

A CUT ABOVE

A plot of land with a real machan, a wacky idea, an enterprising architect. This getaway in Lonavala provides an unusual experience. **Himanshu Burte** got a bird's eye view



How do you build on a wooded hillside without destroying the trees? Lonavala-based architect Shabbir Unwala of Design Workshop took recourse to simple logic — build on the trees themselves. The Machan (literally a platform built on a tree to observe wildlife) is a holiday home on stilts near Lonavala, the hill-station beloved of Mumbaikars. Nestled in the middle of a nurtured forest, it commands a spectacular view of a valley running into the distance.

Built in steel, wood and glass, and held aloft on four concrete columns, The Machan is a unique experiment. To enter it, you walk up a drawbridge, which is actually drawn up at night when guests do desire. Already off the electric grid (electricity is of wind and solar origin on the property), the cottage is then physically isolated among the trees.

The project

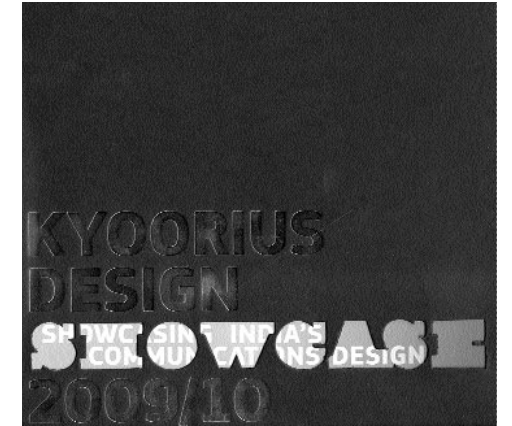
The client, Mumbai-based retired professional Pavan Hooja, had a real machan on a wild fig tree on this site for years before this project was conceived. Hooja bought the barren 25-acre piece of land 15 years ago, and reforested it by stopping the slash-and-burn strategy of the villagers and letting the local Western Ghats trees recover and grow. His brief to Design Workshop was simple: build a habitable space in the woods without cutting down trees. The living areas would also have to make the most of the spectacular view of the valley and flanking hills in the distance.

Kyoorius characters

Look between the covers for design opportunities

Businesses that use design perform better than their rivals, says the introduction to the Kyoorius Design Showcase 2009/10. This is an irrefutable truth and the design industry in India is growing. Many more businesses and individuals seek professional design intervention than they did even say five years ago. To that end, a directory of professionals and services is invaluable, even if only as the first point of contact.

But design outfits in India tend to be boutique hotshops, more often than not started by former classmates from design schools. Even Elephant Strategy+Design, Idiom Design and



A book by its cover

Consulting — bigger, better known firms that have been around for some years — have only about a hundred employees. Globally too, design firms are traditionally boutique affairs — IDEO, possibly the biggest, has only 550 employees. A directory thus works well to showcase work a firm is doing and, more important, to bring it to the notice of potential clients.

That, more or less, is also the intent of *Kyoorius Design Showcase 2009/10*, the second edition of which is just out (the first came out in 2007). "We hope to tingle an interest in the minds of the design buyers and provide them with a justifiable guide to sourcing design services in India," writes Rajesh Kejriwal of Kyoorius Exchange in his foreword to the book. Kyoorius Exchange, the platform for the design community in India established in 2005, publishes the *Showcase* (its other, high-profile activity is Designyatra, the design conference).

Showcase 2009/10 lists 98 of the more established design firms in eleven cities and offers glimpses of their work. It is itself well designed, bright colours, pleasing aesthetics, and a funky touch to the graphics and layout. But the accent here is on graphic design. Other than a few such as Design Directions, Ticket Design, Foley Designs and Studio ABCD, there aren't many outfits listed in *Showcase 2009/10* that do industrial or product design. There also isn't a single firm that specialises in interiors or textiles, two areas in which

DIRECTORIES OFFER USEFUL SNAPSHOTS OF ALL THE NEW WORK HAPPENING IN VARIOUS DESIGN SPECIALISATIONS

design has come to make a real difference to Indian firms. In India, the other directory worth a mention is the *Young Designers* series that National Institute of Design (NID) has been bringing out since 1990-91. It's a basic tome, nicely (if a little stodgily) designed, giving each young designer a two-page profile. It's useful for the snapshots it gives of the diversity of emerging talent, but it is restricted to NID and is not 'commercial' in the sense that a more regular directory is.

Globally you have a number of such directories, the most well-known of which is the *International Design Yearbook*. Published every year for 24 years now, it has a leading designer pick his choice of the best in furniture, lighting, tableware, textile and product design from all over the world.

Online, however, is where the excitement surrounding design directories really lies. There is The DesignDirectory, jointly produced by Core 77 (a web forum for industrial designers) and *Business Week* magazine, which aims to be a 'comprehensive database of design firms'. Core77 also has Coroflot, which has 150,000 portfolios of creative professionals, even students, and there's another from design portal Dexinger. Many of them have listings from India — The DesignDirectory has 482, Dexinger has 211, while Coroflot has as many as 7,438 (we are the country with the second-largest number of entries after the USA).

