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DISCUSSING DESIGN

‘Mumbai is in worst shape’: Architect IM Kadri speaks of his love and recent hate for the city

The man who designed some of Mumbai’s most iconic post-Independence architecture explains what led to the city’s disastrous growth.

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Architect IM Kadri has designed buildings all over India in his nearly five-decade career. National Judicial Academy in Bhopal is one of his creations, Taj Coromandel in Chennai and Fort Aguada Hotel in Goa, among the many others. But it is Mumbai that is closest to the 86-year-old's heart, his “favourite city”.

This is where he has designed structures that have added character to local skylines. His Nehru Centre, a memorial to Jawaharlal Nehru, in Worli is an important, imposing landmark, as are Haveli Building in Malabar Hill, Islam Gymkhana in Marine Lines and Otters Club in Bandra.



The Shiv Sagar Estate, the Nehru Centre and the Happy Home and School for the Blind in Worli.

Last month saw the release of *The Architecture of IM Kadri*, a book written by architectural historian and art critic Kaiwan Mehta which chronicles Kadri's career and explores the design of his buildings across the world. In an interview at his office in Shiv Sagar Estate, also designed by him, Kadri looked back at his career, spoke about his influences and lamented the decay of Mumbai.

When he was seven, Kadri was packed off to study at the primary school at Jamia Millia University in Delhi. This was in the mid-1930s, when the building was coming up, and it formed his first brush with the world of architecture.

“I saw the university building made by an architect called Heinz [Austrian Karl Heinz] and I was flabbergasted,” Kadri remembered. “This can only be made by God. Even as a child I could imagine that the building was completely different.” He would later work with Heinz for a few years.

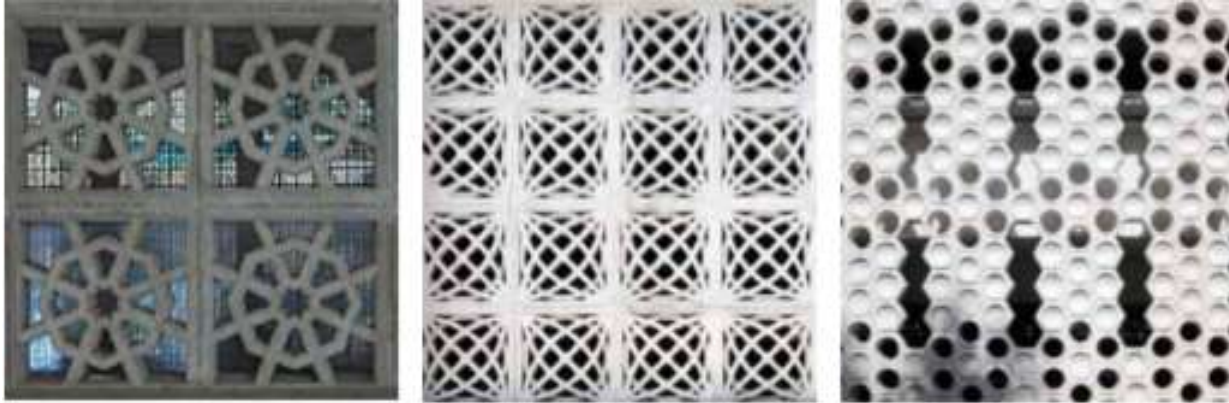


Shiv Sagar Estate in Worli.

The first design he worked on – Brighton Apartments in Mumbai – was influenced by his childhood home in Ahmedabad, a “good house with a big garden”. He added a terrace garden to the design plan, the first in the city, inviting ridicule from his fraternity. “Many senior architects told me, are you out of your mind. Near the sea, you cannot do [a garden] on the ground, what will you do on the terrace. You know the heat of Bombay? It is not worth trying.”

Kadri went ahead with it anyway and since then most of his projects have had an element of greenery.

Another element that characterises his work is the jali. “I was influenced by Mughal architecture. [The] proportions of Mughal architecture, its calligraphy. So wherever required I have used the jali.” Each jali, he explains, has a different meaning. The one at the Nehru Centre, for instance, is three-dimensional and is based on the “rose flower which Nehru kept in his pocket”.



The use of Jalis.

Otters Club in Bandra too was very interesting, he says. “I always wanted [my work] to be a part of the sea, so I wanted to use white marble, but I wanted to use it a differently. The contractor I worked with brought senior artisans from Rajasthan who told me, ‘You are insulting marble. You are using it like stone.’ But the contractor was interested. So I said, ‘Let’s try it. If you didn’t like it then we will stop.’ After completion, when I asked him [the artisan] how it looked, he said, ‘*Bura nahi lagta* (It’s doesn’t look bad)’. Then he put his full effort into it.”

Although he considers the club one of his masterpieces, the club trustees removed his signature jalis a few years back. “I never knew till it was gone and I haven’t gone there since.”



Otters Club, Bandra.

