



Women in Professional Practice Especially With a Gender-Inclusive Approach to Design

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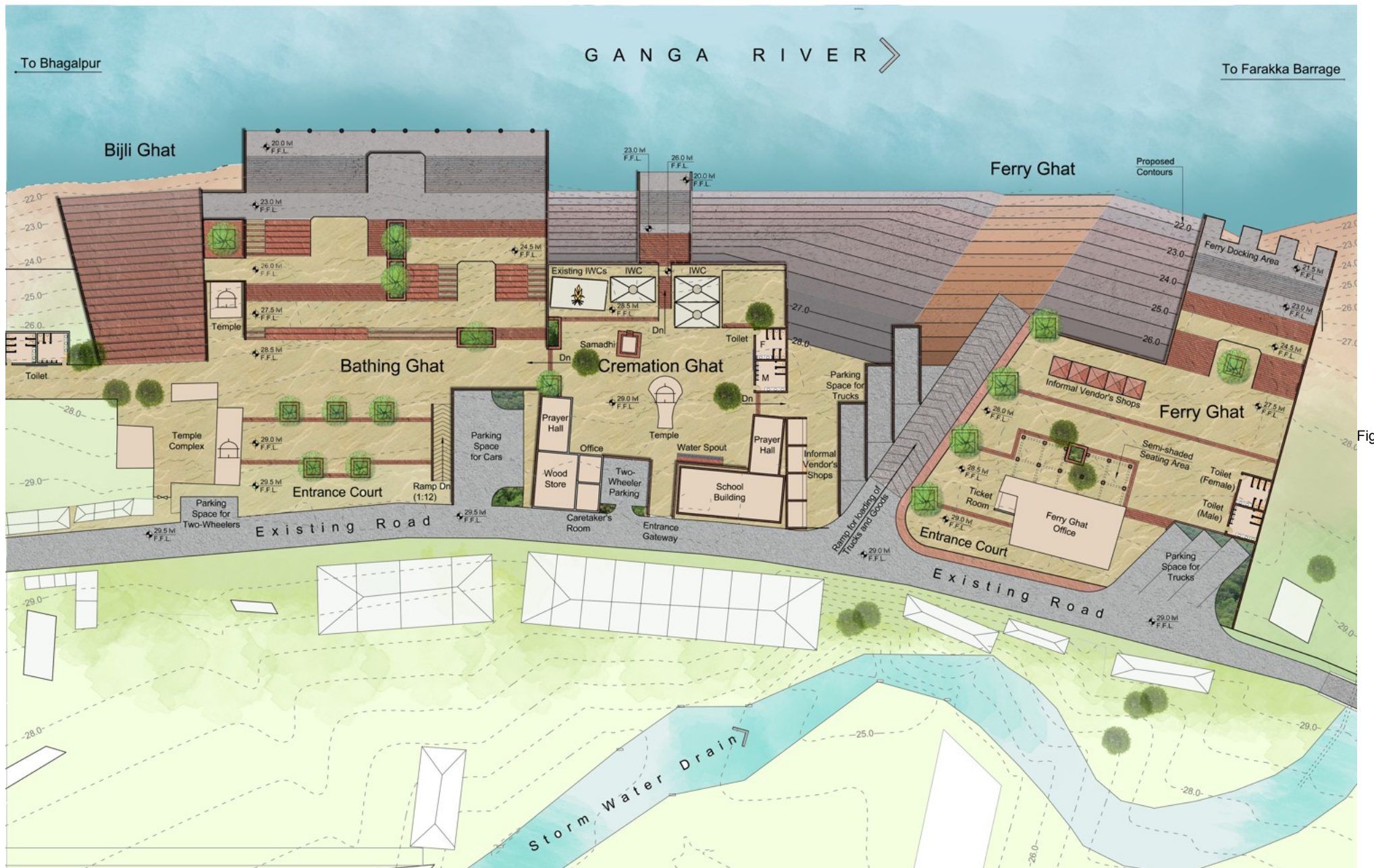
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“You can and should set your own limits and clearly articulate them. This takes courage, but it is also liberating and empowering, and often earns you new respect.” **Rosalind Brewer, President and CEO of Sam’s Club, a division of Wal-Mart Stores Inc.**

