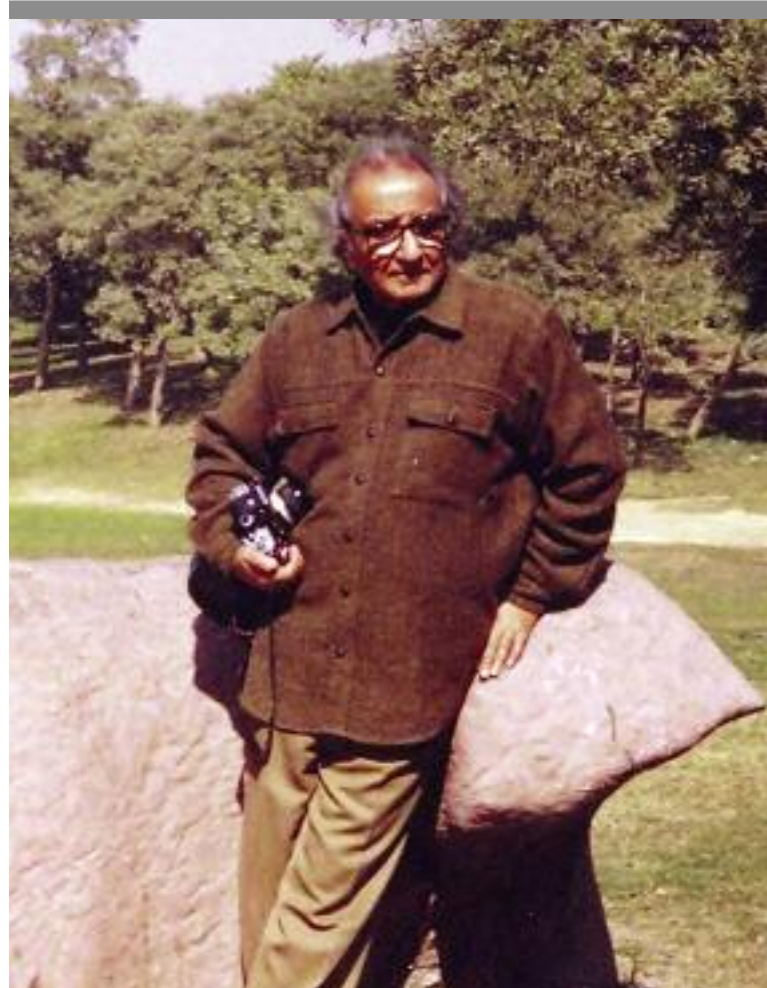


RAVINDRA BHAN



Shakti Sthala, Delhi

UNDERSTANDING OF NATURE'S WORLD

“Landscape Architecture deals with the design of the total outdoor environment with the understanding of nature's world in man's domain. Man and nature are linked together. For creating a sustainable and healthy environment, understanding of nature as a process is very important. The components of nature such as rock, earth, water, vegetation, climate, birds and mammals etc are all linked together and are interdependent on each other. Landscape Architecture plays a key role in any sort of development as it understands how and where to develop, without abusing the natural environment.”

TEXT: AR. APURVA BOSE DUTTA
 PICTURE COURTESY:
 AR. RAVINDRA BHAN

PROFILE
 Professor Ravindra Bhan is one of India's most legendary, respected and successful landscape architects. Having completed his architectural education from abroad he was part of the first ever Master planning attempt of Delhi and the very first Yamuna Riverfront Development plan while he was working with the Town Planning organisation in Delhi. He worked with Architects' Co-partnership in England from 1958-1964 and then in Finland with Ar Reima Pietila. He also worked briefly with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill & Minoru Yamasaki and Associates in USA. Professor Bhan was selected by Ford Foundation as an expert to establish the first formal training programme in Landscape Architecture in India, at the School of Planning & Architecture (SPA) - New Delhi. After heading it for five years he established his own practice Ravindra Bhan & Associates in Delhi in 1974.

Recipient of many accolades in architecture -nationally and internationally, some of his achievements include the Aga Khan award(1980) for Mughal Sheraton Hotel in Agra; a merit award of the American society of landscape architect (1974), first prize for International Low Cost Housing Competition(1973) and ISOLA

MEDAL 2010 for lifetime achievement and contribution to the profession of architecture.

