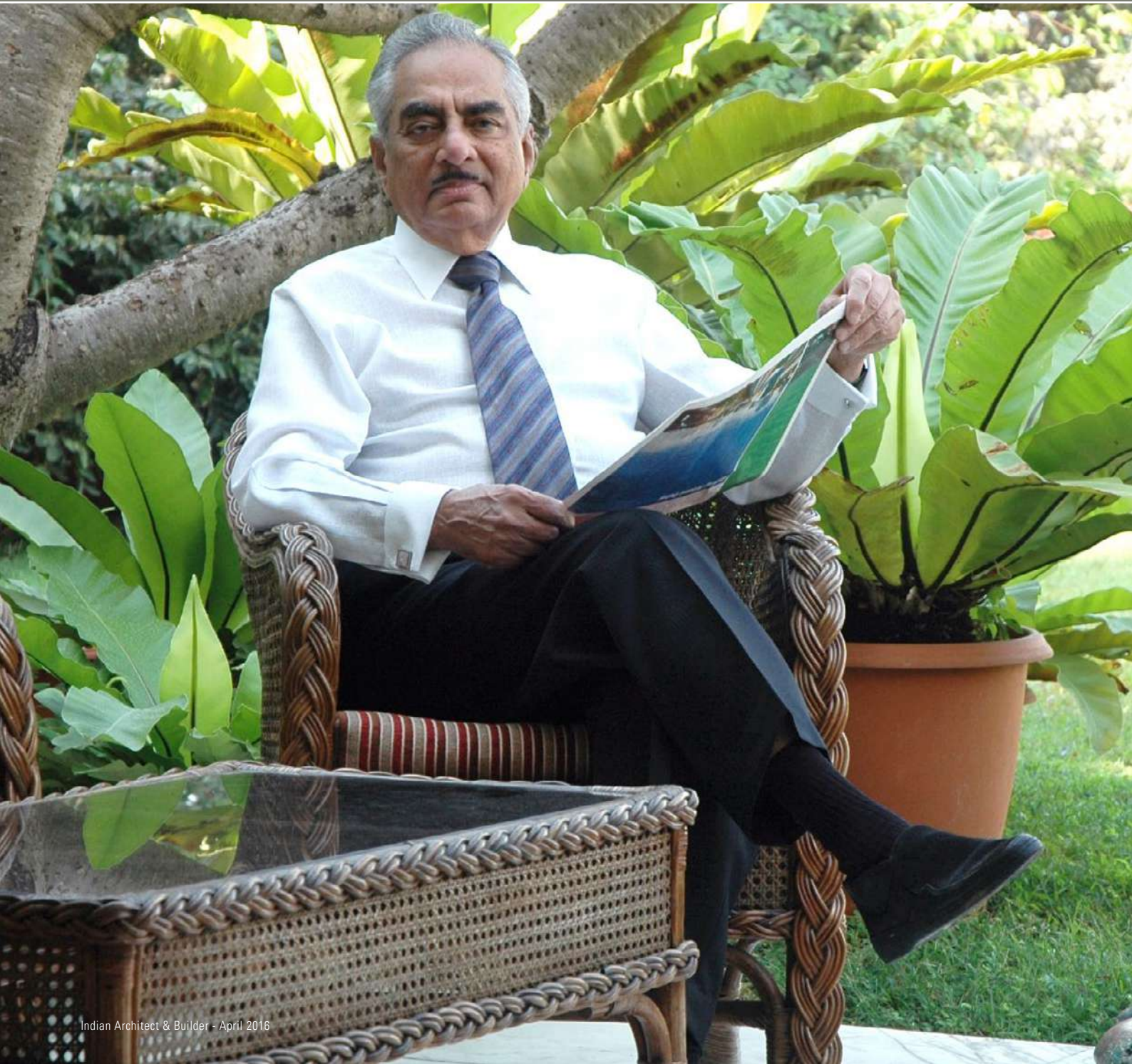


An eloquent balance between traditional and contemporary practices

In conversation with IA&B, IM Kadri speaks about his early influences, his architectural journey and finally the recent publication on his works.

Text and Images : courtesy I M Kadri Architects





↑ The Nehru Center.

