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Cover Story:

A sleek Mumbai apartment by Rajiv Saini

Featuring:

**KNS Architects
Jitesh and Jayesh Makwana
Mindspace Architects
Neelu Boparai**



The House The Whale Merchant Built

TEXT : AMITA SARWAL

PHOTOGRAPHS: MARTIJN HEIL, COURTESY BOPARAI ASSOCIATES

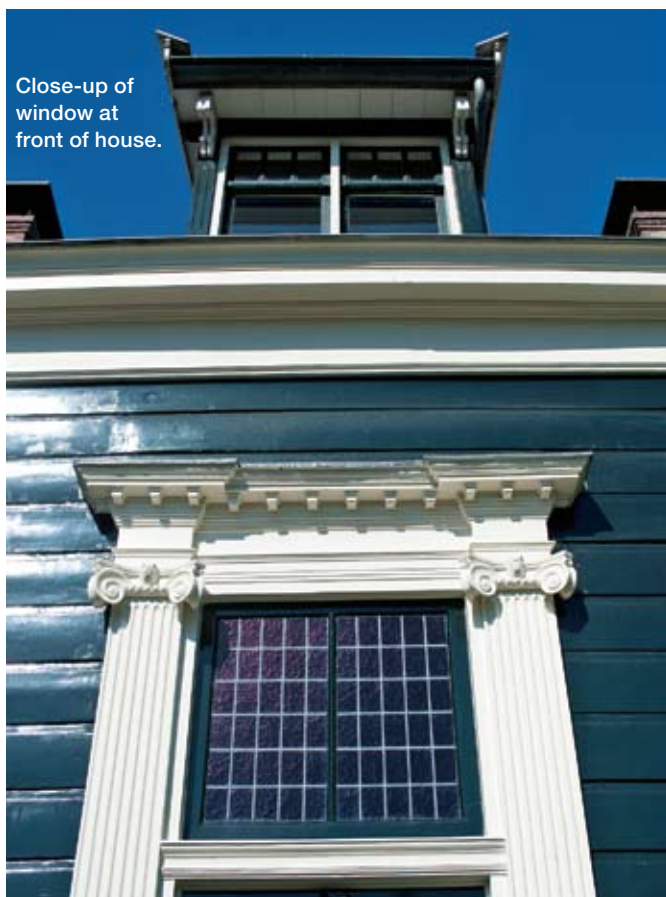




Close-up of wooden relief work above main door.



Door handle and letter box.



Close-up of window at front of house.



Original door knob.

‘We bought this beaten up, 1763 monument because we loved it and needed a space to live and work in. Integrating our office in a new contemporary extension to the main home reflects who we are as architects. It also makes it possible for me to be a full-time mom, while concentrating on a serious career in architecture,’ introduces 43-year-old Neelu Boparai about her home in Oostzaan, Holland.



Facade of office unit.



Gurdev Boparai with daughter Neelu.

Oostzaan (population 9154), is a 16.08 sq km township in North Holland. Googling this unheard-of-till-now town, the 'official' images on an Oostzaan, Out of the Ordinary website include this 250-year-old national conservation home alongside other symbolic photographs, thereby ascertaining its status there.

Neelu Boprai, a Dutch national of Indian origin, was born in Amsterdam. Her father Gurdev Boparai, after graduating from the School of Planning and Architecture in Delhi, in 1967, decided to expand his horizons by hitchhiking to Europe. The decision to settle in Amsterdam in 1969 was based on the comfort level of this warm cosmopolitan city with a human scale. The turban-wearing Sikh youngster's exotic appearance drew a lot of attention but the Dutch people accepted him without negative prejudices or prejudgments.

Boparai spent 17 years working and learning from various local architectural practices. The decision to set up Boparai Associates came along with a large hotel project, and in 1986 the company got off to a flying start.

'As children in this environment, we became aware of the dynamics of architecture. My father wanted a small firm, with not more than 15 employees, so he could maintain a close, personal touch with the clients. Travelling on holidays we were always dragged along to see beautiful buildings and got introduced to Frank Lloyd Wright, Mies Van Der Rohe, Le Corbusier and contemporary architects like Norman Foster, Jean Nouvel, and Calatrava. Those trips inspired and convinced me to become an architect. After school I enrolled at the Technical University of Delft, Netherlands, and graduated from there in 1995 with a masters degree. In 2011, I took over Boparai Associates.



Living room showing part of the original painted ceiling and an Indonesian wood carving on the wall.



'By then, however, we had discovered the original paintings on the ceiling. They had been hidden and lay forgotten behind the false ceiling! When the monument officials saw them, they got very excited and encouraged us to continue working, permit or no, so the entire original state of the house was visible.'



OUR HOME

Choosing Oostzaan and this building for our home was a totally pragmatic decision. It was close to Amsterdam, where I was working at my father's office and what was equally important, it had a lot of space for expansion.

