environment, conceived and nurtured virtually in its entirety by



TOP | Soka Bodhi Garden, outskirts of Delhi
These gardens are designed for a part of the campus of the Indian branch of the Japanese cultural organization Soka Gakkai. This landscape explores the themes of meditation and aesthetic experience whilst walking.

ABOVE | Stone Lotus
Sculptural garden feature – a symbolic marble lotus on a carved granite base (symbolizing water), as an accent to a small courtyard. Shaheer Associates takes particular interest in developing this kind of small feature in designed landscapes, to showcase specialized skills of stone craftsmen of the region, and also to impart a distinct identity to each project.

Mr O. P. Jain, well-known patron of the arts and eminent Delhi citizen. In 1984 I had been around professionally for eight years or so, with not too much to show for it, so he really did do me a great favour when, after seeing another ‘farm-house landscape’ I was designing in the vicinity he involved me in helping him create the landscape of this beautiful place. It evolved over more than a decade, in close coordination with the architect Upal Ghosh. What was uniquely gratifying was the gradual emergence - in the process of its execution - of what could be interpreted as a contemporary, distinctly Indian way of designing landscape.⁵

And doing this work reinforced my belief – which, to be honest, had its origins in necessity rather than idealism – that engaging with creative opportunities wherever they arise irrespective

of material result is not usually a losing proposition, indeed it can be the key to professional success. It allows freedom to experiment, establishes credibility, introduces you to other like-minded people without obligation, and usually over a period of time, and with patience, results in artistic as well as material satisfaction. But of course, it is also unprofessional to work for free.

References

1. Anthony Spaeth, *Best Urban Oasis: Lodi Garden*; *Time Asia*. November 15, 2004
2. Both buildings were designed by Professor T. J. Manickam. The foundation stone of the Planning building was laid in 1958, while the Architecture building was completed in 1965.
3. The residential complex of Ham Common was completed in 1958 by James Stirling and Richard Gowan.



4. Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*; Back bay Books, New York 2005

5. Priyaleen Singh, *Culture, Tradition and Contemporary Indian Landscape Design: Mohammad Shaheer at Sanskriti Kendra; Contemporary Garden Aesthetics, Creations and Interpretations*, ed. Michel Conan; Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington D.C. 2007.