

INDIAN ARCHITECT & BUILDER

EXPLORE

**I
A & B**

TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES INCLUDING COVER 80

MUMBAI

₹ 200

MAY 2017

VOL 30 (9)

ARCHITECTURE
Jateen Lad

INTERNATIONAL
Zaha Hadid Architects
Rocco Valentini Architecture





↑ View of Superstructure from the east.

A Humble Locale

Sharanam Centre for Rural Development, Pondicherry

A community space that uplifts the neighbourhood by providing it the necessary socio-cultural experience using local materials, techniques and influences.

Text, Drawings and Photographs: courtesy Jateen Lad
Compilation: Meghna Mehta

INDIAN ARCHITECT & BUILDER

EXPLORE

A&B

TOTAL NUMBER OF PAGES INCLUDING COVER 80

MUMBAI

₹ 200

MAY 2017

VOL 30 (9)

ARCHITECTURE
Jateen Lad

INTERNATIONAL
Zaha Hadid Architects
Rocco Valentini Architecture





↑ View of the circular hall, bridge and stage wall.

Built at the edge of a rural landscape ravaged by illegal quarrying, the Sharanam Centre for Rural Development enables a grass roots NGO to expand its community-led transformation of chronically underdeveloped villages outside Pondicherry. Constructed from the red soil of the site and having employed and upskilled hundreds of local village workers the project looked to directly tackle pressing environmental and social concerns.

Context, Brief and Concept

In the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, SARVAM, a non-profit NGO based in Pondicherry, initiated their grass-roots rural development programme in two nearby villages of Puthurai and Perambai. Poverty, violence and alcoholism have been deeply entrenched here for generations. Considering developmental indices - such as pure drinking water, sanitation, health, electricity, education, livelihoods - both villages were at the bottom of the scale.

By mid-2006 SARVAM's initiatives had begun to progressively transform community life. To broaden their reach a decision was taken to create a dedicated campus to host wider rural communities in active programmes covering all aspects of village life including education, health, sanitation, housing, income generation and special initiatives for women, widows, the elderly and the disabled. An organic design

brief comprised core facilities such as a large multi-purpose hall, administrative offices and a community kitchen. A well-wisher had donated a 5-acre rural site accessible to 30-40 local villages and Cadbury Schweppes agreed to fund the project.

Jateen Lad, a British architect, shifted base from London to Pondicherry to undertake the design and construction. Given the context, the project had to be more than just a building. There was no contractor; the architect set up the entire construction as a development project in its own right to upgrade skills and livelihoods of local village workers. From the outset the aim was to demonstrate how architecture working from the bottom up can genuinely contribute to sustainable rural and social development.

Architectural Design

Sharanam, meaning "refuge", comprises a large vaulted multi-purpose hall, a variety of meeting spaces, administrative offices, a newspaper studio, community radio station, stores and a community kitchen with semi-shaded washing courtyards. Extensive plantation has healed and revived the heavily abused site; the entrance sequence leads through eucalyptus groves, gardens, an avenue of Palmyra trees to a shaded green amphitheatre (capacity 500) cut into the natural slope of the site.



↑ Drama performed by village children.



↑ Granite steps leading down into the main hall.

The superstructure comprises an array of thin masonry vaults, spanning 9.5m, under which a sequence of distinct gathering and meeting spaces are created through folding walls, level changes and ornamental ponds. Granite slabs step down leading into the main hall which is defined by a massive granite *thinnai* - a raised platform inspired from the Tamil vernacular - which has been designed and scaled for conversations amongst small groups, active workshops for 50-60 or an audience of 200. The *thinnai* extends to the east forming a deep stage bound by two interconnected ponds: one flush with the stage and the other extending through the building. A smaller circular hall (capacity 25-30) is laid out under the detached eastern vault.

In response to the hot and humid tropical climate, the superstructure is an architecture of a large roof and a raised floor plinth - with no walls. Natural ventilation is maximised by precisely orientating the array of piers to funnel prevailing coastal breezes into the building. Ventilated cavity walls, radiant underfloor cooling, carefully positioned ponds and cool, green verandas (which help soften the light) ensure additional thermal comfort without air-conditioning or fans. The acoustics of the vaults enable programmes to be held without expensive audio equipment.

