

AD

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STYLING: KIRAN K. L. P. P.

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST THE MOST BEAUTIFUL HOMES IN THE WORLD

FLAT *Plans*

MAKE THE MOST OF **SMALL SPACES**

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HOW TO
SHOP SMART, ONLINE
DESIGN YOUR OWN
HOME OFFICE
STYLE YOUR LIVING
ROOM FOR LESS

SPOTLIGHT

THE APPRENTICES

In the first of a series on apprenticeships, AD brings you the story of an architect who chose to take this journey. This is Saurabh Malpani's quest for the opportunity to learn from the elusive Portuguese architect Alvaro Siza

WRITER SNEHAL GADA

This is a story of sheer perseverance. On recognizing his guru, Saurabh Malpani spared no effort to earn his approval and be accepted as an apprentice. His patience was tried, his faith tested. It was only when he had exhausted every resource that the door was opened—and even then, just a sliver at a time.

When he met Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza for the first time—as a student researching his work for an undergraduate

thesis—Malpani went prepared with 13 questions. One of them was: “Do you think one should have a guru in architecture?” Siza, familiar with the term, responded succinctly, “When we begin [our careers], the need of a guru is there to initiate. After initiation, gurus may get multiplied as our beliefs grow. The known world is too big; so one guru is not sufficient. The guru is inspiration or inspiration is the guru. You don’t

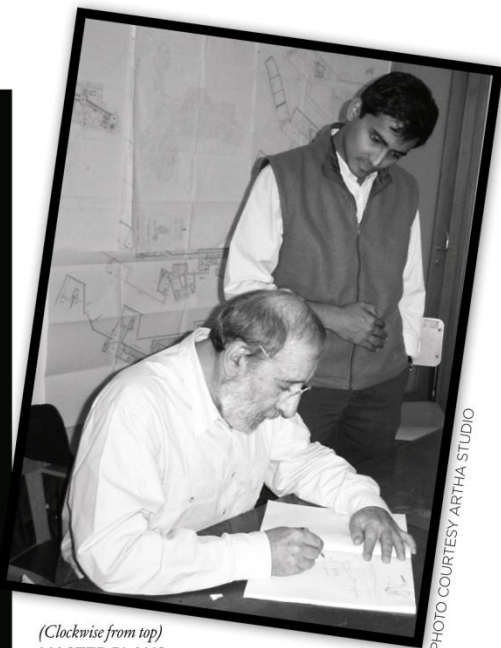


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(Clockwise from top)

MASTER PLANS

Architects Alvaro Siza and Saurabh Malpani. Siza's sketches for Palazzo Donnaregina in Naples. A model of the palazzo; it was the first project on which Malpani assisted Siza.

