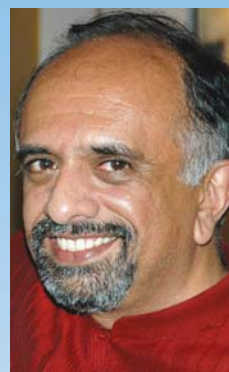


Design that Transcends Function

Prem Chandavarkar, who heads Bangalore-based Chandavarkar and Thacker Architects, has been on the Indian architecture scene for over three decades. His firm was the recipient of the J.K. Cements Architect of the Year Award 2010 in the Indian Architect Category for Tata Dhan Academy, Madurai. In this interaction with *Insite*, the architect talks about his initial years, his influences and philosophy, the ideology of his design-oriented practice, and expounds on two of CnT's projects



Prem Chandavarkar

Chandavarkar and Thacker Architects, or CnT as it is popularly known, is a legacy practice. The firm, which happens to be Bangalore's first architectural practice, was started by Narayan Chandavarkar in 1950. After his untimely death in 1963, Tara Chandavarkar merged the firm with the practice of Pesi Thacker. The current name — Chandavarkar and Thacker — was derived from this merger, but over the years the abbreviated name of the firm (CnT) has become more popular.

There may have been many changes in the management over time, but the firm has remained consistent in one area — its core ideology of being a design-oriented practice that is not personality-centric. "We have an in-house research cell that we use to explicitly articulate ideas that become the beacons of our practice. We wish to rise above an 'architect's architecture' by constructing the practice as a sheltered space for reflection that enables a community to think about how to enrich life through architecture," Chandavarkar says.



Chandavarkar, who graduated from the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA), New Delhi, says that his college days were an exhilarating time to be in the capital. "Contemporary architecture in independent India was barely 20 years old when I joined SPA, and there was a great deal of energy in trying to define the architectural identity of this new nation. The time when I was in college was the tail end of this period of energy. In addition, Delhi was an exciting place to be in ... it was really happening with respect to art, music, dance and theatre. The SPA is located near Mandi House area, which was the cultural centre for Delhi at that time," he remembers.

It was his post-graduation programme (from University of Oregon) that introduced him to a way of thinking — one that became the foundation of his career. "During my post-graduation at University of Oregon from 1980-82 I had a tremendous level of freedom in structuring my programme. I wrote a thesis that examined the linguistic analogy in architectural theory. This year and a half of immersion in a rigorous reflective environment introduced me to a way of thinking that has since been the foundation of my career," he says.

Reflecting on his initial years, Chandavarkar says that it was the jobs he took with other established firms that shaped his thinking and built his confidence in his ideas and designs. Reminiscing about his first job after graduating from SPA, he says that his exposure to Achyut Kanvinde and Morad Chowdhury of Kanvinde Rai & Chowdhury in New Delhi was seminal, and made him aware of what it was to simultaneously practice and think architecture. "We have too many practices that continue on the basis of habit. My early exposure to this ability to resist the pressures of practice and to always deeply reflect on architecture was a great influence," he reveals.

After completing his masters in the United States, the architect lived and worked in Philadelphia. It was during his stint at Jordan/Mitchell (a firm in downtown Philadelphia) that he was given independent charge of projects. "Learning to deal with this challenge of a foreign environment with high levels of professionalism and accountability was the next step of my professional learning. I believe it is important that an architect works for other committed practices before settling down into a personal practice that will form their lifetime career. If you start your own practice too early, then it is difficult to develop anchors. My early experiences gave me the confidence to develop my own line of thinking and to believe in my capabilities, which I might not have achieved if I had joined CnT straight after college," he says.

On the design philosophy that CnT follows, the architect says: "I do not see theory or philosophy as a foundation

to design. When one draws, all philosophy leaves you, and it is a tacit relationship between eye, hand, paper, pencil, and mind. Then one puts down the pencil, looks at the sketch and asks 'What have I done, and is it good?' This then leads to the next round of sketching, and again when one picks up the pencil, philosophy recedes to the background. What is happening here is that a space develops in which a conversation takes place between the sketch and the sketcher. That is the real relationship between theory and practice — theory critiques practice and practice critiques theory. They work best when they contradict each other, and when we attempt to tie the two into a logical framework we lose something substantial."