All auguring well for a better designed future. ■

— Gargi Gupta

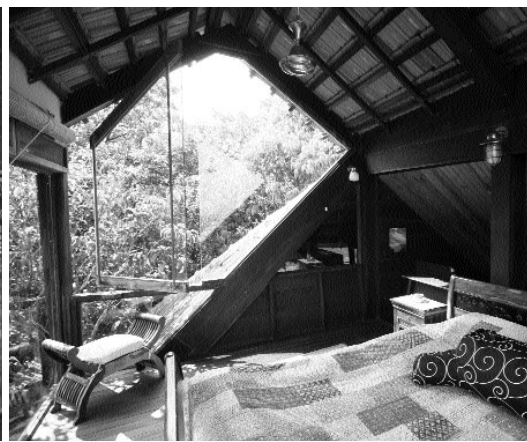
Feedback: editorfeatures@bmail.in



The drawbridge



The living room



An upper-floor bedroom

The experience

The sense of being off the ground is central to The Machan experience, beginning with the walk on the slightly bouncy drawbridge. The entrance lobby that shows you the hillside slipping away down below reinforces it. And finally, the living space with its breathtaking wide-format view over the treetops down the hill, of the valley snaking away into the far distance, clinches the sense of floating above the ground.

That sense is heightened by the two bedrooms, one at a higher level and another suspended from the underside of the living area. The upper bedroom feels like an attic up by the roof boards (made of Malaysian *sal*) and it looks over treetops on all three sides. The lower bedroom is truly a space slung under another. Inside, it is like being inside a glass box under the 'chassis' of the house, watching the trees make their way up.

Accommodation

The Machan must be booked as one unit. It has three double bedrooms and is open year-round. Tariff: Rs 20,000 per night Monday through Thursday and Rs 25,000 per night (minimum two nights) Friday to Sunday, two meals included. Rates differ for holiday weekends. Smaller machans (each sleeps two) are also available.

Getting there

By road off the Mumbai-Pune Expressway, exit at Lonavala/Khandala onto the old highway. Follow signs towards Aamby Valley. About 17 km on, turn left at Cloud9 Resort. It's 0.9 km to The Machan's gate.

Contact

080-8087-7420, 0-95940-53113, reservations@themachan.com

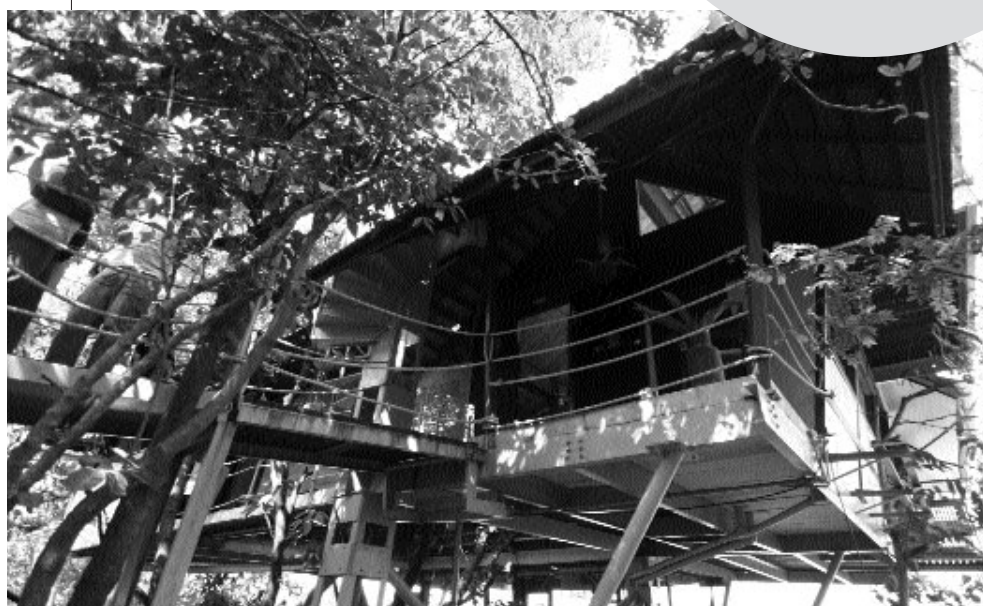


The balcony

Maximising the view

Making the most of the view involved more than just using the biggest sheets of glass for window walls. Two issues have been addressed in the design — ventilation and visibility. For ventilation, narrow bands of ventilators (a stainless steel mesh in a wooden frame) have been placed under the glazing towards the courtyard and the sides away from the main view. Two cosy balconies offer a perch over the forest and also bring in air from different directions into the living space.

One problem with glass is that reflections from behind often interfere with the view you see through it. A simple solution for this is to tilt the glass out at the top, which also reinforces the tree like 'flaring' of the exterior form in this building. That is what also makes the building look a little like a spaceship amid the trees.



The support system



The steel skeleton

The design

The design concept emerged naturally out of these expectations. To minimise the cutting of trees the architect decided to restrict the footprint of the building on the ground. The basic structure of the building is thus like a tree: a narrow trunk which rises off the ground, with branches that support and form the large volume of the crown.

A frame of four reinforced cement concrete (RCC) columns tied with beams at two levels acts like the trunk, which is about 20 feet high at most. A relatively light pre-fabricated steel structure branches out in all directions and forms the skeleton of the building. An old tree is retained in the hollow between the columns which acts like an internal courtyard for the house in the air.

Ecological benefits

One of the chief ecological problems caused by construction is damage to the land on which a building sits. Construction-as-usual involves a lot of digging and backfilling which completely destroys precious topsoil. By touching the ground on a much smaller footprint and cantilevering a large part of structure the architect has managed to reduce damage to the land. This prompted CNN to include The Machan in its 'List of Sustainable Technologies and its Applications for the Future'. Of course, this strategy involves using energy-intensive materials like steel and concrete, which may cancel out the ecological advantage of reducing damage to land. But the reckoning of ecological impact is never a simple matter. The seesaw tilts back in favour of this approach because this building is largely dismantlable. This means that a large part of the material can be reclaimed and reused if ever the building has to 'go'.



A glass-walled bedroom

PHOTOS: SANJAY PATIL