



VINU DANIEL

WORDS
VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR
PHOTO
ANAND JAJU

The architect creating homes out of waste.

Architect Vinu Daniel doesn't work from an office. Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's conviction that the ideal house should be made with material sourced within a five-mile radius, the founder of award-winning practice Wallmakers instead works wherever his next project happens to be. In the past, this has taken him to southern India, where he built a mountain-shaped home from local construction debris; Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, where he made a pavilion with tires collected from waste facilities around the city; and the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where he carved a subterranean home into a rock face that had support beams made from 4,000 discarded plastic bottles. It is an approach that not only marks Daniel out as a pioneer of sustainable architecture but also demonstrates that you don't need to compromise on creating elegant and innovative buildings in the process.

VAISHNAVI NAYEL TALAWADEKAR: How did you come to architecture?

VINU DANIEL: I actually had plans of becoming a musician, but my parents quickly put a stop to that. When I moved to India [from Dubai, where he grew up] to study architecture, I realized I was a poor fit. Nobody smiled. Nobody asked or answered questions. I was disillusioned with the pedagogy and there came a point where I just wanted to escape. It was a chance encounter with the late Laurie Baker, the great Gandhi of architecture, that inspired me to stay. He challenged me to consider myself a disciple of the site and answered my questions [about whether we should be building at all]. Above all, he taught me to always smile.

VNT: Where is Wallmakers based?

VD: We are a team of 12 architects spread across seven Indian states—we don't have a headquarters. We are where our work is and I'm lucky to have friends in many cities who lend me

a spare mattress when I need it. My son, who is nine and in boarding school, has learned so much just by being on-site with my workers and masons. They've all had a hand in raising him.

VNT: Where did you learn to build using earth and waste?

VD: I once visited a small village in Gujarat, where I stayed on the veranda of a tiny mud hut, or *bhunga*. The hut was made of local mud, was earthquake-resistant, and provided respite from the blazing sun. It was an example of how one can do so much with so little. It's often the people with the fewest resources that show us the way.

VNT: Why is it important to build in this way?

VD: Today, less than one-third of the global population lives in buildings made of earth, even though as a material it is far more sustainable and durable than cement. In India, there's plastic and construction debris everywhere. I consider this waste precious. From pebbles and bedsheets to discarded pipes and washing machines, anything can—and should—serve as inspiration.

VNT: What are some of the barriers to building in this way?

VD: The system may be marginally more expensive than building with cement, but the biggest differentiator is the timeline. My processes are laborious and therefore take double the time to execute. There is also an aesthetic consideration: Most people want a home that shines like a diamond, whereas my constructions can be likened to a clay pot.

VNT: What have you been working on recently?

VD: One night about seven years ago, I stepped on one of my son's Lego bricks. The pain was so excruciating that it prompted me to question if they were actually stronger than the materials I used in my work. It led to our latest project: a house made using a combination of mud blocks and over 6,000 used plastic toys. We went door to door asking for donations and assembled quite a collection.