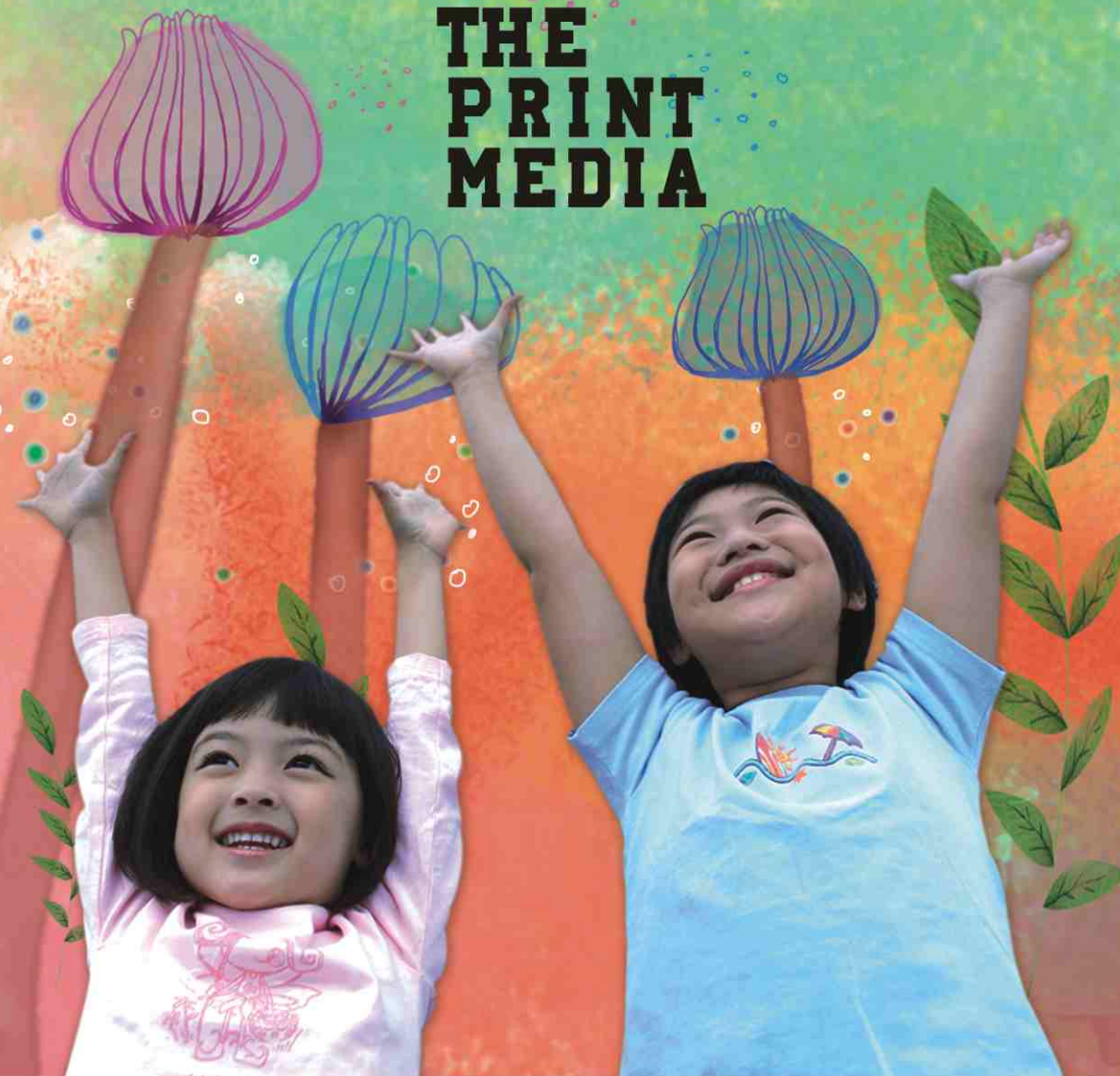


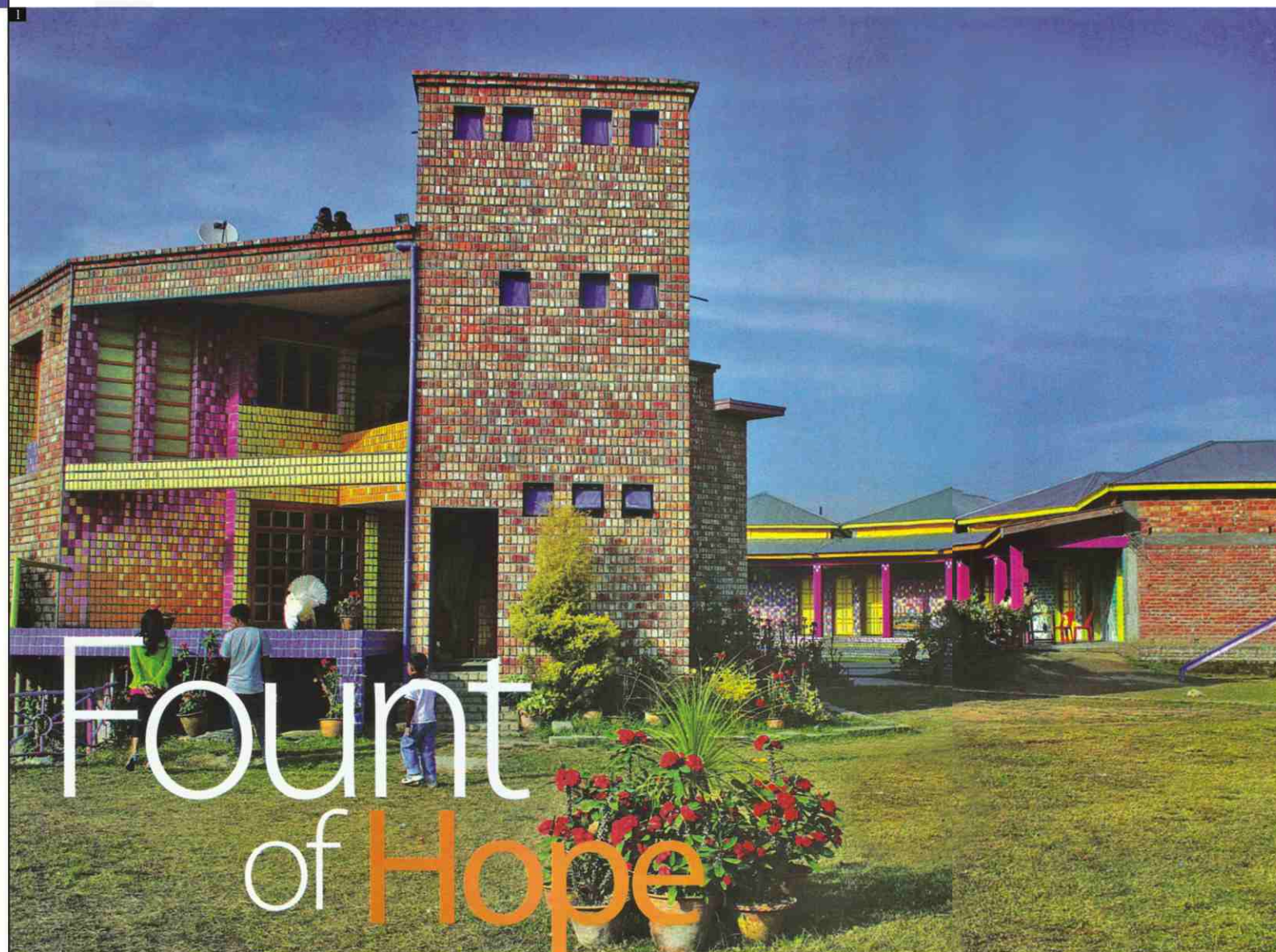


# EXCERPTS FROM RECENT APPRECIATION OF **KIDS'** **FOUNDATION:** IN THE PRINT MEDIA

**KIDS' FOUNDATION**  
KIDS' WORLD COMPLEX,  
AIRPORT ROAD, GHARI, IMPHAL,  
MANIPUR







Kids' Foundation on Imphal's Airport Road is not just a centre for education; it's a well-thought-out lesson in overcoming life's obvious obstacles.

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS: HIMANSHU BURTE

Schools in India are rarely spaces of hope for the child. Rather, much like the education system they try to fit into, they are spaces of coercion, discipline, punishment and every other emotion that thwarts the natural desires and abilities of the child. This is the case in places where everyday life is relatively dull. But quite a large number of places in the country are also affected by violence and uncertainty. Schools surely have a greater responsibility to nurture overstressed childhoods here, right? What kind of school, for instance, can help the children of Imphal cope better with the unbearable pressure of living in a city under siege?

A glimpse of an answer is available at Kids' Foundation on Airport Road, which I stumbled onto during a visit to the city, only by chance. Says, Braja Bidhu Singh who set it up in 2005, "Over the last decade or more, spaces for children have alarmingly shrunk in Manipur. When we grew up there was a lot of space — around the house and neighbourhood — where we could play. Today, children have to spend their entire day within confined spaces. When both parents are working, it is even worse. We felt we have to give children some time and space to be themselves."

