

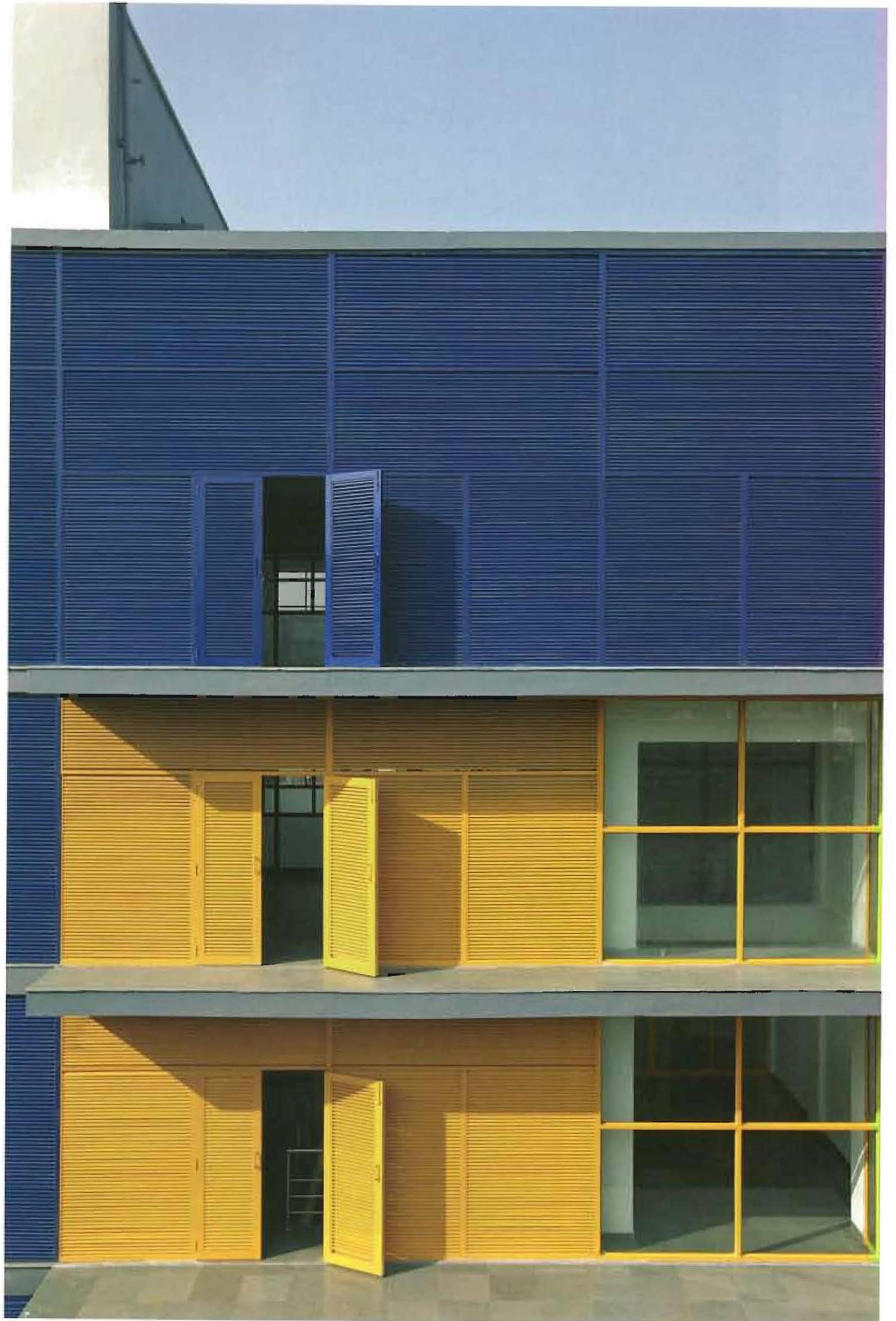
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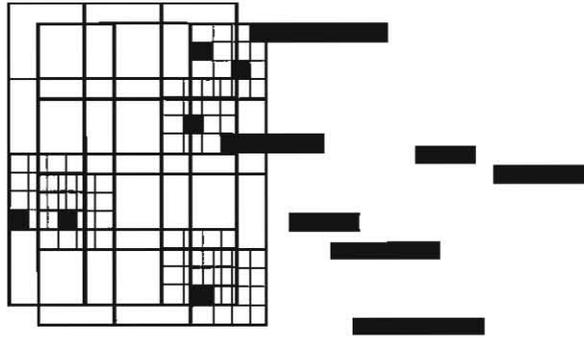
16 • Volume 02 • Issue 05 • March 2013 / **RKDS, Idnany, Pirani** envelope as a mediator / **Kamath Design Studio, Bhattacharjee** debating tactile engagements / **Nemish Shah** language conversations / a city within the city: Sliced Porosity Block by **Steven Holl Architects** / a tribute to the fearless mind of **Lebbeus Woods** / **William Kentridge** the studio as a self-portrait / **Giampiero Bosoni** architecture of adrenalin / **Abir Karmakar** finding lost rooms

