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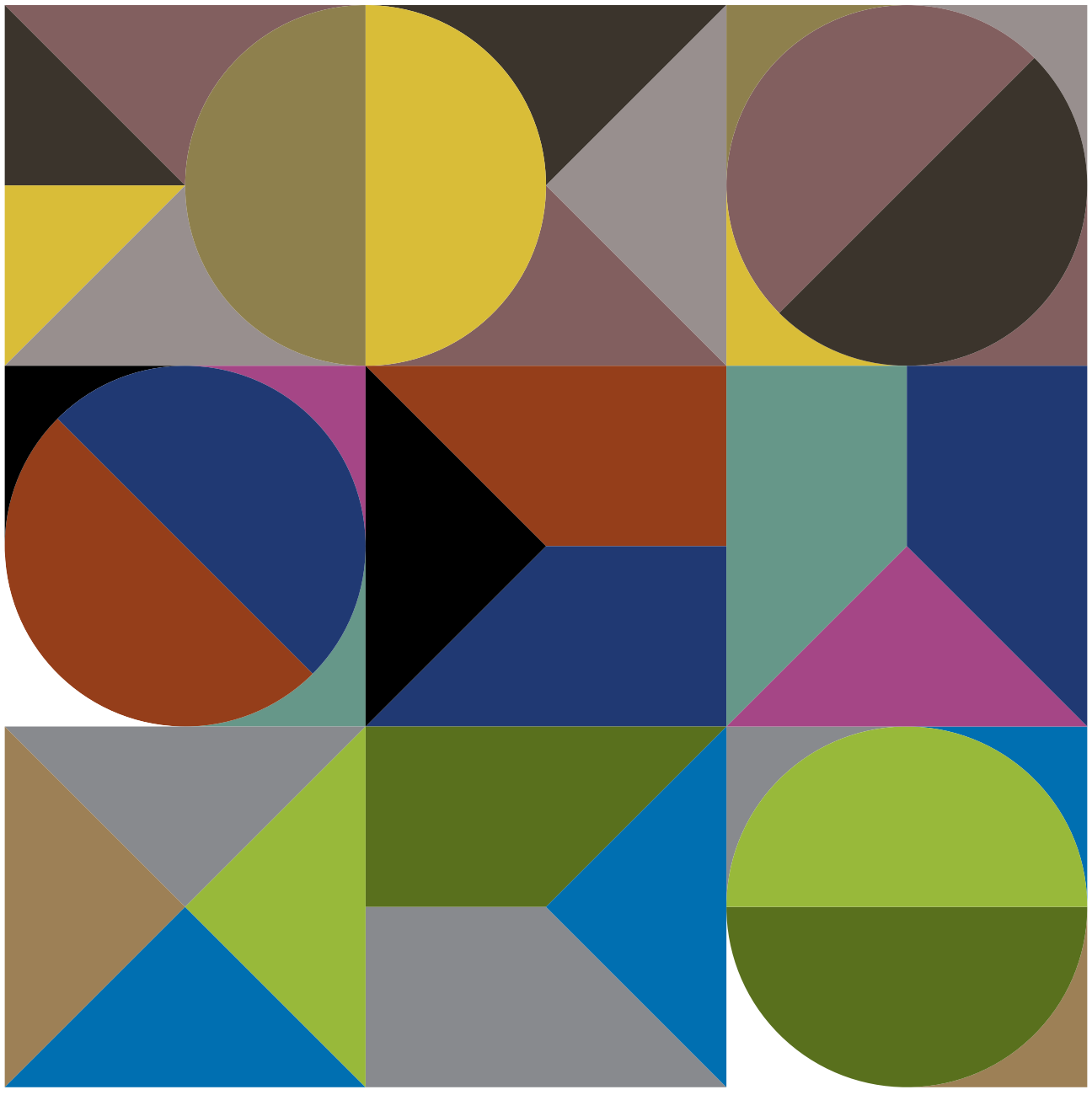
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IN PURSUIT OF MEANING

