

# ARCHITECT and INTERIORS INDIA

Ideas, inspiration and insight for architects and interior designers

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## ACES OF SPACE 2011

The jury speaks

**XAVIER WRONA**  
Frugal architect

**CURTAIN RAISER**  
Acetech 2011

**LIGHTING**  
The latest trends

**TERRIFIC 25**  
Centuryply workshop



**design**  
*to sustain*

INDIA'S GREEN EXPERTS SPEAK: KARAN GROVER, SHIRISH BERI,  
VARUN KOHLI, HAFEEZ CONTRACTOR AND RAVI SARANGAN



# FRAGILE AND FRUGAL

AFFORDABLE ARCHITECTURE IS A DREAM FOR XAVIER WRONA — ONE THAT HE BELIEVES IS ALMOST A REALITY. MARIA LOUIS HAS A TÊTE-À-TÊTE WITH THE IDEALISTIC ARCHITECT IN AHMEDABAD

The intellectual-looking Xavier Wrona does not seem at all incongruous in the informal environs of the CEPT University in Ahmedabad, where the director of the Alliance Francaise introduces us to each other during the Architecture Rendezvous. He is in deep conversation with a couple of students participating in his unusual workshop on 'wearable architecture', but like a true gentleman he acknowledges my presence with a smile that lights up his delicate features. Jokingly, he draws atten-

## FOR ME, ARCHITECTURE IS BOUND TO FAILURE

tion to the dog who regularly visits the classroom that is his base for the next few days. "He comes here only to pee," he chuckles, "not to attend the workshop."

Refreshing, and very unlike the arrogant Frenchmen one usually encounters. But then, Wrona is also very unlike any architect one usually encounters. Candid about his vulnerability, he admits plainly that he became an architect because he was "a bit too fragile to be an artist." Born in 1976, he graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Paris-La Villette and the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, USA; and created his firm Est-ce Ainsi in 2006.

Designing a luxury boutique with other architects (lots of money and very little space) convinced Wrona that he was not suited to this line of work. "My dream, which is nearly a reality, is to design architecture for everybody; including people who know nothing about it and cannot

afford an architect," he discloses. Small projects with small budgets mean living frugally and working long hours, but that's the way he likes it. "Is it possible that architecture is a luxury? It seems to me that we should be able to design buildings with next to nothing," he muses.

The sensitive architect pursues his work solo, almost like an ascetic. "I've always felt that I was involved in a very personal dialogue with architecture. Today, I think it would be impossible for me to work with another person," he maintains, adding that it isn't something he's proud of.

Made-to-measure and super-minimalist housing are Wrona's favourite domains at present. He defines his firm's approach as "a small attempt at doing things differently and finding solutions for a number of questions that have been neglected by contemporary architecture." The architectural firm's purpose and working style are paramount in a conceptual process enriched by writing and literature: "For each project, I try to find a book that I can refer to."

He is also interested in art history, which Alain and Josette Silly introduced him to. The two lecturers have had a major influence on Wrona, and their house in Coupigny has become an important reference tool for his students at the Georgia Institute of Technology. For eight years, teaching has played an important role in his architectural work. "It's impossible to separate the two; there is no distinction between my professional and my private life," declares the architect.

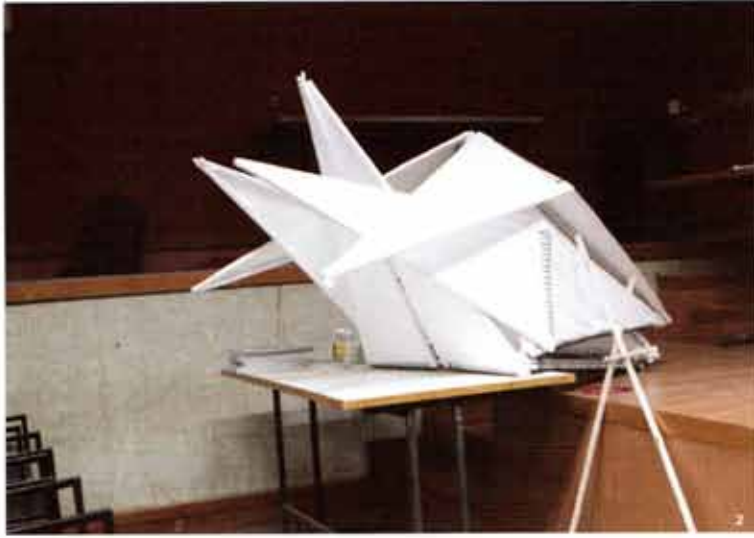
For Wrona, being an architect needs dedication "to be able to devote your life to understanding the world we live in." Not surprisingly, he thinks he is lucky to have such a magnificent job!

