

A Practice No One Sought

MADe is a small practice based in Hyderabad and Spain that strives to engage in public projects that improve the quality of public spaces. We intentionally refrain from seeking private patronage to avoid creating exclusive projects for a select few.

Founded in 2007, we began seeking public projects through competitions. We won an open competition to reconstruct the Tuljapur temple complex in Maharashtra, commissioned by the district collector and the temple trust to relieve congestion during Navratri and accommodate more visitors. The project underwent a rigorous development phase following extensive engagement with all stakeholders. Unfortunately, the scheme was shelved owing to local politics — the collector was transferred, and all work abruptly stopped.

In the aftermath of India's economic liberalisation, a notable shift occurred, marking a departure from the post-independence era, when the government actively supported public projects and encouraged architects to shape urban landscapes. Architecture and urban design are now driven primarily by private developers, and the role of architects in city-making has drastically diminished. Recognising this shift, we explored collaborating with a private company on a school project.

We worked with a mining company in Jharkhand to construct a community centre and school in the mining town of Barbil. We identified an optimal location for the school, and the company leased the land for the project. Regrettably, the project was shelved because the clients were interested only in fulfilling their legal obligation to undertake CSR initiatives. A subsequent ban on mining activities led to the project's complete abandonment.

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence in the Indian state commissioning projects for architects, driven by the goal of rebuilding a national identity. However, the prevailing process lacks inclusivity and democracy and places insufficient emphasis on design quality. It is especially hard — in fact, impossible — for smaller practices like ours to apply fairly for and engage in large government projects and tenders.

We have therefore sought opportunities abroad, particularly in places with structured systems for open competitions. Participating in competitions

not only provides fair opportunities but also helps shape the working methodologies, approaches and ideas of many practices. Drawing on our past experience of collaborating with practices in Spain, these endeavours further reinforced our belief in the significance of public architecture.

Recognising the lack of avenues and platforms at home, we began seeking opportunities through international open competitions. The first was in Porto — a brief inviting entrants to propose a programme and use for an abandoned mill. We responded with the Walled Oasis and emerged victorious. This gave us the confidence and encouragement to keep going.

After a few more competitions, we were recognised as finalists in a prestigious competition to design an extension to the WHO headquarters in Geneva. Since then, public competitions have shaped our corpus of ideas and the issues that interest us. MADe has become a distinct collective practice that uses competitions to secure work. With a presence in India and Spain and collaborators from around the world, we prioritise collaborative working over individual authorship. Each competition offers an opportunity to reflect on and rethink the practice's intentions.

In 2014, we participated in the competition for the Bamiyan Cultural Centre in Afghanistan, in which UNESCO, together with the Government of Afghanistan, was to select a project through an open international call. Our response was to make the landscape the protagonist, with three meditative cubes.

We finally won an international competition in 2016 to develop an art platform in Suncheon, South Korea. It was an open call by the city of Suncheon, in collaboration with the International Union of Architects, inviting proposals for a cultural centre as part of a vision to rejuvenate the old city. The brief included a small museum, an event space and educational facilities. Ours was the winning entry among some three hundred, many from prestigious architects.

Following the result, the mayor invited us to deliver a public lecture, demonstrating unwavering support for the project. The jury had urged the mayor to ensure that we could proceed with the project without altering the proposal. True to this commitment,

the mayor provided full cooperation and assured his successor of continued support. He also ensured that some jury members served on the technical committee, thereby maintaining the integrity of the original intentions throughout the assessment process.

The competition's highest-ranking Korean architect was appointed as the local architect. We could not have asked for more: he had prior experience working with Álvaro Siza on his Korean projects and brought invaluable expertise. As design architects, we authored all construction documentation in English; the local architect adeptly translated and adapted it into Korean construction specifications. He consistently emphasised that the intentions behind our design decisions were to be preserved and that his role was to realise our vision. It is collaborations such as these that define MADe's working ethos and identity.

The Suncheon Art Platform opened its doors to the public in 2021 and received accolades for excellence. In 2022, it was honoured with the Korea Space Culture Award, recognising it as the finest public space — an achievement that underscored the success of our collaborative efforts and the project's positive impact on the community.

These, in the end, are all places around the world that have sought projects through open competitions. It is a culture largely missing in India — one that upholds design quality and merit and truly strives to improve our built environment. In our view, introducing such processes could significantly help make the profession relevant again.

MADe (studiomade.org)
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