

# MADE IN INDIA

## Nine forward-thinking studios on a mission to transform their country

PHOTOGRAPHY: DEVASHISH GAUR

India's rapid growth since its independence, both in population size and rate of urbanisation, has created a series of hurdles for its built environment professionals. Tackling this vast country's architectural landscape goes hand in hand with addressing issues caused by its fast-paced development – social inequalities, tensions between tradition and modernity, contrasts between urban and rural, and India's role in the global climate

crisis all playing their part. Yet a new breed of architecture professionals come armed with passion, ideas and tools designed to foster and bolster India's creative growth. From building with natural materials to supporting traditional crafts, and from site-specific approaches to imaginative, collaborative social action, thinking outside the box is welcome; and for the nine young studios profiled here, it's 'challenge accepted'.

### 01 MITTI ECO CONSTRUCTIONS Tamil Nadu

Below, Fawaz Thengilan, co-founder of Mitti Eco Constructions, at Plot 24 at Sanctity Ferme, Tamil Nadu

'We aim at progressive architecture delivered in a sustainable manner,' say the founders of young Tamil Nadu-based studio Mitti Eco Constructions. 'We seek contextual ideas to kickstart our projects, allowing these ideas to shape the process and fuel our enthusiasm. This excitement drives us from concept to final handover.' Set up by Fawaz Thengilan and Vishnu Kuruvanachery, the practice may be only four years old, but it already has a rich portfolio and high aspirations, blending creativity and technical expertise, and working with a diverse mix of collaborators, from engineers to skilled workers.

'Our methodology centres on creating sustainable buildings without sacrificing design quality,' the team say. 'We strive to craft structures that not only inspire, but also seamlessly coexist with their surroundings. Our buildings are designed to be humble in their environmental integration, yet make a bold statement through a unique presence. This balance of humility and distinctiveness is at the core of our design philosophy.'

Their latest project, a private home known as Plot 133, beautifully illustrates this point. The site was significantly impacted by quarrying and filled with waste up to 4m deep, so the design included the excavation of a trench that would both serve as the structure's foundation and expose the land's natural geology, celebrating its beauty.

The studio's unconventional approach to materials and construction methods also extends to readdressing the idea of luxury. Set in a mango grove at Sanctity Ferme in Tamil Nadu, Flintstone 6 looks sleek and contemporary but was made using the 'debris wall construction' technique, incorporating readily available materials from a nearby abandoned quarry into the build. And a dedication to sustainable experimentation means the team's explorations are ongoing: 'Currently, we are developing lightweight mud panels and proposing bamboo-based buildings. Additionally, we are working on quicker delivery residential models to meet market demands.' @makeinmitti



WRITER: ELLIE STATHAKI





**02 EARTHSCAPE STUDIO**  
Tamil Nadu

Earthscape Studio was formed in 2022 by Petchimuthu Kennedy, who was joined by Shivani Saran S K in 2023. The pair work from their home base using predominantly physical models to develop their designs.

The practice is defined by a core sustainable approach, experimenting with organic materials and adopting a strong site-specific stance. 'We study and research how people respond to nature, and how nature responds to people. We try to be the bridge that connects the two, because when we talk about nature, we sometimes forget that humans are also a part of it,' they say, adding that their methodology consists of rigorous studies of both the natural environment of each project and the users' habits and lifestyle. 'To lessen carbon emissions, we focus on self-sustaining structures and try to reduce concrete mass.'

They consider their first built design, titled Haven: The Eternal Experience Pavilion, in Peermade, Kerala, as a landmark project. Working with local labour from

the surrounding tea plantations, they created a vaulted construction to house cattle, giving the builders the skills to replicate the structure if they needed more space in the future. The building is made of four catenary arches, each consisting of three layers of 25mm-thick *sithu kal* bricks. The client's support was crucial in the scheme's success, they say, adding that his brief was 'the world's best cowshed'.

