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AN INITIATIVE BY STIR

ISSUE #17

₹500



SURVIVAL AND REVIVAL

*The adaptive reuse of the historical fort of Bishangarh led by **Sthapatya Architects** in collaboration with lighting designers **Lightbook** and landscape designers **Visarch**, not only bows down to the original structure but also intelligently articulates the amalgamation of modern and traditional. **Mrinalini Ghadiok** and **Meghna Mehta** of **mondo*arc india** delve into the process employed to deliver an impressive form and efficient functionality of a striking boutique hotel.*



Pics: Courtesy of Sthapatya Architects

Historical buildings intrigue ideas of how the survival of architecture impacts our lives and how its revival can make an astonishing difference. This process of 'survival and revival' determines the narrative of the building and the architect here truly becomes the narrator. A building's journey through time witnesses numerous transformations catering to various needs, uses and significance, while its revival lies in the hands of the builder and the architect. A similar opportunity presented itself before Sthapatya architects, led by principal designers Sandeep Khandelwal and Ritu Khandelwal. As per the requirements and what appeared to be the only way to revive the existing Bishangarh Fort near Jaipur, was to use the best of its components and convert it into a boutique hotel. In this way, the peculiar spaces of the old structure could be celebrated while the rest of the building could be put to appropriate use. The conversion of old royal palaces and forts into hotels is rather commonplace in India, and this project posed the perfect opportunity for such a transformation. "When I first saw the site, it was in complete ruins and we did not know where to start. We did not have accurate plans of the fort and hence the best way to understand the spaces was by actually seeing and subsequently visualising them." Sandeep spent seven entire days on site to understand the structure completely and from this derived the inspiration to convert central openings into courtyards, voids into lift shafts and floor spaces to rooms. While the basic restoration of the project was still underway, the Khandelwals roped in lighting designer Vinayak Diwan of Lightbook to work on the lighting scheme of the to-be hotel. "A lot of areas were still unexplored, and every site visit exposed us to new visual dimensions. It was a challenging project because we were responsible for joining the dots together; for rethinking every design



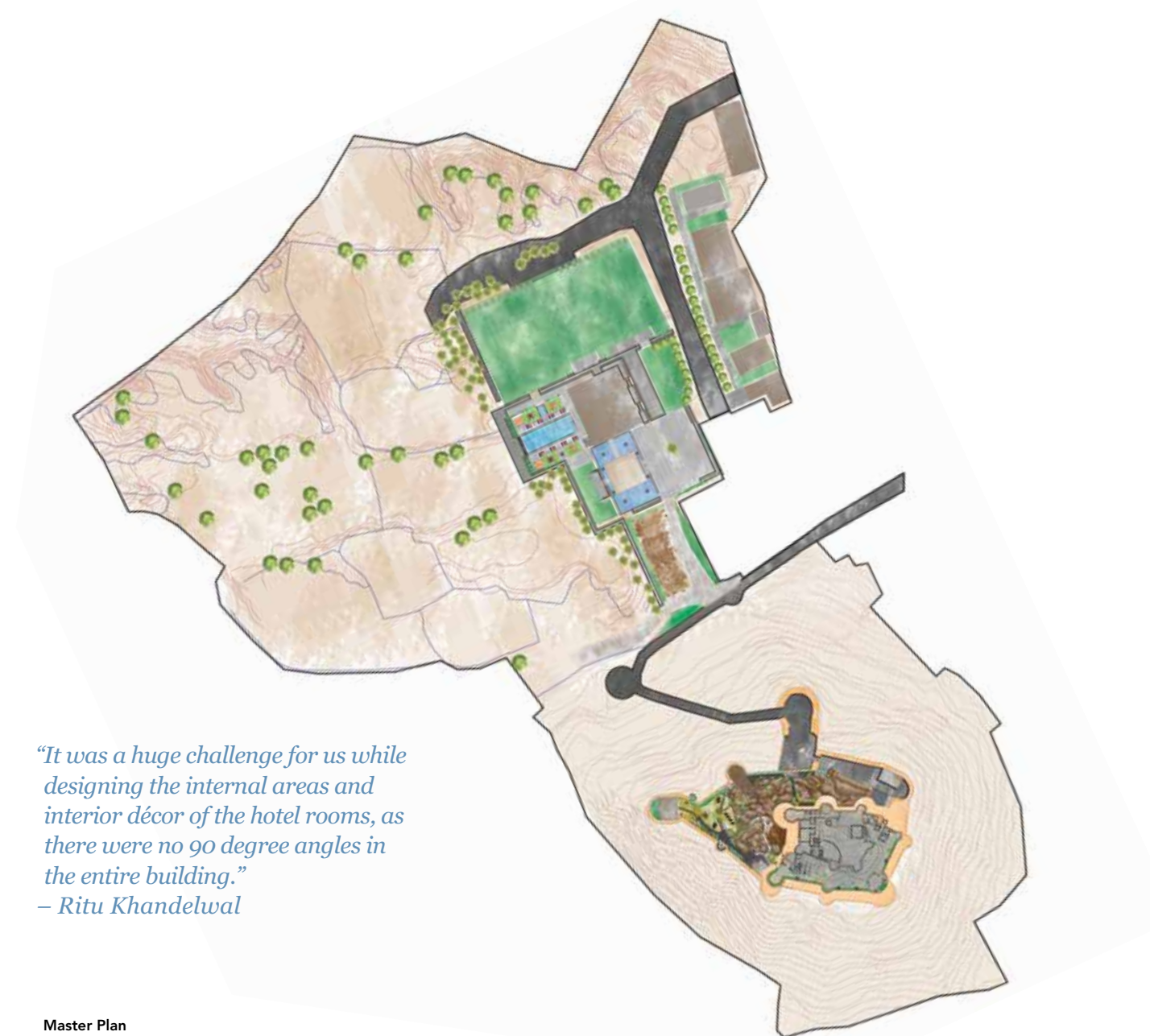
direction given in the past to newly added spaces,” explains Diwan. Two concentric structures of varying heights compose the 230-year-old fort. Akin to many defence based structures of that time, the original layout saw the inner of the two forms peering towards a central internal courtyard, while the outer layer offered vast panoramic views from atop the granite hillock of the small village of Bishangarh below. These primordial forms of the fort were retained through an intelligent articulation derived by limiting interventions in the outer structure and making necessary changes within the interiors.

