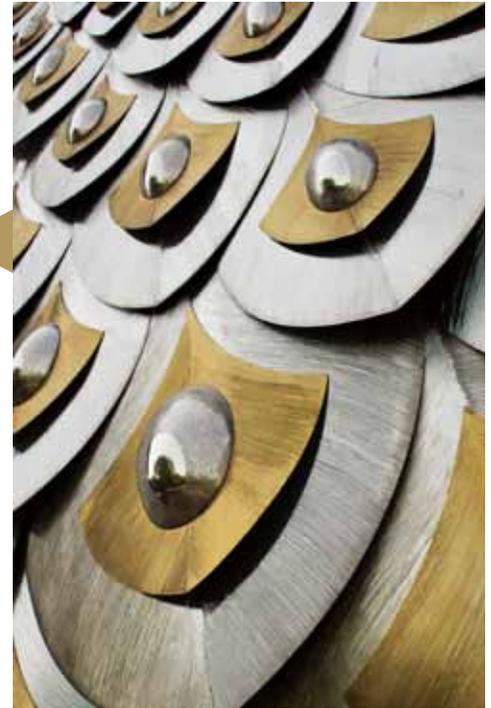




# Blending Old & New



Text: Smitha Sadanandan

**P**reksha Baid, as a designer uses the philosophy of 'Y-walls' that is to look beyond the boundaries to design. Her work reflects an interdisciplinary approach between Art, Architecture and Interior design to define poetics of a space. Graduate from M.A in Textiles Futures, Central Saint Martin's, London, she continues to research on the sensory experience of spaces and human interaction. Y-walls Design is her Delhi based Design practice, established in 2008. In an interview given to Smitha Sadanandan, Preksha Baid elaborates further on her journey so far.

**Did you always picture yourself in the design business?**

I always wanted to be a designer even when I was at school. I imagined myself as a designer. However, getting involved in the design business was an organic process that happened over the past five years. I became an entrepreneur because I wanted creative

environment to work and also for all those who work here at Y-walls Design. My family is into business and adapting to business came quite naturally to me.

### What is your personal background in design?

After doing my bachelors in B.Com(Hons.) from Jesus and Mary College, Delhi, I decided to do a Post-Graduate Diploma in Textile Design at NIFT. The next step was a Masters degree in Textile Futures from Central Saint Martins (CSM) College of Art and Design (University of Arts), London. Y-walls was conceived in London while I was still pursuing my Masters. I studied textiles but was more inspired or rather obsessed with spaces in which textiles are used. It was a step ahead from what I was trained in. My experience there gave me the freedom to think beyond boundaries and evolve a personal approach to design.



Preksha Baid



### How challenging was donning the role of an entrepreneur?

At a start-up level, I faced everything from micro-challenges – buying the right systems for the studio – to macro-challenges – finding the right people to execute my designs and managing finance. I started everything from scratch and, simultaneously, drew up a parallel process of finding ways to move ahead. Setting a



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design team, training them, finding vendors, contractors, craftsmen, technically skilled people and executing projects – it was a continuous struggle for the first two years. My core skills lay in textile, and here I was trying to figure out architectural layouts and doing complex structural drawings. I only had a vision for spaces in my mind. To realise this vision, I had to enable myself; learn a lot of new skills. I had to find people with the right skill-set to execute my vision. Today, the company has grown substantially and we are working on a wide range of space design projects.

### **How would you describe your personal style?**

I love to blend the ‘old’ and ‘new.’ Blurring boundaries to mix ancient Indian craft with modern technologies is central to all my works. The final design solution is always centric to creating designs that are visually beautiful with strong storytelling and craftsmanship. Highly detailed and engineered with lighting is also an important element of the design process.

### **What prompted you to start Y-wall Designs? What is it that you’re aiming to accomplish with Y-wall Designs?**



PB:Y-walls Design was started as a creative studio space to explore my ideas. I started in an empty room with cement flooring and barren walls, though it had a lot of light and air to keep me happy.

