

## Standing out while blending into nature



Kamal Sagar - Principal Architect and Director, Total Environment,

*He creates apartments, homes and offices that are distinct in the context of modern Indian architecture. Meet Kamal Sagar, principal architect and director, Total Environment, who uses only natural materials and finishes, with great emphasis on landscaping and eco-friendly technologies. With hardly any innovation in architectural design in the current crop of new buildings, Total Environment is a refreshing change. To imagine all these concepts way back in 1997 and start a real estate business with just Rs 100,000 is something awe-inspiring! Here are extracts of a conversation with Sagar.*

**Q:** How did Total Environment come alive and what were its roots?

**A:** It began with four of us who were classmates from IIT Kharagpur. We began with a project and slowly my friends moved on. My father, who was structural engineer from Hindustan Steelworks, joined me in 1999. He became my mentor, with his experience in very large projects done for his previous organisation.

This firm was born of a unique project I was handling, when I had my own architectural design consultancy company in Pune and Bangalore. My first project was the construction of a stud farm in Pune that belonged to Poonawalla family. The client was very particular that he didn't want to deal with a contractor and was only interested in looking at the finished project. I was also eager to take it up since I wanted to see my designs being built exactly the way I visualised it. Also, the project had a very strict deadline. We had to finish it eight months, because a conference was being organised there.

The client was meticulous about his needs and fanatically quality conscious. He even wanted to inspect the accuracy of alignment of the roadside fence for the horses. The fence was made of a special variety of PVC so that the horses wouldn't get hurt if they fell on the fences. It also took the weight of the horses. There were experts flown in from America to install it.

After this project I moved on to Bangalore where friends wanted us to build unique apartments that blended with nature. They agreed to buy them, if we created something exclusive like the stud farm house in Pune. This happened at the same time when I was planning to set up a company. So we decided to find land and start in 1996. Since then, the focus has



'Bougainvillea,' and 'Reach for the sky,' which won the commendation trophy and citation for 'The best habitat award for apartment planning,' 'A+D' and 'Spectrum Foundation Architecture awards 2002.'

**Q:** Many other builders have taken up your ideas now. Do you still think you have a USP?

**A:** Customisation is the strongest USP of our company. Nobody in India or even the world offers customised apartments. We too started inadvertently. When we did our first project, we had customers asking for changes. They wanted to change things from switchboards to flooring. That's

always been on creating a home atmosphere where all the spaces are used differently.

**Q:** What unique factors do you incorporate in your projects?

**A:** The idea is to find out the difference between a house and an apartment and simulate a flat with that difference. The only difference we found was that of a garden and we said, "Why not have gardens in our flats?" Our second project was for Microland employees. When we proposed the garden concept, most of them rejected it, because they couldn't stretch their budget. So we decided to implement it at our own expense. When we completed the project, those guys were totally zapped and they told us they had never seen anything like it.

The garden was created on cantilevered terraces with a very high level of waterproofing for the flooring by using crystallization and membrane system. Till date, we haven't faced any problems. Since then there has been no looking back. We went on to build many projects like 'Green is the colour,' 'Life is beautiful,'

when we caught on to this idea and from our second project onwards we started customisation. We sat with our customers and asked them what they wanted. We discuss everything from flooring to colours to wall removals, etc. We show them samples, photographs so they get an idea. Based on that, we make a final set of drawings. We use a single file just for a plan and every plan is approved and signed by the customer and me or my wife. The move is well appreciated and people wouldn't buy flats from us unless we do it."

**Q:** Your firm is known for not outsourcing its contracts. How do you manage this and does that escalate cost?

**A:** Our workers are some of the best artisans in India because their families have been in this business for 400 years. Also, they have gained professionalism and have worked with top builders in Mumbai. We have carpenters from Gujarat and Rajasthan, shuttering guys from Orissa and Bengal, masons from UP and Tamil Nadu who have been working with me since 8-11 years.

We do not outsource because it doesn't



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give me quality. Many a time these outsourced workers put in poor work and they do not use specified materials. There is always some excuse and as you know in the construction business, what is done cannot be undone. If there are ancillary units that can take up responsibility of completing a project, it will be great.

**Q: Can you tell us about the materials you work with? And how do these materials contribute in building quality projects?**

**A:** We have always worked with materials that may not be very eco friendly, but are meant to blend with natural surroundings. They age beautifully. We do use rubber wood for furnishing, which is also eco-friendly. Wire frame brick is another building material that we use since it makes the building look like it is hugging the earth. It makes the structure look more aesthetic.

Our projects take a little longer than usual since the building of wire frame brick wall takes a course-by-course period as opposed to a normal wall that can be built in a single evening. All the bricks have to be correctly positioned and there has to be an equal gap between each brick. Many

people use vitrified or ceramic tiles, which are fast to fit, but the Jaisalmer and Kotha stones that we use needs 15 days just to be mirror polished with eight coats. We also use DOKA, as building material, which is a stable system unlike ready mix concrete that may just fall down as the load builds. DOKA sets very fast, while supporting the load without falling down. It helps you to align beams and columns perfectly.

**Q: What are your thoughts on the current state of civil engineering? Do you find it difficult to retain talent?**

**A:** Today many civil engineers are not very stable. Most of them want to build for the IT industry or they want to go to the US to study. So there is nobody willing to commit to a project and run it for 5-10 years.

**Q: Do you have any plans to expand in the middle econo-mic sector? Are you looking at the middle class for potential clients?**

**A:** Many people approached us asking for flats at lower prices. So we recently launched a project in a slightly lower priced bracket of Rs 30 lakh called 'Raindrops keep falling on my head.' We sold all the flats even before advertising it. We definitely plan to enter the lower bracket in future, as we also need to contribute back to Bangalore. Moreover it's also a stable market for us since it's always present whether it's a boom or a crash in the market.

**Q: The general idea is that larger volumes bring down the cost. Does that rule apply at Total environment?**

**A:** When you customise apartments, it doesn't apply. When you do an apartment and you buy a certain material say like tiles, you buy in bulk. But the minute you customise, you buy material for one house. So you keep buying varieties according to the square feet. Your purchasing power and discounts reduce automatically, that is only for the interiors. ■