

A Life In Design

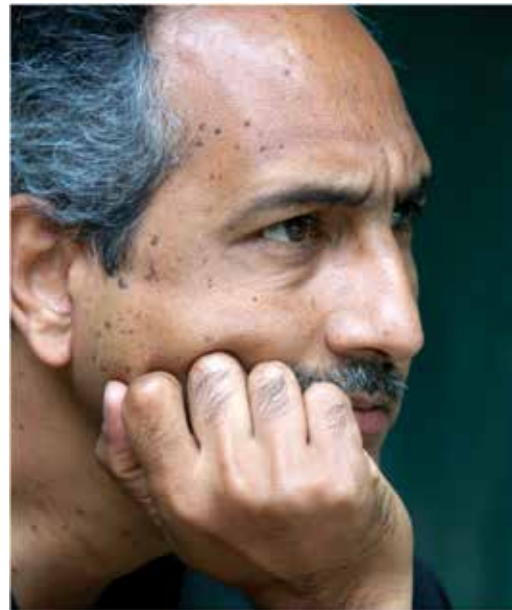
AR. RAHUL KADRI

Building on a legacy, the new gen at IMK Architects focuses on sustainability and contextual architecture

Words / Maria Louis * Photography / Rajesh Vora



Terrace at AURIC Hall. (AURIC-Aurangabad Industrial City).



Rahul Kadri, Partner & Principal Architect, IMK Architects.

Rahul Kadri is a passionate advocate of sustainable architecture, and not without reason. Partner and principal architect of IMK Architects, he inherited his love for nature from his father IM Kadri who set up the architecture and urban design practice in 1957 with offices in Mumbai and Bengaluru. Rahul took over the reins from his father in the 90s, but only after completing a graduate diploma in architecture from the Academy of Architecture, Mumbai, and a Master's in Urban and Regional Planning from Michigan. After 53 years of experience and 85 large-scale projects across India and overseas, it has been a successful model – given that the firm's repeat clients include the Taj Group, JSW, Symbiosis and Club Mahindra.

Your early inspirations?

I went to school at the Sherwood College, Nainital, and hence spent most of my formative years in the Kumaon Himalayas amid lush landscapes. This infused within me a deep passion to create buildings and spaces in harmony with their natural context. While doing my Masters at the University of Michigan, I was influenced by the work and writings of Christopher Alexander and Charles Moore.

Was it a boon or bane for you to be known as the son of architect IM Kadri?

Overall, a great boon. It meant instant recognition personally, and as a



FROM LEFT Atrium at AURIC Hall, where beauty meets sustainability; Front façade detail of AURIC Hall.



firm, we inherited a significant body of knowledge and a smoothly functioning office with the required procedures and operational systems in place. In the 90s, we faced certain challenges with being perceived as an expensive firm, one that only takes on large-scale projects. Also, my father did not permit the firm to participate in competitions, expecting work to come solely because of our reputation.

In what ways were you influenced by your father — personally and professionally?

My love for environment-friendly design has been inspired by my father's interests. We have been designing green buildings since the '60s, so a love for the natural environment is deeply embedded in our lives and work. There is so much to learn from my father's sharp intellect, knowledge and vast experience. The ability to zero down on what is important and focus only on that. To engage with people and have them own their projects. To know who to involve...his choice is rarely wrong.

Milestones and formative experiences you encountered as a student?

Reading 'The Pattern Language' and 'The Timeless Way of Building' were watershed moments. After that, it was studying in the US and being exposed to graduate classes in Economics and Sociology as part of the Urban Planning course.

Some of the significant landmarks on your professional journey?

Our design philosophy is based on Biophilic Architecture, and our focus and commitment is to provide designs that are site-sensitive and in harmony with nature. Our designs create vibrant and warm spaces which are socially responsive, where people thrive and activities flourish. This was best represented in one of our most defining works, the Symbiosis International University in Lavale, Pune — completed in 2008. The idyllic campus, home to 1,000 students, houses

educational and administration functions for four faculties (the Symbiosis Institute of Business Management, the Symbiosis Institute of Mass Communication, the Symbiosis Institute of Telecom Management, and the Symbiosis Institute of Photography) in addition to an auditorium and convention centre, a library, as well as housing, dining, and recreational facilities for students and staff. Buildings/ systems designed to respond to local climate and ecology, integrate seamlessly with the landscape, while a hierarchical network of open spaces cultivates social interaction and cross-disciplinary collaboration.