India

₹200







# Envelope as a mediator

We take a close look at two medical facility buildings in Delhi, both designed by Romi Khosla Design Studios, that straddle two very different sites and contexts. In both these buildings, architecture emerges as a mediator of ideas and values, and this is achieved by a descriptive working of the building skins that are also the tectonic structure of the built constellations - that understand culture and social relationships

*Design*

**Romi Khosla Design Studios**

*Text*

**Ekta Idnany  
Jasem Pirani**

*Photos*

**Saurabh Pandey**



*\*New Architectures of Social Engagement, Niamh Coghlan, Aesthetica magazine, 1 October 2010*

*†<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1064>*

*‡The poor in and around Lahori Gate area are in very bad health due to drug addiction, physical incapability and social desertion. Some have critical diseases like HIV and TB.*

*They are homeless because they simply cannot afford shelter. Barely managing to feed themselves, they pull rickshaws or engage in casual daily labour. Some are sex workers and others get by through begging.*

*The Polyclinic, which will be a day care referral medical relief centre, will serve these poor people in the neighbourhood who cannot afford to get medical treatment and check-ups. Completing the Polyclinic in this dense and crowded locality was not easy. The Polyclinic site had a dilapidated Chungi building that had provided shelter for the homeless and was a hub of drug-related activities. Fully aware of these problems, the architects worked closely with the local community*

The emergence and collapse of every grand narrative has had profound effects on architecture. The recent speedy emergence of megalomaniacal urban manifestations and the resulting crisis have also given cause to much soul searching. The crash of the housing real estate market in the United States that catapulted the recent state of economic affairs symbolises architecture's giddy collusion with commerce and the dilemma of belief suddenly faced by architects around the world. Architects, largely an outmoded species in the planning of important types of building such as hospitals, prisons, airports and probably even schools, have seen their roles largely relegated to fulfilling commissions for clients who can afford to engage in aesthetics.

Can architecture go beyond its capacity to serve the whims of the privileged few and be a conduit for social change? Can architecture rediscover the belief that buildings can perform a benevolent function

in the survival of a community? As architects we are always conscious that "The edifices and buildings that comprise our environment have a profound effect, psychologically and physically, on our behaviour". Illustrating the case in point and trying to reposition architecture and the role of architects post the economic collapse — the NY MoMA's seminal exhibition *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement*, October 2010, focussed on 11 projects across five continents that trained the spotlight away from the architectures of indulgence towards an architecture that largely results from a dialogue with those from underprivileged societies<sup>†</sup> for their benefit. Perhaps the more pertinent question for architects is whether the architectural dialogue can maintain its disciplinary while trying to affect social change. Designed by Romi Khosla and Martand Khosla of Romi Khosla Design Studios, a charitable polyclinic<sup>‡</sup> building located near the

*The façade of the polyclinic has blue and yellow aluminium louvers that serve dual purpose of providing ventilation and enclosure*