Iftikhar M Kadri, Founder and Principal Architect of I M Kadri Architects successfully established his architectural practice in Mumbai in 1960. Through a career spanning over five decades, he has built contemporary buildings grounded in contextual environs in several important cities of India and the world. Also recognised internationally, he has been bestowed with several honours such as a citation in 1993 as an Outstanding Architectural Engineer by the Institution of Engineers (India) and he also won the Best Design Award for the Kowloon Mosque in Hong Kong. In recognition of his extensive social work, the Government of Maharashtra also appointed him Sheriff of Bombay in 1994. His architecture has always captured the ethos of its surroundings putting great emphasis on landscaping for all his buildings, giving each one a mark of distinction.

IA&B: Having trained as an engineer, how did you begin your architectural practice? Describe your early years, hurdles and achievements?

IMK: Whilst my education as an engineer equipped me with the knowledge of construction, architecture and design came to me more instinctively, nurtured by the culture of buildings I grew up seeing around me.

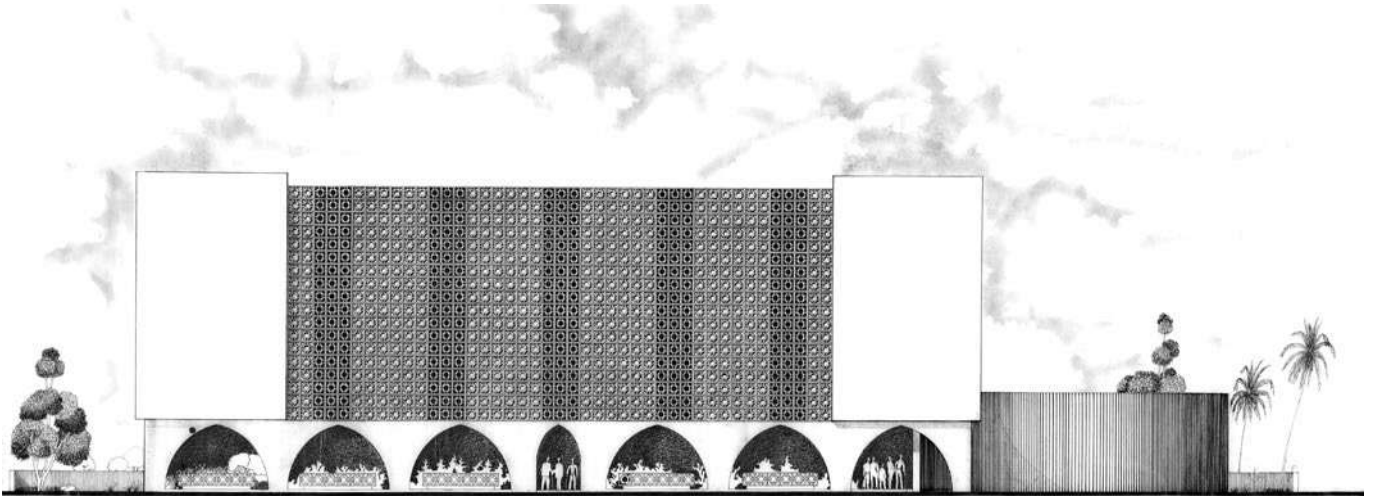
A chance meeting with businessman Phirozshah Dubash led me to become a part of the construction company he ran by the name of “Anderson and Dawn” and also landed me my first architectural project – the Brighton Apartment building.

At the time, when we started building, most of the materials we use today were not available to us. Good quality steel, cement, skilled

