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Bringing in meaningful architecture

Indian architects today are finding new ways to engage with the local climate, style and traditional forms. This is a good sign that should be encouraged, say Australian architect-couple Judith North & Neville Cowland of 'NOW Architecture' in an interview with RANJANI GOVIND



Innovative BUILD: Projects that make best use of nature

Stepping into celebrating a silver jubilee year wouldn't have been an easy journey for an architectural firm rooted in green convictions amidst ideas that oozed of sensible design and acute environmental awareness. 'NOW Architecture,' based in Fitzroy-Victoria (in Australia), loaded with its ideologies of green history, is the proud recipient of a serpentine list of awards from across the world for its endeavour to build smart structures. Logical roofing , cost-effective use of materials and intelligent play of light form its potent principles.

Steering the design elements for NOW is the director-couple, *Judith North* and *Neville Cowland*, whose construction efficiency made them seem like the 'design couple' who saw their ideas of environmental sustainability catch on noticeably over the years. "Our thoughts soak in a timeless quality that is influenced by social values and the identities of the client," say the couple.

Earlier, Judith won a Rotary Fellowship to study low-energy vernacular architecture at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and her expedition continued with

landscape designing, amongst several other courses. Neville's thesis explored recycled building solutions. He was the team leader in the office of Van Trompf in Hamilton before he flagged off his own architectural practice in 1984.

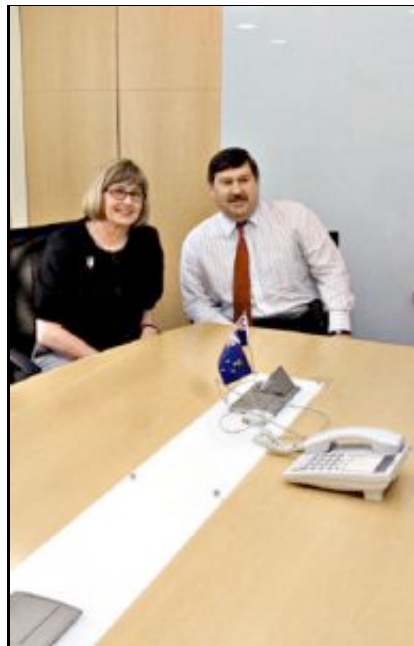
Judith and Neville, who have alliances with the world's well known environmental, structural and civil engineers, quality surveyors and landscapists & horticulturists, are now bringing socially responsible brick-and-mortar design elements into educational institutions that reverberate a sensitivity to curriculum study.

Judith and Neville were in the city recently and are soon going to be commissioned to design a sustainable office tower in Bangalore. *PropertyPlus caught up with the couple for a free-wheeling chat that lead to an exploration of their nitty-gritty elements that make NOW Architecture an international name to reckon with. "It's a holistic responsibility," claim the couple who have no count of the number of commercial, residential and educational buildings undertaken by them over 25 years. Some excerpts of the interview.*

How was the response to your unique ideals at NOW, as it was nearly 25 years ago?

Our principles of sustainable design, energy efficiency and simple elegance were not as 'mainstream' 25 years ago.

Clients, while not fully understanding the vision, could see the benefits of being more efficient with energy-efficient materials. Upon experiencing the finished design, they were able to experience the payback of better thermal performance and the aesthetics of natural light in their buildings and saw that more effective use of space improved functional relationships without reducing the aesthetics and sense of space.



The architect couple behind them, Judith North and Neville Cowland

Can you expand on your four-point excellence...smart primary structures; logical roof forms; economic use of materials; and intelligent interplay of light...

Smart primary structures not only reduce the amount of materials, but also reduce the need for additional finishes. This reduces the embodied energy, capital cost and ongoing maintenance of a building. For example, a concrete slab can be polished to create a stone-like finish which also contributes to the thermal mass and cooling of the building.

If a timber column can be left exposed, rather than hidden or painted, to bring natural materials and a sense of warmth into the building, it's a prime aesthetic element.

By logical roof forms, we don't mean 'conventional' roof forms. A simple hip roof is unlikely to add any special design quality to a building. The roof form is defined by the functional plan, so walls can be used as supporting structure, and the roof form is designed around an efficient structure determined by the plan. But by 'twisting' 'bending' or 'intersecting' simple roof forms in accordance with the primary structure, a unique roof design can be created that stands out as a feature of the building.

Wherever possible we try to find ways for one component of a building to serve multiple purposes. A roof is a water catchment system, underground water tanks can form part of the footing system, glass cladding can be an active array of solar panels... As such, the effective cost of 'green' technologies is reduced by integrating them into the essential function of a building.

Buildings are designed holistically. Efficient planning can effectively reduce a building size by a factor of greater than 10 per cent, improving functionality without loss of amenity or aesthetic quality.

Natural light is always preferable to artificial light. As well as using no electricity, it is typically better for occupant comfort and creating a sense of connection to the outside world. Buildings can be shaped to take advantage of the way the sun travels with windows placed to provide natural lighting while excluding heat gain.

By using white or pale coloured surfaces to increase reflectivity of light and glass to increase transparency, natural light can be maximised. This way, a building responds to changing natural light and provides experiential connection to natural rhythms of day/night and the seasons.

Your environmental focus has won a host of awards...what are your underlying social values?

The social and cultural aspects of buildings are especially important for our educational work. Schools, perhaps more than any other building, must be socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and be an active facilitator to community engagement. We endeavour to create schools where a student feels inspired to learn in the spaces; teachers adapt to a changing curriculum and classrooms have a connection with nature.

We have created schools where the playgrounds are kitchen gardens and children are taught to cook food which they have grown, food preparation facilities are used to offer hospitality to the wider community and where libraries provide a resource for parents as well as students. These measures create a connection with the world and people outside the school gates, engaging students with society and environment.

Your picturisation of Indian buildings? How much do Indian design sensibilities matter in world architecture?

Cultural diversity is important, just as genetic diversity. Culture reflects social and intellectual history and the value systems generated from different histories and experiences are all important.

We are concerned that western values and culture are usurping cultures which could be said to have deeper values, not only in older cultures of indigenous minority populations, but also in strong cultures such as in China and India.

While new communication technologies provide many benefits, we need to be aware that there is a potential to overwrite cultural values and reduce culture to a common base level. India has a rich and diverse culture, nationally and regionally, which provides unique identity and local relevance to the built environment.

In 1978, when Judith travelled to India to experience Indian architecture first hand, she found that from the modernist vision of Chandigarh to the ancient streets of Ahmedabad, Indian architecture is rich and has much to offer the world. In any country, the influence of local environments, building techniques, materials and forms can be seen in its historic buildings.

We have studied indigenous buildings all over the world and have found that buildings were usually pretty well adapted to their environments because they couldn't artificially modify the building environment with mechanical systems.

We believe that these elements should also influence contemporary buildings such that they respond to their context and speak of the city or country. Indian architects today are finding new ways to engage with the local climate, style and traditional forms. This is a good sign that should be encouraged, and something we will be seeking to learn from.

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