Previously a member of the Delhi Urban Arts Commission, Professor Bhan is presently the Vice President of National Committee ICOMOS, India and a Advisor in National Martyrs Memorial Committee, Hussainiwala. He is also a member of the expert committee formed to advise on the modifications to Central Secretariat, Parliament House & Rashtrapati Bhavan and other government buildings in New Delhi; Member of eastern Region Publication and Editorial Committee of International Federation of Landscape Architects; Member of International Committee for Historical Gardens, ICOMOS, Belgium; Advisor, Delhi Development Authority for the formation of Master Plan for DWAR-KA Township; Life Member of World Wild Life Fund, India and Member, of Indian Heritage Society, New Delhi, India.

He has also taught at the University of Philadelphia and Washington University, St. Louis, USA. Presently he is a visiting professor in the Department of Urban Design and Department of Landscape Architecture in SPA, New Delhi.

Some of his famed projects include Shakti Sthala - memorial to Late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, New Delhi; Development, Conservation and Reconstruction plan for Ayodhya Ghats, U.P;

Master planning and site development plans for Ravindra Sarobar, Kolkata; Site development and landscaping for a 500 acre township of Chambal Fertilizers, Kota, Rajasthan; Golden Temple Corridor site development, architecture and landscaping, Amritsar, Punjab; Site development and landscaping of ISKCON Temple, New Delhi; Urban design, landscaping and site development for Andrews Ganj Housing for HUDCO, New Delhi and Mughal Sheraton Hotel in Agra, U.P.

Apurva Bose Dutta (ABD): Please let us know about your education and professional background. What inspired you to take up architecture as a vocation and landscape architecture as your specialization?

Ravindra Bhan (RB): My interest in nature is deep rooted in my upbringing in the picturesque surrounding of immense natural beauty of Kashmir. My schooling in that part of the world exposed me to various facets of nature and its appreciation, which later influenced and guided my career. My parents, who had abiding interest in Arts, encouraged me to pursue painting, photography and music as my hobbies. I became interested in Indian classical music and started to learn musical instruments- *dillruba* and *tabla* and continued to learn them for a long time. In fact, later on during my studies at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, I got a chance to collaborate with my friend Sumit Ghosh, who plays sitar and we both used to perform

at a local cafe in the evenings.

During my college days in Srinagar, I devoted considerable amount of time to painting and photography, participating in various competitions and exhibitions. One of my painting and photographic exhibitions was inaugurated in Srinagar, Kashmir by well known painter and architectural historian Percy Brown. I also contributed my photographs regularly to the various leading publications of the country. After finishing college I decided to pursue photography as a career and joined a three year course of cinematography in Bangalore. However, after studying only for a year, I was disillusioned with the method of its formal education and decided to give up the course.

It took me a while to decide my future course of action. I finally decided to join SPA in 1952. The faculty was headed by a young lady Elizabeth Ghuman, a sensitive architect. She was instrumental in giving my thoughts a direction by encouraging and helping me to develop interest in landscape and sensitivity towards inherent natural order.

As a student, I was fascinated with the architectural developments in the European countries. I thought it a worthwhile exposure and a good learning experience if one could work abroad and pursue studies. To pursue my dream I left architecture studies halfway and joined the office of Architect A.P. Kanvinde for whose work, as a student I had great admiration. After

working there for about one year I got introduced to Shivnath Prasad who showed interest in my academic work. Shivnath Prasad at that time was heading the Department of Town and Country Planning Organization which was formed to work on the Delhi Master Plan, which was being formulated for the first time after independence. With the help of Ford Foundation I got an offer to join the team which I readily accepted. The working environment was exciting and new ideas were encouraged. I got involved with many interesting assignments and later on worked on the very first Yamuna river front development scheme. I stayed with the organization for two years.

In 1957, I left for England where I joined the architectural firm of Architects' Co-Partnership - a firm of seven young talented architects who had graduated together from the Architectural Association School, London. I worked with them for six years and also pursued my architectural studies part time. A casual meeting through a mutual friend in London with Reima Pietila, the famous Finnish architect influenced my future career. On his invitation, I shifted to Finland to join his office and stayed with him. This was to be the greatest experience of my lifetime. Pietila was one of the finest human beings and a great architect to work with. Working with him gave me a new insight in the profession of design and architecture. His non-conventional methods, design ideas and ways of developing design were amazing. Besides

other work, I worked closely with him on the design of Kaleva church in Tampere.