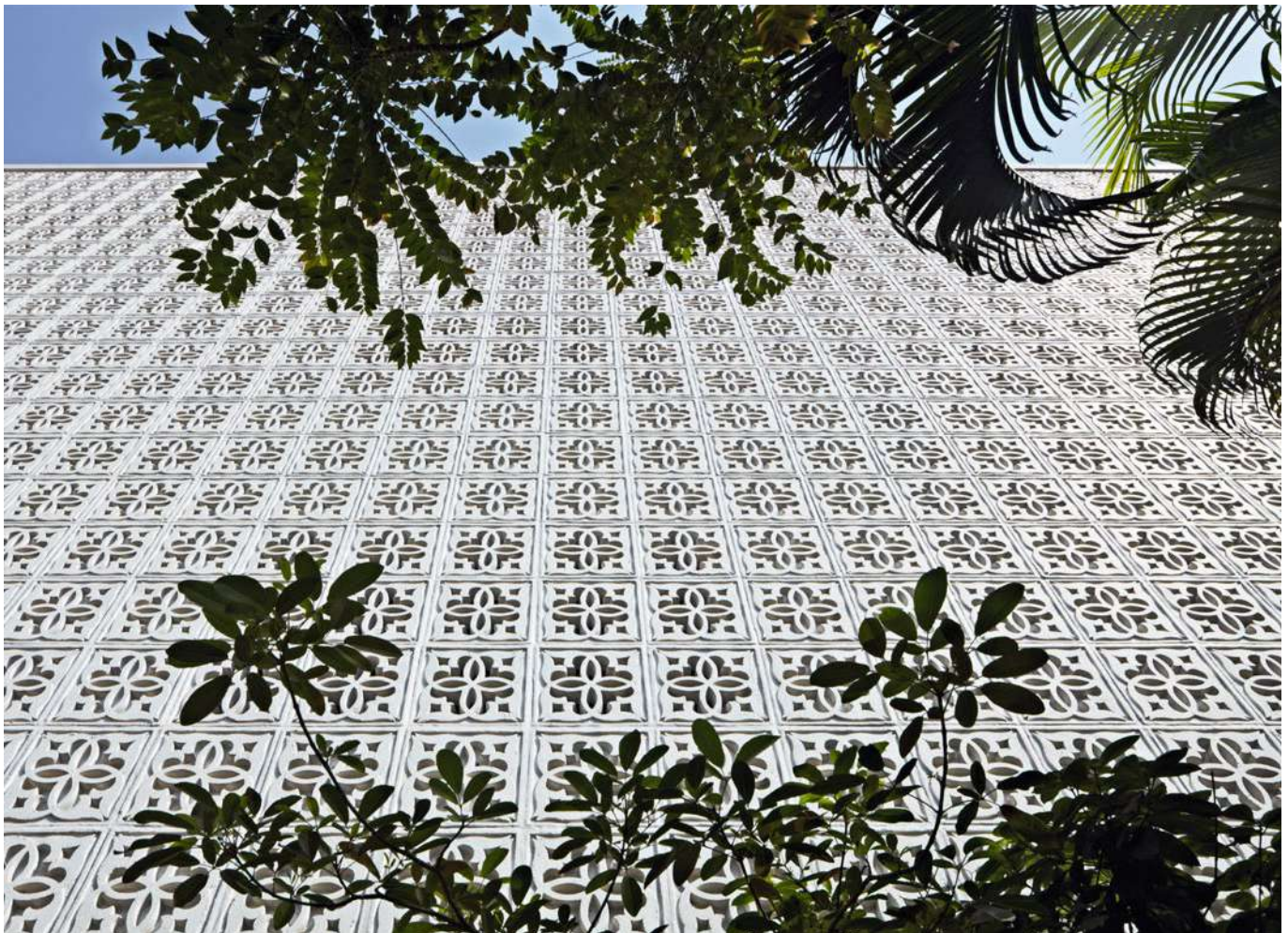
workmanship, all of it was scarce. This limited how high we could go. Scaled drawings and details produced in the office were far too complex for a “muqaddam” – site supervisors to follow. We actually spent our days on site, drawing chajja and cornice details on the walls of the building. We worked hands on simplifying details for our carpenters and masons on site. That is how it worked. For Brighton, I was the architect, contractor as well as the seller. The experience was tremendous. Brighton was special – and also became my home for the about 14 years.

Following this I continued to work with Anderson and Dawn and led several important projects for them, and in the process acquired great skills and insight in the field of architecture and construction.

In 1960, I began my own architecture firm, I M Kadri Architects, with a single assistant architect, one draftsman and an office boy.



↑ Elevation of the Happy Home and School for the Blind.



↑ Jaali at the Happy Home and School for the Blind.



↑ Islam Gymkhana.

IA&B: Your work sees a lot of traditional motifs and elements of architecture. How do Kadri buildings address the question of tradition and modernity? Have the two cities you grew up in, Ahmedabad and Delhi influenced your work?

IMK: Indian tradition is very important to me. I was born in Ahmedabad and studied in Delhi. I grew up in two cities punctuated with historical monuments and buildings. The rich heritage and history of these regions forms a part of my subconscious – it is always there with me. Growing up within the influences of urdu literature and poetry - architectural nuances in ornamentation and texture, lyricity in form and proportions is a natural part of my architectural vocabulary.

The '*Jaali*' too was derived from this association with tradition. The *jaali* was a traditional, cultural and industrial expression of our country at the time. The Happy Home is a wonderful example where a modern building combines the element of "*Jaali*" façade to produce a result that is modern yet ornamental. The *jaali* is a very delicate material to work with. It lightens buildings. The heavy architecture and proportions of the building was made lighter by employing the '*jaali*'. The *jaali* reconnects one to memories from history whilst reinventing the physical form of the building. At the Happy Home you can see the contemporary and the classic together. An arcade of pointed arches, medieval in style but modern in proportion was used to visually lift the building of the ground.