Stating that influences are important as "one does not learn if one does not have one", he believes that to refuse to admit to influences is to refuse to learn. "One must be open to all kind of influences, even a tree outside the window." When queried about his favourite architects and buildings, Chandavarkar reveals that he is drawn to architects who produce a timeless quality in their work. Among modern architects who have achieved this he thinks of Frank Lloyd Wright, Carlo Scarpa, Geoffrey Bawa, Tadao Ando, Alvar Alto and Luis Barragan. "What is remarkable

about these architects is that although they were internationally recognised as masters, unlike many other masters of their time they were not followed by schools of imitators. When one achieves this kind of a quality in the work, there are no shortcuts. Everyone has to go through the same rigour themselves," he says. Among his favourite buildings are those at Fatehpur Sikri, the



Padmanabhapuram Palace, and Alhambra.

Does he have any role models? This is a complex question and a list of names won't be enough, he says. "I have many role models, and each is for a different reason. They range from famous people to people who are close family and friends," he adds.

Chandavarkar is concerned by how architecture is influenced by fashionable trends from across the world with no recognition of context. "In this overly media-influenced world, we are seduced by images, confuse innovation with novelty, and develop building form through digitised algorithms that have little to do with architecture. Our struggle is to sustain a feeling for space and scale and how it is brought to life by inhabitation and the flows of nature. While I do see some architects seeking to do this, I unfortunately also see too many who do not connect with these fundamentals. Hopefully the pressures through crises such as climate change will make more architects think about the fundamentals," he says.

