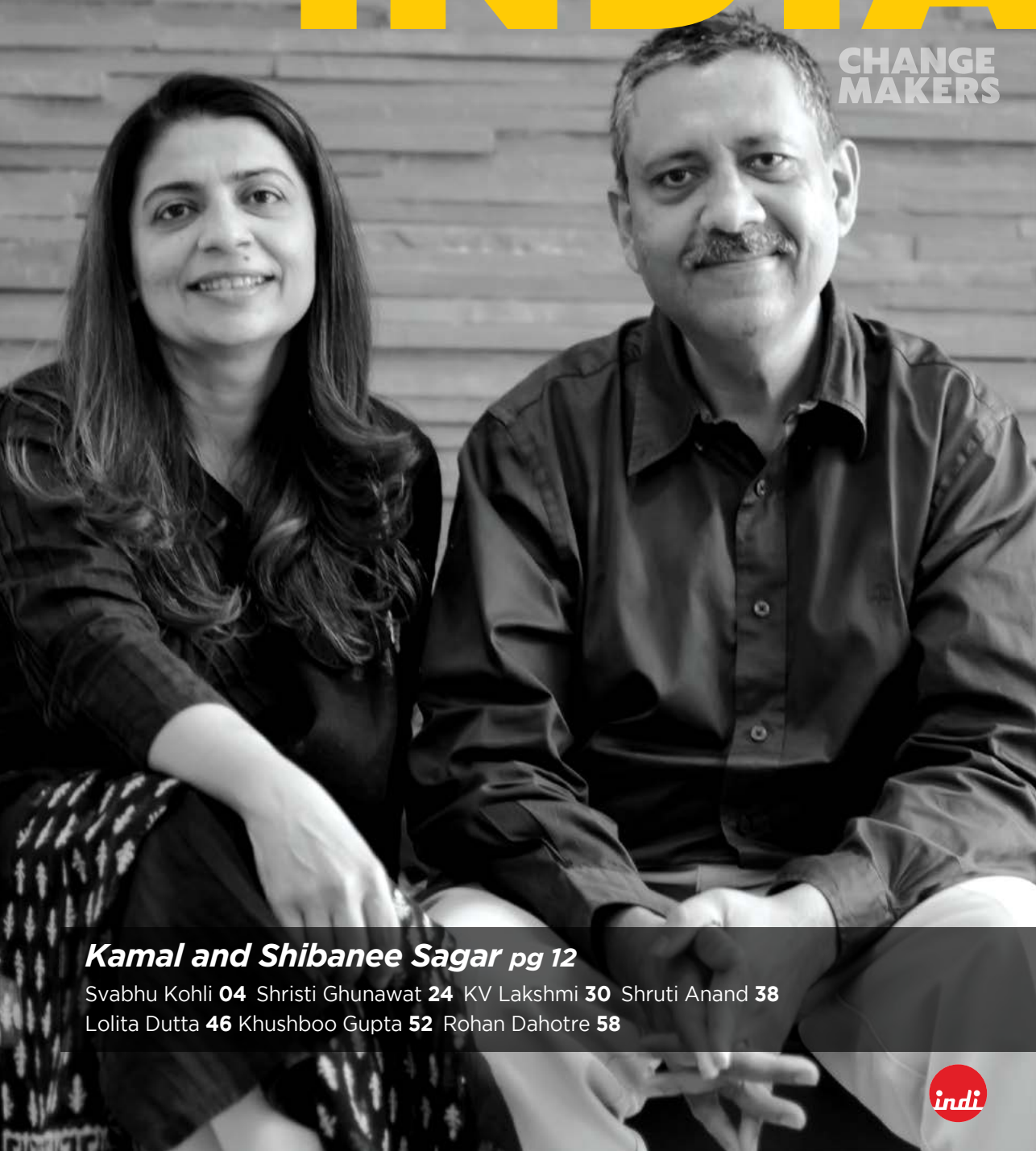


# DESIGN INDIA

**POOL 139**

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**CHANGE  
MAKERS**



***Kamal and Shibanee Sagar pg 12***

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*a*  
garden  
*for*  
every  
home