The pair are now experimenting with traditional Indian lime plaster types that require minimal maintenance. Their goal is to explore sustainable buildings that can withstand extreme weather conditions and unpredictable natural phenomena. However, the human element is also a factor, as evidenced in *The Infinite Rise*, a farmhouse in Coimbatore, completed in 2023. They say, 'Craftsmanship is equally important in sustainability. In this region, people use stone as the primary material as it is easily available. So we used local craftspeople to create the building's stone walls.' [earthscapestudio.com](http://earthscapestudio.com)

Above, Shivani Saran S K and Petchimuthu Kennedy, of Earthscape, at *Into the Wild*, in Mettupalayam, Tamil Nadu



**03 SOCIAL DESIGN COLLABORATIVE**  
Delhi

Swati Janu founded her studio in 2017 after volunteering to design a school for the children of farmers along the Yamuna river in Delhi. It was an initiative that 'snowballed' into the foundation of the Social Design Collaborative in 2019, where she leads a small team of architects, sociologists, social workers, activists and designers. 'At the core of our practice is creating inclusion within the built environment,' says Janu. 'Cities have been structured along lines of socioeconomic inequalities, further amplified by class, caste or race. What role can design play in creating more equitable cities is the question our practice attempts to find answers to. This has required a diversity of approaches, ranging from advocacy for housing rights to counter-cartography questioning top-down master-planning in our cities.'

The practice's interdisciplinary nature means its work travels way beyond traditional building design. Examples include a toolbox to make Delhi's master plan accessible as part of the civic campaign 'I am Delhi too'; policy

advocacy and civic campaigning; grassroots collaborations around the community-driven building of schools, libraries and daycare centres; and curating public art exhibitions.

'There is a critical need for diversity in our profession. Whoever is designing our built environment dictates what kind we create and live in,' says Janu. 'In India, about 60 per cent of architecture students are women, but by the time they graduate, this drops to 20 per cent. And it's a minuscule percentage if we look at how many women are principal architects running their own firms.'

'If we are to build inclusive public spaces and equitable built environments, then it's very important that we talk about diversity in our design studios and planning offices. It took 42 years before a Black architect was awarded the Pritzker Prize. There have only been six women who have won the prize since it was first instituted in 1979. These are the conversations that I feel are missing in our field today and need to be mainstreamed.' [socialdesigncollab.org](http://socialdesigncollab.org)

Above, Swati Janu, founder of Social Design Collaborative, at her studio in the Pamposh Enclave, south Delhi

WRITER: ELLIE STATHAKI



**04 DHAMMADA COLLECTIVE**  
Bhopal

It's rare for recent graduates in India to set up shop outside major metropolitan areas. Yet it's exactly what Nipun Prabhakar did in 2021 when he founded Dhammada Collective in the quiet city of Bhopal; Nilesh Suman and Simran Channa joined him soon after to complete the team. 'Access to design is lacking in smaller cities and rural areas,' says Prabhakar. 'We wanted to focus on these regions to provide an alternative to rapid, often unsustainable growth.'

Two interlinked ideas sit at the core of their work. The first is participatory design, best exemplified by their largest commission to date: an ongoing project to co-create more than 50 'rural homestays' with homeowners in the central state of Madhya Pradesh for the local tourism board. Similarly, in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh, the collective is working with villagers to rebuild a primary school that was ravaged by recent floods. 'We're engaging with communities who haven't worked with architects before,' says Channa. 'So building trust is a struggle.'

We have to unlearn what we have learnt and learn from what they know.'

Cultural preservation is the second aspect of the collective's work; every project begins with a survey of local materials and ways of building and living. A community plunge pool in Bhopal, for instance, is constructed in locally sourced basalt, topped with red sandstone that further encases 'grinding' stones made by local craftsmen, in a design reminiscent of traditional stepwells.

The group's work extends to exhibitions (an upcoming show will focus on the mobile nature of pastoral Indian communities) and craft-based products, developed as much to diversify their revenue streams as to support local economies. The big dream is to digitally document the country's vernacular building traditions and share this archive with the public. 'Sometimes architects have to play roles beyond that of just designer,' says Prabhakar, in an obvious nod to the name of the practice, which translates to 'performing one's duty'. [dhammadacollective.com](http://dhammadacollective.com)

Below, Simran Channa, Nilesh Suman and Nipun Prabhakar, of Dhammada Collective, at their studio in Nadir Colony, Bhopal



**05 SKETCH DESIGN STUDIO**  
Rajasthan

If her weekend home is any indication, it's safe to assume that Rajasthan-based interior designer Shipra Singhania likes to put her money where her mouth is. In 2023, the founder and principal of Sketch Design Studio, a natural building and interior design practice established in 2014, used kitchen ingredients to build Mud House, her family's pied-à-terre on a permaculture farm in Rajasthan. She conjured up the structure with nothing more than mud, lime and edibles such as neem, jaggery and fenugreek seeds. Though the project marked Singhania's debut as an architect, creating it was second nature for the designer, who has long used natural materials and vernacular techniques to craft beautifully modern homes, offices, and retail and hospitality spaces that tread lightly on the environment.