Shaded spill-out spaces and green verandas connect to two office buildings and a store whose solidity and long minimalist walls contrast with the lightness and openness of the superstructure. These are accessed through small, cooler courtyards. The interiors are notable for their hand-finished pigmented floors, cool-to-touch earth plastered walls and full-height glazed screens in reclaimed



↑ Hundreds of acres ravaged by illegal quarrying and dumping on the site.



↑ Hand laid pebble flooring.



↑ Free-spanning optimised vault built without formwork.



↑ Hand-trowelled mirror finish to earth plastered wall.



↑ The washing courtyards of the kitchen building.

teakwood. The interiors are further cooled by ventilated cavity walls and insulating roof gardens above.

Environmental infrastructure includes a comprehensive surface water and rooftop rainwater harvesting system collecting, storing, filtering and recycling water throughout the year, a large sanitation block with farm-sensitive waste management and an elegant kitchen building with semi-shaded washing courtyards detailed with handmade water-saving basins and troughs. Since completion in mid-2014, Sharanam has allowed SARVAM to expand their development programmes to benefit more village communities. The campus is more widely used than originally planned with local special-needs schools, development agencies, farmers, teacher training institutes all hosting regular events.

Process: Construction as Social Development

From the outset, the architect structured the project to address pressing issues affecting the village communities – severe environmental degradation, chronic poverty, a scarcity of jobs and the near absence of employable skills. Deliberately set up without a contractor, the entire construction was programmed as a means of development, directly employing and training local village workers on-the-job in a range of new skills including blockmaking, innovative masonry, precasting, carpentry, stonework and finishing techniques. The architect and his assistant assumed full site responsibilities including foreman, daily supervision and the procurement of materials to ensure quality, financial accountability and transparent payment to workers – many of whom learnt to sign their names for the first



↑ View down the Superstructure.



↑ Split-level ponds behind the stage.



↑ Materials Detail: Natural pigments, lime plaster, polished concrete, earth blocks.



↑ Interior View of Media Office.

time. Throughout, the workers established their own wages, working hours and holidays. New techniques were regularly developed in collaboration with more skilled workers who were keen to further their skills-set allowing detailing to become more refined. From the exact earth blocks, masonry details and castings to the hundreds of precisely cut interlocking granite slabs and teakwood sections, the project encouraged every able worker to demonstrate their true capacity. Workers photographing their daily accomplishments on mobile phones was a common sight and conveyed their pride and confidence.

Sharanam employed a total of over 300 local village workers with at least 60 percent of the construction costs directly invested into the villages through wages. Furthermore, the increased skill levels helped improved livelihoods: previously unskilled workers are today employable as masons, bar benders, painters; masons now work as independent contractors while carpenters and stone workers are undertaking more lucrative, professional contracts.

The ethical approach to construction attracted numerous institutional visitors including the United Nations Environmental Programme (who consider Sharanam to be one of the top five green buildings in India), the World Bank, government agencies, corporate houses undertaking CSR, the Tata Trust, local NGOs as well as renowned architects and engineers from overseas. Furthermore, the alternative, multi-disciplinary and hands-on nature of practice inspired international students from diverse fields such as architecture, microfinance and



↑ Interior of Administrative Office Building.

human services. In 2011/12 9 graduates from the Manchester School of Architecture undertook part of their RIBA professional training on the project – with many then inspired to work further in the challenging context of international development as a result. ■

FACT FILE:

Project	: Sharanam, A Centre for Rural Development
Location	: Usteri Lake, nr. Pondicherry
Architecture & Construction Management	: Jateen Lad
Project Assistants	: Trupti Doshi, Spencer Fretwell, Chandranath Sinha
Client	: SARVAM, a unit of Sri Aurobindo Society, Pondicherry
Funding Partner	: Cadbury Schweppes Asia Pacific Pte Ltd, Mumbai
Site Area	: 20,200 sqm
Project Area	: 2,530s qm
Head masons	: Velmurugan, Kumar, Muthulingam, Palani, Bhaktawatchalam
Earth Technology Consultant	: Auroville Earth Institute, Auroville
Electrical Engineer	: Asha Electricals, Chennai
Radiant Cooling Advisor	: Dr. Surendrah Shah, PanAsia Pte Ltd, Mumbai
Construction Estimate	: INR 2,00,00,000
Initiation of Project	: 2007
Completion of Project	: 2014