*In his effort to improve the quality of life in the built environment, **Kamal Sagar** set up an architect-led real estate and design company 25 years ago along with co-founder **Shibanee Sagar**. He tells Designindia how Total Environment has redefined the role of nature in architecture.*

*Van Gogh's Terrace Garden*

## COVER STORY

### Briefly describe your architectural journey before Total Environment.

**K&S:** I graduated from IIT Kharagpur with a degree in Architecture and worked with Omni Architects at Lexington, Kentucky in the US, before moving back to India. I was hired by Mr. Zavaray Poonawalla to supervise the design and development of Poonawalla Stud Farm in Pune. I completed the project in just eight months. Even today I consider my days at the stud farm as the building blocks of my architectural journey. In executing my very first project, I had found my calling - to use the power of design to create an entire environment for people.

Shibanee graduated from Sir J. J. College of Architecture in 1993 with a degree in Architecture, and worked in Mumbai before proceeding to the US to do her Master's at the Savannah College of Art & Design, Georgia.

### What led to the formation of Total Environment?

**K&S:** It all began with one single reason - the ability to design and build the way we

wanted, without compromise and staying true to our design principles. When I started my architectural practice in 1996, I found it very difficult to get good quality construction delivered through contractors because there simply wasn't a customer-centric, brand building approach in the industry. Contracting was, and still is, in most cases, only a means of income and sustenance.

As architects, we realized, very early on, that a home in a high-rise, high-density housing community could be much better than what prevailed in the market, and took on the idea of embracing nature and creating high-quality homes that were warm and individually designed around each family. The other thing I discovered, in my search for a one-bedroom apartment for myself at that time, was that design, in the housing space, was limited to fads and gimmicks – the only attempt at good design in this space worldwide, that I was aware of at that time, was Moshe Safdie's Habitat, in Montreal, back in 1967 and Charles Correa's Kanchenjunga Apartments at Mumbai.



*Windmills of Your Mind*



Poonawalla Stud Farm

During my short stint in the US, I had the opportunity to visit Mies van de Rohe's Farnsworth House and Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater house. These were hugely inspiring and I wanted to create homes like that, but within our high density, high rise housing communities in India.

I designed a few projects for real estate developers in Bangalore, but they were unwilling to accept my ideas and so I realized that the only way I could do this was to take up the responsibility for not just designing, but also developing and constructing these communities and that's how Total Environment was born in 1996 as an architect-led construction and real estate development company.

### **How do you both divide your responsibilities at Total Environment?**

**K&S:** Finding a co-founder can be one of the most stressful ordeals for anyone trying to get their business idea off the ground. Shibanee and I have found comfort in working with each other from the very start of this journey.

Shibanee goes to great lengths in detailing each Total Environment Home, and brings in the warmth and character that we're so well known for. Her little details make the big difference. She and I are jointly responsible

for the architectural design of all the projects at Total Environment, while I also focus on the business side of things.

### **What differentiates you from the rest of the players in the real estate industry?**

**K&S:** We keep our customers at the center of everything we do and that defines very simply, all the things we do differently from everyone in the industry worldwide:

*Design:* Our approach to design is always a problem-solving approach – it's not based on how it's going to look on the brochures or how it's going to zap people into buying from us. It's simply based on a good understanding of the site, the families that are going to live in and use our projects, and with our own principles of authenticity, simplicity, harmony, connection and attention to detail. We design each Total Environment Home by putting ourselves in the shoes of our customers and then designing them as we would for ourselves. Simple clean lines and minimum walls ensure free flowing spaces without compromising privacy.

*Embracing nature:* We have always believed that you cannot call a home a home if it doesn't connect with the natural world. Every Total Environment home is designed around a garden, often around multiple gardens, even if the home is an apartment on the 30th floor. Each garden comes complete with sprinklers and a drip irrigation system. Large glass panels help bring nature into the home from these gardens, blurring the boundaries between the indoors and the outdoors.