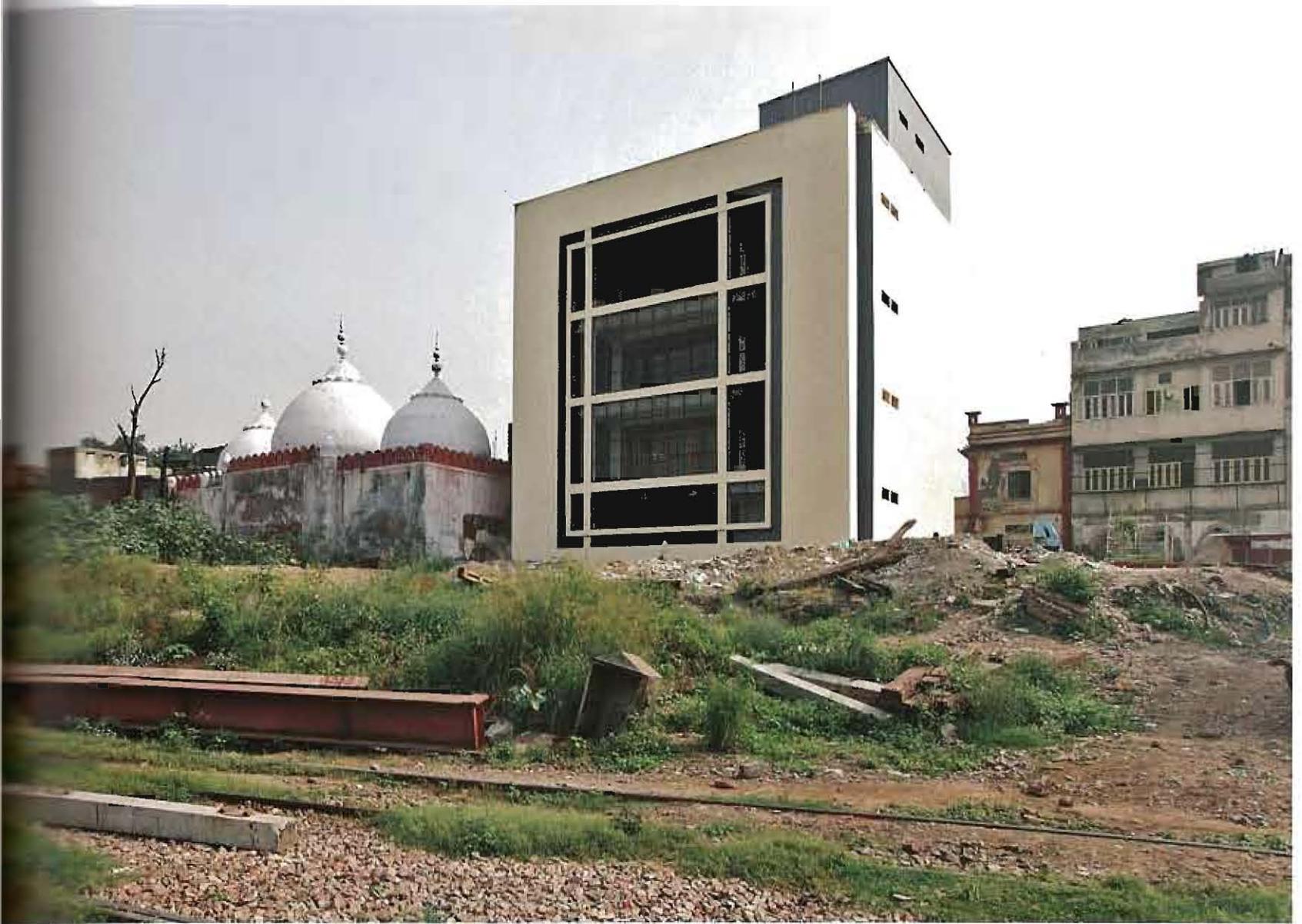


Lahori Gate area of Old Delhi can endeavor to provide answers to some of these questions and more. Catering to the poorest and those living on the fringe of the urbanity of the national capital, the polyclinic was commissioned and donated to the Municipal Corporation of New Delhi, by the Sir Sobha Singh Public Charitable Trust. The building stands situated in the heart of the old city of Delhi, contesting boundaries with the railway line, a *masjid* and a burnt down slum. While it is conventional in architecture to hold the context sacred, how does one deal with a context that is hostile in accepting the architectural agent? The architects realised that engaging the local community and enlisting cooperation from the adjoining *masjid* and railway authorities would enable them to surmount the odds.

The building for the polyclinic stands pristine amongst the rubble of the erstwhile slum, platonically perfect, harking back to the days when Modernism predicated that architecture could bring one closer to Utopia. Almost mimicking the urban situation it hopes to counter, the face that the building presents to the world, or at least the world that passes by on the railway tracks, appears cubed, sterile and serene. This western façade is exactly that — a façade, a solid curtain with a punched-in picture frame that hangs off the front of the building, shading the glass screen set behind by deep recessed balconies on every floor. Behind the added veil of an iron security mesh, this side hardly betrays what might be inside. The particular articulation of this “curtain” enables the ruse of an open floor plate completely concealing the fact that the services of the building are housed right behind it. On the other side, the building opens up to the community that it hopes to serve and is in diametric opposition to the western face. The entrance through this side is perched on a

modest porch that almost feels contiguous with the ground plane of the neighbourhood. The low plinth tiled in Kotah and large glass panes of the entry way blur the divisions of the outside and inside. Further throwing caution to puritan ideals of the other side, this façade is a brightly painted unmonolithic curtain bounded on both edges by the concrete side walls. It would appear as if the interior of the building is pushing itself outward from within the confines of the concrete shell. Large expanses of glass that make up part of the curtain allow a complete reveal of the inside of the building, while also allowing the occupants a view of those who might be hesitant to reach out for help. The banality of the aluminium louvers that serve to provide natural ventilation all the while ensuring privacy contradict the careful detailing of the building. The precise gaps where the curtain wall pulls away from the side walls embeds storm water drain pipes rendered in shiny stainless steel appearing as innocuous structural glazing members. Horizontal breakers that shade the glass also serve to mark floor levels and act as ironically risky balconies with absent railings. The building is deliberate in the humble expediency with which one can read it and it is this that allows it to exist and be accepted within the chaotic milieu that surrounds it. The same idea also extends into its theoretical reading — syntactically the building is using the module of the ‘Maison Dom-Ino’ diagram proposed by Corbusier as the basic building block of Modern Architecture. The plan is a virtual nine square grid with equal bays along the north-south axis. But along the other axis the final western bay is foreshortened due to the available site conditions. The architects choose to deal with this compromised bay with amazing intuitiveness reminiscent of Baroque spaces. They highlight the diminutive

Above, left. The entrance is perched on a modest porch that almost feels contiguous with the ground plane of the neighbourhood. The low plinth tiled in Kotah and large glass panes of the entry way blur the divisions of the outside and inside. Above, right: the polyclinic has been designed keeping in mind its close proximity to other buildings. Opposite page, top: the building stands situated in the heart of the old city of Delhi, contesting boundaries with the railway line, a *masjid* and a burnt down slum. Opposite page, bottom: a view from one of the rooms of the polyclinic showing the horizontal breakers that shade the glass and also serve to mark floor levels and act as ironically risky balconies with absent railings (the railings are supposed to be installed at the door itself)







by detaching it off the mass of the building by providing a gap, rendering it into a 'free façade', all the while using the available *poché* to conceal service areas.