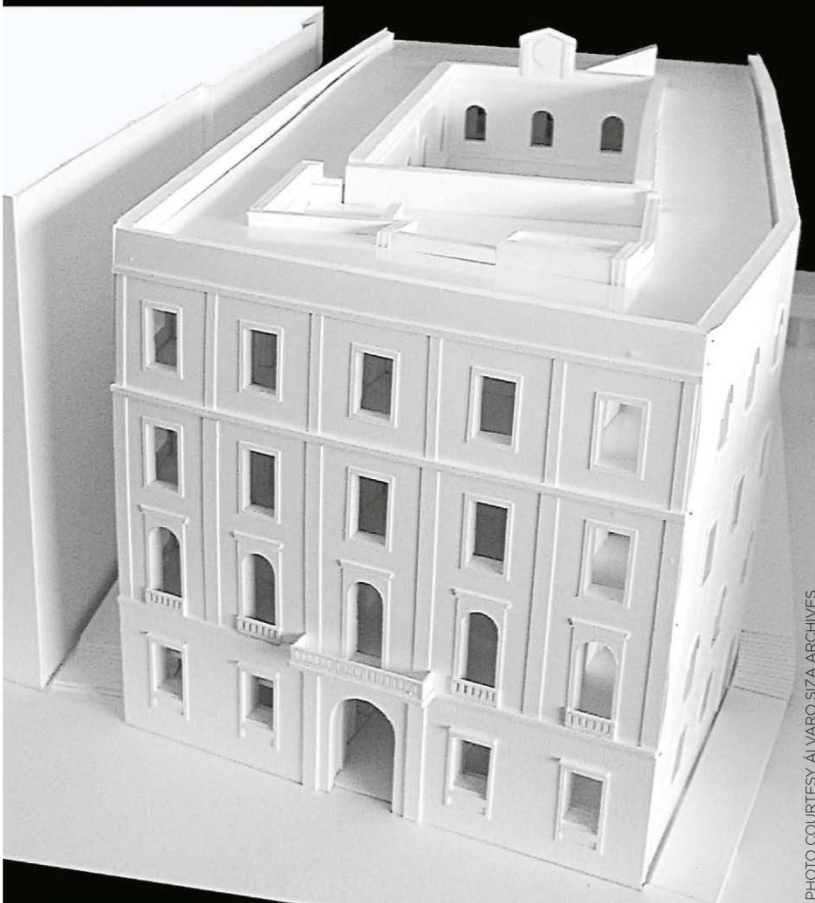
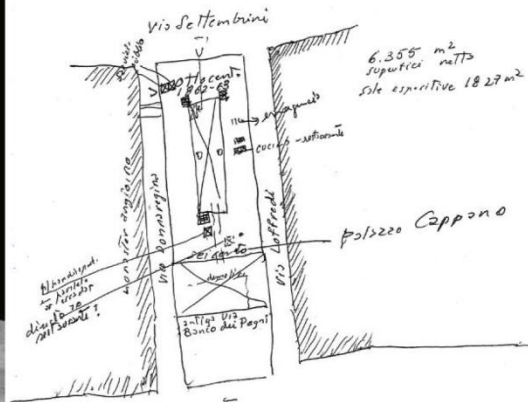
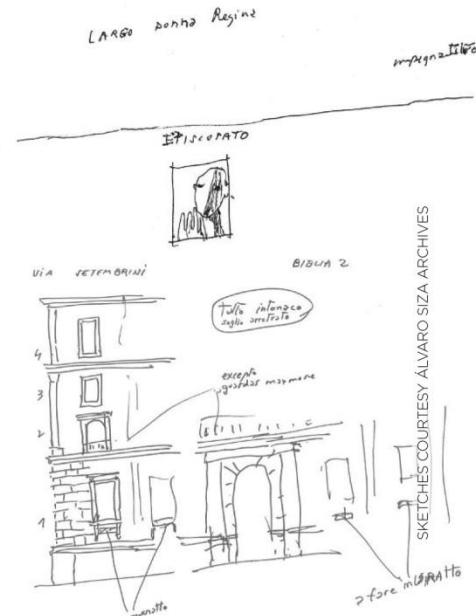
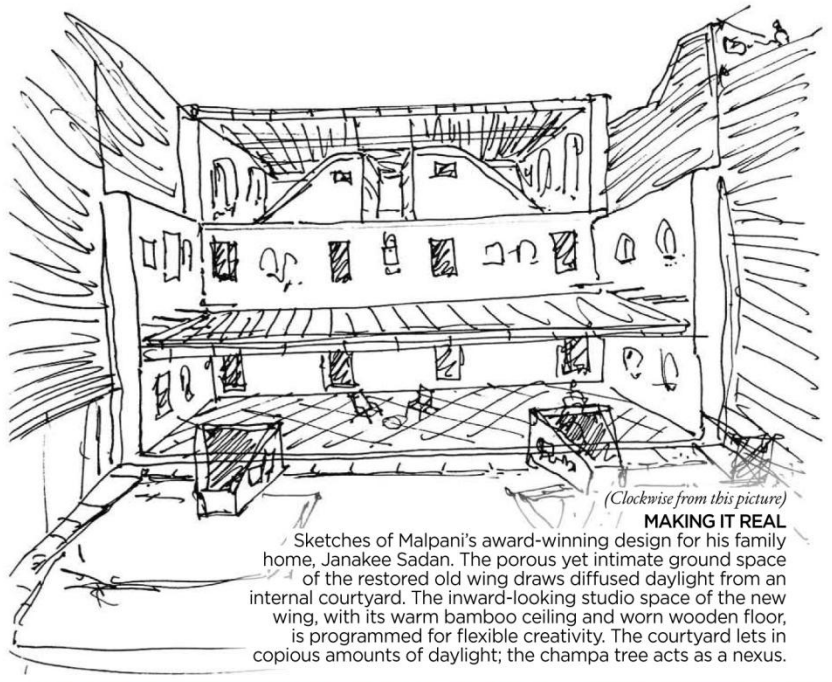
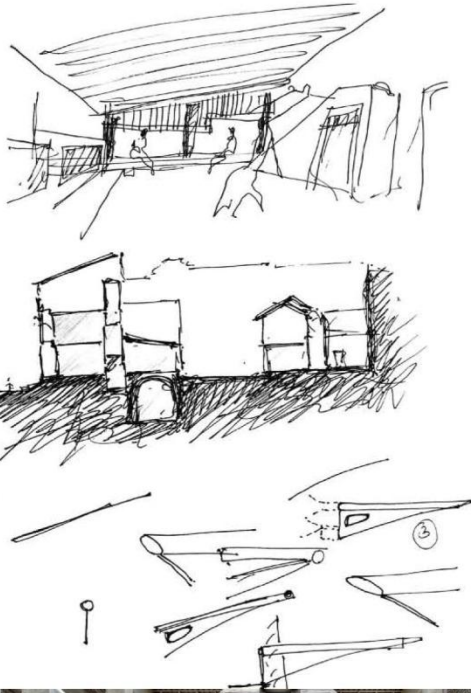