*Timeless materials:* One of the nicest things about a Total Environment Home is how it gets better and better with time, turning more beautiful as it grows older. Our exposed brick

## COVER STORY

exteriors develop a unique character and the Kota stone and marble floors get better with age. It takes a lot of pain to build with natural materials but, in the end, they make all the difference.

*Furnished homes:* When you design a home you have to be able to make everything work in harmony – including the furniture and the cabinetry. So we invested in a furniture manufacturing unit and made furniture a part of every home we sold.

*Custom interior design:* We decided to custom design the interiors of each of our homes to suit the lifestyles and functional needs of

our customers. Over time we developed a proprietary platform we call eDesign, which allows our customers to design their homes themselves - including walling, furniture and electrical layouts, floor and wall finishes, kitchen cabinetry, shelving in the wardrobes, and even landscaping.

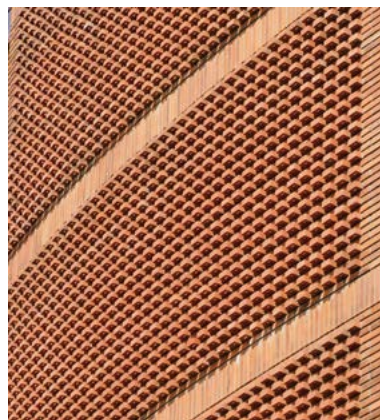
*Quality and craftsmanship:* When we started Total Environment in 1996, we realised that if we were to meet our aspiration of delivering high quality at scale, we would need to build capabilities and expertise for each part of the building. So we built Total Environment Machine Craft, a production facility with a powerful combination of craftsmanship for



*Design*



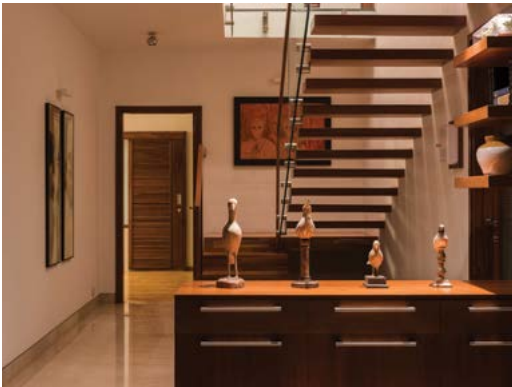
*Embracing nature*



*Timeless materials*



*Furnished homes*



*Custom interior design*



*Quality and craftsmanship*

kitchens, furniture and doors & windows, a craft masonry team to build all our flooring and complex patterns in brick, a horticulture and landscaping team, a metalworks team, plumbing, electrical, waterproofing teams. We also set up a very powerful quality assurance team to ensure that our work is carefully inspected at every critical stage before proceeding to the next stage and to ensure that every little snag is resolved before a home is handed over.

### **Which have been your most memorable projects?**

**K&S:** Our central design philosophy has always been about blurring the lines between the indoors and outdoors, to create spaces that blend beautifully with their natural surroundings and get better with time. Some of our noteworthy projects are:

*The Good Earth:* This 24-apartment project is known for the large, beautiful Gulmohar tree which was retained without being cut, and the building was designed and constructed around it. We go back often to



*The Good Earth*

maintain the tree, shaving back the concrete of the pergola to accommodate its broadening trunk and branches.

*Windmills of Your Mind:* It is designed around the idea of deeply embracing nature. From the terrace gardens of each individual apartment and the earth sheltered roofs of the single-family homes, to the landscaped skywalk on the rooftop of the apartment towers, the total horizontal landscaped area in the project is larger than the area of the land on which the project is built.

*BHAU Institute of Innovation, Entrepreneurship and Leadership at College of Engineering (Pune):* The ball-like form developed as an answer to the requirement for a smaller footprint for circulation around the building. In keeping with our ideology, we have used natural material; the two-way curved structural shells in concrete are clad with exposed brick. The curved planes have worked well for the acoustics of the lecture halls while the fenestration on the sides bring in natural light and air while leaving out distractions of the outside world.