My stay in Finland was extremely rewarding. Healthy discussions and frequent interactions with friends of Reima and Ralli, his wife and many renowned architects, painters, industrial designers and textile designers was a great experience in itself. I left Finland after working for a year and half and joined Minoru Yamasaki's office at Michigan, USA where I worked for him on the World Trade Centre project in New York.

Through all these years, at the back of my mind I always had the desire of completing my formal architecture education. I joined and finished my architectural studies at Washington University at St. Louis Missouri, USA. My prolonged interaction with Shuko Monakata, a world renowned woodcutter and my teaching experience of graphic design to undergraduates was very helpful and immensely rewarding.

After my graduation, I worked briefly for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill in New York. During my stay in New York I met Ian McHarg who was instrumental in helping me to pursue my post graduate landscape studies at University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. I joined his office and worked with him as a senior designer for more than seven years and also participated in the teaching programmes at the Penn. University.

ABD: Who were the archi-

ects who have influenced you in your career?

RB: I have been greatly influenced by two people in architecture - Reima Pietila, who designed some very beautiful buildings as a part of nature and laid stress on the use of local materials. The other major influence was Ian McHarg who also happened to be the head of department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania from where I graduated. He revolutionized the concept of Landscape Architecture by publishing a book called 'Design with Nature' in the 1960's, where he advocated preserving the relationship of nature and man. Whatever I have learnt about Landscape Architecture, I owe it to him.

ABD: What is your approach to design and how would you characterize your special kind of architecture?

RB: Design is a very complex venture and it really depends for whom you are designing - human beings/animals/etc. Also what is taken into consideration is the period that you are designing for, the availability of materials and the height at which you are designing. The close and symbiotic relationship between plains, site and mass is very crucial and it is important to understand that for a design process. After understanding all constraints in terms of design, one really needs to find out the possibilities about how a building can be placed keeping in mind the relationship of man and

nature. This is my approach to understand nature and how best we can design to maximize the potential it is offering us.

ABD: How would you describe Landscape Architecture? What would you say is its relevance to architecture?

RB: Landscape Architecture deals with the design of the total outdoor environment with the understanding of nature's world in man's domain. Man and nature are linked together. For creating a sustainable and healthy environment, understanding of nature as a process is very important. The components of nature such as rock, earth, water, vegetation, climate, birds and mammals etc are all linked together and are interdependent on each other. Landscape Architecture plays a key role in any sort of development as it understands how and where to develop, without abusing the natural environment.

Its relevance to architecture is substantial. Any built form creates a considerable change both in the physical and natural environment of a place. A landscape architect manages the development in such a way so that the relationship between man and nature remains within tolerable limits, thus, minimizing the abuse of natural environment.

ABD: Like other architects of the older generation, do you feel you are at a juncture where you have to make a conscious decision of holding to the past



Chambal Fertilizers

or do you think it is important to adhere to the contemporary design ambience?

RB: I do not think that design is a reflection of the past or present, in fact it is a process which merges the past and present. There are design parameters which remain fixed and some parameters change with time. Suppose if you are designing a chair, as a designer you relate to the measurements of human body which almost remain fixed. The variable components are material which would change with time. What is new today would become old tomorrow and what is contemporary would become historic later. So what actually changes is time, material, aspiration and a change in attitude. Design is a process and what is modern design, is only on the face of it. The essence of the design no matter in what age it has been created remains the same as does the spirit. For example, we all

know that years may pass but the Taj Mahal would always be admired for its design quality.

ABD: in other countries there are two models that are followed in Landscape Architecture - european or the Japanese. in india, where does the inspiration for Landscape Architecture arise from?

RB: I don't think the Japanese or the European Model is followed per say. Of course the traditional landscaping - traditional gardens of the Japan is really wonderful. Also in Europe like England, there have been traditional aspects of landscaping, but these are not models which are followed anywhere. Design is a process and is an outcome of so many things. It depends on the country which is really designing.

ABD: you have worked with Skidmore owing, and Merrill and Minoru yamasaki and

Associates in uSA. How would you compare the Landscape Architecture being practiced in india today to other countries?