So the school integrates what other institutions practice as oppositional activities — work and play. One campus, two names: Kids' Foundation is the primary school and the attached Kids' World is the children's park. During school hours, students get to use the park — with its swimming pool, pavilions, play equipment, rockery and bridge — and after hours, it is open to the public for a small fee of Rs 5 per person. Since it is meant to be a space for children, young couples unaccompanied by a child are not allowed in. The elderly, meanwhile, are welcome. They get their respite and the contact with children is mutually beneficial.

The 2.5-acre campus, designed by architect Bhavananda Singh with significant inputs from Braja Bidhu Singh himself, reveals a deep commitment to delighting children, particularly in the open spaces. The crucial move, in design terms, is the graceful fanning-out arrangement of the classrooms aligned in a radial pattern with the central block which houses the studio for the resident artist as well as an art gallery. A beautifully scaled amphitheatre is created between the two blocks. Its radial arrangement (emphasized in its paving) also allows the head of the institution a

[1] The ground-plus-one block houses the art gallery and the artists' studio

[2] Rockery and pool in the garden





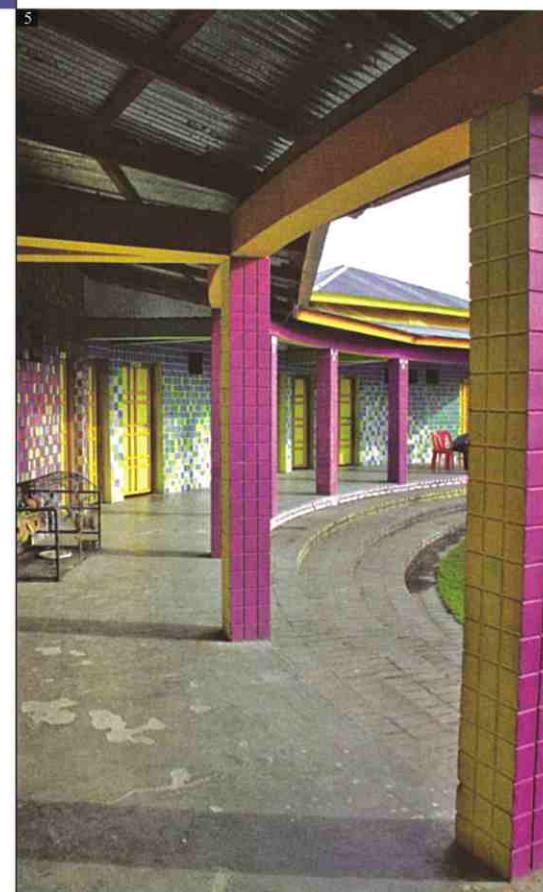


clear yet discreet view of the classrooms. The unplastered walls are built in rat-trap bond, and each brick is picked out in a colour different from its neighbour. Apparently, the resident artist Ishwor Singh and Braja Bidhu painted each brick themselves. What results is a polychromatic shimmer of pastels which lifts the building out of its dull, peri-urban context with subtle drama.

Tiny details have been pursued with idiosyncratic vigour to achieve this shimmer, which is at times strangely reminiscent of the ceramic tile mosaics of central Asian architecture. To begin with, the RCC columns of the structure have been hidden behind the external brickwork. Further, the bricks for the external walls have been specially manufactured with grooves that divide their 'stretcher' (the long face of the brick) into three equal parts. From far, this creates the impression that the external surfaces are clad in a tile of uniform size, with continuous joints. Move closer to the veranda-side wall of the classrooms and you are horrified with the suspicion that brick courses (layers) have been laid without either alternating the long and short sides (headers) of the brick, or staggering the joints!



- [3] A thatch-roofed pavilion in a corner of the garden
- [4] An unconventional colour palette lights up the seriousness of the brickwork



- [5] Along the curving corridor
- [6] The lush view from the entrance



It is the apt exuberance of colour that makes the surface games with perception appear convincing. The colour palette moves across the cold and warm hues of pastels. Pastels of yellow, pink and blue may be easier to pull together than the pure hues themselves. Even so, pink columns never work so well; the little checkerboard motif near the capitals could only have emerged from an assured painterly sensibility.

Wisely, however, everything is not staked on architecture. There is an earnest effort at securing a pleasant connection with nature (even if it feels potted), in different ways. The landscaping is lush and colourful, while the rockery and other elements are stereotypical, they assume a different significance in this city: it feels like a miracle that someone could actually break out of the oppressive stress of living on the edge in Imphal (including getting home before dark, which often means around 4 pm) and think about the little arched bridge over an artificial pond.