Kadri has seen much change in his career. “When we started, hardly any materials were available. Cladding material was not available. Good timber was not available. Good size of glass was not available. But then, it was a different world. You can’t say better, but it is more easier now. More convenient. We had to make a billion things.”

In the 1980s, Kadri had submitted a report to Bombay's municipal corporation, which he says included a plan to “make Bombay slum-free in 10 years”. A resolution was passed accepting the proposal, but governments changed and it never came to fruition. He tried to present the report again when he became the Sheriff of Mumbai, a titular position, in the early 1990s, but it was too late and his tenure was too short.



A rendering of Brighton Apartments (1959).

He believes it was the Rent Act, an old legislation meant to keep rents under control, that “ruined Mumbai”. The legislation resulted in tenants paying as little as Rs 400 as rent a month in areas where the market rates ranged from Rs 20,000 to Rs 60,000. “In the 1940s, when I [first] came [to Mumbai], there were beautiful buildings,” Kadri said. “Today it is the worst possible shape. That is because of the Act. They should have gradually increased the rent. Even public housing cannot come in because of the Rent Act. Entire central Bombay is in a mess.”

It didn’t help that there were no planners and architects in the government who could rein in Mumbai’s ad-hoc growth. As Kadri puts it, development in the city has been “building-wise” when it should have been in clusters of five-ten acres of land. “Had they done town planning in the ’50s or ’60s, Bombay's history would have been different. That’s the difference between [Central and South] Bombay and the suburbs. There was some sense in it here. There [in the suburbs] there was no correct utilisation.”

While he chose not to comment on the work of his contemporaries, Kadri expressed disdain for Le Corbusier, the architect of Chandigarh. “I liked the work of [Brazilian architect] Oscar Niemeyer and [Egyptian architect] Hassan Fathy. These

are the architects with imagination. Corbusier was not an architect. He was a sculptor. When you stand in front of a building in Chandigarh you will feel a deep sense of meaninglessness. Buildings should not be like that.”



National Judicial Academy, Bhopal.

Kadri doesn't put signboards on his buildings because he wants them to have a presence and be recognisable. “We are in Shivsagar Estate [Industrial Estate in Worli], but can you see a sign anywhere? Clients protested. They said, ‘How will taxi drivers know where to go?’ But they [taxi drivers] learnt after a while. At Sahyadri

Guest House [a government guest house in Malabar Hill], there is a small postbox for the address.”

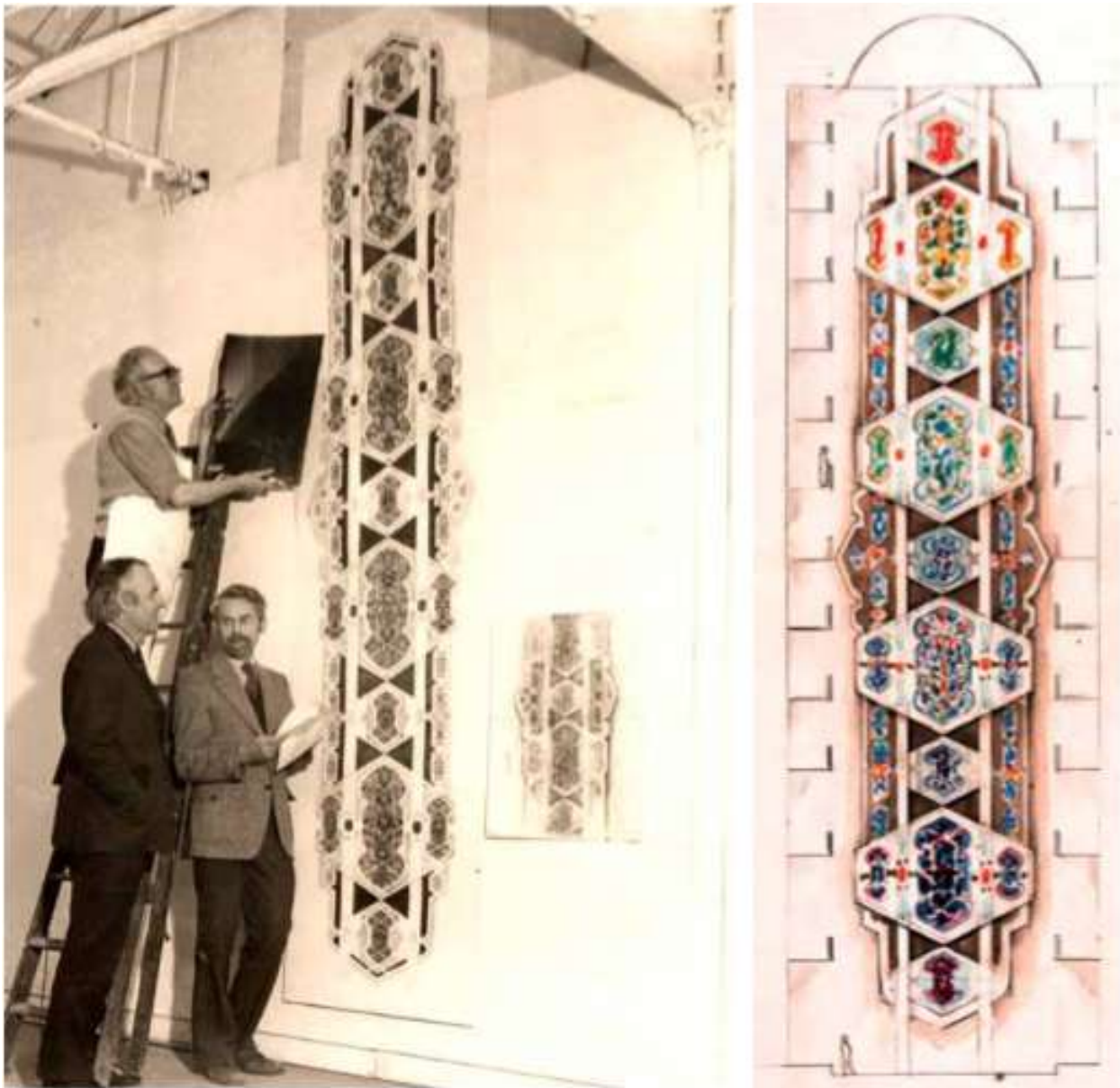
Which work of his is his favourite? “All of them,” Kadri said without hesitation. “They are all my children. And I like them very much. At every moment they were the best of my work. Each has something added to it.”



