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big interview



An architect with enormous experience world-wide, Adi Mistri, currently the Design Principal and Sector Leader at Stantec Consulting Private Limited, thinks that steel is the answer when you want to use something that is light, if you want to do something that can be erected quickly or something where the tracery of exposed steel is of benefit. Excerpts from the interview...

ADI MISTRI

Design Principal
& Sector Leader,
Stantec Consulting
Private Limited

prompting change in conventions

Q What does architecture mean to you and what is your philosophy when creating a design?

A The thing that drives me the most about architecture and creating something new is to come up with something that's very beautiful and functional, but, has a unique reason for being that particular building based on the requirements that you're given. Sometimes the requirements are very specific while at others, they are extremely vague. In the latter situation you have to dig and figure it out what is it that the owner or the client wants and from that you proceed to design.

The things that come to the surface are manifold, it is not one or two things; it's what you bring as an individual designer to the table, it's what your colleagues bring along with them and then the whole process starts. In today's world it's become a much more dynamic process where you cannot do it alone, in fact you almost shouldn't want to do it alone. This is because there are many players, not just the traditional ones but there are sociologists, biologists, etc. In the broadest scope of design, the challenge is in a world that's globally much more sensitive. So, you're always part of a bigger whole in the design process. However, even so someone has to say, well I don't think we're going down the right road, so those judgement calls still remain in the hands of individuals. I'm a big believer in the fact that you've got to be a strong designer, you've got to know what the big picture is and keep that and the spirit of the project alive.

Q As far as working with materials is concerned, which ones are your favorites and why?

A Yes and no. There are many ways to hold things up. We're fighting gravity all the time as designers. It is a challenge based on the particular application. If there is the need for an expression that is both functional and

otherwise solid and heavy, you would use masonry for something that comes from the ground and goes up. If you want something light, you'd probably be inclined to opt for wood or steel where the expression of using sticks to support things is commonplace among our profession. So, I do not have favorite materials, I try to figure out what needs to be used for the purpose.

Q Steel construction has several advantages over conventional methods. Could you highlight the same from your experience?

A I've used steel for quite a bit of my projects. I think steel is the answer when you want to use something that is light, if you want to do something that can be erected quickly, something where the tracery of exposed steel is of benefit. In terms of solving challenges, we have used steel in my work in the States. Oftentimes, we'd do additions to buildings, renovations of old warehouse buildings; typically where you want to engage a new building to something that's already been there, we tend to use steel. Very often, our design attitude was not to bang up the addition against the existing building, but to separate it. The separation could be something like a passage or a light giver or an entry and typically we use very lightweight steel to make that engagement happen. There are some really nice interventions that you can do in steel which would be more restrictive in other materials.

Q The acceptance of steel as a go-to material for construction is not very popular in India. What according to you are the reasons for this?

A I think a lot of this hesitation comes with the culture and tradition. If you drive through the city, country or small village and you can see small concrete structures coming up everywhere; it's almost like masonry. The use of concrete is sort of second

nature and I think it's going to be a while before the acceptance of something that's made in a factory and brought to the site in a precise dimension, that could either be welded or bolted together using heavy machinery – I think those are the restrictions. People take a long time to switch to something new from what you've done that works, it's just a fact of nature. Steel can do different things, but concrete is a very strong competitor just in terms of how it has been used. So, I think it is going to take some time and evolve. Tall buildings, for example, which are done in concrete but are typically done much more successfully and quicker in steel would help. As more and more tall buildings in steel are made in India, probably that will drive in a change.

Q What measures, according to you, should be undertaken to create an impetus for steel based constructions in the Indian scenario?

A I think more of conventions, conferences that talk about the current and probable use of steel, more conversations about the challenges of construction that steel can better solve than say, concrete. Basically, more exposition, more evolution of demonstrating ideas, showing that steel works at all levels be it the tall, mega level structures or the more poetic expressions when it comes to smaller projects, at the artists' level by way of sculptures instead of engaging with materials like wood. Propagating the whole notion of strength, utility, beauty, flexibility in being able to use small sections versus big timbers; everything has its place. It's a question of selection and evolution and putting it out together.

Q What advice would you give to young architects who are starting out?

A To them I'd say, just spread your wings and be informed. Use anything and everything that makes sense, but, more than anything, do it studiously, and I think steel falls in that category. ■

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