Materially, as well, the building contributes to the above dialogue and enhances the graphic legibility of the project. While functional need dictates that the building is robust, vandalism-proof and economical yet the architects manage to clearly reinforce the diagram in the material reading on both the façades — one is clearly able to discern the three structural bays. While the side facing the tracks is a mere rational rendering of the divisions, the louvered façade chooses to tell more about the interior function. The vertically continuous blue louvered bay calls out the stacked staircase hidden behind it. The yellow painted louvers indicates floor areas such as landings and corridors. Glass is used largely to de-materialise boundaries inside and allow views to the outside from the waiting lounges. The use of concrete, plaster, steel, glass and the use of the primary colours on the louvered façade, alludes to the traditional material palette of Modernism and yet the same materiality also allows the building to enter in subtle competitiveness with the commercial edifices of the contemporary urban city. It is the above dialogue that could allow the building to create a sense of pride and ownership amongst the community. It also allows the architects to further the disciplinary conversation within its own fraternity.

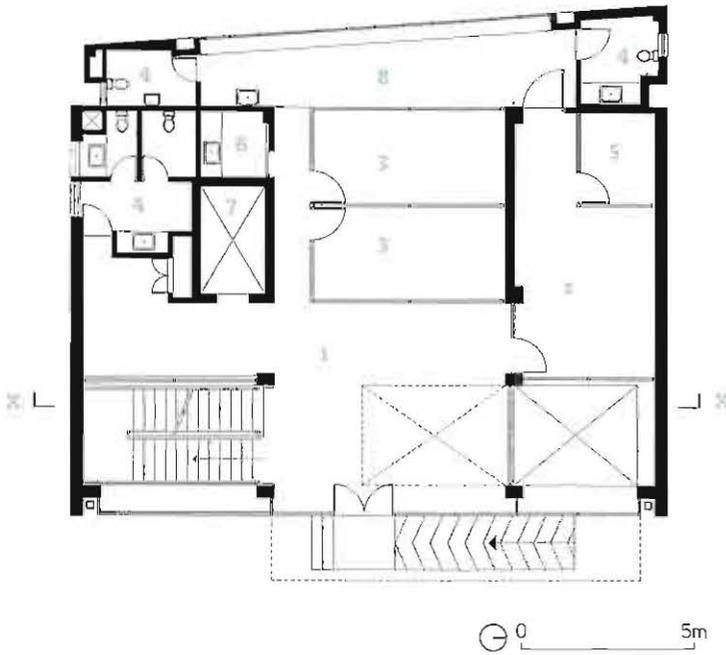
Architecture does not necessarily need to return to the belief in any all pervasive grand narrative to reposition its importance to humanity. But perhaps if architects were to re-appropriate some of Modernism by sieving out dated ideals such as the 'architect as the mastermind or celebrity'; and adopt the entrenched belief that power of architecture and architectural space can nurture, enhance and improve the survival of a community while engaging their participation — then, architecture might rebalance itself in the humanities rather than occupying lofty and lonely perches in high art.

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EKTA IDNANY  
Architect

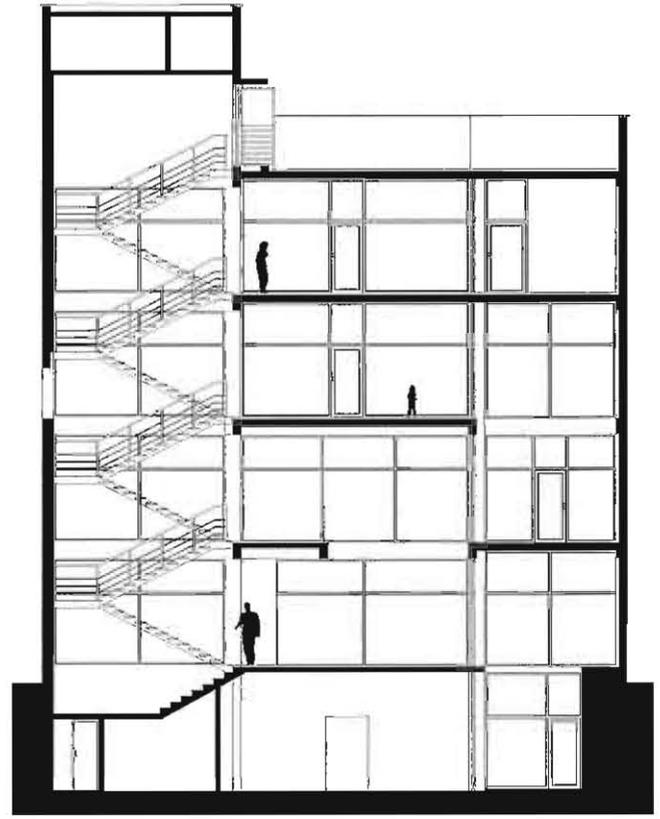
This page Glass is used largely to de-materialise boundaries inside and allow views to the outside from the waiting lounges. Opposite page, top: the vertically continuous blue louvered bay calls out the stacked

staircase hidden behind it and the yellow painted louvers indicates floor areas such as landings and corridors. Opposite page, bottom: rear view of the building