Expanding horizons for women have led to a broad vista of opportunities maximising their involvement in previously male-dominated professions such as the building construction sector. The phenomenal growth in the number of practising women landscape architects in the last century reinforces the possibilities that this industry offers to our gender in particular. Though women in landscape architecture find themselves in minority in senior positions or at site, in particular, however, they have already carved a niche in creating sensitive designs, quality consciousness through attention to detail and time and team management. Their arduous journey in a largely patriarchal (though attempting to be more liberal) urban Indian society has lent them the distinction of managing a duality of tradition and modern, making them more sensitive to a gender-inclusive approach in design. This paper looks at various projects that have been carried out by Delhi based landscape firm Beyond Built Pvt. Ltd., lead and comprising mainly of women. Adopting a research based philosophy, the firm has been involved with a wide range of design, research and awareness building projects in the realm of contemporary and historic landscape design.

The past half a century has seen Indian women expand their career ambitions and spread their wings towards professions and roles previously inaccessible to them for a multitude of factors.

As a result, the 21st century has seen greater integration of Indian women in male dominated fields like building construction, architecture and related design fields. The progression from integration into acceptance and equality is, however, a longer and more arduous journey.



Fig

1a_Enhancing public spaces through waterfront development

While few women landscape architects or firms engage in the public realm preferring the private or corporate sector for their more intellectual engagement, it is design in public domain, in particular, that can benefit tremendously from involvement of our gender ensuring sensitivity, understanding and inclusivity. Consideration for every age group, socio cultural background and physical ability in our society is the need of the hour in order to offer equitable and healthy user-friendly spaces. Designing of public parks, water front development (Refer Fig. 1a & b) and ecological conservation, greening of slums are some of the areas where we can aspire to 'make a difference'.



Fig 1b_Waterfront development

This article offers an opportunity for personal reminiscing looking back at a professional journey that commenced 25 years ago when I chose to take up education in this field. Through nearly two decades of work experience I have witnessed a progression from primarily individual client based to corporate led projects; from landscape architecture working with the natural landscape to designing largely on basement slabs; from rustic natural materials and aesthetics to working with a glossy palette and fascades. Changing client needs and contexts have had a deep impact on our profession and ethos aspiring to be viewed as a new and upcoming nation to be reckoned with. Tall skyscrapers, glazed cities, exotic plantations and a passion for the global has taken our drawing boards by storm. However, now after two decades of engagement with the upper echelons of society there is a new realisation that our profession needs to engage with the larger community if we are to make any difference to our chaotic urban environments. It is now the decade of 'designing with a conscience'. Through this article I piece together my journey as a landscape and heritage practitioner and an attempt to delve into my personal experience of operating in this sector and how gender has influenced my practice along the way.

Shared ownership and accountability:-

A perspective that I bring into my practice, which is also the result of over 16 years of part time academic engagement, is the need to hinge our design philosophy on intense research. This is applicable for historic projects but the methodology equally informs our contemporary works. Over time the project typology that one has been engaging with has evolved. A design project that caters to society, by its very nature needs to be inclusive responding to needs across users and aspirations serving all target groups including children, the elderly and the disabled. Details such as lighting, signage and elements for visual comfort contribute towards creating user-friendly environments.

Not one for malls myself, working on a Multi-use development work in Chandigarh named Elante for Larsen & Toubro, brought in the realisation of their possible relevance as future public open spaces for our aspiring youth.



Fig 2a_Central court, Elante Mall, Chandigarh

Elante, a multi-use development, required the design of an expansive Central Court (measuring approximately 80,000 sq. ft.) to serve as a social nucleus for the retail and office spaces. Our vision for Elante was to create a common civic space inside a shopping mall that encourages meaningful social experiences that reflect our cultural ethos. This project is designed as a play of contrasts. While the architecture is aimed at grandeur, the landscape is intended to be on a human scale. The design concept envisions a democratic landscape 'for the people' (Fig 2a).

It is important to provide orientation and identities within the larger space, therefore a set of smaller courts were built into the design of the main plaza. These intimate spaces were woven around differential slab levels, stairwell, and light well cut-outs, as the site demanded. What emerged is a range of experiences within the greater whole. The Central Court therefore encompasses a collection of spaces: some to facilitate cultural performances and larger gatherings, and others for passive recreation and for children, of a scale and design meant for hosting more intimate events.