The 3-meter thick load-bearing walls of the fort once played a critical role in the defence of its royalty. Thus, its openings were restricted to rather small punctures on the exterior façade. However, changing the function of the space to a boutique hotel, it became important to harvest daylight in the interiors. Hence, the designers resorted to strategically placing a series of small and big windows in order to avoid hampering the overall grandeur of the elevation of the fort. “Daylight within the fort was measured and we had values which were ranging from 2 lux to 10,000 lux. So, careful planning was done keeping in mind

the transition between spaces,” says Diwan. Given the functioning of the fort and its peculiarly designed spaces, the architects were left with odd areas and semi-circular bastions to make use of for the new hotel. Thus, all the hotel rooms ended up being unique in shape, size and form. “It was a huge challenge for us while designing the internal areas and interior décor of the hotel rooms, as the structure is a completely organic form with no 90-degree angles in the entire building, making it impossible for typical layouts,” explains Ritu. The larger bulbous volumes became suites, while narrower corridor spaces were allotted single and double occupancy rooms. Though this resulted in multifarious room formations, it also offers an interesting mix of options for guests to explore.

Carving out lateral, and more so the vertical circulation was a demanding task. The hotel planning required four visitor elevators, another service elevator, as well as two staircases. These were assigned either to attach to peripheral walls or occupy un-designated shafts. While the overall layout might flag many interstitial zones of not the most efficient spatial use, these breakout blocks become intriguing elements of pleasant surprises within. The corridors are studded with large windows and sit-ins that look onto expanding views, niches become storage facilities or better still, bay windows with intimate lounging corners, bastions become extravagantly relaxing bathing experiences within suites, and deepened arches pitch quiet repose.