RB: In India, the profession of Landscape Architecture is still in infancy. Here, we have less than five hundred qualified landscape architects. Moreover the awareness of landscape profession amongst governmental agencies who are mostly custodian of developable land is almost nonexistent. Also most of the professional who are concerned with the built environment do not appreciate the need of associating with a landscape architect.

The scenario in developed countries is very different where the contribution of landscape architects in built environment is well recognized. In India there is a great future for the profession but the proper recognition of the profession would still take some time.

ABD: you formed the first

training programme in Landscape Architecture in india at SpA, Delhi and also headed it for a number of years. How would you rate the landscape architectural education in india and what are the glaring challenges they face?

RB: Architecture and Landscape Architecture are two separate disciplines. At the time I founded the landscape programme there were a total of 25 to 30 schools of architecture in India, and SPA, Delhi was the first school where Landscape Architecture at the postgraduate level was introduced. There are around 150 schools of architecture now but still only 3-4 schools teach landscape architecture at a post graduation level. The profession of landscape architecture has not kept pace with the growing demand for the profession. There is acute shortage of trained professionals and teachers to guide the students.

ABD: How has Landscape Architecture developed in india over time? With the commonwealth games held in india do you think the landscape was in line with the requirements? What improvements have been made in response to the commonwealth games as far as Landscape Architecture is concerned?

RB: I would say that now there is definitely awareness of the profession in India. But the larger projects like public housing, low cost housing, infrastructure projects, recreation projects etc are handled by the government agencies which still do not recognize the role played by the landscape architect in built environment.

Coming to the commonwealth games, we had a fantastic opportunity to upgrade many facilities which were completely lacking in the city. Although enormous amount of money was spent on the up gradation but it



Iskcon Temple, Delhi



Ayodhya Ghats, U.P.

was a total waste, since most of it was unplanned and implemented in great haste. Very few professional landscape architects were involved, even those involved did not have the experience of handling the jobs of this nature. The results are evident everywhere. The substandard and improper materials have already starting falling apart and shoddiness of the work is apparent. Massive drive for overall plantation for road network is equally pathetic. The design quality of plant material is improper and poor. Some of the hedges planted on the road meridians are so close that their stems touch each other. It would be a miracle if even ten percent of them survive in the course of time.

ABD: The indian pavilion at the Shanghai World expo had a dome which was covered with medicinal and herbal herbs. can you please give your comments for the same and would you like to have done it in a different manner than what was done?

RB: I am not well aware of the bamboo dome at Shanghai World

Expo and would not like to comment on it but I am aware of the so called design of vertical gardens where plants are grown on ground in horizontal trays and then clipped on to the system forming vertical surfaces. Plants always grow towards the direction of the light. Plants on a horizontal surface bend towards the light in haphazard manner. I find it illogical and ridiculous. You are denying the natural growth process which imparts the plant their character. The designer is not utilizing the full design potential of plants.

ABD: india has one journal fully devoted to Landscape Architecture - Journal of Landscape Architecture. What recommendations would you suggest for the magazine and for Architectural Journalism as a whole in india?

RB: It is a good magazine and only of its kind in India. One would like to see coverage where design projects are evaluated for their design sensibility. The attitude of publishing and pleasing some how needs to change. We need a kind of journalism where we

should cater for the general readers and as well for professionals.

ABD: Which cities in india and the world would you say represent the best kind of landscape architecture?

RB: There are many interesting and good design projects abroad and in India which are mostly isolated so pointing out a favourite would be rather a difficult task.

The attitude of people and the way they relate themselves with the total environment gives rise to coherent and holistic designs. During my stay in Finland I found Finns very sensitive when it came to design. Finland is a picturesque country dotted with more than eighty thousand lakes, beautiful pine trees and scattered large boulders. Their bylaw mentions that you are not supposed to change the original landscape.

They do not alter the character of the place by flattening it. They are not allowed to shift any rock or cut any tree on the site. If they want to build they are only allowed to build around it. Even the architects who build there take utmost care to preserve the

natural landscape. The attitude of people and the concern for the environment has created a holistic environment in which the relationship of man and nature has been maintained.

ABD: Way back in 2002 when you had visited chandigarh, one of the most well planned cities of india, you were not happy with the Landscape Architecture there. Have you noticed any difference in the past few years?

RB: I have not been to Chandigarh recently. The planning of landscape structure there is excellent but I feel the local public works department does not understand how to structure and manage the spaces which at the moment look disjointed.

