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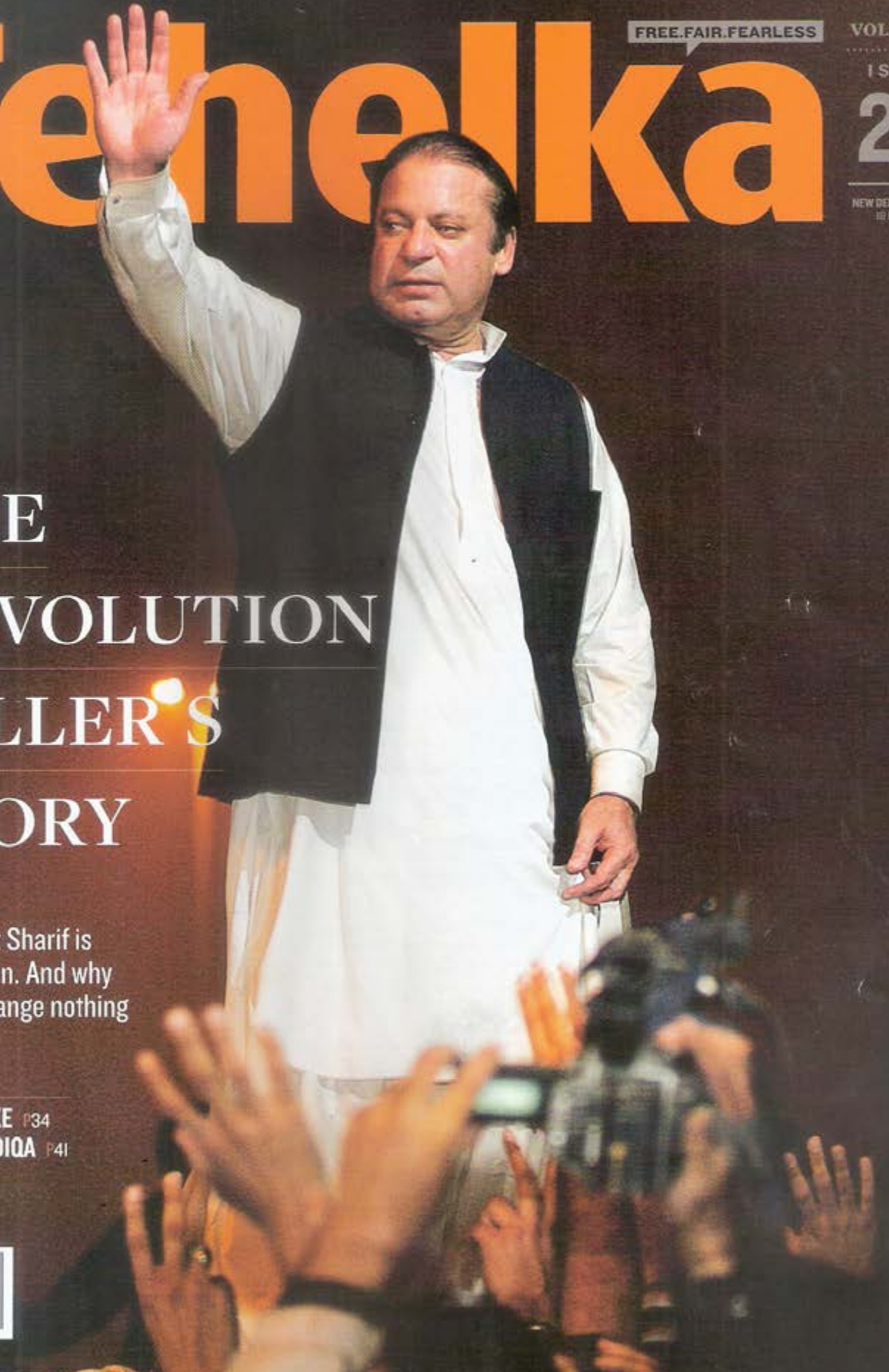
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Q&A

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FOUNDER AND MANAGING PARTNER, MORPHOGENESIS

'From 1991, we just lost our marbles as a society'

MANIT RASTOGI is often slightly embarrassed when his pioneering work in sustainable architecture is celebrated internationally, because he believes his solutions are nothing more than basic common sense. That common sense, he tells **AJACHI CHAKRABARTI**, was sacrificed in the quest to build visible symbols of our new economic might.

