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BETWEEN PURPOSE AND PLACE

In a world where work is untethered, *Architecture Discipline's* Akshat Bhatt, Heena Bhargava, and Deeksha Gulati explore how design can give the workplace renewed purpose and meaning



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COVER STORY

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A full-page background image showing a lush tropical landscape. In the foreground, several large palm fronds are visible, some with a golden glow from the setting or rising sun. In the background, a building is partially visible through the dense foliage. The sky is a warm, golden yellow, suggesting sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is serene and natural.

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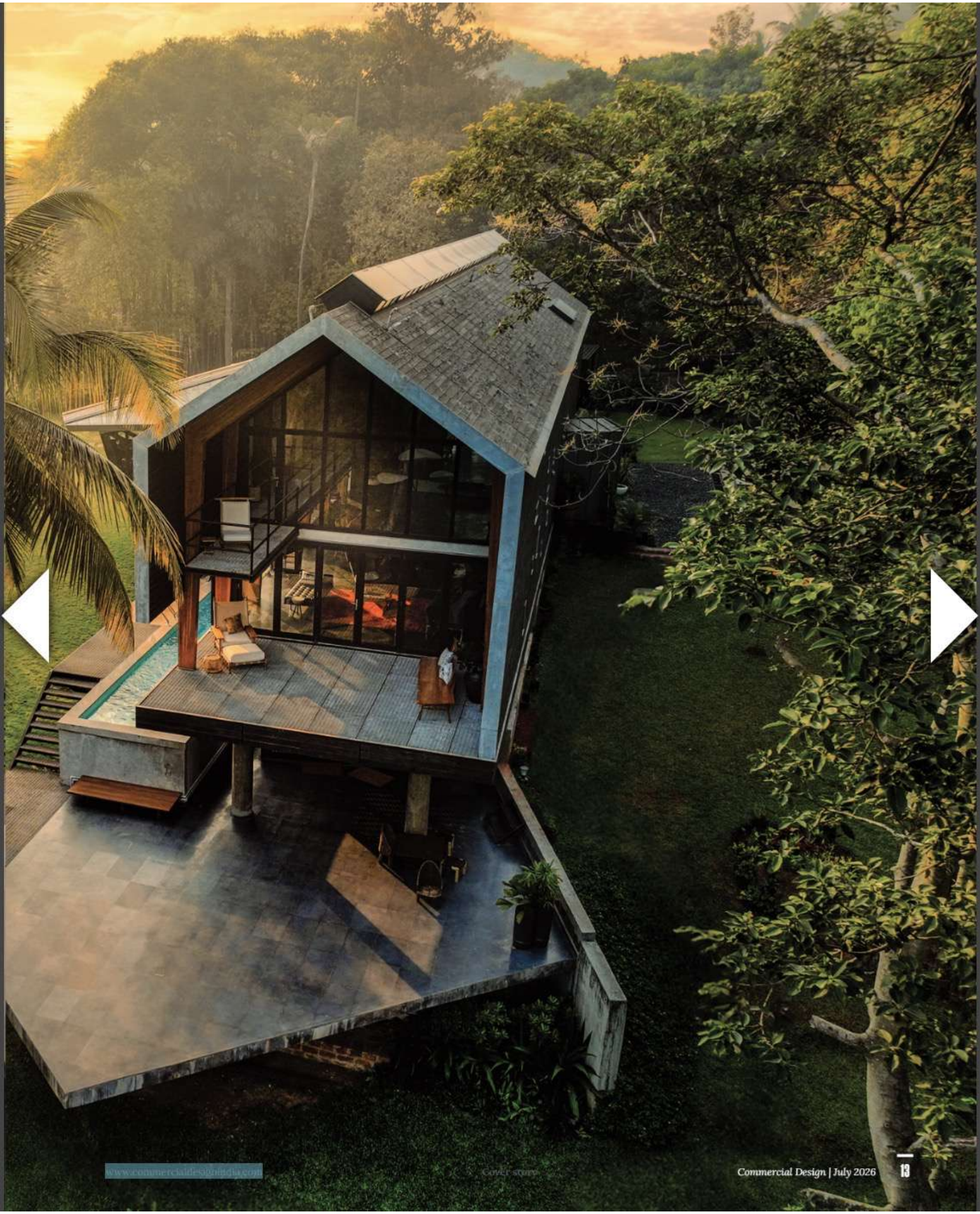
As work becomes increasingly untethered from place, Architecture Discipline explores how design can create workplaces that people are drawn to, not required to occupy.