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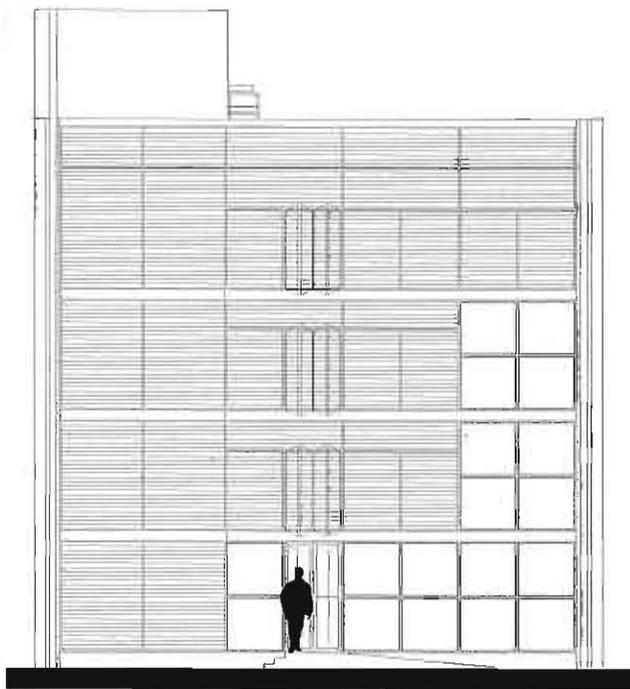


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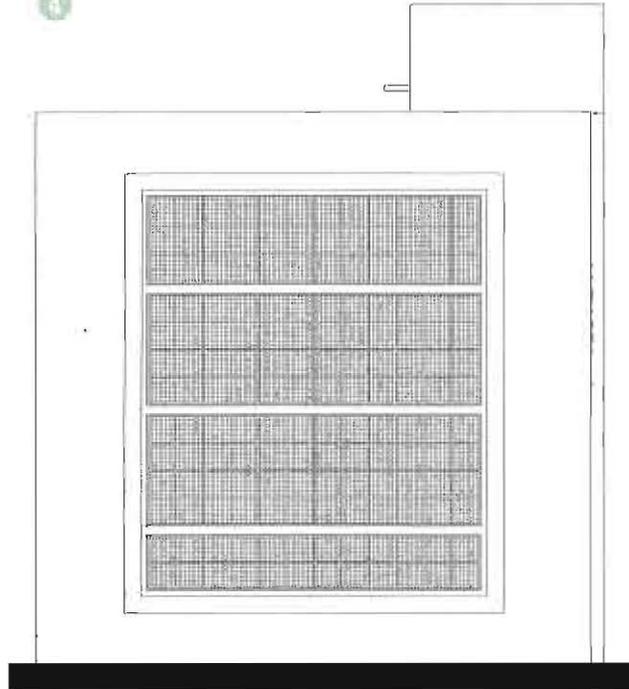
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0 5m

4



0 5m

- 1 Lobby
- 2 Office
- 3 Consultation Room
- 4 Toilet
- 5 Rest Room
- 6 Pantry
- 7 Lift Shaft
- 8 Balcony

**POLYCLINIC FOR THE DESTITUTE**

Design Romi Khosla Design Studios	Electrical Consultant SEMAC India
Principal Architects Romi Khosla, Martand Khosla	Plumbing Consultant SEMAC India
Design Team Rejnish Pant	Client The Sir Sobha Singh Public Charitable Trust
Structural Consultant SEMAC India	Location Old Delhi