The original structure was in a deplorable state with no insulation and no facilities. We basically started from scratch by stripping the entire house to its bare essence to make it inhabitable. While stripping, the monuments department came for an inspection and as we didn't have a permit to start the renovations as yet, they stopped us. Renovations and refurbishments are closely surveyed by government officials specialising in preserving the Dutch building heritage. By then, however, we had discovered the original paintings on the ceiling. They had been hidden – and lay forgotten – behind the false ceiling! When the monument officials saw them, they got very excited and encouraged us to continue



Lord Ganesha in wood from India.



'The prominent fireplace in the library is an original ornament. We retained the original elements of the house as much as possible.'



The entrance lobby where they added Portuguese tiles.

working, permit or no, so the entire original state of the house was visible.

'The discovery of the ceiling paintings hit the Dutch newspapers! They feature images of sea gods – Neptune, Mercury and Lady Fortuna as the house was originally built by a merchant of whale products. I suppose Lady Fortuna is the Dutch counterpart of the Indian goddess Lakshmi – vastly different cultures with similar goddesses and similar aspirations! Upon sighting the paintings, we decided that they deserved a main feature role in our interior. One painting is now in the library and the other forms part of our living space.


'The monument department approved our determination to restore the original setup of the house including a middle corridor connecting two rooms on either side. Upon acquiring the property we counted almost 15 rooms. All tiny and inefficient. We actually opened the floor plan up and created spaces which show the



The living room extends into the dining area, which is demarcated from the open kitchen by a counter.



A part of the attic floor was removed so they could add more height and light into the house through a long skylight.



The master bedroom retains the original wooden beams.

qualities of the structure. So less rooms but more quality. In the current dining area, we removed a part of the attic floor above so we could bring more height and light into the house through a long skylight right above the dining table. The changing light throughout the day gives a continuously different atmosphere to this area. In the attic itself we created three bedrooms and the bathroom was made by adding a dormer window, carefully designed to suit the old structure.

'Yes, this is my favourite renovation to date, because I live in it and because it gives me such joy every time I see what we have achieved and what we have managed to restore including all the original ornaments of value. These have been given a feature role in our interior as has the structure and original setup of the house. The prominent fireplace in the library is an original ornament, as are the wooden beams in the attic, the entrance door and stained glass windows. We retained the original as much as possible. Missing doors were replaced by appropriate old doors from an antique store. Added items which we collected on our various travels around the world harmonise with our interior – such as two Ganesh effigies and two wooden panels from Indonesia.

'Renovation and restoration have always been an important part of our practice. My father did his first independent renovation project in 1986. It was a large complex of listed monuments containing a church, a printing business, a pastor's house, shops and other functions. We kids watched with bated breath as new foundations and even new basements were made under

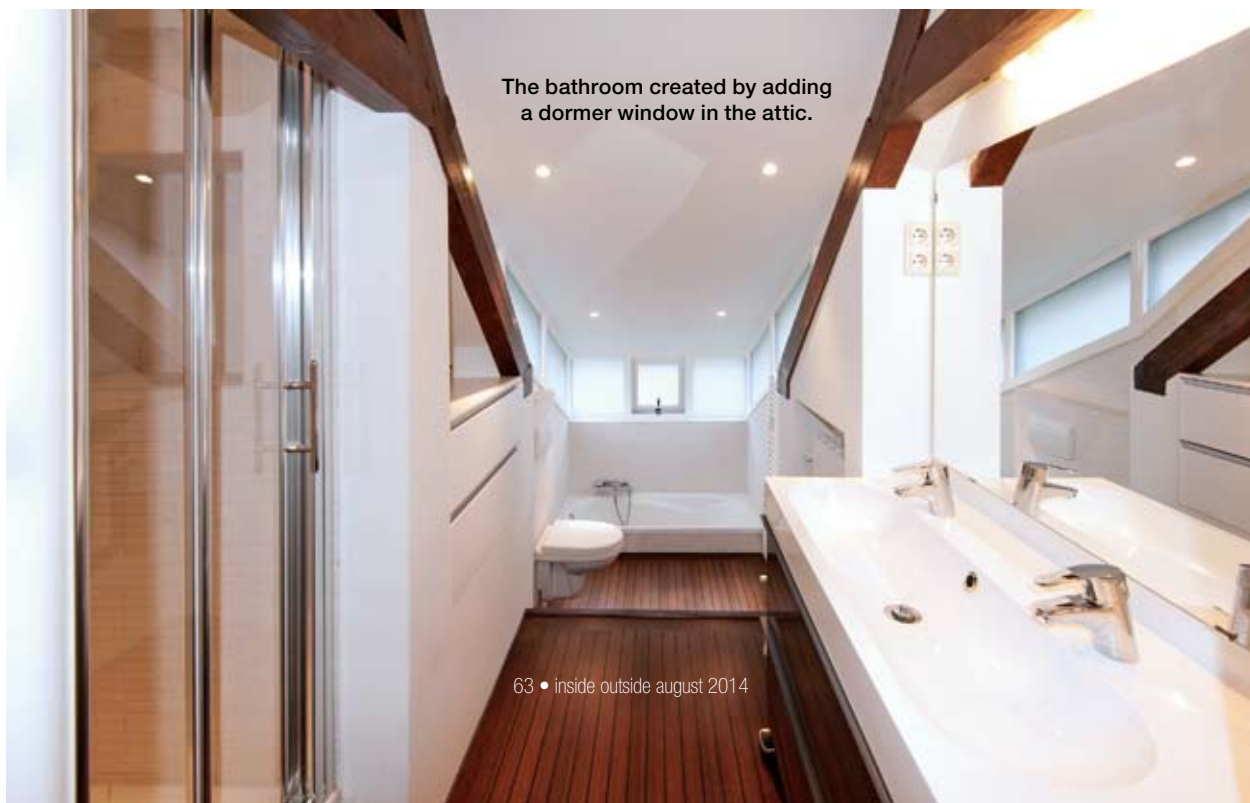
the existing buildings. So when I started renovating the house I knew what I was up against and what was possible.