By Rashmi Naicker

Every generation leaves behind a particular image of work. For some, it was the corner office, a symbol of achievement framed by polished timber, closed doors and carefully guarded authority. For others, it was the endless field of cubicles that defined the late twentieth century, where productivity was measured in presence and routine. Then came the era of open plans, breakout zones and startup culture, where work sought to appear less corporate and more communal. Each workplace reflected the values of its time, becoming a physical record of how society understood ambition, success and collaboration.

Today, however, that image is becoming harder to define.

The workplace stands at a moment of profound reinvention. Technology has untethered work from geography, hybrid models have challenged long-held assumptions about attendance, and a new generation of professionals is reshaping expectations around wellbeing, flexibility and purpose. Increasingly, the office is no longer a place people are required to occupy, but one they actively choose to return to. As a result, architects and designers are being asked to solve a far more nuanced challenge than ever before: how do you create workplaces that remain relevant when work itself has become fluid?



The answers are emerging in projects that prioritise people over processes and experience over efficiency. Across contemporary workplaces, the focus is shifting from desks and departments to culture, community and connection. Offices are becoming environments that encourage spontaneous conversations, support multiple modes of working and foster a sense of belonging that cannot be replicated through a screen. Natural light, material warmth, adaptability and wellness are no longer secondary considerations; they are becoming fundamental building blocks of the modern workplace.

Yet this transformation extends beyond spatial planning. It raises deeper questions about sustainability, longevity and the role architecture plays in shaping organisational culture. In an era defined by rapid change, how can workplaces remain resilient? How can design create environments that nurture creativity while responding to evolving social and environmental priorities? And perhaps most importantly, what does the future office look like when its primary purpose is no longer simply to accommodate work, but to enrich the lives of the people within it?

To explore these questions, we spoke with three leading voices whose work continues to shape the conversation around contemporary architecture and workplace design: Akshat Bhatt, Founder and Principal Architect of

Architecture Discipline; along with Heena Bhargava and Deeksha Gulati, architects at the firm. Through their perspectives emerges a shared understanding that the future workplace is not defined by trends or typologies, but by its ability to evolve, endure and place human experience at its centre.

Beyond the image: Akshat Bhatt

In an age where buildings are often consumed as images before they are experienced as places, architecture finds itself navigating an uneasy tension. On one side lies the slow, patient act of creating spaces that respond to context, climate and human need. On the other is an increasingly image-driven culture that rewards immediacy, visibility and spectacle. As social media accelerates the life cycle of architectural trends, the profession is being compelled to ask an important question: what remains valuable when the image fades?

For Akshat Bhatt, Founder and Principal Architect of Architecture Discipline, the answer lies in architecture's enduring ability to remain relevant long after attention has moved elsewhere. Looking back at nearly two decades of practice, Bhatt reflects that the years have not altered his core beliefs about architecture. If anything, they have reinforced them. "The last 20-odd years that I have been practising architecture and design have only strengthened my beliefs,"

he says. "It has not diluted them."

That conviction stems from a career shaped by travel, teaching, research and an unwavering commitment to understanding architecture beyond stylistic trends. While contemporary discourse often gravitates towards visual impact and instantly recognisable forms, Bhatt is careful to distinguish between architecture as a discipline and architecture as a business. "The business of architecture and the practice of architecture are not the same," he notes. "I think often we confuse the two, which we should not."

The distinction is particularly relevant in an era where architectural success is frequently measured through visibility. Yet Bhatt remains sceptical of the industry's fascination with iconicity. "I don't think any project ever sets out to be iconic, because that's not a real-world architectural intent," he says. Buildings, in his view, acquire significance through time, use and cultural relevance rather than deliberate attempts at image-making. Meaningful architecture unfolds slowly. It accumulates value through experience, often over decades, while social media trends disappear within months. Architecture, therefore, must be judged on a longer timeline.