RANJIT SABIKHI

1935 – 2024

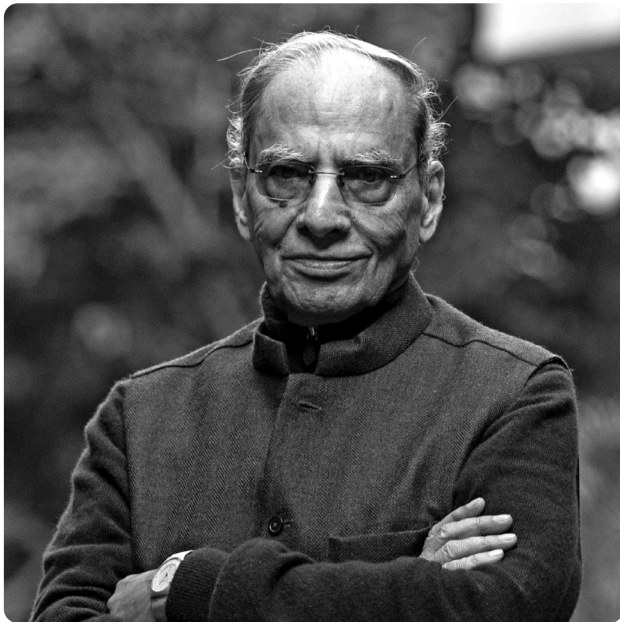


PHOTO CREDIT | RSA Architects

Ranjit Sabikhi, was a visionary architect and urban designer, blending sensitivity to cultural contexts with a sharp eye for detail. A mentor and thought leader, he championed people-centric spaces, shaping India's urban landscape.

When I got to know Prof. Ranjit Sabikhi in 1991, he was already a legendary figure in the disciplines of Architecture and Urban Design. I applied to him for the position of trainee in his organization and got an interview call. On the appointed day, I reached there and was mesmerized to enter the beautiful exposed brick corner building, which was the office of the Design Group [M Block Market, Greater Kailash - Part 2]. One entered at the mid-level and then walked across around a triple-story atrium across a bridge to enter the conference room. Turning to the left there, one accessed his office. He sat across a large teak-

edged white laminated table with a white table lamp illuminating his worktop. The table was stacked with neatly arranged papers, a yellow Rotring pencil, an eraser, some Rotring pens, a roll of yellow-tinted gateway paper, and behind on his sideboard laid neatly rolled drawings. The wall was adorned with a sectional perspective of a project and a framed certificate of the Aga Khan Award. He asked me to take a seat, patiently sifted through my portfolio, asked a few questions about my group housing site plan, grilled it a bit, and made some general critical comments on the rest of the drawings, by the end of which I was so terrified, especially by his intermittent silence and deep gazing eyes which bore through you, that I wanted to escape. His strict demeanor was very much visible and so was his politeness, command over language, his measured words, and his impeccable mannerisms. However, I was hired and asked to join on 1st March 1991. Thus began a lifelong association with him.

“To me, architectural form making, however exciting, was not enough. I was more fascinated by the space between buildings and the gradual process of inevitable change over time. In my opinion, buildings need to be conceived as living organisms as part of the larger context, and be designed to accommodate change”.^[1]

Later as I worked with him, with as much naivety as you would expect in any fresh-to-be graduate, I gradually started learning the “a, b, and c” of architecture, how to look at things, observed his penchant for detailing and at the same time his ability to think of the big picture.

To start with, he had put me on to a residential project for a young couple. I sat through the briefing session on his instruction, to take notes, which he did not even look at later [it was probably for me to learn to organize my thoughts]. How painstakingly he worked out the corner detail of the flooring border of the living room of that house was a revelation. Even his notes, in his beautiful slanted handwriting on the corner of the butter paper or the note pad were so methodical. He had the rare ability of being able to look at things from a broad perspective, the overall context, its place in the overall scheme of things, and yet at the same time he had the sharpest eye for detail – be it a border, be it a junction of the staircase railing, be it a wood joinery detail, he always strove for the best and wouldn’t pause sketching alternatives till he was satiated. The pursuit of perfection was ingrained in his nature.

