



HOUSE WITH BALLS - PHOTO BY YOSHIO FUTOGAWA

HOUSE WITH BALLS

by *Gurjit Singh Matharoo*

All architectural pursuits are tedious, painful & more often than not heart breaking. Its only some individuals, animals and circumstances in the process of building it up that sometimes make the experience light and act as balms or pain relievers. Here are some we encountered along the way to House With Balls.

TIGER'S DEN

Professor Girijasharan is a fine professor at the famous Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad. Mahesh read a story about his experiments and we met him. He had researched on a cooling technology using pipes embedded in earth, carrying air from outside to inside and thereby cooling it. It's called the Earth Tube Heat Exchanger, ETHE in short. The highlight of this experiment was that it was already installed in Ahmedabad zoo in the tiger's cage. Our simple thought was if tigers can cool their heels off why can't homo-sapiens, not realising each tiger in India has yearly budgets in crores of rupees, a privilege not available to us lesser mortals. We had to find a cheaper alternative and after long research in materials and methods we carried out the installation part directly below the house and left the 50k expenditure outside the house for a later date. A year later when I nudged Mahesh to take it up he said the house is never warm; it has water one side, large overhang & greens on other. Its half in ground & roof has earth as insulation so we don't need the system here. The mother had eaten the necessity for invention. It's only now that we have another project where we have been able to convince the clients to use this ETHE technology. Lucky tigers!

SUSTAINABLE ARCHITECTURE

Mahesh is a fine human being with keen interest in all animals and our ruthless approach to architecture & love for mechanical experiments made us good friends. He has an aquarium shop in the city. One day he came up with this unusual brief of a 600 square yard plot in the outskirts, for which he wanted four 1000litres fish tanks and a room. The room would serve as an observatory, a weekend retreat and a place for experiments in sustainability like Earth Tube Heat Exchanger, Bio Gas, rain water collecting and harvesting, etc. Basically we could do anything we wanted, very excited we thought before he said that 'I have set aside Rs.5 lacs for the house'. After much pain the house was completed with fit outs costing Rs.7 lacs that was less than the cost of curtain door that won us the Emerging Architecture Winner Award'09. Only after Mahesh's house got the winner slot in International House of the Year'10 with an award of £ 5k, did the house actually become sustainable for us!

MATSYA UDYOG (FISH FACTORY)

Once the tanks were ready some fish were brought to acclimatise themselves to the new concrete environment. The locals were already suspicious looking at the dull strange structure coming up in their serene surroundings. A word spread already that glasses are so that one standing outside could look and choose fish, once chosen, they would be picked through the windows above, the counter and sink were then used for cutting and packing and the balls were some kind of wholesale weighing mechanisms before being sold! And the name struck, we were used to our buildings being called water tanks, dams, prison, institute etc etc, but matysa udyog was our first, so much so that it scandalised the vegetarian gated community & Mahesh was summoned by the organisers to stop this fishy business. Only he knows how he convinced the organisers & the locals since v too were in doubt if the locals were reading our deeper subconscious minds.

KIND DOG

It was time for flooring. Since the space was monolithic, the flooring too had to be in cement concrete. I had lived all my childhood in a house which had shining cement floors but now it is a dying art & there are few takers. I called upon an architect friend in Mumbai who was working with an architect designing

expensive houses with traditional methods. And here we were, trying to design economical houses with modern methods. He told his team would be too expensive for us and the best way out was that his instructions are followed while we use our people. It had to be done at night so there was less heat and dust. It had to be done by one person so the strokes were even and he can walk out from another end upon finishing. Only mineral water was to be used so there are no salt deposits later and so on and so forth. We followed his instructions to the t, except mineral water though. And just when the floor was laid & finished a stray dog appeared on from nowhere. Gently walking he would make less impression. Team couldn't shoo (better word) it away less it got agitated & played havoc with wet floor, neither the team could sit silently and wait lest it would become comfortable & sat on the floor. Fortunately it took mercy on the team and left on its own. Not since my childhood, when I had asked a classmate of mine to return my drawing he had borrowed, to which he had replied that his cow ate it up, had something so disastrous happened to my creativity. My friend called next day to inquire if all went ok. I told him about the dog and he doesn't talk to us still.

POTS AND PANS

When I had carried out small interiors/modifications in my own flat years ago, there was a thin concrete slab inserted within 9' standard height. The only constraint of this slab was that, because the lights couldn't protrude any further below the 6'6" slab we had to make depressions into it to carry the incandescent lamps. To make these depressions I had relied upon the only few pots from my kitchen of bachelor days. It would have given a smooth finish and would be retrieved after the casting for further use. Applying the same idea we asked Suchi, Mahesh's wife to lend us their varied utensils before the casting. Now the light is thrown into it making it different in all areas as same vessel cannot be kept at two places. Just like me, looking into these lights the Mohattas can revisit memories filled into these pots, even pot boilers!