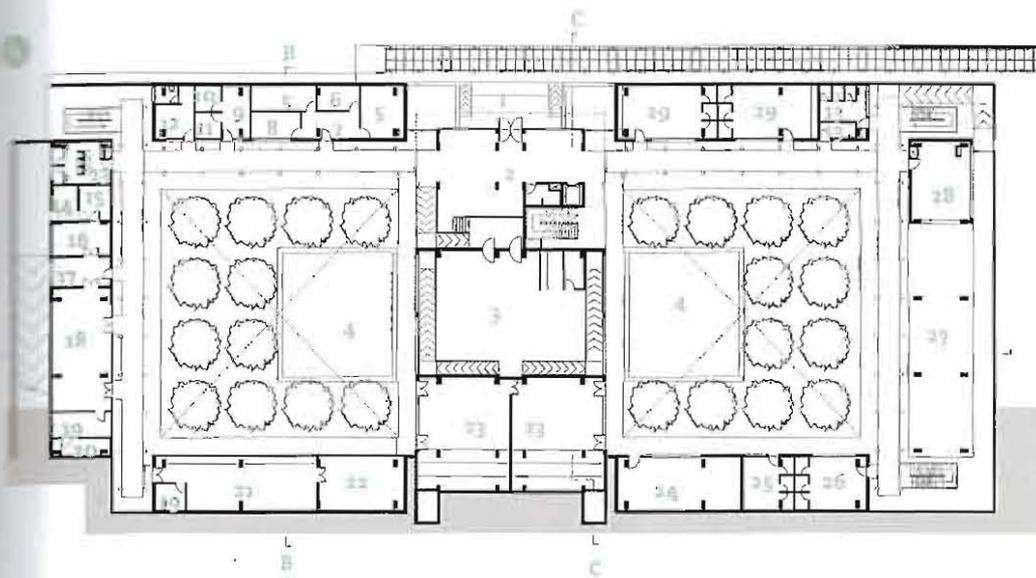
**FACT BOX**

Project Area  
1093.5 m<sup>2</sup>

Construction Phase  
2009 - 2011

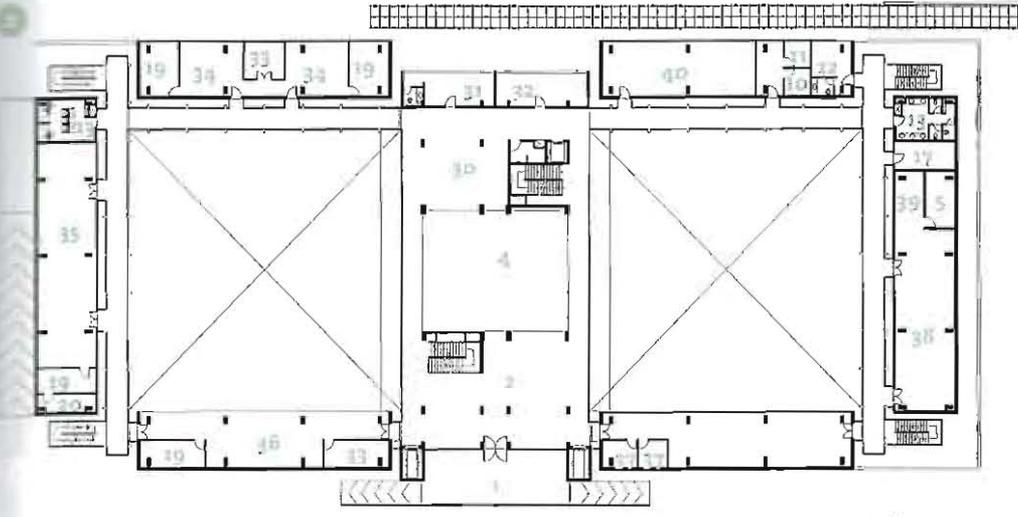
**DRAWINGS**

- 1 Ground floor plan
- 2 Section X
- 3 East elevation
- 4 West elevation

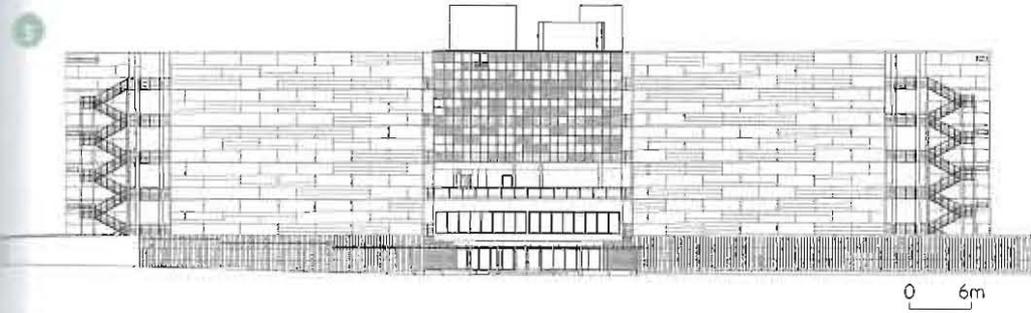
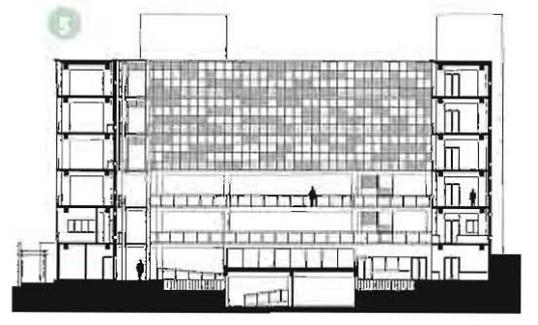
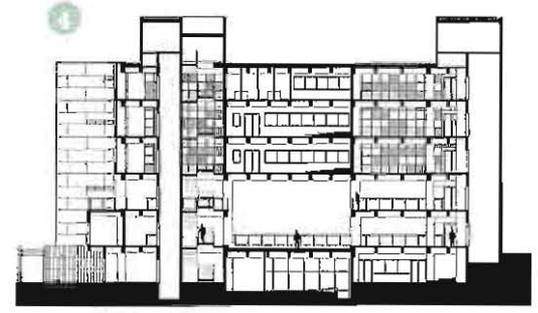