Your first independent project, and what did you learn from it?

An engineering college in Salem. The project helped me learn to trust my instincts, and to understand that I needed to develop my own style that was different from my father's.

When did you take over the reins of IMK Architects, and what did it mean for the firm?

It was in the 1990s, a period marked by significant shifts in India's socio-cultural landscape. In a newly liberalised economy, different models and typologies

evolved, modern technology made inroads into the architecture and construction industry and concerns of climate change emerged in mainstream discourse. We focussed on social consciousness and urban ecological sensitivity. We always strive to explore the potential of architecture within the paradigms of culture and civilisation to serve the needs and aspirations of the communities.

Tell us about the most significant projects of IMK and why.

Our expertise lies in various segments ranging from healthcare and hospitality to educational campuses, self-redevelopment, residential townships. Our significant projects include those that have made the most ecological and social impact.

Auric Hall, Aurangabad is today a landmark for Aurangabad Industrial City (AURIC), India's first greenfield, smart industrial city. The 16,660sq-m building houses administrative and commercial functions. The design pays homage to the rich culture and history of Aurangabad while creating a timeless example of beauty and sustainability.

The recently completed Symbiosis University Hospital and Research Centre (SUHRC) in Pune is being used by the



TOP National Judicial Academy; BOTTOM Faceted brick box façade of Symbiosis University Hospital and Research Centre.



Maharashtra government as a Covid-19 quarantine facility and hospital. Occupying the lower slopes of a hill within Symbiosis International University's 260-acre estate in Lavale, SUHRC is a 96,100sq-m, 216-bed, multi-specialty hospital that represents a new and progressive face for healthcare infrastructure in India. SUHRC draws from the ideas of biophilia (an innate human tendency to seek connections with nature and other forms of life) to promote recovery and rejuvenation for patients and healthcare professionals.

The Madikeri Resort at Coorg, Karnataka is a hospitality project designed for Club Mahindra Holidays and Resorts. Drawing inspiration from local culture, we created a site-sensitive design in harmony with nature. With maximum exposure to nature, the soul of our design lies in the interaction between people and the semi-outdoor spaces blossoming with trees and plantations, using age-old local techniques.

Your dreams and expectations for the future of IMK Architects?

IMK Architects is focused on making places where people thrive — we want to be an organisation that both listens and learns. Our collaboration with the client develops the brief, and carries forward till the execution of the project. We are constantly questioning our beliefs and strive to make our buildings serve the users beyond expectations.

Challenges you face in running a practice, especially during this pandemic?

During the pandemic, the initial fear was of projects shutting down and office staff not being able to successfully work-from-home (WFH). Luckily for us, our projects were stalled only for a few months, but picked up when the lockdown restrictions were lifted and we have been able to achieve our target deliverables. Working remotely, our team has been able to put together strategic and efficient systems through which we could issue drawings to site, conduct online virtual meetings with clients or on-site, as well as

physically visit sites when necessary by taking all required precautions.

What does success mean to you?

As an office, success is redefined with every project. For me, success lies in the everyday, in every moment I find myself creating, interacting with those around me, and having the power to affect the lives of others through my work.

I inherited a successful architectural practice that had a legacy of timeless and beautiful buildings, strongly rooted in their context. I hope to create a practice that codifies learning in its processes and grows to build many places. As a firm, we operate in studios of 4-8 people, and the firm has 5 studios — each being almost autonomous, operating with common purpose and processes. I want to grow our way of working, to many more studios, so that we can empower many more people to thrive within the spaces we design.

As a mentor to aspiring architects what message would you give them?

Focus on the needs and highest aspirations of your clients and all users or inhabitants of the building or spaces that you are designing. Your training allows you to do things that can make a profound difference in people's lives and to the planet at large through the choices you make in terms of sustainability. So, use your skills to make the world a better place, one project at a time.