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Wild Prospects

Kunal Maniar shares his approach to designing landscapes that are studied and sensitive, yet gloriously spirited



Step into one of Kunal Maniar’s gardens and you will be transported into a verdant oasis. With just over two decades of experience, the principal architect of landscape firm Kunal Maniar and Associates has garnered a reputation for creating inspirational outdoor spaces with a genuine respect for nature. Sustainability is one part of this; the other is letting nature dictate the design, a combination that has led to all sorts of greenscapes - from private residences and holiday homes to hotels and large landscape projects, that share a symbiotic relationship with their natural surroundings. Here, we hear from Kunal on how he got into the field, his creative approach and the joys that come from it.

What drew you to pursue landscape architecture and how did you build a practice of it?

Growing up with a view of the Hanging Gardens atop Malabar Hill, I realised the importance of integrating nature into our living environments from early on. This led to an interest in placemaking and studying landscape architecture in Melbourne. After returning to India, I immediately launched my independent practice without any prior work experience or apprenticeships. Oddly, there weren’t many landscape firms in the city, so my practice took on a pioneering role. As most landscape projects involve collaboration, I had the opportunity to work alongside celebrated architects like Noshir Talati and Nozer Panthaky, Nozer Wadia

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From top: A beach-front poolscape; A rich layering of the designer’s favorite tropical plants; (OPPOSITE) Kunal Maniar of his namesake practice next to a monolithic concrete bench of his design

and Pinakin Patel, who imparted their knowledge to me during my early years.

How do you create landscapes that are culturally and environmentally sensitive?

Because no two sites are the same, I first study the language of the land: its contours and characteristics like soil, water, climate and orientation, and develop a design that responds to these unique conditions. I have an innate sensitivity to ecology and am partial to indigenous plants and locally-sourced hardscape materials. Our softscapes practise ‘xeriscaping’, which involves planting native species that require minimal water and maintenance. This helps reduce water consumption and supports the local ecosystem. We’re also conscious about using our resources efficiently, like crushing construction debris from sites and using the aggregate as gravel for driveways and courtyards, or recharging groundwater by using methods that encourage rainwater to percolate into the ground.

Do you have any planting rules like playing with certain colour combinations or mixing textures?

Nature follows no rules - so we don’t either! Creating a planting plan is like whipping up a feast. Sometimes, I introduce rich layering like in a biryani, carefully playing with ground cover species, shrubs, ferns and native trees; other times, I use calculated randomness to plant grasses that mimic the sheer chaos of bhelpuri!

What do you hope your gardens offer people?

I hope my landscapes are sanctuaries to escape the burdens of the outside world and heal from everyday stresses. It’s rewarding to hear about the little joys my clients experience nurturing their gardens, from the satisfaction of butterflies starting to visit to when fruits grown onsite ripen and are enjoyed by the whole family.

What are you looking forward to?

I’m currently creating a ‘cactuario’ in Alibaug and going all out with cacti and succulents - a planting typology that’s often underrated. The project is also an ode to the works of the Mexican architect Luis Barragan, whose distinct style I admire and am excited to create my own tropical rendition of! ♦

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