In Singhania's eyes, anything human-made should add value to the earth. 'It's easy to only set your sights on the end result, but what about the people, land and materials that are poured into the project along the

way? As designers, the onus is on us to be more sensitive to this part of the journey,' says the designer, who holds a BA in interior and spatial design from London's Chelsea College of Arts. Singhania views each project as a child of the earth, borrowing materials and labour from the immediate environment to honour both people and place, equally.

Her portfolio includes a round house in Rajasthan built using only natural materials such as lime, bamboo, stone and starch, with no steel or concrete; a holiday home in India's Aravalli range with rammed earth walls and traditional lime plaster; and a stone dwelling near Delhi, featuring a cost-effective mud paint composed of clay and starch.

'Our interior design philosophy is rooted in minimalism, focusing on clean lines and simplicity. We believe that by keeping designs simple, we can highlight the true beauty of each space,' says the Lucknow native. She may be 150 interior design schemes and 10 natural building projects deep, but she is nowhere near done. [designsketch.in](http://designsketch.in)

Below, Shipra Singhania, of Sketch Design Studio at Mud House, her family's pied-à-terre in Alwar, Rajasthan







**06 STOMP**  
Tamil Nadu

Husband-and-wife architect duo Vignesh Sekar and Shamini Vignesh enjoy a good movie. 'We love to lean into the camera angles, the quality of light, the artistic sensibility,' say the pair, who approach a site in much the same way a cinematographer would a set, carefully framing spaces and ensuring every element tells a story. 'It's all about creating an experience.'

They established their practice Stomp, in Madurai, after graduating in 2016, and see themselves as facilitators rather than architects. 'We craft environments that are functional, personal and sensitive to the cultural context,' they say. 'We are merely mediums between the earth and the built environment.' This explains why each of their projects has an artisanal quality, embodied by thoughtful craftsmanship, timeless materials and unexpected moments of wonder. 'It's a process, one that wouldn't be possible without collaboration with other studios.'

Stomp's work is driven by curiosity and backed by the experience of seasoned

craftsmen, meaning no project, no matter how complex, is off-limits. They set the bar high with their first residential contract in 2018, a climate-responsive home, in Tirupattur, with a façade of terracotta jali tiles, skylights and lightwells. Materials, including Athangudi tiles, were sourced from within a 50km radius.

The duo regard architecture and interior design as two sides of the same coin. 'The two grow out of each other, and we don't really treat them separately,' they say, referencing Billy O'Tea, the ship-shaped dwelling that the studio designed in Thoothukudi in 2023. It featured a hull-like terrace with seating and seashell motifs in a tribute to the town's rich history as a port city.

Recently, Stomp has embarked on a new journey, working with the Indian Railways to reimagine three stations in South India. 'This project serves as a foundation for our broader aspirations, which now extend to multi-family residences, homesteads and boutique hotels,' they say. [stomparchitects.com](http://stomparchitects.com)

Above, Shamini Vignesh and Vignesh Sekar, of Stomp, at the Geoffrey Bawa-designed Madurai Club in Tamil Nadu



**07 ATARCHITECTURE**  
Mumbai

Founded in 2014 by Avneesh Tiwari and Neha Rane, atArchitecture is centred on balancing contemporary takes and tradition. Its HQ, a 100-year-old space in Mumbai, reflects the duo's love of this mix of heritage and adaptive reuse. 'Through our building projects, we look for deeper insights into how spaces can uplift the human spirit,' say the pair. 'We value narrative over image, and strive for delight, sustainability and efficiency in design. We also place great emphasis on involving local people, using their expertise and creating a building system that fits seamlessly into the context.'

AtArchitecture's working methods may seem conventional – hand sketching and using both paper and CAD modelling – but the architects see each of their designs as an experiment, a chance to offer something new to their clients, and the wider field. A social cause often emerges as a key motivation in their explorations: 'We try to use architecture as a valuable tool to initiate a conversation between the users and the context so that

a building is not just an object in space. This has led to a focus on public and social interventions with expanded programmes developed through a participatory process.'