Fig 2b_Pathways and seating, Elante Mall

With accessibility becoming a central concern in outdoor recreation, ramps have been incorporated leading up to major spaces. The edges of all the plazas are treated such that they form backdrops or alternate as seating or planters, thereby scaling down the large central plaza into usable and interactive segments. The retaining walls for the large planted areas are designed with niches for seating using unembellished cuboid forms to add to the simplicity of the landscape. The material palette, on the other hand, uses fine craftsmanship, central to Indian design, and is used to make the court visually cohesive and compelling. As with the central space, the paving pattern directs movement, and uses a variety of textures to create visual interest (Fig 2b and c).



Fig 2c_Planting beds and seating in central court at Elante Mall

Elante is a unique project in our repertoire of works due to the vision of shared responsibility vital to the project. We took on an added responsibility on the clients' request as supervision consultants. This appointment, beyond our design contract with the clients, ensured complete answerability on our part while ensuring that civil and horticultural designs were executed to desired quality in the completed landscape. This experiment at Elante has shown us a new avenue to engage with projects, to ensure quality is delivered through shared ownership and accountability (Prothi Khanna, 2014).

Project palette: management and reporting:-

As very few of our gender make it to higher decision making positions in a predominantly male business environment, thereby challenging the relevance of women as project managers for smooth execution of large-scale projects. Though understated, women bring to the table team spirit, quality and time consciousness along with integrity and focus. It was in such an environment, while working as local landscape consultants on the DIAL Terminal 3 project that we needed to forge collaborations and develop work strategies to ensure timely completion of deadlines with a focus on quality and detailing. This was critical in order to achieve optimum utilization of resources for both the client and consultants. Clarity on each participant's role and continuous collaboration, brainstorming, and interaction was the need of the hour for a cohesive contribution. Spread across an area of 5.2 million square feet, and the third largest Terminal in the world, the project in question at the time of inception in 2006-07, was a trailblazer in scale and significance and was conceived keeping in mind an integrated approach to infrastructure development in the developing world. Taken up during the Commonwealth Games 2010, the added complexity of time management gave rise to new challenges in project execution.



Fig 3a_Exterior landscape treatment at DIAL

The landscape design focused on establishing an environment with soothing planting schemes and large grassed berms as large expanses informal public spaces as an approach to the Terminal. These green mounds are seen today as public recreation spots, which are utilized by health enthusiasts and visitors alike in the early hours of the day as walking, yoga and meditation spots (Fig 3 a and b). The idea of providing a barrier-free environment for various members of the society, today, sees the general populace enjoy this expanse as their own. This offers a snippet of the culture of open spaces we aspire to introduce to our cities – informal, inclusive and inviting (Prothi Khanna and Gupta, 2010).



Fig 3b_ Interior Landscape treatments at DIAL

Designing for diversity:-

Landscape architecture provides the context in which the built environment exists. Creating spaces that are sensitive to user experience is the core principle that guides our design philosophy in a range of projects. The spaces that we conceive have a strong influence on the quality of people's lives. Decisions about the design, planning and management of spaces can enhance or restrict a sense of belonging. They can increase or reduce feelings of security, stretch or limit boundaries, promote or reduce mobility, and provide or pollute a healthy environment. They can also remove real and imagined barriers and foster greater understanding.

Housing projects are a particular genre where landscape design requires to cater to women centric need. Community support, looking over children's play areas, designing with the 'eyes on street' for enhanced security and sensitive interventions with regards to the use of facilities by ladies require to be addressed.

An inclusive approach places people at the heart of the design process and celebrates diversity by providing for flexibility in use. It offers new insights into the way people interact with the built environment and creates new opportunities to deploy creative and problem-solving skills. It also enables everyone to participate equally, confidently and independently in everyday activities (Inclusion by Design, 2008).

In India, creating usable spaces for women in public areas requires the application of this approach in creative ways. Waterwoods Apartments (2005) was a project conceived with a tightly knit community living, built around the concept of a central courtyard that creates a micro-climate for the stay at home and working from home women in Bangalore. The basic idea behind the design of this apartment complex was to create spaces and buildings that people could use to form strong, vibrant and sustainable communities.



Fig 4a_Swimming pool at Waterwoods Apartments,

Bangalore

The design of the central court for Waterwoods Apartments is a specific case. Designed for a new developer, receptive to innovative ideas, the architectural design was modified in the design of the 1,200 sq. ft. swimming pool. Earlier located on the surface, we felt this to be against the grain of Indian tradition where it would be uncomfortable for the ladies on campus to be using the pool in full view of all apartments (Fig 4a).



