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# BRICK AND CONCRETE

A FASCINATION WITH THE SIMPLE DESIGN OF HIS HIGH SCHOOL LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR SINGAPORE-BASED INDIAN ARCHITECT GAURANG KHEMKA'S SOARING CAREER IN ARCHITECTURE.

WORDS AMITA SARWAL





(FROM FAR LEFT) Vertical screens, gardens and balconies create a rhythmic façade at Alila Seminyak, Bali; Rooms at Alila Seminyak, Bali, merge seamlessly into the balcony and the ocean beyond; Gaurang Khemka.



The decision to become an architect came quite early in Gaurang Khemka's life. "I was deeply inspired by my high school building, the Modern School in New Delhi," recalls the 32-year-old founding director of URBNarc. "The spaces within, the quality of light and above all the beautiful use of only two materials – exposed brick and concrete."

After completing a degree in architecture at the Sushant School of Art and Architecture in Delhi, and then a Master in Urban Design at the University of California, Berkeley, Khemka worked with some of architecture's biggest names: Charles Correa, Kerry Hill Architects and HOK. Each left an impression. "Kerry Hill Architects is a true design studio where countless hours were spent in designing and detailing every corner," says Khemka. "Kerry's buildings are exacting and each is a delicate jewel. I was used to being a star – but at Kerry's studio everyone was a star, so it was a humbling experience."

Khemka's time at HOK in San Francisco and Hong Kong finally led him back to Singapore,

where he eventually decided to venture off on his own by founding URBNarc. Not even three years old, the firm's portfolio continues to grow. His most recent breakthrough was winning an international design competition for the Indian Heritage Centre in Singapore, which was inspired by the *baolis*, or stepwells, of Rajasthan.

"I love the concept of how people gather around water," says Khemka. "My idea was to use this as a metaphor to create an urban oasis. In addition, the duality of nature and how opposites come together to form a whole has always inspired me. Male, female, yin, yang, *purusha*, *prakriti* – the list is endless. I want to create a journey through this centre where colliding, opposing forces and materials will create a fragile and loving tension."

The Indian Heritage Centre is projected to open in mid-2014. Meanwhile, Khemka has been busy with other Singapore projects. The 79-room Naumi Liora boutique heritage hotel in Chinatown opened in early October and MYthology, a fashion retail store on Club Street opened in late September.

Work also continues on the Alila Seminyak, a resort hotel that will open in late 2013 on what Khemka describes as "a beautiful beach in a very urban part of Bali." He says the hotel is meant to be a secret garden in the midst of the city. "The neighbouring streams are being cleaned, fruit-and flower-bearing trees, vertical and roof gardens have all been planned to attract the local micro fauna back."

The design also draws inspiration from its Balinese surroundings. "Visually, we have used contextual metaphors of the Balinese concept of paying homage to the three layers of *nista*, *madya* and *utama* – the low, middle and high respectively. A heavy base, a lightweight structure of posts and a hovering roof maintain the harmony of man, architecture and landscape that is quintessential to the Balinese culture. We have done this using a contemporary idiom as we believe danger lies in pretence to tradition. In addition, we are using completely local building materials and craft skills to create what I believe will be a truly contemporary hotel befitting its context." [urnarc.com](http://urnarc.com) 