PHOTO COURTESY ALVARO SIZA ARCHIVES



SKETCHES COURTESY ALVARO SIZA ARCHIVES



(Clockwise from this picture)
MAKING IT REAL
 Sketches of Malpani's award-winning design for his family home, Janakee Sadan. The porous yet intimate ground space of the restored old wing draws diffused daylight from an internal courtyard. The inward-looking studio space of the new wing, with its warm bamboo ceiling and worn wooden floor, is programmed for flexible creativity. The courtyard lets in copious amounts of daylight; the champa tree acts as a nexus.



make a copy. Follow your own way; integrate knowledge and transfer it; it becomes yours.”

LOVE

Malpani has humble roots and has remained true to them. He grew up in Sangamner, Maharashtra, in an old house where his family lived at the time and the restoration of which he undertook a decade later to create the award-winning design of Janakee Sadan. Infused with Gandhian values, he was drawn to architecture as a tangible tool with which to serve society and transform lives. Making the transition from a relatively conservative town to the progressive School of Architecture at the Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology in Ahmedabad was not easy, but ultimately rewarding. It was through the school's exchange programme that he visited Europe for the first time, and where he had the opportunity to experience the buildings he had studied—among them, Siza's work.

While the monuments left a deep impression on him, Malpani was uninspired by most of the modern construction he saw. Fuelled by a booming economy and shaped by cutting-edge technology, he felt this architecture was founded on theories that he could not relate to. “But Portugal was different,” he says. “Here was a language I could understand: simplicity and beauty. And buildings that I could imagine in my own country.” Malpani discovered that the same person had created many of the projects he'd admired. His curiosity piqued, he sought out the office in Porto that Siza had designed and was sharing with three other architects. Unable to find its unassuming street entrance, he circumambulated the compound three times before he could discover a gate. And so began his pilgrimage.