**How challenging has it been to develop and construct your projects yourself?**

**K&S:** Our vision has been to create spaces and experiences that inspire people to make a difference – that's what keeps us going to this day, through all the mind-boggling challenges and nightmares that we have to work with in this extremely difficult industry. We wanted to build a brand in an industry where no such concept existed worldwide, and for this we had to deliver custom designed homes at a significantly

higher level of design and craftsmanship, establish credibility and get the market to break free of the clutter to understand the value of our product. To do all this, being a bootstrapped company with only Rs. 10,000 in capital, has been an enormous challenge.

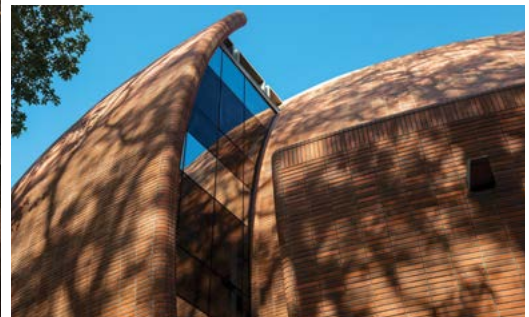
This was made further difficult by the fact that we sold our homes based on a fixed factor on carpet area and not on 'Super Built Up Area' which had become the industry norm – this made our homes appear more



*Top to bottom: Windmills of Your Mind*



*College of Engineering, Pune*



expensive than they were, just because we were being transparent and ethical.

As our popularity grew, and the demand for our homes increased, our next big challenge was to figure out a way to continue to custom design each home interior with over 100 architectural drawings and details per home. We developed a globally unique proprietary software platform, eDesign, which allows our customers to design interior spaces of their homes themselves – through an exhaustive seven-stage process of design.

**What changes do you foresee in the way homes will be designed and constructed in the next five years?**

**K&S:** Advancement in technology will largely have a positive impact on the industry. Digitization of processes across the entire value chain, be it in design, supply chain or operations, will enhance collaboration and

drive data-driven decisions. Technologies like Building Information Modelling (BIM) will play a vital role, linking design to execution, thus reducing inefficiencies in the system. Advancements in construction technology and materials will also contribute to shorter delivery times and cost-efficiencies. Of course, 3D printing, AI and Robotics will redefine many processes in the construction industry. When it comes to marketing and sales, innovations in digital technology, virtual and augmented reality, and machine learning are already proving to be game changers.

**What would you say is the legacy of Total Environment?**

**K&S:** Total Environment's contribution to real estate has not only redefined housing, but also influenced a generation of architects, designers, engineers and craftsmen. We'd like to think that what our customers have grown

to appreciate about our designs stems from us challenging a few fundamentals of mass housing options. In the last 25 years, we have delivered homes to more than 1,200 families, each one tailored to fit unique lifestyles and needs. Out of genuine care and concern for our customers, we do what we believe are the right things to do, regardless of whether they make good business sense or not, and despite the enormous amount of complexity and difficulties some of these undertakings create for us. We hope this influences the industry to move in the direction of bringing about positive change.

Our work has inspired, and in some cases forced, several large players to focus on real design and has also redefined how customers view design and understand the value it offers. In fact, we have been informed that other architects and real estate developers visit our projects and experience homes to view the latest designs, materials and construction techniques, and use us as a benchmark in all their internal discussions.

#### What are your plans for Total Environment?

**K&S:** The goal is to inspire people to make a difference to the world. Our passion has taken us places we couldn't have imagined

- from design, construction and real estate development to making furniture. From music to hospitality to beer brewing, we have been able to apply our design driven philosophy to all aspects of life. If it is created by Total Environment, it will be sensitively designed, completely original and in a league of its own. After 25 years, we still think that the journey has just begun!

#### What would you advise young architects in the field?

**K&S:** First of all, trust yourself always in all kinds of circumstances, even if everyone is dissuading you. If you believe in your decision, just go ahead.

Secondly, you get what you inspect, not what you expect. You need to check and review at every stage to ensure that the quality is up to your requirement.

Lastly, there are no shortcuts – hard work is the only way!

[discover@total-environment.com](mailto:discover@total-environment.com)



*Lost in the Greens*

*Left: Footprints  
Terrace Garden*