The recent monograph recounts this combination of tradition and modernity through the lens of history through several of my works and buildings.

IA&B: A building that marks the transition from South Bombay to the Suburbs is the Shiv Sagar Estate at Worli. Unmissable on

that stretch, and a first in office complexes - could you tell us a bit more about its conception and design?

IMK: The Shiv Sagar estate was one of the first commercial complexes to be commissioned in Worli – and also amongst my first few buildings. Through the course of the book, several 'firsts' – emergence of new building types that led to a change in the cityscape of Bombay is recorded.

A new development in an emerging part of the city, the building had to define a new benchmark within the existing urban fabric. A new form and visual identity was to be given to this new programme. It had to be impactful, yet soft on the eyes – an object of beauty in the fast paced cityscape. Cladded with solid marble, the buildings make a strong statement whilst the breaking up of the façade into a sequence of surfaces allows it to be visually appealing.

At the time, very little air conditioning was used in office buildings. As much sunlight as possible was to be allowed into the interiors. To facilitate this, the plan of the building was generated from the idea of a triangle – maximum periphery for the same area. Unusable corners were chamfered off and the hexagon form of the building emerged. Now, with maximum surface area, the buildings allowed ample light into its interiors. Climate responsive measures to cut off glare were adopted. The southern face was a blank façade with no openings whilst the longer east facing facades were shaded with a composition of louvres that allow interplay of light on the building form.

The beauty of the building is that it still looks fresh, undeteriorated with time.

IA&B: The terrace garden is a feature that has been used in several of your buildings – ranging from Swapnalok to Nehru

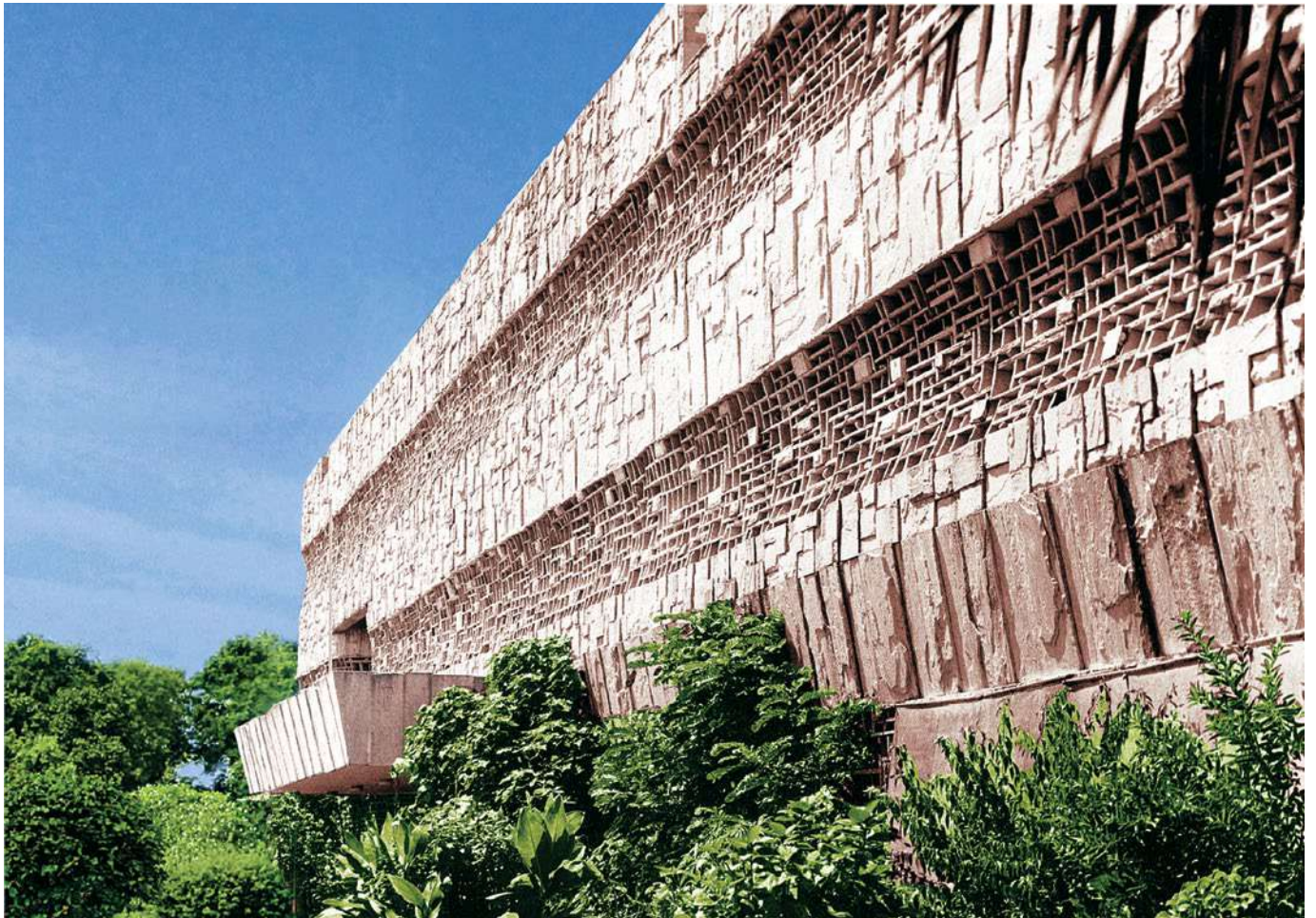
Centre, that too, at a time when the terrace garden was not a widespread trend. How have you conceptualised this concept in different buildings?