Fig 4b_Landscape treatments for Waterwoods

Apartments, Bangalore

We were able to convince the clients for the pool to be taken to a lower level while still retaining the open to sky character to add privacy as well as to give visual access to the Health Club area. In order to create some privacy for each apartment planting on the basement slab was designed. The issue of inverted beams and thus shallow planting depths on the deck slab were overcome by introducing taller planters over basement columns and creating a checker board language of softscapes and hardscapes (Fig 4 b and c).



Fig 4c_Outdoor seating arrangements at

Waterwoods Apartments, Bangalore

Future for the Past: Children's activities undertaken by the Beyond Built Trust:-

We strive to exist in a culture where we can contribute to the profession and society at large. In keeping with our aim to 'make a difference', Beyond Built Trust was established in early 2011 to contribute towards the field of education and exchange of ideas and experiences. Here we undertake awareness building activities for children in order to acquaint young minds with their rich cultural and natural heritage. It is imperative to transfer the spark to future generations, who are increasingly exposed to cultures other than our own. Hence, as a team of women professionals we began spearheading activities for children. It is a known fact that learning by doing is a better way of comprehending a concept than conventional means of reading and listening. With the objective of understanding and appreciation of one's culture, urbanism and design, this initiative is geared towards developing activities based on an exploration of what invokes curiosity in a child's mind (Figure 5 a and b). The main aim of conducting these activities is to ignite a child's imagination towards our shared heritage/environment/context so they inherit a sense of pride and belonging towards our culture. By using a vocabulary that is familiar to a child, culture is simply portrayed as another aspect of everyday life, not as an externally induced entity. This can be achieved by facilitating tools that evoke interest in the design of spaces and their comfort and livability.



Fig 5a_Children's activities at workshops conducted

by Beyond Built Trust

At Beyond Built Pvt. Ltd. and Beyond Built Trust we strongly believe in the relevance of creating a balance between the role of a professional practitioner with one of philanthropy where we can apply our knowledge base and skill set to contribute to the public realm, one that may be seen as a small yet significant contribution of women to a profession that is, even today, strongly pivoted on patriarchal principles.



Fig 5b_Children's activities at workshops conducted by BBTworkshop

Conclusion:-

In the last few decades more and more women are managing to break stereotypes and achieve greater success in their role as leading design professionals. A number of women have finally been able to work their way up the business ladder, arriving to high ranking positions in some of the most renowned architectural firms of the world. Women have shown the world how they can be great leaders, and how their outlook towards the profession is strikingly different from men, due to their unique skills and leadership style. Women designers have, in particular, received acclaim for putting people and ecology first in their problem solving approach. Advances in technology plus the evolving work and family roles of women in India have contributed to the business environment of the 21st century. The changing roles of women have led to their greater participation in the employment sector and consequent changes in many aspects of Indian life. It was anticipated that increased labour force participation for women and subsequent participation in multiple roles would result in increased stress. Research studies have actually determined that the opposite is true. Women who participate in multiple roles experience lower levels of stress-related mental and physical problems and feel generally better than their cohorts who engage in fewer roles. Current research supports the fact that employed women, regardless of marital status, reported greater happiness than the non-employed women. It confirms that employment has a positive effect for women and families (Jacobs and Schain, n.d.).

Despite this conclusion, women still encounter a number of difficulties and misperceptions that affect their performance in the workplace. This is particularly true for design professions like Construction and Architecture that have a long history of male-centred existence. Bringing in change requires a shift in outlook and attitude from a broad range of participants that includes clients, consultants, engineers, contractors and labour. This is, however, a longer process that can benefit from an even greater women involvement in the profession across all these participating agencies.

Another agent for change is the body of work that many women designers have created over the past few decades. Today, many women designers are inspiring others to steer landscape architecture towards a sustainable and inclusive future. By creating holistic designs, which respond to the character of their locale they have been able to produce robust schemes which address contemporary site conditions, pressures of usage, while responding to the rich historical and cultural context of the place. Through a range of projects they have been able to demonstrate a mature and unique design perspective that has enriched the profession in new and creative ways.

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Got some tips, design ideas? Share them with the community.