This long-term perspective has enabled Architecture Discipline to work across an unusually diverse range of projects,



Headquarters for the Rug Republic, Delhi



Akshat Bhatt, Principal Architect, Architecture Discipline.

“The business of architecture and the practice of architecture are not the same. Too often, we confuse the two.”

from representing India on international platforms such as the India Pavilion at Hannover Messe to developing community-focused healthcare infrastructure through the Mohalla Clinics initiative. Despite their apparent differences, Bhatt sees no hierarchy between such commissions. “Every programme and every commission is unique in its own way and requires a distinctive approach to achieve meaningful change or make a meaningful contribution,” he explains. Scale may vary, but the architect’s responsibility remains constant.

That sense of responsibility becomes even more pronounced when discussing sustainability, a term that has become ubiquitous within contemporary architecture. For Bhatt, sustainability extends far beyond technological interventions or certification frameworks. It is fundamentally tied to how societies consume resources and how cities continue to accommodate

growing populations. “The biggest challenge for us in architecture today is how to create habitats for the people who need it the most,” he says. “How do we ensure that the drivers of our economy and the crucibles of culture, which are our cities, remain liveable and, over time, become healthier places to live?”

His response shifts the conversation away from sustainability as a design feature and towards sustainability as a collective responsibility. In a rapidly urbanising world, the challenge is not simply building more efficiently, but questioning whether building anew is always necessary. “The most sustainable building at the very moment is the one that already exists, which you can reuse in a meaningful way,” Bhatt observes. The statement is both practical and provocative, particularly within an industry often driven by constant cycles of construction and reinvention.

Looking ahead, Bhatt identifies another emerging concern: architecture’s growing tendency towards hyper-specificity. Buildings are increasingly being designed for highly specialised uses, often with limited consideration for future adaptation. Yet history suggests that the most enduring architecture is rarely the most specialised. Instead, it possesses the flexibility to accommodate changing needs across generations. “There is a need for projects with greater flexibility and longer lifespans,” he argues. “By creating projects with short-term use, we are being counterproductive.”

PC: Jeethi Sharma



The studio of Architecture Discipline, where research, craft, and contextual thinking come together to shape architecture that is both contemporary and deeply rooted in place.



The Discovery Centre at Bhartiya City in Bengaluru.

This belief in longevity also informs his approach to commercial architecture. While today's developments are expected to be efficient, sustainable and experience-driven simultaneously, Bhatt does not view these requirements as competing priorities. Rather, he sees constraints as one of architecture's most valuable tools. "One of the agendas of design is to take the constraints of any given situation and turn them on their head," he says. "If a building is not expressive, it is a lost opportunity. If a building is not efficient, it is a lost opportunity. If a building is not well engineered and well designed, it is a lost opportunity."

Such clarity extends to his observations on architectural education. Having spent nearly two decades teaching and engaging with academia, Bhatt believes that schools across the world are struggling to keep pace with rapidly changing realities. "Architectural education and the architectural profession need to keep pace with rapid changes in user demands, environmental conditions and global market shifts," he says. "That is something that academia, not just in India, but the world over, has not been able to catch up with."

Even architecture's systems of

recognition are not exempt from scrutiny. As an international juror and RIBA Awards Ambassador, Bhatt acknowledges the pressures created by the growing culture of awards and industry visibility. While rigorous evaluation processes continue to play an important role, he notes that many awards have become intertwined with events and promotional ecosystems. "There is pressure from the industry on participation for the sake of visibility," he observes, adding that this can sometimes result in recognition being awarded where it may not necessarily be deserved.

Running through all of Bhatt's reflections is a recurring belief that architecture must resist the temptation of short-term thinking. Whether discussing sustainability, education, commercial development or professional recognition, he consistently returns to the value of clarity, longevity and meaningful contribution. In a profession increasingly shaped by acceleration, his perspective serves as a reminder that architecture's greatest achievements are rarely immediate. They are measured not by how quickly they capture attention, but by how enduringly they serve the people and places for which they were created.