- 1 Entrance
- 2 Lobby
- 3 Central Block/ Library
- 4 Terrace Garden
- 5 X-ray Room
- 6 Darkroom
- 7 Scanning
- 8 Staff Room
- 9 Faculty Room
- 10 Reader's Room
- 11 Lecturer's Room
- 12 HOD's Office
- 13 Toilet
- 14 Store
- 15 Deep Freeze
- 16 Mortuary
- 17 Technician's Room
- 18 Dissection Hall
- 19 Preparation Room
- 20 Store
- 21 Histology
- 22 Museum
- 23 Lecture Room
- 24 Stores and Services
- 25 Staff Common Room
- 26 Faculty Changing Room + Common Room
- 27 Cafe
- 28 Kitchen
- 29 Students Changing Room + Common Room
- 30 Waiting Room
- 31 Dean's Office
- 32 Record Room
- 33 Demo Room
- 34 Biochemistry and Pharmacology Lab
- 35 Physiology + Pathology + Microbiology Lab
- 36 Oral Biology and Oral Pathology Lab
- 37 Consulting room
- 38 Public Health Dentistry Clinic
- 39 Sterilisation room
- 40 Office

0 6m



0 6m



**DENTAL COLLEGE**

Design  
**Romi Khosla Design Studios**

Principal Architects  
**Romi Khosla, Martand Khosla**

Design Team  
**Maulik Bansal, Ram Pandarathil Nair, Megha Shah**

Structural Consultant  
**SEMAC India**

Electrical Consultant  
**SEMAC India, MaxMEP**

Plumbing Consultant  
**SEMAC India**

Civil Contractor  
**CPWD**

Client  
**Jamia Millia Islamia University, New Delhi**

Location  
**New Delhi**

**FACT BOX**

Project Area  
**11,696 m<sup>2</sup>**

Construction Phase  
**2007 - 2009**

**DRAWINGS**

- 1 Ground floor plan
- 2 First floor plan
- 3 North elevation
- 4 Section CC
- 5 Section BB



The envelope or exterior of the building is what defines the boundary between the inside and the outside. The exterior appearance is what we first experience or see of a building. In a similar way, we see people first as how they visually appear to us. In both of these cases it can be said that we are seeing the "skin" of the object. "Skin" is the boundary of the object that separates the object from the space around it. The "skin" of a building — its façade — is sometimes considered to have a social and cultural role in representing what is inside the building. Traditional typologies of buildings such as "temples," "villas", or "municipal buildings" usually have sufficient connection to a system of understanding that we know the programme of the building from the architectural elements that are used to make the exterior form.

The articulation of the skin of a building is about the movement between the inside and the outside — one that is defined by the programme that is concealed and revealed within. Bernard Tschumi states that the envelope of a building is what excludes or includes by its articulation of the surface by fortification or porosity, by veiling and by screening. This suggests that movement from inside to outside is constitutive of space rather than being a product of space. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, two French philosophers, have said it well, "A substance is said to be formed when a flow enters into a relationship with another form."

Principal architects Romi Khosla and Martand Khosla of Romi Khosla Design Studios based in New Delhi, were entrusted with the responsibility of designing a dental college for the Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. The college

besides being a teaching centre for dentistry also provides dental care to the people in the surrounding areas. The programme therefore had to be designed keeping the three users in mind; the common public, the doctors who were going to teach and practice and for students who were going to learn and assist. The architects realised that it was crucial for the programme to be simplified so that it is easily understood by the three end-users and allows the users to flow from one space to another. This defines the envelope as a connector from the inside to the outside.