As a designer, it is very important to be critical about the kind of future spaces that are being built and what impact it would have on our social fabric. Spatial design is a relatively new field in design. It requires skills to understand the site context, architectural planning, interior detailing, product design and most importantly, the aspect of human connection and interaction with the spaces

Going forward, I want to design and build spaces that have a soul: Functional and well built, beautiful and emotionally rich. To make every day ordinary spaces look extraordinary and more human; this is what I strive to achieve.

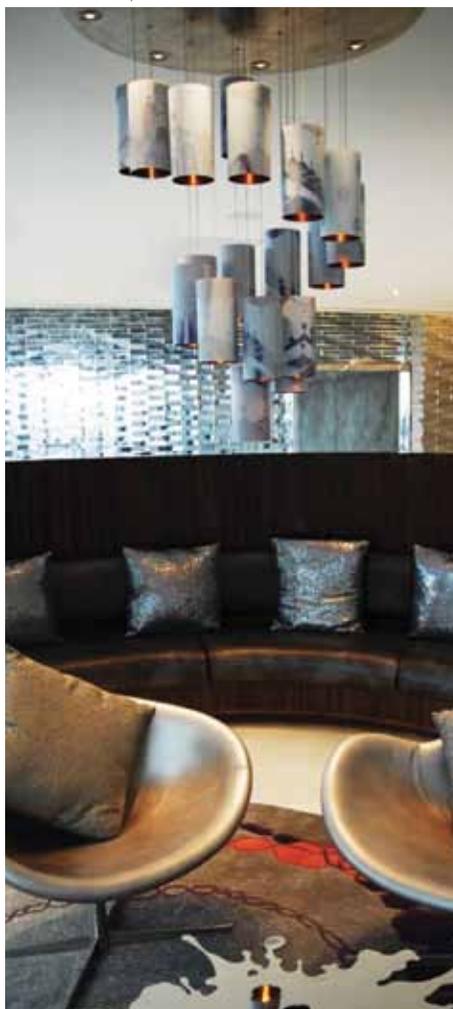
Why can't an office give an experience of being in a beautiful garden like space? Can we change the retail experience for people in malls? How can schools be a modern gurukul? Is there enough thought on using sustainable materials? Are we designing spaces for the needs of disabled? If we don't ask why, there is no way we would search and discover.

### **What sets Y-wall Designs apart from the competition?**

There are for sure some key aspects that set us apart from the rest. Primarily, ours is a multidisciplinary design approach to design visually beautiful and tactile spaces. Besides this is the ability to mix aesthetics of craft and modern technologies, detailed engineering – strong understating of structural design; integrated lighting design; and expertise on material thinking – we've worked with wood, stone, textiles, steel and plastic, among others. At Y-walls Design, there is a continuous research on new materials and its application.

### **Where do you find inspiration for your work?**

I get inspired from experiences in life. Something as mundane as buying veggies and interacting with the vendor gives me an insight into designing better processes at work or research on a new subject. What we design is an extension of ourselves – as a designer and experience in life. Now I work very hard on the conceptual stage to refine the thought process to design better experiences for spaces. Recently, my interaction



## THE RUBY CEILING

Hand-drawn patterns illustrate the different styles of Kalamkari paints in graphics. It took us a year to get the artists to hand-paint more than 500 meters of fabric. There were services running behind the ceiling, so we had to make the fabric ceiling waterproof and pest-proof, and integrate lighting and structure into the tiny space available above the ceiling. We had to be cautious with the scale of the graphics to make sure it was not overpowering in the space. The experience was fantastic and the project, a big success. It was challenging as it meant merging the boundaries of craft, design and architecture for a hotel space. And more so because it was a 'ceiling,' not a wall or a floor. It was during the final installation on site that we realised the craftsmen had forgotten to mirror the design – it's a ceiling and needs to be fabricated upside down. The support structure was already made and there was no option but to redo 500 meters of Kalamkari fabric. A small A4 size of Kalamkari takes a week to make; it is a labour-intensive process. In that moment of crisis, I asked the carpenter in Marwari if he could suggest a solution. That day, I realised that language is powerful – the fact that I spoke in their regional language immediately connected us as a team. He looked at the plans, asked for a pair



of scissors and we started brainstorming. Since the design resembled a puzzle, we deconstructed each element and started designing a new puzzle. Within three hours we had a new design. If you were to look at the original design and the constructed 'Ruby Ceiling,' it would be hard to figure out the changes. That learning was great and I am glad I reached out to someone without any prejudice thinking that only education could offer design solutions. It was simple common sense and lateral thinking as a team that saved us.



with a craftsman about mobile phones and his words "smart phones are smart because we can touch them" inspired me to research on haptic technology (science of touch feedback) and use it to express craft in a space.