To put it in the words of Aristotle—he was concerned “*not with things as they are, but with things as they might be and ought to be*”.

This very philosophy led him to look beyond the traditional practice of architecture. His designs reflected a deep sensitivity to cultural contexts and the environment, earning him accolades, inclusion in international exhibitions, and recognition in publications on contemporary Indian architecture. As an advocate for better urban design practices, he participated in international conferences and served on juries for significant global projects, including the New World Bank Headquarters in Washington, D.C.^[2]

Prof. Sabikhi taught at the Delhi Polytechnic Department of Architecture, which later became the School of Planning and Architecture SPA for almost two decades. There he founded India’s first Urban Design program where he mentored and inspired scores of students, many of whom turned out to be the who’s who of Indian Architecture practice and academia like K.T. Ravindran and Prof. Mohammad Shaheer. Admired by his students and his contemporaries alike, he was an innovator and a thought leader whose contributions have set a benchmark for future generations of urban designers and architects in India.

“His clarity of thought and brevity of expression even at that age was remarkable when as a handsome, young, flamboyant bloke he would come to the studio, go over student’s work, give his critique and wind up by the lunchtime to take care of the practice. But even that half an hour was much more worth it than the hours of blabbering that you come across these days. Gone are those days.”

—Prof. Mohammad Shaheer

Prof. Shaheer acknowledged the support he got from Sabikhi during his academics in the Department and even early professional growth when he called upon him to be a consultant to the Design Group for the Indian Embassy at Kuwait and all subsequent projects.

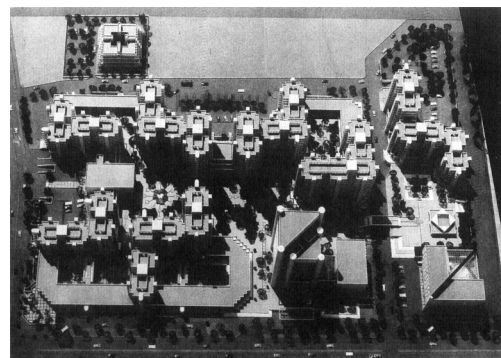
Equally pertinently, I remember the mutual admiration Prof. Sabikhi had for Prof. Shaheer “*in adding a dimension to his site plans and professional work through his rare skills*” during one of our interactions on the housing site plan I was working on with him.



YMCA Institute of Engineering, Faridabad [1969] features functional modernist architecture with academic blocks, laboratories, and open spaces, emphasizing practical learning and technical education.



Yamuna Apartments, New Delhi [1980s] includes low-rise modernist architecture, spacious layouts, and landscaped open spaces, promoting community-centric and sustainable urban living.



Janakpuri District Centre, New Delhi [1980s] features mid-rise commercial buildings, plazas, and pedestrian-friendly spaces, reflecting functional modernist architecture and planned urban development.

During the later years, when I was fortunate to work as a Landscape consultant with him, I remember some of his lesser-known projects in the public realm like the township he conceived for the IAS IPS officers at Mullanpur, Punjab in 2012. [Figure 2] He looked at the site, shunned the thought process of the Governing Board, and came up with a site plan with a large contiguous green, which ran through the site, accessible from all pockets, provided with all the requisite facilities and respecting the ecology by taking cognizance of the drainage channel - using it as a centerpiece rather than decimating it beneath inconspicuous culverts to dispose of the rainwater. He used it as a resource and yet he didn't compromise on the saleable area.

It was a great joy and learning to work together with him, P. C. Jethi, and Jagannath Rath together on this unique project, where he inspired everyone to do his best. His attention to road geometry and making universally accessible spaces at such a scale was remarkable and stemmed from his sensitivity and love for what he did.

