

superPRACTICE Journal

1. How I Got Here

(2014-2016)

The first time I truly considered what I wanted to do with my life was in 2014. I was 16. It happened unexpectedly during an English speaking test at school. Each student had to draw a chit with a topic, and mine read "career." I remember it so clearly, because something cracked open in me that day. I got emotional while speaking. I remember saying how unfair it felt that we're expected to choose the direction of our entire lives at an age where we're still figuring out who we even are. Somehow, that honesty earned me the highest score in my grade.

I said I was torn between becoming an architect or an archaeologist. One fascinated me. The other intimidated me. So, naturally, I chose the one that scared me more. Architecture.

On my first day of architecture school, my mother casually said, "I always knew you'd end up in this field." I brushed it off, thinking it was just one of those things parents say. But then she reminded me that when I was younger, I used to draw house plans. Sketch layouts of homes we visited. Flip through architecture and interior design magazines instead of storybooks (of which I have vague memories).

(2016-2021)

Architecture school was... brutal. In India, the education system is rigorous, but the culture inside architecture schools can feel particularly harsh. Many of the faculty didn't teach from a place of generosity or mentorship but through fear. It was this inherited cycle of suffering: "I went through worse, this is nothing."

Critiques weren't to guide; they were to crush. After my second year, I almost dropped out. I couldn't see the point anymore. The stress drowned any excitement I had, and the joy I once associated with design was nowhere to be found.

But I didn't leave. I stayed. And eventually, I found out why.

In my fourth year, we had an Interior Design unit taught by Mr. Yogendra Singh, a young, sharp, queer teacher with a clarity of vision I hadn't encountered before. He taught with empathy. He showed us how to look at interiors not just as spaces, but as stories. His approach changed how I saw design and reminded me why I'd chosen this field in the first place.

He believed in me when I didn't. He saw something in me and urged me to see it too. He even wrote my recommendation letter for RCA.

We kept in touch after I graduated. I remember him telling me, "You don't have to call me 'sir' anymore. We're colleagues now. Call me Yogi."

Yogi passed away recently. His impact on me, on so many of us, was immeasurable. This journal, in many ways, is for him.



Who am I?



How unfair is it that we are expected to choose the direction of our entire lives at an age where we are still figuring out who we even are?

ARCHITECTURE OR ARCHAEOLOGY
(intimidating) (fascinating)

Naturally, I chose

[Architecture!]

(2021-2024)

Entering the professional world after graduation was a jolt. I came out of architecture school burnt out, uncertain, and a little numb. But slowly, that part of me started to flicker back to life.

My first full-time job was at Atelier Ashiesh Shah, one of India's most renowned design studios. After everything I had been through, getting that role felt surreal. It was the kind of place people dreamed of getting into, and there I was, walking through its doors as a fresh graduate.

Because the studio was small, I was involved in everything. Architecture, interior design, product design, even website design, the book launch, admin work. The pace was fast, and the learning curve even faster.

My first full project was a restaurant called Neuma, in the heart of Mumbai. Seeing it open, seeing it featured in magazines across the country was wild. We weren't credited publicly, neither I nor my senior, Lila Sarin, who worked tirelessly with me. That part stung. But seeing our vision realised still made us proud.

I learned so much in that studio but I also learned when it was time to leave. The atmosphere was heavy with fear. Everyone, from the interns to the housekeeping staff, worked with a quiet tension. A fear of making mistakes. A fear of being seen messing up. And it all centred around the principal architect. I realised I had stepped into a different version of the same fear-driven culture I had left behind in school.

As I moved on to other studios across India, I realised this wasn't a one-off. This was the norm. Toxicity disguised as discipline. Berating passed off as critique. Staying till 1 a.m. on a shoestring salary, simply because that's how things are.

At least 60% of my peers that I graduated with have left the field. Some by choice. Many because they had no other choice.

But I stayed. Because I love this field enough to stick around. I knew that if I wanted to keep going, I had to find new ways to exist within it. To rebuild my relationship with design and with myself as a designer.

MY FIRST PROJECT



SITE IMAGE



MY ACTUAL BLOOD



SWEAT & TEARS!

MULTIPLE TRIALS & ERRORS



NEUMA



DRAWINGS TO REALITY



SITE IMAGES

ATELIER ABHIESH
SHAH.

- Architecture
- Interior Design
- Product Design
- Website Graphics
- Graphics for Book



FIRST FURNITURE DESIGN

THE FINAL RESULT!

2. My Time Here

(2024-2025)

To remind myself why I began this journey in the first place, I knew I had to step away and leave behind the systems I had internalised and give myself the space to relearn.

And what better place than the world's top art and design school?

Before joining RCA, I sat down with myself. I set intentions of how much I wanted to learn but also that I would be very open to unlearn. This year was about both.