The double role the campus plays — academic and recreational space — is particularly significant in a country where institutions regularly under-deliver even on their core function. It is even more crucial in a place like Imphal where the fabric of the city is coming apart in the face of insurgency, poor governance and the lack of sensible regulation. The very fact that the school was built (in 11 months, that too) in a place like this, was itself a minor miracle. It is, however, the third dimension to the campus, which really makes it a truly significant experiment. The studios for resident artists integrate serious art practice into the daily rhythms of academic life. While the institution promotes the artists by organizing shows in the metros, the artists train the children while also pursuing their work. The school thus attempts to set up another layer of creative cross-fertilisation while sustaining contemporary visual art in a city where ordinary life is itself full of extraordinary challenges. Is it too much, then, to say that schools in other fortunately normal cities in India may have something to learn from the way this institution challenges its dispiriting urban environment? ●





## Business Standard

# ROLE REVERSAL

Architects are experts in building, but inhabitants are experts at dwelling. **Himanshu Burte** visits three buildings in which the design was led by the owners

**H**omeowners often claim to have designed their houses themselves. Occasionally, but not always, they credit the architect or designer with just 'drawing the blueprints' or 'supervising the workers'.

Architects and interior designers are resigned to cracking wry jokes about this easy erasure of their professional role, so unlike that of other professionals like doctors. After all, designing a building or even an interior space coherently is a learnt skill. Clients normally lack such training, even if occasionally some might have the talent. So the unhappiness of professional designers at being robbed of credit is legitimate.

But are there also projects where the client's design and institutional vision has really made an equal if not greater contribution to the way a building turns out? Surprisingly, there are many examples, like the three presented here, none of which is a house.

How can a layperson match an experienced professional in the complicated task of architectural design? Broadly because design and building are collaborative acts, whether we know it or not. Each player has unique strengths, which can complement the other's strengths and compensate for his or her weaknesses.

### Broader vision of need

Some clients conceive of a project to answer a broad social need. They imagine the functional requirements and architectural qualities not as usual but with reference to that vision. Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai is one example. The client — the late Jennifer Kapoor — had a clear vision of an inexpensive space for performance that would also be a refuge of sorts for theatre walls and would allow for creative experimentation. She found in Ved Segar a skillful and receptive architect, and together they created a little gem of a place whose impact on the national cultural scene is way greater than its small footprint.

The school in Imphal described below is another example. It had to have a children's park open to the public after hours because the client, Braja Bidhu, saw that as an important need in a very anxious city lacking such amenities.

### Expert in use

Architects might be experts in building, but inhabitants are experts at dwelling. Specialist architects are a new phenomenon — users have been building or designing for themselves for thousands of years. Clients who build a project for a specific personal use often understand their own spatial needs more richly than any architect. A sympathetic architect can, of

course, listen and interpret these needs into a customised brief for design. When the needs are unique, the answering architecture can also be unique.

Adishakti's theatre below is an example of how an experienced theatre director can have a vision for her own theatre that is unlike any usual theatre. Such a client is also more empathetic towards the unspoken needs and desires of other users of the space.

In the Imphal school, the client personally worked on painting each brick in the wall a slightly different colour to create a vibrant atmosphere attractive to kids.

### Limits of professional knowledge

Like all professionals, architects have limits to their knowledge about their own discipline. There are design devices they have never tried, or new materials they have missed hearing about. Clients often do much research related to some aspect of architecture they find fascinating and can provide valuable inputs. It is then upto the architect to run with them and produce something that he or she may not have produced alone. Such is the case with the Bharati Vidyapeeth's Institute of Environment Education and Research, Pune, whose polymath director suggested unusual, sensible and effective provisions for sustainable comfort in the design.

### KIDS' FOUNDATION, IMPHAL

**T**his little primary school stood out from the atmosphere of fear and neglect that marked Imphal when I visited in 2007. It was started in 2005 by Braja Bidhu, a local businessman. Bidhu had an unusual programme for the school. Apart from classrooms, it has a children's park open, at a nominal fee, to city children accompanied by adults. It also has a studio for an artist-in-residence who works with the kids. Bidhu had a specific vision for the design. He wanted curved forms as well as lots of colour. Local architect Bhavananda Singh produced an elegant form. Then the resident artist and Bidhu painted each brick in various pastel shades to create a wonderful shimmering wall surface reminiscent of the Impressionists. Producing that shimmer involved work. The bricks were specially manufactured with grooves on their surfaces. The long face of each brick is broken up into smaller squares so that three colours fit on one long brick face. The crowning detail was the popular birdcage in the verandah-corridor.

