

focus



A 1500sq ft apartment in South Mumbai, which was restored with a very open-ended agenda by architects Khushboo and Kunal Khandelwal, the two halves of the firm they spearhead - Design Inc.

Text: Amrita Shah
Photographs: Courtesy Nivedita Magar and Alan Abraham

UP FOR GRABS

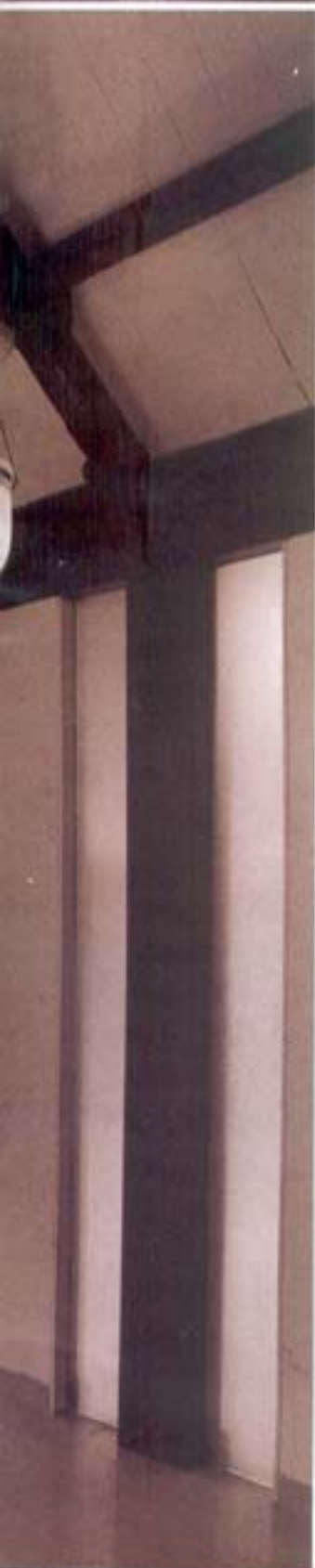
An embossed brass plate, faded away with age proudly proclaims '1893 BPT'. Another marble plaque states the name of the building with the date 1902. This three-storey building, located in south Mumbai, has obviously seen its fair share of history; as a structure originally owned by the Bombay Port Trust, and then converted into a residential building as the dates proclaim.

In a state of neglect and disrepair, the third floor of the building was recently given a new lease of life by architects Khushboo and Kunal Khandelwal. "When we walked into the project, the house was a mess! It had been lying vacant for 30-odd years. Part of the roof had rotted. The Mangalore tiles had come off, and during the monsoon...well, you only need to use your imagination," says Khushboo. The previous owner had been an architect...though seeing the photographs of the house in its ramshackle state, that seems difficult to believe. A false ceiling hid the incredible timber roof structure, wooden partitions were placed in a seemingly random manner all over the house to subdivide the otherwise large rooms, the bathrooms were entered through the kitchen... add to this, years of non-use. So the young couple did the only thing they could - rolled up their sleeves and took on the challenge.

First on their agenda was fixing the leaking roof, which was dilapidated to the extent of missing tiles! So off came the false ceiling (part of which had collapsed anyway). "That was when we discovered the incredible roof structure," says Khushboo







enthusiastically. Kunal adds, "The unfortunate thing is that we started work in May, just pre-monsoon, and the first thing we had to do was open up the roof and start fixing it." So there were days when it rained straight into the house, not only flooding it, but also the flat below! The neighbours thankfully were very understanding... even when their ceiling slab was broken through, during renovation work! New to restoration, the renovation turned into quite an adventure for the young couple, with Kunal reminiscing about drinking *chai* while sitting on the roof at 3 in the morning, waiting for his *kadiya* to finish fixing the terracotta Mangalore roof tiles.

"The roof form, being of such a strong geometry, dominated the design concept and the demarcation of spaces," says Khushboo. So the sub-dividing partitions were removed and the walls were restricted to the periphery of the roof structure. The joists and rafters of the roof were stripped of all paint, down to the rich Burma teakwood. Trying to establish a blend of the colonial structure with a contemporary feel, the Khandelwals decided to use the roof as the focal point in their design, and accentuate it with glass and brass *haandi* lamps hanging from the beams. The old windows were also stripped to the wooden framework

Previous page, left: On entering the house, the corridor is encountered first. Previously in shambles, the lean-to roof had to be almost completely restructured. **Right:** A peep into the second bedroom along the corridor. **Opposite page, left top:** The front room. The roof structure is the dominating element in the design, with the *haandi* lamps, wooden skirting and cane chicks giving the place a warm feel. **Left bottom:** The verandah runs through the house, interconnecting all the rooms. The designers had to replace the original windows which were in a very bad state with metal sliding windows. **Right top:** A contemporary touch. The wooden column central to the partition wall was pre-existing. The designers used frosted glass to bring a sense of lightness to the wall, while maintaining a sense of connectivity between the two rooms. **Right bottom:** The proposed bedroom. The highlight of the room is the rose window, a discovery the architects made while they were fixing the roof. **This page:** One of the bathrooms. Simple and graphic in nature with the use of black and white tiles and stainless steel fixtures.



and polished, the plywood blocking the arch of the bedroom windows was replaced with glass and sliding windows replaced the concrete *jaali* in the passageway. Touches of the modern made their presence felt - a partition wall uses frosted strips of glass and wood - a contemporary look that surprisingly works and complements the warm feel imparted by the use of wood and incandescent lights. Brass tower bolts and latches, reminiscent of colonial yore, add the finishing touches.

The original mosaic flooring was replaced with vitrified tiles - "we had suggested Jaisalmer stone or in-situ IPS, but our client thought that tiles would be more appealing to a prospective buyer or tenant," says Kunal. The client lives down the road from this building, and had little interest in putting the property to use till recently. He essentially wanted a flexible space - a space that could serve either as his office or a flat where he could rent out individual rooms to different tenants. This factor came into play while redesigning the bathrooms and kitchen.

In fact, the idea of selling it is also under consideration, keeping in mind the prime location of the building. So the house is up for grabs. But till he figures out what to do with the space, he has given the flat to his driver!