ABD: out of the vast repertoire of your projects which is the project closest to your heart?

RB: There are a number of projects that have been very close to me where I feel something very substantial has been achieved. Some of them being- AYODHYA GHATS, U.P.

More than hundred years ago, the course of the holy river Sarayu

shifted away from the Ghat edge of Ayodhya town. Over time, the Ghats and burgies were completely buried in silt. Within a century their existence was almost forgotten and a significant component of the historic town was lost. The ritual of bathing in the river moved away from the traditional edge of the town to the new flow of the river. The old bed became a peripheral vacant land between the old town and new alignments of the river. Haphazard growth of vegetation and stray manmade structures encroached upon this uncared stretch of land. Modern service lines like sewerage and electricity found easy access through this area.

In 1985, the irrigation department of the Uttar Pradesh Government decided to construct an irrigation canal through this area, connecting the river Sarayu and a stretch of agricultural land beyond the town. We persuaded the authorities to dig up and expose the hidden Ghat steps and burgies - a difficult and long-drawn process made even more tedious by the stubbornness of officials of



Mughal Sheraton

different departments that had to be patiently overcome, as anything like this was not on their agenda. The discovery of old Patwari maps showing the existence of some Ghats became visible and we suggested and designed a system by which the proposed irrigation canal could flow close to the old town edge touching the Ghats. We almost forced the authorities to implement the idea that was liked and fully supported by the local people.

The old Ghats were conserved, repaired and reconstructed and water flowed once again after a gap of hundred and twenty five years, giving back the old town of Ayodhya their Ghats which they lost over the passage of time.

SHAKTI STHALA, DELHI

The other project that I have enjoyed working on is SHAKTI STHALA - 'The abode of energy'.

It is a place where one experiences quieter moments to pay homage to one of the most remarkable woman that ever lived. It is a tribute to the life, ideals, vision and courage of Indira Gandhi.

The memorial evokes the emotional response of her innate strength and varied personality which combines strength and sensitivity, traditionality, progressive outlook and symbolizes the charismatic impact of her personality.

The design of Shakti Sthala reflects the love and concern of Indira Gandhi for nature. The concept has been evolved by using primordial elements of nature such as rocks, earth, water and trees. The understanding of interdependence of these design elements with each other has evolved a harmonious relationship bringing all the elements together, creating a befitting memorial with an ever changing visual experience.

The visitors come upon the Samadhi of Indira Gandhi almost unexpectedly. The monument stands in a cradle shaped form created out of gently sloping earth berms. The area is planted heavily with indigenous trees and wild ground covers of various kinds. Plants have been selected carefully so that every season of the year brings the change in the landscape enhancing the nature phenomena.

The iron rock which weighs 60 tonnes and is 5m high stands like a sentinel guarding the spot where Indira Gandhi was cremated. The rock symbolizes her courage, fortitude and strength of purpose. The shape, colour and texture of the rock imparts a haunting beauty and radiance to the environment which is dramatic but at the same time peaceful and serene and gives an aura that is almost like her presence.

Shakti Sthala is also a geological museum, the first of its kind in the world. It represents India symbolically by representing the geological crust of each and every state and union territory of India - right from Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir to Kanyakumari and from Assam to Andaman and Nicobar Island. These rocks which on average weigh five to six tonnes are displayed in the forty five acre area. It took three years to collect the rocks from each and every state of India and four years to complete the project.

The help for this project came from the geological survey of India, Indian army, boarder security forces and state governments. Some rocks were lifted by helicopters while some fragile rocks were air lifted. Special road tracks were also constructed to lift some special rocks and get them transported.

The task was enormous and very complex. The late Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was monitoring the project himself and it is only because of his keen interest that a project of this magnitude was realized.

I find this a very unique project

which has been realized because of the government involvement and very efficient monitoring system from Prime Minister's Secretariat.

MUGHAL SHERATON, AGRA (1974-1977)

It was very important to design the building as a low profile structure. The intent was to not over shadow the urban character of old and historic town of Tajang, but to integrate the new construction with the surroundings. The city of Agra has a very unfriendly climate during summers. The complex has been designed as a series of related building blocks arranged around three sunken landscape courtyards to reduce heat intake into the build form. Symbols and salient features of Mughal architecture and landscape have been reinterpreted into the design vocabulary. Every single room of the hotel has a view either of the internal landscape courtyards or the surrounding gardens. The project was selected as one of the twelve best projects built between 1960-80 in the world. The project was awarded the Aga Khan Award in 1980 for excellence in design and integration of architecture and landscape architecture.