EDITED EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW

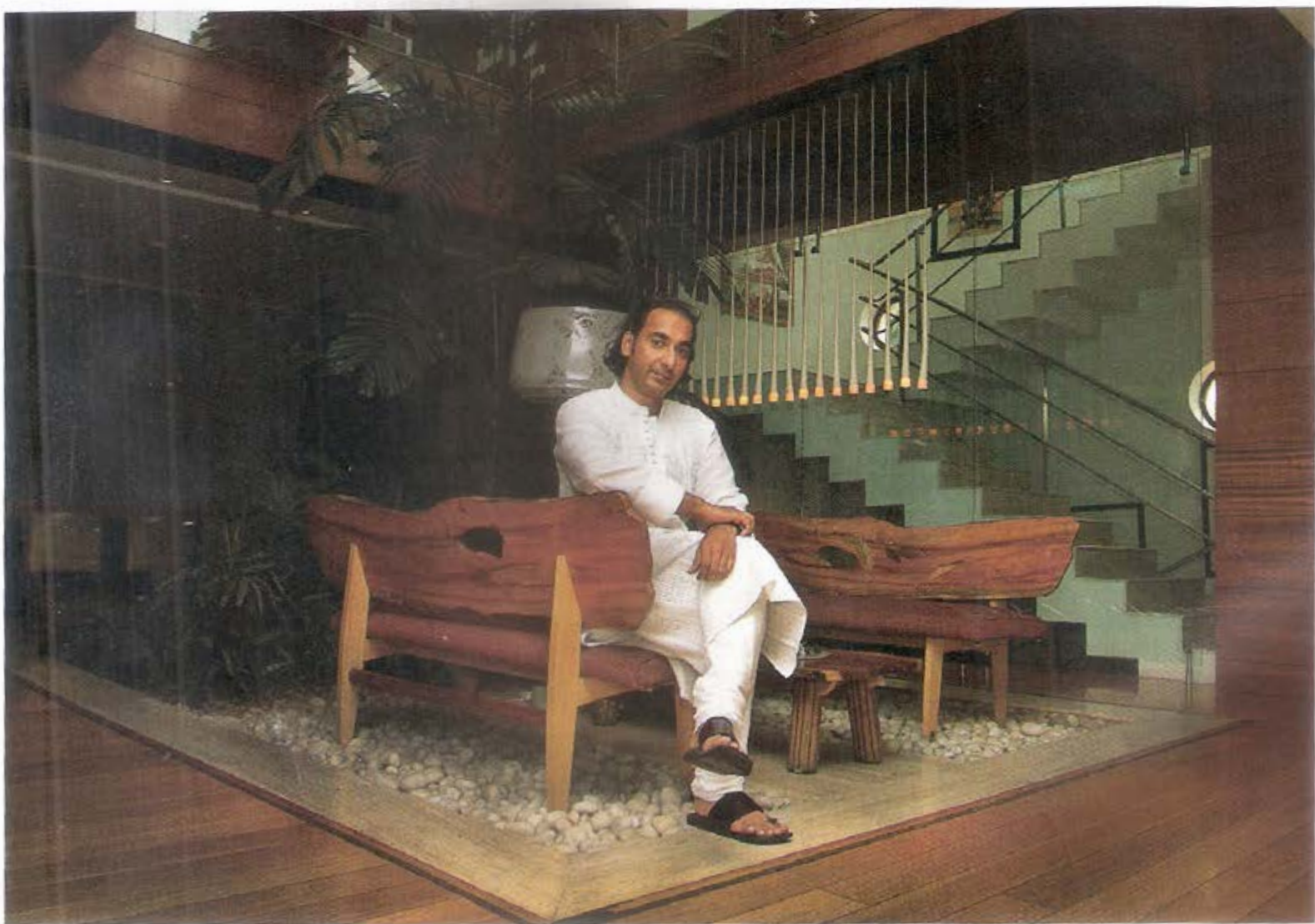
Q As an advocate for sustainable architecture, what is your understanding of the term?

A It's a very fashionable term. Everyone claims to be sustainable, whatever industry they are in. To understand sustainability, what you have to do is to look at the past, the history of the past few hundred years in the region. Sustainability was not something we considered traditionally as a layer that

you bring onto what you do. We did not have a choice but to be sustainable. Especially in a climate like ours, you couldn't survive if you did not have energy or water. The kind of architecture and urban planning that naturally evolved over the past 500-1,000 years was generically sustainable. It used local materials, buildings were cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter; they used thick stone walls. Water was given more importance, hence the creation of the *baolis* and stepwells. People were doing this not to save the planet; they were doing this because that was the way to be.