Careful to extend the design sensibilities of the original fort, the architects have predominantly used natural sandstone, marble and granite. The new plaster is made of the local sandstone and tested to match the old plaster. “We tried to rejuvenate the essence of the fort by getting into the details and trying to follow a vocabulary that fully belonged to the structure. Jharokha styled windows, and Tudor and cusped arches highlight the inspiration that flows from the Jaipur Gharana architecture (an amalgamation of Rajput and Mughal styles), while trying to keep the elevation of the



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Master Plan
Drawings: Sthapatya Architects



Fort Floor Plan

fort intact, and at the same time harnessing daylight into the building,” elaborates Ritu. Along with a naturally illuminated environment, it was imperative for the designers to conceptualise a lighting scheme that was concurrent to the aesthetic value of the old fort as well as in tune with the contemporary nature of the hotel. Diwan elaborates, “Monumental lighting needs a sensitive approach from the initial stages of conceptualisation as one tries to find the right balance between modernity and heritage. Our aim was to create a hierarchy of illuminated spaces which changes from the arrival court at the lower level through the narrow winding passages of the fort to the wide corridors of the guest floor.” He adds, “Every space posed a different challenge during the

initial concept sketches for the project, but we had design clarity that every physical space needs to be articulated with a play of light and shadows cleverly.” Sandeep chimes in to say, “The use of jalis and screens in the corridor creates a magical reflection on the floor of the corridor; as the building breathes the shadows change and patterns evolve through the day.” Playing with local materials, forgotten motifs and traditional crafts done in a peculiar Jaipur style, the team of designers worked together to deliver different experiences for different parts of the hotel, keeping alive the ‘mystery’ of the space. While the rooms are dressed in subtle elegance, the dining areas are rendered more dramatic. The shapely arches are offset by intricate columns, a blanched

marble canvas is dotted with timber furniture, and deepened upholstery adds nostalgia to regal dining in a contemporary fashion. The general ambience is cosy and intimate, drawing focus to the finer design details through directed accents of light and colour. Even the outdoor terraces, though grand and hefty, are softened with dimmed lights that graze the enclosing fort walls to give a gentle glow, while tables are fitted with lanterns. Many other elements cater to the authentic feel of the hotel - vegetable dye frescoes, antique brass embossing, hand-picked artifacts, hand-woven carpets and rugs, and intricate lattice stonework in the form of jalis as seen on the exterior façade. “Extensive research and care was taken to



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derive a vocabulary that fully belonged to the original structure. Design ideas of the past were encapsulated in a way that served the modern needs best. It was a constant dialogue between age-old design methods, and current ideas in architecture and technology, resulting in traditional materials being used with a certain amount of modernity,” elucidates Sandeep. A short stroll downhill along the rampart wall leads one to a tent-like structure or *haveli*. Interestingly, this was created at a later stage when it appeared that the hotel guests sought to wander beyond the rather introverted massive fort structure. Therefore, the *haveli* was developed comprising of an arrival courtyard, banquet lawns, the pool, veranda, terrace, a bar, fitness centre and the Play Soldiers Club. With unmatched views of the surrounding hills, this has become a popular spot to relax and also explore various adventures.

The Alila Fort perched atop an Aravalli hill seems to have been extended from the earth on which it stands. This is not far from the truth, as all materials from the construction stage to the furnishing stage have been sourced locally, from within a 100km radius, involving the local community in the process. It is a complex transformation done simply in all aspects of design. “We too kept it simple and unified in terms of the lighting concept, and emphasised on the architectural scale of the main structure along with generic accents on the peripheral structures or the climbing hill around it. The final outcome was a lighting design which was muted, sublime and articulated, which made the fort look almost floating from the ground level,” describes Diwan. An adaptive reuse of a historical building not only renews, replenishes and rejuvenates a neglected structure, but also saves time, costs and the perpetual loss of heritage

to generations. Architecture must act as a catalyst for the survival and revival of buildings to fulfil the needs and stand the tests of time. While the fort walls clearly stood the test of time, almost unnoticed, it is indispensable to say that the architects have made it worth it, and charmingly so.
www.sthapatyarchitects.com
www.lightbook.in
www.visarchstudio.comm

PROJECT DETAILS

Alila Bishangarh Fort, Jaipur, Rajasthan
Developers: Kings and Knights Hotels Private Ltd
Architects: Sthapatya Architectural Design Studio
Principal Architects: Sandeep Khandelwal, Ritu Khandelwal
Design Team: Aanchal Jain, Kanika Sharma, Chandani Sharma, Swapnal Jangid, Priyanka Gupta, Naresh Asiwail
Lighting Design: Lightbook
Landscape Consultants: Visarch
Structural Consultants: JK Verma