ABD: you have been india's most eminent landscape architect and ecological planner who has beautified the country with his Landscape Architecture. is there any specific kind of project left that you desire to create today?

RB: Yes, I would like to get involved with large public areas especially in big congested cities. We do not have large public well designed spaces in cities and even if they are, they are not at the right places where people frequent. The management and sustainability of large public spaces in residential complexes is needed very badly to upgrade the quality of life.

ABD: How do you see the future of Landscape Architecture ten years from now?

RB: I think the future will be brilliant since the younger generation is sensitive and very perceptive. But we definitely need more formalized exposure to landscape education only after which the potential of the profession can be realized.

In Conclusion
Landscape Architecture, an increasingly relevant and pertinent aspect of architecture has very few people who have understood its nuances and worked on them. Professor Ravindra Bhan's passion for nature comes comprehensively from what he says and the way he says. Talking to him certifies how India still needs such legends for the country, and how the younger generation architects still needs stalwarts like him to show us the right path. And above all, we all need to understand and learn from him that humility remains the best asset of people as successful and passionate as him.

Apurva Bose Dutta

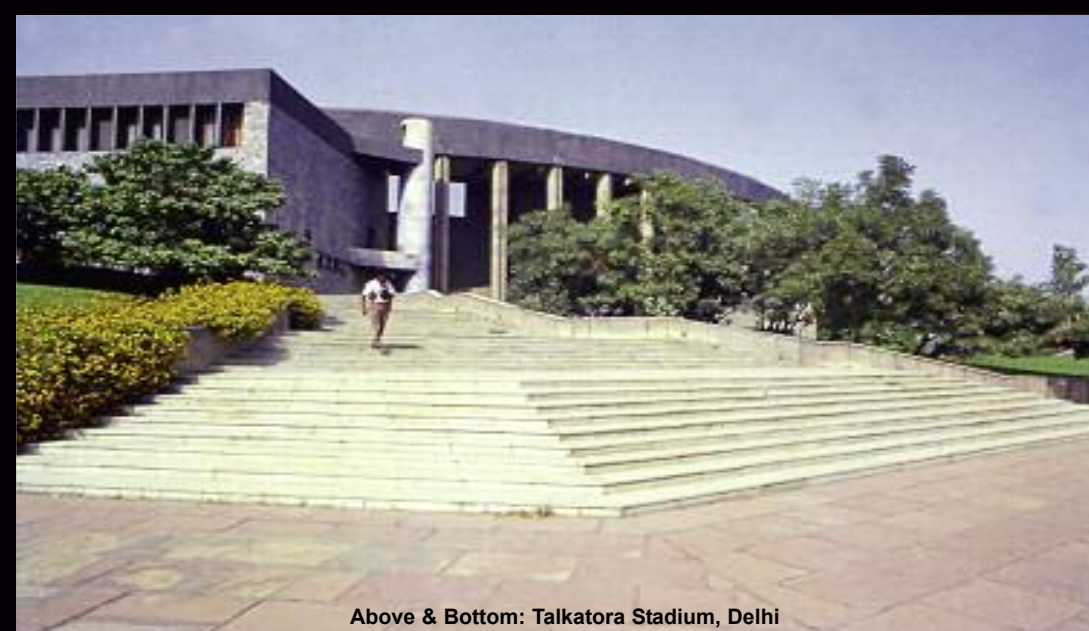


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RAVINDRA BHAN SPEAKS ON ARCHITECTURE

“ Architecture and Landscape Architecture are two separate disciplines. At the time I founded the landscape programme there were a total of 25 to 30 schools of architecture in India, and SPA, Delhi was the first school where Landscape Architecture at the postgraduate level was introduced. There are around 150 schools of architecture now but still only 3-4 schools teach landscape architecture at a post graduation level. The profession of landscape architecture has not kept pace with the growing demand for the profession. There is acute shortage of trained professionals and teachers to guide the students. ”



Above & Bottom: Talkatora Stadium, Delhi

School at Parwanoo