Q So what changed?

A Somewhere along the line, a disjunction happened. Globally, we saw the disjunction in the 1970s, before the oil crisis, when oil was cheaper than beer. In New



York, buildings were made where lights would be installed without switches. They calculated and realised that it was cheaper to leave the lights running 24x7 than installing a light switch. With that came the notion that we could build in a way that was divorced from climate. Airconditioning was invented, and people realised that they could build the same building in Texas and Alaska, because they could get the 22 to 24 degree temperature inside. Energy was not an issue.

India took much longer. Even in the early '90s, architecture and planning in India was responsive to the environment, because in cities like Delhi, there were tremendous power cuts. As a people, we've had a strong relationship between the inside and the outside. Then came 1991, our financial independence so to speak, and we just lost our marbles. We went for the transplantation of buildings from the global North to the South. We brought architecture here that had no relevance, because we thought it stood for globalisation. We never understood what we were good at. Our policies were not geared around sustainability. We began to plan cities as if we had the most amazing cold climate and everyone had cars. We neither focussed on mass transit nor on walking, cycling, public spaces. Sustainability disappeared from our consciousness.

Sustainable architecture is seen as a domain of the rich. But greater percolation can only come by making these houses significantly cheaper. That really isn't happening, is it?

But it is. It depends on where you look in India. The problem in housing is the price of land, not really the price of going green, because land has been cartelised since Independence. That brings us to urban planning. Until we move away from this land-use model, we're not going to get the cities we want. Until the government stops selling land to private individuals who put boundary walls around, you will end up with this city full of islands, where the only democratic space is the street. The correct model to adopt is one of urban design with integrated planning. It is perhaps not as remunerable to certain people to do it that way. But that is the only way.



● Built to perfection Corporate office of India Glycols in Noida and The Nira in Kerala

For example, when we were looking at the question of sustainability in Delhi four or five years ago, we were intrigued by these *nallahs* that everyone complained about. When we got access to Google Earth — we couldn't get access to satellite imagery before — we discovered there are 20,000 *nallahs* in the city with a total length of about 350 km. They're all interconnected and connected to the river, and are continuous. You can walk along the *nallahs* from the Qutub Minar to Shri Ram College of Commerce without crossing a road. And they were all carrying sewage. We realised that if we could rehabilitate these *nallahs* by breaking down the sewage using anaerobic plants and modulating the embankments to create walking and cycling tracks, we would have these 350 km of incredible infrastructure, which connects schools, markets, museums, parks, just about anything. We calculated that this would cost about ₹1,000 crore, which is less than a fifth of how much we spend on cleaning the Yamuna. It would solve the water table problem,

the sewage problem, the Yamuna's problem, the public health problems of dengue and chikungunya, the transportation problem by providing last-mile connectivity. We took it to the government, and to our surprise, they were very receptive. What we couldn't find was the one person in charge. There were 26 agencies involved, and that was the tip of the iceberg. In 2009, the lieutenant-governor approved the scheme, but the Commonwealth Games scam put it on hold. After that, we just couldn't get all the people into the same room. As long as all these people sit in different silos, you're not going to get sustainable urban planning.

There's also the role of the citizens, who aren't incorporated in the planning process as stakeholders.

You know, it's a bit of a chicken-and-egg thing. If you look at what happened in Defence Colony, they went and covered the *nallah* because the residents there pushed the local MLA to do so. Now, the residents don't understand that this is going to be a disaster because you can't put a concrete slab. There's going to be silting, and the sewage is going to choke underneath. How're you going to clean it? And if you can't, you're going to get what Bombay gets: floods. The next time it rains, water is going to enter the basements of Defence Colony. When you involve the stakeholder, it is your duty to educate them. And to do so, the person educating should also be educated.

Covering a *nallah* is the instinctive response for Western-educated people. Why do we continue to import these ideas of urban planning?

How many studies are there that indicate that building flyovers does not reduce traffic? Plenty. But why do we go ahead and build them? Because it is something that is visible in a five-year political tenure. Holistic environmental planning can take years, but covering a *nallah* can be done in a five-year tenure, even if it is potentially disastrous. I really don't think it's a question of us importing from the West any more. The lack of understanding is incredible, but it has to do with how we are as a society. ■

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