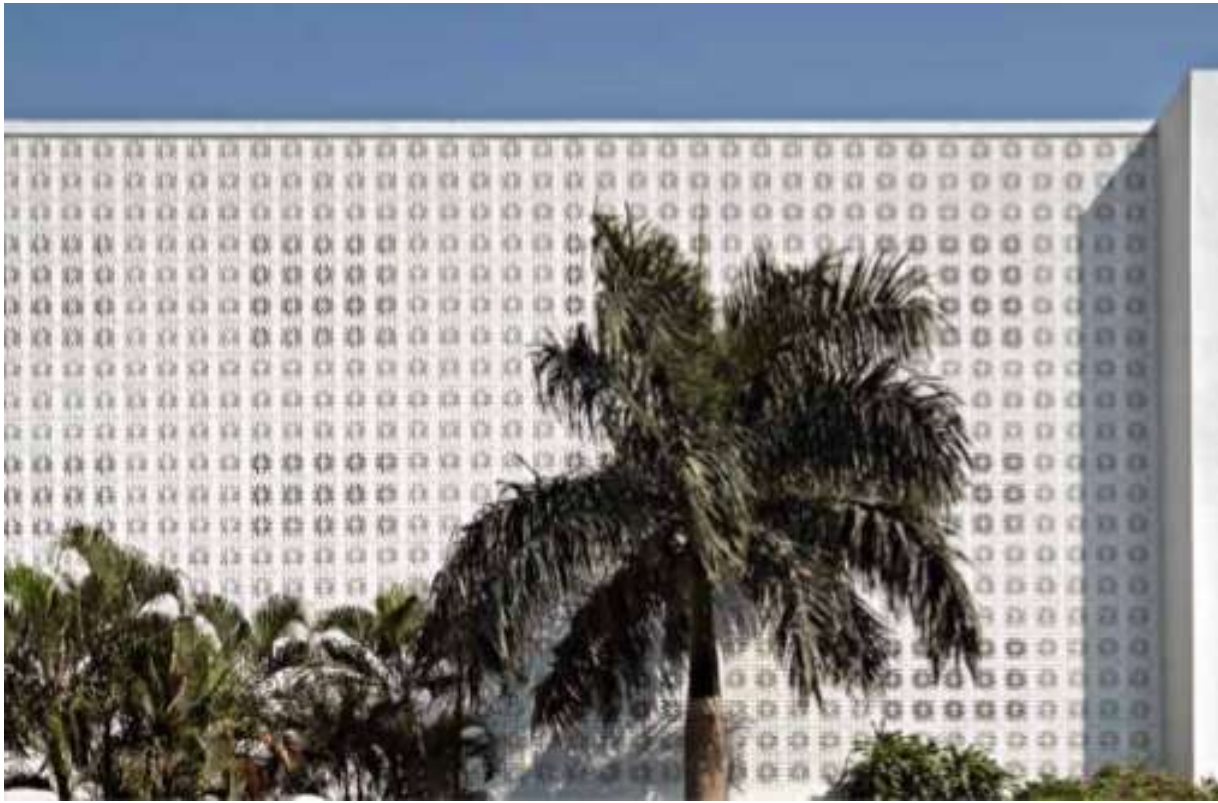
Kadri's plan for the Fort Aguada Hotel in Goa.



Islam Gymkhana, Mumbai.



At work on the world's largest mural at Hotel Ramada in Dubai.



Happy Home and School for the Blind in Worli.



Detailing of the Sahayadri Guest House in Mumbai.



IM Kadri.

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