Designing for belonging: Heena Bhargava

If Akshat Bhatt's reflections are rooted in architecture's responsibility to endure, Heena Bhargava's perspective begins elsewhere: with people. Long before materials are selected, plans are drawn or forms begin to emerge, she believes architecture starts with understanding the invisible networks that shape everyday life. The relationships between people, processes and places are not secondary considerations; they are the foundation upon which meaningful design is built.

"For me, architecture begins with listening before designing," she says. It is a deceptively simple statement, yet one that reveals much about her approach. In an age where architecture is often celebrated for its visual identity, Bhargava's attention is directed towards something less tangible but arguably more enduring: human experience.

Every project, she explains, exists within a complex web of relationships. There are the people who will inhabit it, the systems that sustain it, and the larger social and cultural context in which it resides. Before considering form, materiality or aesthetics, she seeks to understand how these relationships function. "Before thinking



PC: Jeevin Sharma

Heena Bhargava, Architect, Architecture Discipline

"The success of a project is often measured not by its architectural statement, but by how seamlessly it becomes part of people's lives."

about form or materials, I try to understand how people will move through a space, interact with one another, and ultimately connect with the wider community."

It is a philosophy that shifts architecture away from object-making and towards place-making. Buildings cease to be isolated entities and instead become frameworks through which everyday life unfolds. Whether designing a residence, a hospitality project or a public institution, Bhargava views architecture as an enabler of connections. "I see architecture as a framework that enables relationships to flourish," she says. "The design emerges from understanding those relationships and giving them spatial expression."

That belief has been shaped most profoundly through her work on community-focused and public projects. While architecture

is often discussed through the lens of aesthetics or innovation, these projects revealed a different measure of success. They demonstrated that architecture's true impact is often felt not in the moment of completion, but in the ways it quietly integrates itself into people's lives.

"Working on public and community-focused projects has had the greatest influence on my thinking," Bhargava reflects. "These projects make it clear that architecture is not simply about providing physical infrastructure; it can affect dignity and wellbeing."

The observation speaks to a broader understanding of architecture as a social act. The most meaningful buildings are not necessarily the most photographed or celebrated. Often, they are the ones that become indispensable to the communities

they serve. "The success of a project is often measured not by its architectural statement but by how seamlessly it becomes part of people's lives," she says.

This sensitivity to human experience also informs her understanding of architecture's influence on society. While buildings alone cannot solve complex social challenges, they can create conditions that encourage positive behaviours and interactions. The organisation of space, the placement of thresholds, the visibility between people and the opportunities for chance encounters all shape the culture of a place in subtle yet lasting ways.

"The biggest lesson has been that architecture can shape behaviour and culture in subtle but lasting ways," Bhargava explains. "The way spaces are organised influences how people meet, communicate and interact."

These effects are often invisible, unfolding gradually over time. A thoughtfully designed workplace may encourage collaboration. A public space may foster inclusivity. A neighbourhood intervention may strengthen community ties. Through seemingly small design decisions, architecture can either reinforce hierarchy or nurture openness. "Small design decisions can either encourage openness and interaction or create separation and hierarchy," she notes.

Such thinking becomes particularly relevant when discussing sustainability, a term that has often been reduced to technological solutions and performance metrics. Bhargava advocates for a broader and more holistic understanding, especially within the Indian context.

"In India, sustainability must extend beyond technological solutions," she says. "It begins with understanding climate, culture, local resources and patterns of use."

For her, genuinely sustainable architecture is not defined solely by energy efficiency. It is measured by resilience, adaptability and longevity. It is architecture capable of evolving alongside its users while remaining relevant to its context. Traditional Indian building practices, she argues, already contain valuable lessons in climate responsiveness and resource efficiency. The challenge lies in integrating those lessons with contemporary lifestyles and technologies.

"A sustainable building should age gracefully, remain relevant over time and create social and environmental value," she says. "Longevity, flexibility and responsible resource use are, in my view, as important as performance metrics."

Underlying many of these ideas is Bhargava's deep appreciation for observation, a quality nurtured through her passions for travel and birdwatching. Both pursuits have shaped the way she understands the built environment, teaching lessons that architecture often overlooks.