## What inspired you to study architecture and make a career for yourself as an architect?

I studied architecture after training in art in high school. I felt a little too "fragile" to take up the arts. I knew from artists that







Loneliness in front of one's art practice was extremely difficult to sustain. Architecture seemed less difficult. I chose an architecture school which had a strong consideration for art. This has now become a very rare kind of school in France, unfortunately.

**Who were the people and places that influenced your decision?**

A couple of art teachers from high school – Mr and Mrs Silly (this isn't a joke). They were able to teach me the depth and beauty of art history. I built the first building of my practice for them.

**Name some of the design icons that have inspired you.**

Most of the "icons" belong to art history books and the historians that have interpreted them. I'm very concerned with the unbridgeable gap of richness there is between a painting from Fra Angelico and Le Corbusier's entire work. There is so much more to be taken from paintings of such artists than from the most important architects, however brilliant. Art history of the 20thC is a constant reference. Dada, the Nouveaux Realistes, Arte Povera, Fluxus, CoBrA; and artists, thinkers, poets, filmmakers such as Marcel Duchamp, Joseph Beuys, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Georges Bataille, Georges Didi Huberman are the works from which what I'm trying to do rises.

There are architects too – Borromini, Hejduk, Koolhaas – but I look at them

through the lens of the figures I have mentioned previously. Not directly. I believe that architecture needs to really be fed from everything else rather than architecture, and that the works of the greatest architects emerged from a direct dialogue with "the world" rather than "the history of architecture". For me, architecture is bound to failure. It's an impossible task. And where artists can succeed, the most wonderful buildings are (despite all efforts and intelligence) failures.

**Could you look back and recall in brief your journey?**

The journey was long – four schools in three different countries (France, Italy and the USA); four years spent on the architecture thesis; a lot of doubts about dropping architecture for art school or maybe a philosophy major. And the encounter of magnificent teachers that helped imagine that other kinds of practices could be imagined. After a deep love of art history, I really was blown away by the history of architecture. But the reality of architecture firms that constitute our reality were never a source of fascination, despite maybe the mirrored work of OMA/AMO – the last major architecture practice that considers writing to be part of the work of architects?

**What were the landmark events for you? How did they help your growth?**

Landmarks were teachers, definitely, as well as continuous and intense work. It has been little stones after little stones – but for this recent prize from the Ministry of Culture that has been a major help (AJAP). The 'growth' was simply education. Lots of mistakes, stress and discussion with teachers, backed up with a lot of reading. Being exposed to very different ways of teaching around the globe has most certainly been extremely helpful. But I'd say that the main help of landmark teachers is their ability to be non-complacent as well as very good at encouraging one's personal, intimate intuition about what ought to be done in architecture.

**Which was the first project you handled independently? What did you learn from it?**

The first built project was for this couple of art teachers. It was a bathroom on four pilotis. It has been the worst nightmare ever, as well as the most intense source of joy. The construction site has been extremely long and horribly painful – but the process of discovering the 'ballet' of the real that each new building implies, was earth-shattering. I have encountered so many problems during this construction that my employer told me I could launch my own practice, since I had seen the worst of what could happen on a construction site.

1. French architect Xavier Wrona.

2&4. The 'wearable architecture' being presented at the end of the workshop.

3. Wrona with the participants from CEPT University.





5. Student Allyson Chase's clothing architecture (2009) denounces the modern enslavement of women in the world of underground fashion. It is a set of sewing patterns that are constrained by the movements of the woman who wears it.

