Rahul Mehrotra

Rahul Mehrotra (born New Delhi, India, 1959) graduated from the School of Architecture, Ahmedabad in 1985 and as Master of Architecture in Urban Design from Harvard University in 1987. From 1987 to 1988 he worked for Stubb & Lee in Boston, then in Bombay for Charles Correa from 1988 until 1990. In 1990 he established the office of Rahul Mehrotra Associates in Bombay. Since 1994, he has been Executive Director of the Urban Design Research Institute, Bombay and in 1995 he founded the conservation practice, The Bombay Collaborative. He has taught at the National University of Singapore (1998) and University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2000, 2004) where he is an Associate Professor. The firm’s work has been exhibited in Ankara, Berlin, London, Paris, Shanghai, Tokyo and Vancouver. Important completed works include the Shanti House, Alibag, India (1997); Film Maker’s House, Alibag, India (2001); the Laxmi Machine Works, Coimbatore, India (1998); Cantonment Bungalow, Ahmedabad, India (2002); Chowmahalla Palace restoration, Hyderabad (2002-); and the Orchard House, Ahmedabad, India (2003). Mehrotra’s work has been published in numerous journals including A+U (Japan), Architectural Design (UK), Architectural Review (UK), Asian Architecture (Singapore), Indian Architect & Builder (India) and Monument (Australia). Mehrotra was a contributor to World Architecture 1900-2000, vol.8 (2000), and author (with Sharada Dwivedi) of Bombay – The Cities Within (1995).

Essay and project descriptions by Philip Goad
In Rahul Mehrotra’s architecture, the lessons gained from history and local material practice are invariably brought into elegant counterpoint with progressive technologies. Yet these architectural gestures are quiet and non-demonstrative. They highlight such fundamental elements as a wall, a window, steps and the frame. The Shanti Weekend House at Alibag (1997), across the water south of Bombay, employs local load-bearing masonry techniques combined with a technically sophisticated steel-framed skillion roof. Also at Alibag, the Film Maker’s House (2001) has similarly heavy massed walls faced in local stone, which shelter dark mysterious interiors with deep reveals to small window openings. The dark coolness of the interior contrasts strongly with the external fly-away roofs propped off spindly steel columns. Heavy and light, dark and light become simple but effective design themes that resonate with the sparseness of the surrounding landscape. The Orchard House (2003) at Ahmedabad is a starkly beautiful house, which does not deliberately echo the sculptural exuberance of Le Corbusier’s renowned work in Ahmedabad, such as the Sarabhai House (1955) or the Shodhan House (1956). Mehrotra appears to draw more lessons from the muted subtle massing and saturated colours of Mexican master, Luis Barragan. In this spacious courtyard house, water becomes the contrasting element of lightness and coolness against the massive surrounding walls that bake and radiate colour in the blazing heat of Ahmedabad.

Mehrotra’s architecture in these detached residential projects reveals his fondness for aesthetic restraint in design. Yet he is not averse to including such conventional architectural elements as the all-encompassing roofs seen in his factory for STP Construction Additives, Goa (1995) and in the corporate headquarters building for Laxmi Machine Works Group at Coimbatore (1996-98), where huge gabled roofs provide cooling shade and large amounts of covered space without the need for air-conditioning. The symbolic value as well as the practical function of the roof is, for Mehrotra, not an element to be feared or avoided. Too often a roof with a pitch or a hip is disregarded for its obvious semiotic value, as if its use might attract a ‘regionalist’ label of genuflection towards a colonial past, or be seen as weakness on the part of the architect’s aesthetic resolve. The bias towards abstraction holds only limited value for Mehrotra, and he scoffs at such preciousness. This is his strength as an architect. His work demonstrates comfort with working in valid modes, which depend on the specifics of each situation. Rahul Mehrotra cites a straightforward but essential mantra for tropical architecture: “buildings that breathe, that make places in the shade...”