COMPASSION

Siza was not present that day, and it would be another two years before Malpani would

meet the master with his questions. On returning to Ahmedabad, Malpani's area of enquiry was approved, even encouraged by his thesis guide, but published material on his subject was scarce. Eventually, this led him back to Porto, to the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Porto, on a four-month grant from them to pursue his study of Siza's work, of which the university building was also one. His unpreparedness for the lack of equipment at the school proved to be fortunate: Malpani was obliged to assist the vice dean with a research project in exchange for the use of his office computer. The people he met there arranged for his first meeting with Siza, and his involvement with the research resulted in his being invited back to Porto a few months later to participate in a workshop connected to the project.

It was then that Malpani met Siza again, at his office one Sunday, to present him with a copy of his dissertation. When asked about his plans for the future, Malpani

◀ once more expressed his wish to work with Siza. “In the future, it is possible,” was the non-committal reply. “But my future is in one month,” he implored. He was travelling on a shoe-string allowance from his brother and his return flight had been booked for a month later. He knew that if he left now, he would not be able to muster the resources to revisit. Irritated by his persistence and eager to be rid of him—Siza’s next appointment was waiting—he dismissively asked him to return on Wednesday. On Wednesday he was asked to return on Friday, then on Monday, and so on until he had walked through the secret gate, and back out, over 20 times.

Yet, he would not concede defeat. He postponed his departure by another month at a substantial cost, moved out of the school-sponsored accommodation where he had overstayed his welcome and into a small sublet room, and further reduced his already insubstantial vegetarian diet by eliminating expensive items to support this decision. Ill from a protein deficiency and at his wit’s end, Malpani found sympathy in the office secretary. She advised him to try his luck on a Saturday when Siza had planned a quiet day of work alone.

GRACE

About the nature of his profession, Siza once said, “Architects don’t invent anything; they just transform reality.” Malpani brilliantly applied this adage to his situation, choosing to focus on the fact of constantly being asked to return on another day rather than not being entertained on any.

Impervious to the scorn he was received with when Siza saw him that fateful day, Malpani waited resolutely. While the master worked; ate his lunch; met a client; took his siesta on a Le Corbusier-designed chaise longue in a spare room strewn with various awards, including a Pritzker—until, at last, he heard the words: “You may start tomorrow, for one month.”

Starting that Sunday, Malpani went on to work with the hero of “poetic modernism” for three years—his appointment being extended by three months, then six months, then a year at a time. There was no hierarchy in the office; every employee worked directly with Siza and would be assigned charge of the project after the initial design was confirmed. A healthy culture of internal competition prevailed, with two or more architects



(This picture and below)

OPEN HOUSE

Mostly reusing materials from a collapsed part of the old building, the new wing shows a modern face to the court between the two; the painted wall is an annually changing artwork by neighbouring children. A sketch of the courtyard.

PHOTO AND SKETCH COURTESY ARTHA STUDIO

presenting their ideas to the others. All proposals would be examined evenly, the best aspects of each being incorporated to ascertain the most appropriate approach. Scrupulously favouring “banality and speculation” over “excitement and entertainment” in his larger vision, Siza breathed life into projects through meticulous detailing, which he had mastered over three decades as a teacher of Building Construction at the Porto School.

It follows then that the man, like his designs, is very simple. “He has no leisure other than smoking, and has immersed himself entirely in his practice,” explains Malpani. Recounting an incident where

Siza had broken his right arm in a road accident, he says, “He quickly got back to work using his left, saying that it had 40 years of unexplored potential!” In another, he describes how Siza, an unapologetically clumsy dresser, diffused a situation when a waitress—during a client meeting—spilled wine on his shirt. He said he could finally pass off as a fashionably distracted artist!

Such modesty and an unglamorous outlook to the profession are qualities that Malpani hoped to instil when he returned to India and founded Artha, a sustainable design studio in Pune, which he leaves precisely at 5:45 every evening to spend time with his daughter. ♦