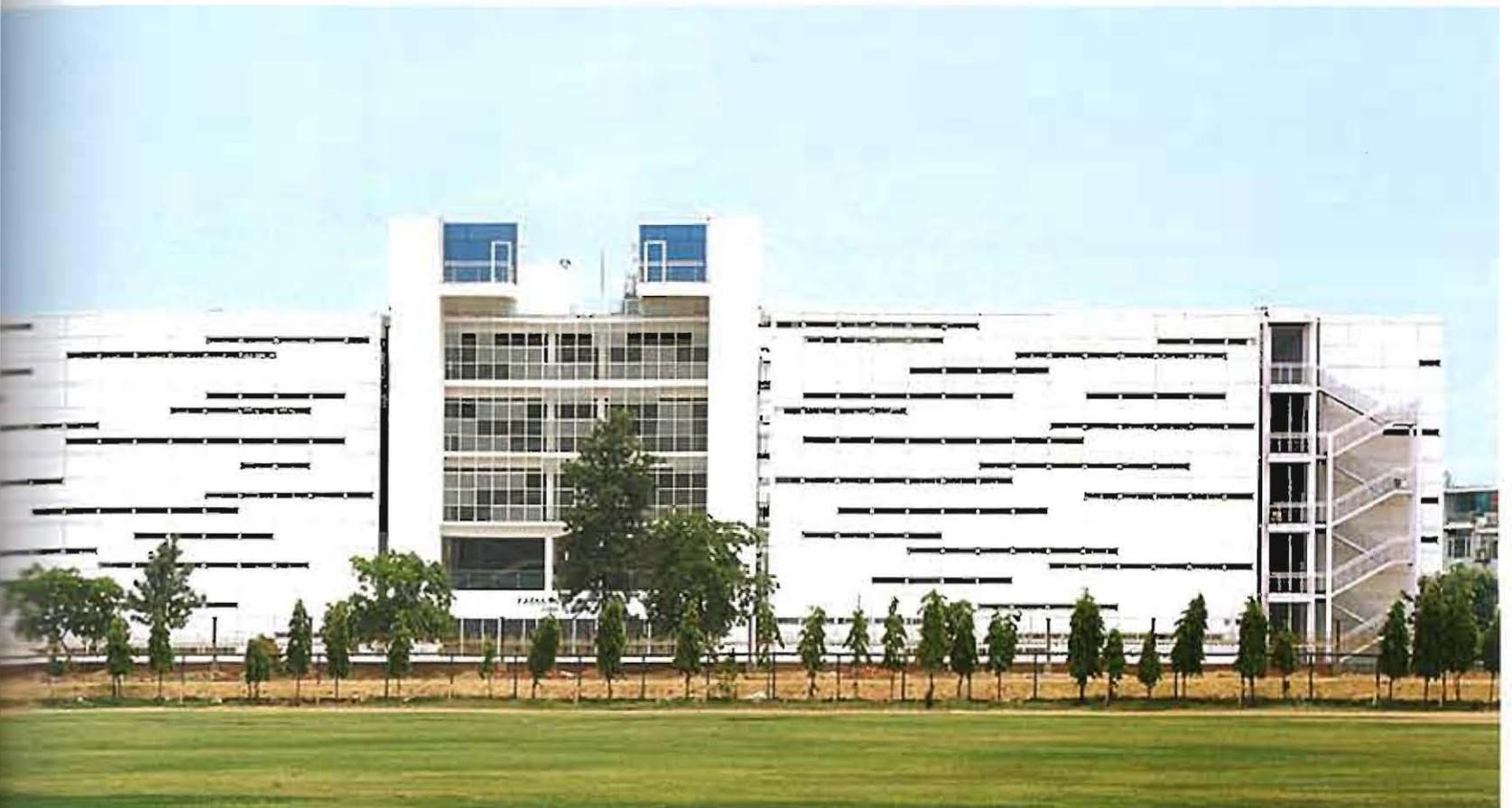
Romi Khosla Design Studios ensured that the façade was designed to serve dual functions. The northern façade of the building behind which the clinics have been located such that the structural curtain wall glazing provides enormous daylight for dental treatment. On the southern elevation, the glazing has been confined to horizontal narrow openings that protect the southern side of the building in the clinic areas from heat gain. Here one can argue that the skin of the building is as an organising element that relates functionally in connecting society to the building in a non-spatial way. Therefore, the underlying relationship is that the skin/envelope separate as compared to making connections, by transforming space into a represented system.

Programme, envelope and context form the basis of architecture and buildings. Herzog and de Meuron have designed, with artistic vigour, a number of buildings where the surface of the building, its "skin", is not of familiar or traditional architectural forms. These projects include the Dominus Winery in Napa Valley California, where the





The varying levels of transparencies, openings and closings in the façade links the aesthetic experience with the connected spaces beyond and the disconnected social system





The surface itself forms the structure of the building as structural glass, reinforced concrete frames, structural steel staircases and corridors emerge and disappear, separate and connect to map the programmatic and contextual elements

"skin" is made of "gabions" — where chicken wire enclosed blocks of stone used in highway retaining walls. The skin is actually the structure, and yet is also simultaneously a metaphorical allusion.

At the Dental College, although architects Romi Khosla and Martand Khosla may not have implied any metaphorical allusions, their treatment of surface architecture with the varying levels of transparencies, openings and closings in the façade paradoxically links the aesthetic experience with the connected spaces beyond and the disconnected social system. Here, the surface itself forms the structure of the building as structural glass, reinforced concrete frames, structural steel staircases and corridors emerge and disappear, separate and connect to map the programmatic and contextual elements. Similarly, the Seattle Public Library by Rem

Koolhaas also makes the skin a highly conscious element while at the same time it is the structure for the building. The reality of the Seattle Public Library is that the skin has the integrity of being the structure and is the central idea of the building. Also in the case of the Dental College structure, which has an institutional typology, the architectural surface creates 'spatial effects' that have a function which defines the envelope as a mediator. With reflective glass surfaces adorning most city skylines, where we know of nothing that is beyond or inside, and in most cases where the building is the worst arbitrator of energy, it is elevating to see that Romi Khosla Design Studios has mapped the complexities of the programmatic and contextual elements by the articulation of the skin. The articulation of the skin of a building, or of a person, is about the movement between inside and outside. An

envelope that not only mediates and simplifies but becomes a part of that movement from the outside to the inside space is a critical and fundamental aspect of space. It is substantially different from the representation of space. Most often than not studies pertaining to façade articulations and/or surface architecture is limited to the tectonics of building. We have established that any building is both the space of the building and the space around the building. In that framework the tectonic analysis of "skin" should be expanded to take more consideration of the interactions of the surface with the space. At the same time, a study must be carried out that maps and layers movement in relation to geometry.

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**JASEM PIRANI**  
Architect