"Birdwatching and travel have taught me the importance of observation," she reflects. Natural ecosystems, she explains, demonstrate remarkable levels of interdependence and resilience. Every element contributes to a larger whole, creating environments that are both adaptive and enduring. These lessons frequently influence the way she approaches spatial relationships and the integration of buildings within their surroundings.

Travel, meanwhile, has reinforced the importance of cultural rootedness. Some of the world's most memorable places are not necessarily those that seek attention. Rather, they are places that belong effortlessly to their context.

"Some of the most memorable places are not necessarily the most iconic," Bhargava says. "They are the ones that feel deeply rooted in their landscape, climate, history and community."



PC: Jeevin Sharma

Deeksha Gulati, Architect, Architecture Discipline.



An upcoming, contemporary mixed-use tower.

"India's greatest opportunity lies not in building more, but in building with greater intent."

Perhaps that sentiment best encapsulates her architectural philosophy. At a time when architecture is often pressured to stand apart, Bhargava's work advocates for something quieter yet more profound: buildings that belong. Buildings that listen before they speak. Buildings that strengthen relationships rather than simply occupy space. And ultimately, buildings that remind us that architecture's greatest achievement may not be what it creates, but what it allows to flourish.

The architecture of meaning

If architecture today is being asked to do more than provide shelter, then perhaps its greatest challenge lies in creating meaning. Not spectacle, not excess, not even comfort alone, but environments that resonate long after one has left them. For Deeksha Gulati, architect at Architecture Discipline, this

pursuit of meaning has shaped a professional journey that mirrors the changing role of architecture itself.

Having spent nearly a decade within the practice, Gulati has witnessed architecture expand beyond traditional concerns of form and space into something far more nuanced and interconnected. The profession she entered years ago is not the same one she navigates today. "Over the years, I've come to understand architecture as a far more layered discipline," she reflects, "one that negotiates between culture, climate, economics, craft and human behaviour."

What began as a fascination with the physical language of architecture gradually evolved into a deeper understanding of its social and cultural influence. Architecture, she believes, derives its true value not from the objects it creates but from the experiences it enables. "It has evolved into a

deeper appreciation of architecture's ability to shape experiences, foster connections and create lasting value for both people and place."

That idea finds particular relevance in Gulati's extensive work within the hospitality sector, where she has led design teams for some of India's most recognised hospitality brands, including The Oberoi, Taj Vivanta and jūSTa. Hospitality projects, perhaps more than any other typology, reveal architecture's ability to shape memory. Guests may remember a view, a material, a courtyard or the quality of light filtering through a room. Yet the most enduring experiences are often impossible to define.

For Gulati, the distinction between luxury and memorability lies precisely there. "The distinction lies in emotional resonance," she says. While luxury has traditionally been associated with exclusivity, abundance and comfort, memorable hospitality is rooted in something far more profound: connection. The places that remain with us are often those that feel inseparable from their context.

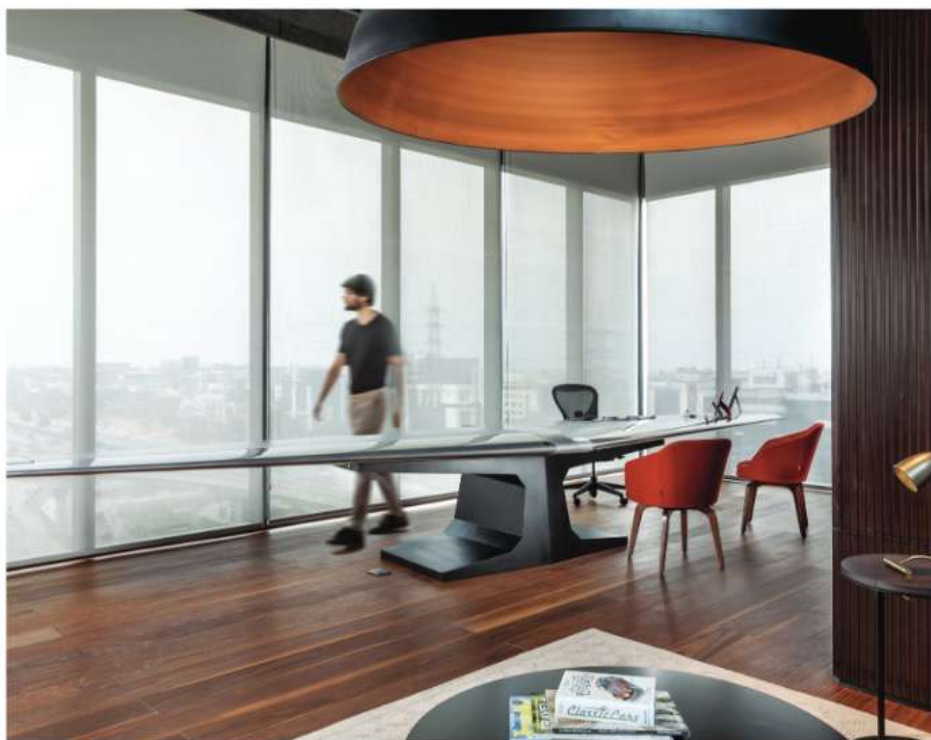
"The most successful projects weave together context, culture and experience to create environments that feel immersive and deeply connected to their setting," she explains.