He not just wanted to run any mundane architectural practice even at the age of 78, when he had done it all. He had passion for his work and every new project was an opportunity. Sabikhi importantly also establishes the much-contested binary of Western versus Eastern ideas of urban design, the homogenizing effects of industrialization, and the newfound reality that architecture has become a response to the rhythms of the real estate market that are at the best of times only "somewhat guided by developmental controls".^[3] Yet he made the best use of any such opportunities and attempted to create an architecture which is for the people and spaces which are living. A case in point is one of his last completed projects, on which our firm was lucky to work with him, the Orris Gateway SCO at Gurugram, a typical real estate project, in which yet again he exhibited his mastery of catering to the pedestrian, considered public safety and carved out a functional open space. A similar attempt has been made in his unbuilt master plan for the Kidwai Nagar Development.



Wildflower Hall, near Shimla [early 2000s] features colonial-style architecture, panoramic Himalayan views, and eco-sensitive mountain resort planning.



Hyderabad's GMR Aero Towers [2021] showcases contemporary sustainable architecture, integrating eco-friendly design with advanced infrastructure in a mixed-use development.

His philosophy of work has been so well documented in his book, *A Sense of Space - The Crisis of Urban Design in India*.

I want to share with the readers a glimpse into his humane side, his giving side, always so forthcoming to share his knowledge and work with young people, mentoring them and yet respecting their skills [not in a patronizing way] but genuinely helping them grow. He could also occasionally be ruthless [there have been instances] when owing to paucity of time whatever reasons you haven't performed to his [or your expectations] — he would admonish you to do well and come up with the best.

He continued to work till the last day at the ripe old age of 89 because he loved what he did and could do that forever. He passed away peacefully in his nap, almost like having chosen "*ichchha mrityu*" content and peaceful, knowing he had cared for everyone around him.

In the words of Mrs. Asha Sabikhi, his wife of six decades, of whose stoic contribution and support for him throughout his journey, very few know of and who kept him free to pursue his passion over all these years, while managing his home and the office administration,

"He was a good man, a strict man, not easy always. He loved architecture. He lived in architecture. He strove for excellence and could not tolerate mediocrity. His son, Siddharth will have very big shoes to fill. It is not easy to get over him"

Yes, it is not easy to get over him. You will always be missed, Sir!

References

- [1] *A Sense of Space - The Crisis of Urban Design in India*. Ranjit Sabikhi HarperCollins Publishers, India, 2019
- [2] *Ranjit Sabikhi: Father of Urban Design in India*. Christopher Charles Benninger's Facebook post dated 10th March 2015
- [3] *Greening Delhi*. An interview with Ranjit Sabikhi by Chitra Balasubramaniam

Ranjit Sabikhi

14 November, 1935–14 December, 2024

Studied Architecture at Liverpool University, UK. 1957 and 1959

Worked with Chamberlin Powell & Bon, London

Set up Practice with Ajoy Choudhury, The Design Group. 1961

Taught at Department of Architecture, Delhi Polytechnic [now School of Planning and Architecture]. 1959–1975

Visiting Critic at Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, Washington University, St. Louis

Established India's first Urban Design program. 1970s

Design Group expanded to ARCOP Design Group with Ramesh Khosla. 1974

Independently established Ranjit Sabikhi Associates. 1990s

SIGNIFICANT WORKS

Oberoi Wildflower Hall, Shimla

The Taj Bengal, Kolkata

Mughal Sheraton, Agra

Embassy of India, Kuwait

National Council of YMCA, New Delhi

YMCA Institute of Engineering, Faridabad

District Centre, Jankpuri, New Delhi

August Kranti Bhawan, New Delhi

Trident Hotel, Cochin

IAS IPC Officers Township, Mullanpur [Punjab]

Yamuna Apartments, New Delhi

Commercial projects, Zirakhpur

Orris Gateway SCO, Gurugram

BOOK

A Sense of Space: The Crisis of Urban Design in India, HarperCollins Publishers, India, 2019



All photographs courtesy RSA Architects