6. Interior of the Studiolo designed by Wrona.



**Which projects did you find the most challenging? How did you overcome the challenges?**

The main reason why we do architecture is to face challenges. We have never done a project that did not carry a lot of risks. We seriously cannot work without a challenge. And I might say that the challenge has most of the times been to reveal that there was a possible real challenge in projects that seemed banal or unexciting. It is by looking at a kitchen or a bathroom as something that had to be in competition with Bramante's *Tempietto* or a very light Duchamp artwork such as 'three standard stoppage' that the most so-called 'uninteresting' project could become a lever to dialogue with problems of our contemporary world. How did we overcome those challenges? By a tremendous amount of work, a lot of stress and a very economic lifestyle. Spending this much energy, time and effort on projects that had such limited budget has implied from day one a sort of monk-like lifestyle, both in terms of dedication and income.

**Do you play the role of mentor to young student architects and designers? In what way?**

Very limitedly, because I am not an important architect. But through teaching, there has been the creation of a very strong bond with students with which the exchange continues, and for which I know that my teaching has been important. This mainly has happened because every time I have had the opportunity to teach, I have really tried to make it an experience as important as the one I have received from my teachers with the angst of not succeeding. I believe students have been marked by a discourse which tries to bluntly look at architecture

as not an important thing in itself – but an incredible means to alter the state of our world with an emphasis on political issues. It helps them relate to a discipline that has not yet touched them sincerely, which is the only thing a teacher should be aiming for. Once a student is concerned, he becomes his own engine and his most severe critic. He is part of the shared debate on architecture.

**Could you describe your dream project?**

My dream project is not a building, but an architecture firm – a place that would be the exact transposition of architecture school within reality; trying to build a working environment that functions as a business, yet still have only profound architectural/philosophical concerns as the only leading criteria for all the projects. And not paying interesting projects with money-maker ones. As of today, the firm is doing this. It is a reality, but we fail in making it a functioning 'business'. The economy of the office is more than fragile. It is a constant source of concern and stress. But we would rather do something else than bend and produce buildings to make money.

**Do you think architecture is a form of art? Mention some landmarks that you consider art.**

That's a tricky one. It could be a form of art. It depends on what we call art. If we follow, as I do, Joseph Beuys, speaking is art. It is a vocal sculpture that is constructed between two individuals. Human beings are of an artistic nature with Beuys. I find that to be most true. Pasolini might also have agreed, in mankind's most humble existence which he found in the Ragazzi – the poor, young Italian suburbanites. The question would be: how is it possible that despite mankind's deep artistic nature, most of our actions are non-artistic?

Why is it that despite the gigantic means deployed in any single building, 99% of the world's architecture is an insult to mankind? They all are, to some degree, like conversations; while most of them are extremely bad

art. To my understanding, revere-able architectures of architects, as you imply, could be found in San Carlino alle Quattro Fontane in Rome, OMA's unbuilt Grande bibliothèque in Paris, the castle and garden of Vaux le Vicomte... I have a long list of them.

**What would you like to be remembered for, by your peers and succeeding generations?**

I would like to be remembered as a practice that showed that architecture can happen with nothing, a lifetime practice can exist with 100% of its projects having tried to change the conditions of our existence. I am not saying we did. I am saying that I would like to.

**Could you recall your experience of working with the CEPT students?**

The few that had the amazing energy to add to their schedule this non-credited workshop have been truly marvellous students – extremely dedicated, very intuitive and with a fantastic ability to creatively bounce off unforeseen problems. I've been sincerely moved by their deep desire to seize the opportunity that was given to them, of using architecture to address crucial, muted contemporary political issues of Indian society. I sincerely hope we'll meet again.

**What will you most remember about your trip to Ahmedabad? Why?**

Most definitely, it is the relationship with nature. I have witnessed a living coexistence of mankind and nature that is absolutely non-existent in what I have seen of the Western world. The presence of animality and its ability to move among humans in the same way that humans evolve among animals is the most beautiful example of reality I have been exposed to. I sincerely hope that such things as tradition, religions or Gandhi's concept of an alternative modernism will prevent India's economic growth from making the presence of animals disappear from everyday (every hour?) life, the way it has done in the West. ■