It is a perspective that challenges many contemporary notions of luxury, particularly in a world where architecture is increasingly consumed through images. Across hospitality, residential and commercial projects alike, visual impact is frequently mistaken for value. Yet Gulati advocates for a quieter understanding of luxury, one grounded in authenticity rather than excess.

"True luxury, to me, is about quality of space, light, air and experience," she says.

In the contemporary Indian context, this philosophy feels especially relevant. As cities grow denser and lifestyles become increasingly fast-paced, luxury is no longer defined by ornament or scale alone. Instead, it emerges through clarity, comfort and the thoughtful orchestration of everyday experiences. "It lies in creating thoughtfully designed built environments that endure," Gulati notes. "Spaces that feel effortless and authentic, where restraint, clarity and a strong sense of purpose take precedence over opulence."

Such restraint, however, does not come easily. Behind every successful project lies a complex negotiation between aspiration and reality. Budgets, timelines, resources and client expectations often appear at odds



Corporate Headquarters for East India Hotels (The Oberoi Group) in Gurugram.

with creative ambition. Yet Gulati views these forces not as obstacles but as essential components of the design process itself.

"The most rewarding projects are those where creative ambition and practical constraints inform one another," she explains.

It is a philosophy that echoes Architecture Discipline's broader belief that design thrives within limitations rather than despite them. "Budgets, timelines, resources and client aspirations are not limitations to design," she says. "They are part of its framework." The architect's role, therefore, is not simply to pursue an ideal vision, but to identify what is essential to that vision and protect its integrity throughout the process.

Underlying these reflections is a deeper concern for the future of the profession itself. As India continues to urbanise at an unprecedented pace, architects are being presented with opportunities unlike any previous generation. New cities, institutions, public spaces and cultural infrastructures are emerging across the country, creating possibilities for meaningful intervention at every scale.

Yet Gulati believes that the industry's greatest opportunity is not one of quantity. "India's greatest opportunity lies not in just building more, but in building with greater intent," she says.

The statement feels particularly resonant in a profession increasingly shaped by speed, visibility and relentless production. The challenge facing the next generation, she suggests, will be maintaining a commitment to quality, context and cultural relevance amid these pressures.

"As our cities and aspirations evolve, architects will play an unprecedented role in shaping the country's public and cultural fabric," she observes. Yet the profession must also guard against losing its sense of place. "The challenge will be maintaining a high professional standard and a sense of place in a profession increasingly driven by speed, scale and visibility."

Taken together, Gulati's reflections offer a fitting conclusion to a broader conversation about the future of architecture and work. If Akshat Bhatt speaks of longevity and responsibility, and Heena Bhargava of relationships and belonging, Gulati reminds us of architecture's enduring capacity to create meaning. In a world increasingly defined by acceleration, she argues for a more intentional approach, one where buildings are not judged solely by what they look like, but by how they make people feel, how deeply they connect to their context, and how meaningfully they enrich the lives of those who inhabit them. ■