

The Business of Architecture

Architecture has a lengthy curing process. One has to mix in and mature in the cask of practice before its taste can be savoured. Experimentation is the key in this profession and one learns it with every step. Ar. Robin Chhabra exclaims, “At the age of 33, I am very far from learning the true depths of the aged barrel of architecture, ever eager to be of the perfect taste just like a smooth golden whisky”. He shares the story of his journey of foraying into being a businessman.

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Architecture came by luck into my life. I was quite clueless when I went to the University of Michigan as an undeclared major. I wanted to major in math and economics but that did not quite work out. I started to take a couple of architecture classes as it was something that always fascinated me. The joy I found in 8am studios was not as apparent in any of my other classes. As all architecture colleges go, this one was no different. The crazy studio hours, going from design to structure to classes on professional practice was rigorous and fulfilling. It was a rush and we graduated thinking we could rule the world, but we were wrong. My first job out of college was as a junior designer in a boutique architecture firm in Singapore. Here I had to relearn architecture all over again and that was exhilarating as I made many mistakes and learnt from them too. I got an opportunity to work on competitions, hotel design, retail design and even a theatre set design for a Chinese play. The city was amazing, the work was difficult and everything was a steep learning curve which gave me a sense of true confidence. It is strange how the mind works, things unlock and secrets unfold at their own pace. Practicing architecture in reality, dealing with clients, selling your ideas is a must for all students and you should do it while studying. It gets you ahead in the game.

Post Singapore I returned to get a Masters in Architecture, which I think in my case may have been a wasted effort if done directly after an undergraduate. When you know what you want out of life, life is a lot easier. I returned to India to work in a great design architecture practice, Serie Architects. Here the formal and typological exploration of design was a different way of architecture and the team worked hard and together to achieve a great level of excellence.

Throughout all my experiences, I always felt that the business of architecture was something I wanted to understand better. As architects you are consistently trying to convince the business side of your design decisions and quite often a compromise is required to reach a conclusion. If architects could understand this and vice versa then perhaps that would lead to a different kind of creative energy. Dextrus was born out of that. Coworking spaces are a great example of where business meets design and hence that pursuit seemed like a natural transition. I had a personal desire to learn all parts of a business; HR, operations, accounting, marketing and sales. These business considerations put pressure on the design of the space but it was exactly in that jostle where good design lies. Evaluating the opportunity cost of each design element helped us gauge what was truly important and what was not. I think all architects should own and operate more and more businesses in the space of realty.

When making a good single malt, the design of malt ferment matters but so does type of cask you use for it to mature in. The two work together to give that great final taste. 🍷 ▲



Ar. Robin Chhabra, CEO, Dextrus

Robin Chhabra is the CEO & Founder of Dextrus, a coworking space. Dextrus was setup in 2018 as a coworking space in the growing commercial center of BKC, Mumbai. A variety of companies call Dextrus home and they range from large tech companies to hedge funds. Robin has previously worked as a Senior Architect for Serie Architects, Mumbai. His role dealt with all aspects of running the project from design to execution. Prior to this, Robin has worked in Singapore with a boutique architecture firm, Kay Ngee Tan Architects, where he worked on projects of different scales from theatre set design to heritage hotels. He has done his schooling from Winchester College, UK and has a B.Sc. in Architecture as well as a Master of Architecture from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.