The renovations haven't finished yet! They are an ongoing process since we moved into the house in 2005. The ceiling paintings still have to be cleaned and restored by removing the varnish layer which has discoloured and darkened them. There is a basement with old tiled walls where we haven't even started. So although I'm happy with what's been done up to now, I'm not yet satisfied. Perhaps that is part of an architect's mental makeup. It can always be better!

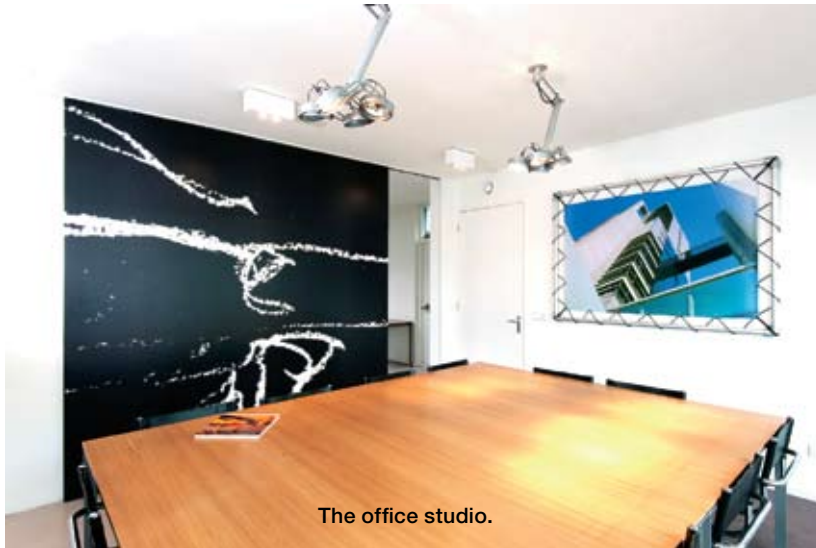
They created three bedrooms in the attic itself, while the bathroom was made by adding a dormer window, carefully designed to suit the old structure.



Four-year-old son's bed tucked cosily under the attic roof.



The bathroom created by adding a dormer window in the attic.



The office studio.

'I like to be practical. I think the greatest challenge is to make a design look as transparent as possible.'



Reception area in the office studio.



INDIAN ROOTS – CITY OF THE SUN

‘My Indian roots have enabled me to introduce a kind of exoticness in our projects in the Netherlands. One of our major housing projects is in the award-winning City of the Sun; it is part of the largest urban residential, low/zero energy and carbon neutral development in the world due to the use of active and passive solar energy. We used Indian weaving patterns, sari borders, etc, as inspiration to integrate in our design of the brick facades.

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listening to the client's wishes and desires and a full understanding of the underlying problems in the project and it takes teamwork alongside the client to achieve the ultimate goal. We like to creep under the skin of the final user of each building.


'We've done this for a number of hotel projects like Sofitel Legend The Grand Amsterdam, Novotel City Amsterdam among others which had logistical problems and needed to be reorganised, renovated and revamped.

'I visit India every year and I see the frenetic construction activity in Gurgaon, Noida and Delhi itself. There are many excellent buildings – and some horrors! But that is in the nature of things. I recently designed a beachside holiday home in Kerala, where I incorporated the best of both worlds – local tradition and Dutch rationality. I would love to work in India. Maybe a project in which I can apply my knowledge of sustainable architecture, good detailing, budget consciousness and pre-fabrication – all the things that I am confronted with every day here in Holland and which I could amalgamate with local Indian tradition.

AN AVERAGE DAY

'Every working day begins after sending husband and kids off to work and school. At the office my colleagues and I discuss daily priorities over a cup of coffee and then we get on with it.

'Often a day is filled with meetings and other days are freed up for design work. I like to design early morning at around 5 am

so I can focus on each individual project. This is the most tranquil part of the day for me. A working day runs from 8 am until around 6 pm. Sometimes later if a deadline demands so. At the end of the day the family has dinner together, and if the weather permits, my husband and I go for a bike ride. Out in the open fresh air really clears one's head and relaxes you. Good for body and mind!' 



'My Indian roots have enabled me to introduce a kind of exoticness in our projects in the Netherlands. We used Indian weaving patterns, sari borders, etc, as inspiration to integrate in our design of the brick facades.'