And it was everything I hoped for.

Yes, I wish I had more time with my thesis. But I also loved that our time here wasn't just about a single project. Media Studies, AcrossRCA, and my elective SemioMatter, all shaped me. They pushed me to understand design as a layered, evolving process not just a fixed output

I learned that spatial design isn't just about four walls. It's about people. History. Context. Texture. Power. The stories' materials hold before they arrive in your hands. The politics of an image. These were things I hadn't been taught to consider before but now, I couldn't ignore them.

One of my biggest realisations was that there's no single process to design. I used to think the early stages had a standard formula. That belief feels so limiting now. My process here was fluid. Messy. Personal. And that made it beautiful.

I want to thank Kazumasa Takada and Kevin Haley, my principal tutors. Kazu brought architectural clarity and sensitivity. Kevin added sharp, unexpected turns that helped me think more expansively. They never told me what to do. But they always helped me figure out how to do it.

This year gave me confidence. Recognition too, some of my projects showed at Milan Design Week, ROCA Gallery, One Canada Square. I even led a youth workshop during my early project stages, encouraged by Kazu and Kevin.

But beyond the accolades, what mattered most was the freedom. For the first time, I worked in an environment that didn't run on fear. I wasn't told I was wrong. I was never asked to prove myself before being listened to. Even in small moments like when I asked Graeme Brooker a question starting with "Is it okay if we..." and he immediately said, "You never have to ask us for permission."

That moment stayed with me.

I leave RCA clearer. Kinder. More confident. I'm still learning how to operate without fear, but at least now, I know it's possible.

And now, I get to ask - what next?



END OF YEAR SHOW!



MEDIA STUDIES FINAL!



WITH KAZU & KEVIN!



MILAN DESIGN WEEK!!!



SELECTED FOR ACROSS RCA FINAL EXHIBITION!



WHAT'S NEXT?

3. Where I Hope to Go From Here

(2025-Hereafter)

Last week, during a career tutorial, Kazu asked me a question I had never really asked myself:

"What do you imagine your life to look like at 60?"

I didn't have a clear answer then. Over the past week, I've been reflecting on that. And what follows is a rough sketch. A hopeful outline. (Not a clear answer yet)

Now to 35:

Right now, I'm 26. I have a few years of experience behind me, but I still feel like I'm at the very beginning of something. I want to use the next 8-9 years to learn intentionally, to work across different firms, in different parts of the world. To explore varied design approaches, office cultures, and ways of thinking.

And while I build this foundation, there's one hope I keep close.

For the last two years, I've watched the destruction in Gaza unfold with heartbreak, helplessness, and a growing urgency. In the years to come, when Palestine is free from blockade and begins its process of rebuilding, I want to dedicate a year or two of my life to help in whatever capacity I can. As a designer, as a collaborator, who believes deeply in the role of care, in spaces that carry trauma and memory. I truly hope to see that day.

35 to 40:

At 35, I hope to return to my hometown, Kottayam, and take the leap to start my own practice. It might be hard. It might feel slow. But I've learned that beginnings usually are. My aim is to eventually build a team. A team that is close-knit and collaborative to work across projects of different scales, from small interventions to larger spatial narratives.

But beyond the work itself, I want to create a culture within my studio that feels safe, generous, and collaborative. I want to build what I didn't have.

I also hope to take on more public space projects starting small. A better bus stop. A *chayakada* (small tea shop) that feels more welcoming. I see so much potential in Kerala, but also a deep resistance to change. I want to challenge that, gently.

40 to 50:

By my 40s, I hope my practice has some rhythm. I also want to begin forming or joining a collective in Kottayam - a network of designers, architects, and creatives working together to make our city more livable, inclusive, and thoughtful.

I hope to work with local government, with neighbourhood committees, with whoever is willing to listen. The idea is to bring attention back to the quality of public space. To push for buildings that honour context. To push back against the glass-and-metal boxes that feel so disconnected from our roots.

50 to 60:

By this point, I want to slowly begin transitioning toward education. Whether that means starting a new school of design, or contributing to an existing one, I don't know yet. But I want to be part of changing how design is taught in India.

I want to help build a curriculum that encourages experimentation, accountability, and care. I want students to learn through conversation, not compliance. I want them to feel excited and not afraid. By then I hope to have a good blueprint of how this place would run.

60 onwards:

I like to think I would still be working at 60, work that feels restful. Maybe I'll just be teaching by then. Or mentoring. Or writing. But whatever I'm doing, I want it to come from a place of purpose.

I want to be able to say that I contributed not only to the built world, but to the culture that creates it.

This timeline isn't a checklist. It might shift. It most definitely will. But it gives me direction. It helps me remember what I'm working toward.