CAMEL'S LEGS

On one of my site visits, there appeared a herd of camels storming the site from all around. Been particularly interested in chomping away the plantation on the roof, perhaps because they didn't have to bend their necks down, they had lined up in front of the long opening. The shutters and balls were not there yet, and it was surreal to see the window filled up with camel's legs and genitals. I didn't carry the camera then, so this image remained nostalgic in my memory. By the time the house was ready, fences had come up all over & a once farmland had become what we now call it, the gated community' where stray humans are not allowed, let alone camels. It was when acclaimed photographer & publisher Yoshio

Futagawa San from Global Architecture, Japan, who had found us out, came visiting, one of the greatest living legends of architectural photography that I thought of having to realise my unfulfilled dream, the dream of camels shot with the house. Labu, who is our office assistant, administrator, directory, manager all rolled into one has this uncanny ability to make anything happen. He was given the task of arranging the camels. Futagawa san is a Zen master. In 40 degree heat he stood out with the camera set, he waits patiently for the right moment, not drinking even water, not even uttering a word. After he took one particular shot he exclaimed something in Japanese. I asked his son who speaks English what was it that San had said. He replied 'Cover', and months later the camel & the balls were on the cover of coveted Global Architecture making us the first Indian architect to grace the cover in their 45 year old history.

Camels moved on ...

BENDING RULES

One of the simplest aldrops to latch a door has been the one made from bending a steel bar in a triangle with one end protruding to insert it in door frame. It is mostly used in toilets and low cost houses. We wanted to make it simpler with profiles so that it was possible to have latching, locking and handle all by just bending a plate and a bar. The locked bar must hide behind the bolt heads so that they cannot be accessed for opening. The final outcome is so strange that it became the epitome of all design exercises in this house. And to the burglar it is a paradox, in 25 rupees the padlock doesn't lock anything, is outside the latch and

yet it cannot be opened, till Suchi, Mahesh's wife called 'that the open 'look' of the lock will invite burglars and then years ago once invited he will find some other ways of getting inside.

HOT DIPS

It was obvious that doors and windows shutters were to be in pressed steel with bending edges to make thin sheets stiff, economical, strong & opaque. No light was required inside as the windows inside water would bring in soothing light. Instead of painting on shutters it was better to use galvanised iron sheets so as to have a uniform long lasting finish. Orders were placed, measurements taken, samples checked and approved. But when the entire stock arrived on site we were in for a rude shock. The shutters were warped beyond recognition. Instead of using GI sheets the vendor had chosen to carry out the Galvanising in 500 degree Celsius, after making the panels in mild steel, warping our simple Euclidian planes into hawkish worm holes. The entire lot was rejected and vendor never paid back the advance. On 2nd thoughts, if we had used those panels, they would have given House With Balls another, may be more contemporary, dimension!

HEADBALL

We wanted the two long windows to give an option of having it completely open without vertical members (mullions) in between. Every alternate top hung shutter has a small spring latch which holds itself & adjacent ones in place to lift and to keep shutters in open position. After exploring many options like hydraulic struts, friction stays, slotted xxxx etc, which proved to be all cumbersome & expensive. The children playing in the neighbourhood with cheap plastic balls brought forth a simple idea. These balls could be used as casts for a counterweight mechanism holding shutters wherever we left them and since all the action happens below shoulder level the swaying weights wasn't a concern. On one of our first outing at House With Balls, the indoor outdoor separation worked well for the families and the children inside were protected, warm and comfortable with the fishes and us outside in the slopes with the counter in between. And then we heard the wail, the ball had found its first target. It was my two year old sons head!

HOUSE WITH NO BALLS

Such is the irony that an architect and friend of mine built his house with love and care near the House With Balls, with only an empty plot in between. He and his family started to live there and started to invite their other friends and entertain other architect friends to their house. In the meantime from our office a Welsh boy Rhys and Bhavana, a brilliant architect from Bangalore were preparing for sending the entry for awards, to be picked up from over 700 entries, the panels must first be catchy and therefore, a name was to be sought. 'House with an aquarium', 'aquarium with fish outside', 'fish house', 'submarine house' cropped up though nothing could beat 'matysa udyog', the name by the locals. But since it wouldn't appeal to international jury it was dropped too. Finally the fascination for balls overwhelmed them and titles like house of balls, ball house came up before settling for the slightly naughty 'House With Balls'. With this name having graced the covers of three premier international magazines it became well known in our small architectural fraternity. What sealed the fate was this story from another architect friend who visited Mahesh's neighbour and our friend and met me later. He said, 'when I looked across and saw a low concrete structure, I asked my host if that was the famous house with balls?'. To which architect friend replied 'yes that is the house with balls and this, where you are standing is almost famous house with no balls'. Mahesh's neighbour and our friend had indeed blended with the locals.

FURTHER RESOURCES

-> [Gurjit Singh Matharoo](#)