I love 'Frida Kahlo's' work. It is visually very powerful; you can see through the pain she went through. I draw inspiration from Japanese design. Designers like Tokujin Yoshioka and Yasuhiro Suzuki inspire me endlessly. Their sense of visual balance and knowledge of material is amazing.

### What has been the most challenging but rewarding project in interior design?

As a project, 'Ruby Ceiling' was very rewarding as the entire process from design to installing was highly engaging. Working with an ancient textile craft and engineering it for a ceiling of a hotel lobby (Park Hotel, Hyderabad) was a good learning. We crafted every inch of the fabric by hand over a period of one year.

The most challenging perhaps was 'The Peacock' installation for the Ministry of External Affairs. It involved a lot of engineering and technical planning. Handcrafting an industrial material like stainless steel was quite challenging. The art installations are heavy and need immense structural detailing to install on sites. Last year, we made a huge three-dimensional peacock installation in stainless steel, a hard, monochromatic and visually cold material. We designed a unique process of handcrafting stainless steel, and a material that is industrial in nature finally looked so crafted and tactile. We now use the same techniques for various projects where we need to handcraft stainless steel for facades and canopies. Some projects are more focused on craft, or graphic exploration, some on material innovation and some on technology.

### How did your collaboration with Priya Paul on the 'Ruby Ceiling' for Park Hotel, Hyderabad, come about?

PB: It was a great experience working with Priya Paul. She brings out the best in people and has a great understanding of craft and design. Having an informed client makes it so much easier for the designer to be free and come up with innovative solutions.

'Ruby Ceiling' is inspired by the hand-painted ceiling at my grandfather's house in Bikaner. The project involved a detailed process of understanding the craft, graphic



development, researching the natural pigments and integrating it with the interior scheme. 'Ruby Ceiling' is a graphical interpretation of Kalamkari, an ancient craft with a history of over 2,000 years; one that very few craftsmen in India still practice.

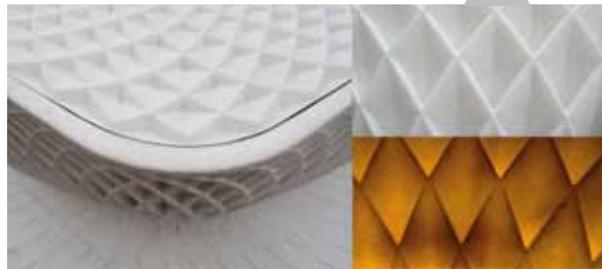
### What's the crux behind your lighting design projects?

Materials and forms appear very different with integrated lighting. It adds subtle visual layers and depth to a space or a product. I play with integrating new materials and lighting to create visual drama and depth.

### What is it about installation projects that excites you?

An installation design project involves a very different process. It allows me to blur the boundaries between art, craft and design more seamlessly. The design ideas can be more abstract; an installation is not confined to always have a functional use. When I design installations, I feel like a craftsman, detailing the piece with love and care.

The jewel peacock is a 3D form with integrated handcrafted stainless units. Since it was for a government



space, I wanted to use an Indian form that everyone could easily identify with. The clients loved it; so did the passers-by as the peacock installation is visible from the road.

### What are the new projects in the pipeline?

Y-walls is currently working on a wide range of interior design and installation projects from hotel interiors, crafted corporate interiors and a funky urban saloon. We are also adding a lot of sub-services such as material consultation and graphic solutions. Since most of my work has a design approach – mixing craft and technology – we have started an internal research lab to research on 'crafting technologies.' This will involve working on traditional and ancient craft of India, while focusing on these new technologies to design visually stunning spaces and products.