IMK: I come from an agricultural family. As a child I used to be very involved in gardening. Along with my elder brother we would spend hours in the gardens, air layering plants and learning about new methods of planting. I have always lived in and around open spaces. Traditional houses in Ahmedabad had a 'Zenana' and 'Mardana' – the Zenana opened out into a private garden court. Jamia, where I studied, had expansive lawns and open space. Gardens and green has always been an integral part of me. The way I imagine urban homes draws on experiences from my childhood, including the Diwan's Bungalow in Ahmedabad where gardens intertwined with the kitchen and living spaces.

My entry into the architectural profession was with the apartment block, Brighton at Nepeansea Road. Back in 1960, Brighton was the first building to have a terrace garden in India. In subsequent projects, like Swapnalok, Jeevan Manek and Haveli House even though the buildings required being stacked as apartment housing, terraces and gardens formed a natural extension of these urban homes. At Swapnalok, the building form emerges as a layer of stepped landscaped terraces defined by site contours – the roof of one apartment here forms the garden for the other. At the Haveli house each duplex apartment has a private cantilevered garden whilst in Jeevan and Manek the language



↑ Brighton Apartments.



↑ The Otters Club.



↑ *Jivan and Maneck.*

of a verandah within the home creates urban courtyards transported from the old architecture of Ahmedabad.

IA&B: Clients play an important role in anchoring the growth of an architecture firm to support its beliefs and philosophies. How did you gain the support of your esteemed clients?

IMK: I'll tell you about one of my clients - it all began with a design competition for the TATA Chemicals office at Bombay House. All other architects had proposed, senior officers to be seated alongside the windows whilst the staff was made to be seated deeper inside. I reversed the planning – I proposed that all the staff be alongside the windows and senior officers be located in the interiors of the office. On seeing my proposed design, the then Manager at TATAs called me and said 'I like you'. I was nervous. Turned out he was extremely happy with my design as it aligned with his philosophy of uplifting the workforce. That was the beginning of a new relationship with the house of TATAs. Following this, I got the opportunity to work on several projects with the TATA's including the TATA Chemicals Township at Babrala.

An aspect of my work that I have consistently maintained over the 200 projects I have designed is that I never repeat my designs. I charge a hefty fee from my client and I then believe that my buildings are my



↑ *Haveli House.*

client's property or possession. As every client must take pride in the buildings that I have designed for them, I reinvent and innovate in every one of my projects.

IA&B: Lastly, we believe you are launching a book on your wide range of works. Could you tell us a bit about the monograph, "The Architecture of I M Kadri"?

IMK: It is after long that we have released the book 'The Architecture of I M Kadri'. The book is authored by theorist Kaiwan Mehta. When we began writing I did not know what to expect since it is a critical biography. But surprisingly, the book has turned out beautifully.

It is not just a portfolio of works but a thematic and historical analysis of the architect's oeuvre. Along with being a monograph, it traces the architectural history of India in the decades post-independence through reflections on my works.

The book has a lot of archival material. Axonometric views that were developed to determine form and proportions of buildings and meticulously done ornamental details at that time are all showcased in the form of hand drawings. The book has a Foreword by architecture historian and professor of architecture theory, Peter Scriver. ■