Home within House, one of their first realised works, is an award-winning affordable housing project that aims to address the lack of safe and secure housing for more than 17,000 factory workers in the Phnom Penh special economic zone. Other significant works include the Northeast Pavilion for the Surajkund international crafts fair, which also won Best Use of Bamboo in the 2023 Wallpaper\* Design Awards.

Tiwari and Rane hope their profession can open doors for people in the industry and the wider community. 'India is a country that is in the process of evolving and growing rapidly, but it also has a large vulnerable population, deep-rooted traditions, a vast rural context and differing conditions from state to state. To practise here is to acknowledge all these dichotomies and to represent, reflect and help shape them,' they say. [atarchitecture.net](http://atarchitecture.net)

Above, Avneesh Tiwari and Neha Rane, of atArchitecture, on site at Palkhadi House, under construction in Uttan



**08 NORTH**  
Himachal Pradesh

If you were to drop Rahul Bhushan in the middle of a forest with no food or water, by the end of the week, he'll have designed a sustainable treehouse, started a wildlife yoga retreat, and convinced the squirrels to invest in eco-friendly architecture. The architect, hailing from the Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, uses ancient techniques and materials, such as wood and mud, to create earthquake-resilient structures designed to blend seamlessly into their environment. 'Our vision is to create low-impact environments that are as much a part of the landscape as the trees and rivers around them,' he explains.

Bhushan's practice, North, is dedicated to empowering indigenous communities, preserving traditional design and fostering social development while addressing pressing issues such as climate change, cultural loss and environmental degradation. 'I feel a profound responsibility as an architect to safeguard the wisdom of our ancestors,' says Bhushan, who completed his master's

degree from CEPT University in 2016 and an executive programme from IIM Ahmedabad in 2018. 'We've spent more than a decade documenting 200- to 300-year-old buildings. Ancient architecture and engineering have always been passed down orally, but our research has brought much of it to light,' he says. 'Here in Himachal Pradesh, no one has the same job year after year. Each season brings something new, and we live in harmony with nature. What's the fun in just being an architect when I can be a cook, a gardener and a musician as well?'

North has five verticals: architecture and design, construction, workshops, ecotourism, and a foundation for community support. 'It's a living, breathing centre for sustainable architecture, craft innovation and community,' says Bhushan, who counts among his projects a cabin inspired by dhajji architecture, and furniture with nailless joinery. Next on his list is an off-grid campus for North featuring regenerative energy practices. [thenorth.in](http://thenorth.in)

Below, Rahul Bhushan, founder of North, at his studio in Naggar, an ancient town in Himachal Pradesh



**09 COMPARTMENT S4**  
Gujarat, Mumbai  
and Karnataka

Eight partners – Nishita Parmar, Vedanti Agarwal, Monik Shah, Manuni Patel, Prasik Chaudhari, Krishna Parikh, Kishan Shah and Aman Amin (pictured from left to right below) – got together in 2017 to found Compartment S4, a design practice with studios in Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Bengaluru. With a mandate to create spaces and buildings that achieve social, economic and environmental sustainability, the studio has the principles of dialogue and research at its heart; and true to its nature, the concept of collaboration is central to its operation.

With so many partners, a firm spirit of cooperation is necessary to reach decisions, so design ideas are continually filtered through discussions among team members. Openness and diversity are equally valued in finding each project's solution and enriching designs through a nuanced, layered approach. This ethos has led to the completion of a series of projects with recent work including Nepean Greens, a public plaza in Mumbai; an experiential sensory park in Uttarakhand;

a lake precinct in Chennai; a private school in Ahmedabad; and several private residential projects. Meanwhile, Basa, a community tourism centre in rural Uttarakhand, is considered a 'defining moment' by the team. The project engaged the local community and created livelihood opportunities for the women in the village, acting as a precursor to the firm's broader work on public spaces.

'The field of architecture often prioritises redundant stylistic statements over nuanced, context-specific decision-making,' they say. 'We believe each project deserves a unique approach and fresh perspective, treating it as a blank slate to understand its complexities.'

Alongside the studio's building work, a series of discussions and workshops, titled 'Friday Night Conversations', offer the co-founders the opportunity to address the complexities of their profession, while the studio's self-published annual print journal *Unmute* invites contributors to write on pressing issues related to the built environment. [compartments4.com](http://compartments4.com) ★

Below, Compartment S4's co-founders at Nepean Greens, in Malabar Hill, a public square the practice designed in 2022

