

ANUPAMA FROM AUROVILLE

Interview: FILIPE BALESTRA

She started her career in Auroville. The experimental city in South India is still part of Anupama Kundoo's world, whether she builds a full-scale house at the Venice Biennale or teaches in Queensland. Filipe Balestra speaks with an inspirational architect.

Auroville is a unique collective experiment located in South India, where a city of 50,000 people from all over the world is planned with the aim of human unity. This idealistic place is also one of the starting points of the award-winning architect Anupama Kundoo, known for her research-oriented practice and practice-oriented teaching.

Her contribution to the latest Architecture Biennale in Venice involved a full-scale facsimile of her Indian project Wall House. It received international acclaim, with the New York Times mentioning it as "a gem among rubble".

Recently, the Stockholm-based Brazilian architect Filipe Balestra saw her lecture in Mumbai and made contact for an interview about eco-dada architecture, an installation in Barcelona and a window built with an old bicycle wheel.

Where are you originally from and how did you become interested in architecture?

– I was born in Pune and grew up in Mumbai where I went to school. I did an

aptitude test on the advice of my aunt and they recommended architecture which I had never considered, but upon hearing it for the first time, I heard a whole-hearted yes in my own voice. I never looked back.

What is Auroville exactly and what was your role in the execution of that process?

– I had not understood the intention of this project when I landed there in 1990, but I was moved by a lot of pioneering work happening there. In my architectural projects I sought to find locally relevant solutions to architecture in ways that minimized the environmental impact while increasing local participation. Over the years I contributed to planning and urban design as I gradually discovered the work of Auroville's Parisian chief architect, and in 2009 I authored a book on him.

I have seen your lectures both in Sri Lanka in 2011 and recently in Mumbai. What strikes me is your "hands dirty" process. Even though these techniques are what perhaps Sou Fujimoto would refer to as primitive, the objects are crisp and well built. What does a typical project look like?

– You can judge better than me what is typical. I can say that my own aesthetic sense is shaped by the values of early modernism and I like simple clean compositions without clutter, and I also like to deliver calm spaces. But I do not like simplicity and repetition. I value the building process as an integral part of the architecture and the primitive look you are talking about could well be the result of the context in which those projects are situated.

Regarding academia: you were teaching in Queensland, Australia and now you have arrived in Madrid knowing there is a huge economic crisis awaiting you. What drives you to Spain?

– I have been invited to build an installation in Barcelona along with five other foreign architects. My husband is Spanish and I have never lived in Spain, so I look forward to my children and me getting closer to family. I have also lived through the recession while I was in Berlin. When people have an economic crisis there is a sense of being grounded in reality and knowing what the priorities are. There is less wastefulness and frivolous spending.

Most of the people who visited the last Venice Biennale could not help noticing your work. What you created was some sort of eco-dada architecture which I perceived as very real. What was your core intention building a 1:1 scale house?

– The first thing was that I wanted to make a statement that architecture can be successfully represented without any other medium, such as posters and models and photographs and verbal explanations. My exhibit was titled Feel the Ground. The theme was "Common Ground" and I thought if I simply avoided the use of English or Italian as a language, and any intellectual explanations, then I would have established the widest common ground, and not excluded or strained any visitor.

Coming back to eco-dadaism: my favorite picture of your lecture in Mumbai showed a round window being built using an old bicycle wheel. That sort of improvisation is something I came across when I once built a school in a favela. How much space do you leave out for the unexpected?

– I actually like to plan everything but am always open to any unexpected developments or new information. I am not usually unsettled by new iterations of the project during conception and till the very last stage of realization it can keep evolving if there is any good reason to consider a better alternative to what I had originally designed. To be open to the unexpected is to be alive.



Anupama Kundoo. Below: Dr Kundoo's own home, Wall House in Auroville.



PHOTO: ANDREAS DEFFNER, SONJAWINKLER AND ALKA HINGORANI

The lake resort project in Mulshi, India seems to be built from very local materials. Was this designed by you alone?

– This project was influenced by the kind of thatch structures developed by John Allen, an Australian architect living in Auroville. I was very impressed by the way he had solved the basic dwelling unit that could be built with natural materials in a few days and with little resources. Many people in Auroville lived in such dwellings in Auroville's pioneering period. My own hut in the earliest days was also built that way. I ended up living in that structure for ten years. Later, my clients at Mulshi who had visited my house were impressed.



Wall House as an installation at the 13th Architecture Biennale in Venice, 2012. Photo: Andreas Deffner.



The orphanage in Pondicherry, in collaboration with Volontariat NGO.

At Sangamam you managed to build quality row housing with a budget of USD 4500 per unit. Do these houses have a kitchen and toilet?

– Yes, it includes kitchens and toilets. The key areas of savings were cement-stabilized rammed earth foundations, rammed earth walls, terracotta interlocking hand-made roofing units without any supporting structure and a compact efficient plan that reduced any unnecessary square metres of area.

My favourite project is the orphanage in Pondicherry. Not only is it unique in its own energetic spectrum, but also it was built with mud bricks which were fired up on site. How does this technique work?

– This technique of built-on-site mud construction was pioneered and developed

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by a Californian ceramist, Ray Meeker, who lives in Pondicherry. As the whole house is built with mud bricks and mud mortar it needs to be built using vaults and domes. Normally 40 per cent of the heat needed to fire products is lost in the oven walls. The idea is to tap this heat and use it to make a mud house stable through converting it into ceramic and preventing it being washed away when faced with moisture and rainfall.

– So theoretically this is an attractive technology, as it can be built almost using only labour, with the exception of fuel.

Your Wall House feels like a local family habitat that belongs to its location. The core of the house fades slowly outwards into nature leaving social spaces in between built and non-built. What is the story behind this experimental unit?

– This house is my own, so it represents my own sense of freedom and flexibility. I have very organized spaces for each activity but I do not need the harsh separation of each by rigid walls and distinct rooms. Most of all I don't like the harsh separation between the house and the universe around it. I never like to lose the individual – while being distinct and unique is but part of a larger whole, in which the individual finds his own comfortable position in the rest of the space around it, in harmony and in constant connection and awareness of it. Also I don't have too many objects, so the space itself is the dominant experience.

What do you envision doing in the near future?

– I am continuing my research in housing alternatives for the changing society. I think the time has come to bring the outcome of 24 years of intensive research and experimentation into the mainstream, now. 🌀

ABOUT ANUPAMA KUNDUO

Dr. Anupama Kundoo has worked, researched and taught all over the world: TU Berlin, AA London, TU Darmstadt, Parsons New School of Design, New York and currently at the University of Queensland in Brisbane. In 2013 she won the Dr. Vishnu Joshi award, presented by the Indian Society of Ferrocement. She has been featured in a wide range of books and international journals such as the Phaidon World Atlas of Contemporary Architecture and AD Architectural Design London. In 2009 she authored *Roger Anger: Research on Beauty*, about the life and work of the Chief Architect of Auroville.

Anupama Kundoo is one of six international architects invited by the Barcelona city council to create the installation *Books Unbound: The Library of Lost Books* at Plaça Salvador Seguí, symbolizing the recovery of Barcelona by its citizens. It will open in June.

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