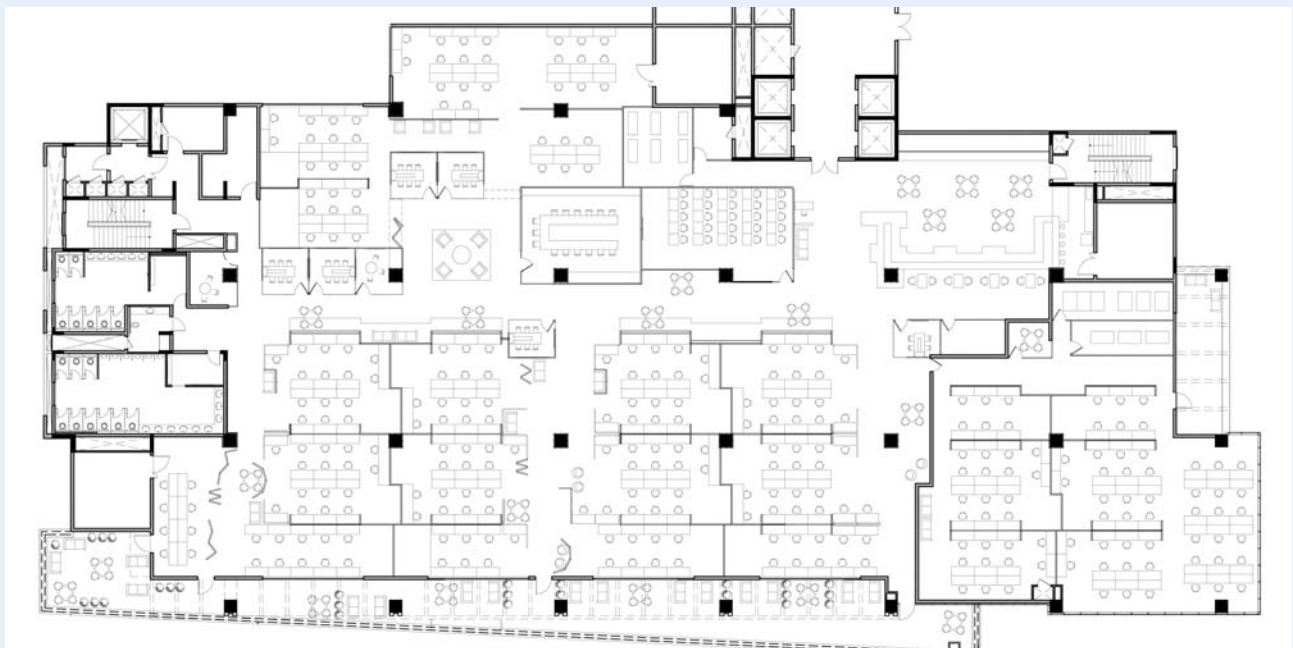
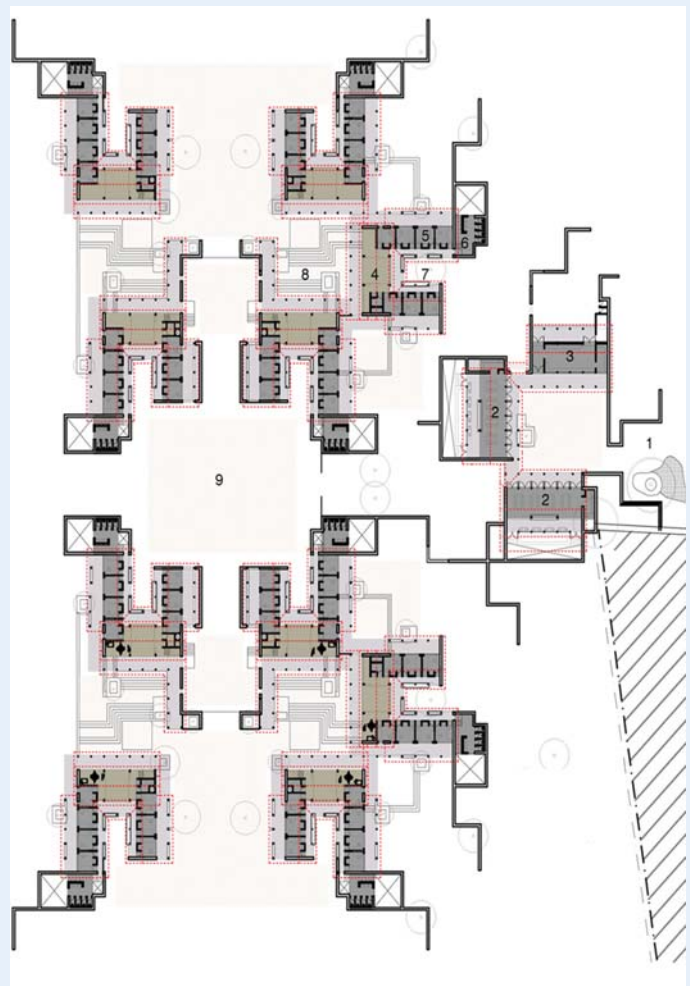
Insite takes a look at two projects that reveal the design philosophy and ideology of Chandavarkar, and consequently CnT.

Tata Dhan Academy, Madurai

A management training institute that provides professional education in rural development, this is also the project that won us the J.K. Award in the Indian Architect category, Chandavarkar says. Speaking about the design, he says it all began with a study of the Chettinad style to understand the planning, scale, detailing and materiality, which was then reinterpreted to suit the spatial functions and needs of the school.

“The site layout picks up on the way villages are distributed across a region, with clusters from which interconnecting roads spring out. The individual cluster grows as radiating squares and interlocking courtyards, halls sided with verandas that open on to a landscaped courtyard, maintaining the transparency of every space,” he says.

Winning this award was very special for the firm — firstly, because it is a non-commercial non-profit institution, and secondly, as it is located in a rural setting and is very different from most of the other work undertaken by the firm. “We are glad that the jury was discerning enough to not get seduced by the formalist pursuit of novelty that often compels current architectural work, and recognised a project with a restrained vernacular expression,” he says.



Aditi Technologies Building, Bangalore

The key objective of this Bangalore-based project was a design that was based on non-hierarchical system of working. The design began with a community spine that concluded in gathering spaces with strategic placement of street anchors. Rooms grouped around interactive neighbourhood courtyards gave the company the flexibility of expanding them whenever needed. Opaque walls perpendicular to the outer glass and translucent low-height partitions were introduced, allowing maximum utilisation of light and providing space for writing surfaces and storage. □