



# Blue, Green and White

In a conversation with IA&B, Bangladesh-based Rafiq Azam talks about his architecture, his painting and his journey through colour, space and light.

*Photograph & Images: courtesy Shatotto; Rafiq Azam*

**Mohammad Rafiq Azam is the Principal Architect of the architecture firm Shatotto, based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is also a teacher, a lecturer and a painter. Azam has accumulated a number of achievements in architecture and painting. He has given lectures worldwide and his work is published and exhibited on national and international platforms. He has been a finalist twice for the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and has been a winner of the World Architecture Community Awards numerous times.**

**IA&B: You are an artist and an architect. Where do you find your roots? How do the two relate to your work?**

**RA:** I wanted to be a painter – just a painter and nothing else. Since the age of seven I immersed myself in watercolour, especially by pouring green and light onto my paintings. Eventually, green, light and water became inseparable in my life.

After my HSC Exams, I had wished to get admitted to the Institute of Fine Art to receive formal training to become a painter. However, my parents' desire to see me as an Engineer eventually landed me in the Department of Architecture, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). Even then, I was happy to realise that Architecture presented me with the scope to continue my painting journey.

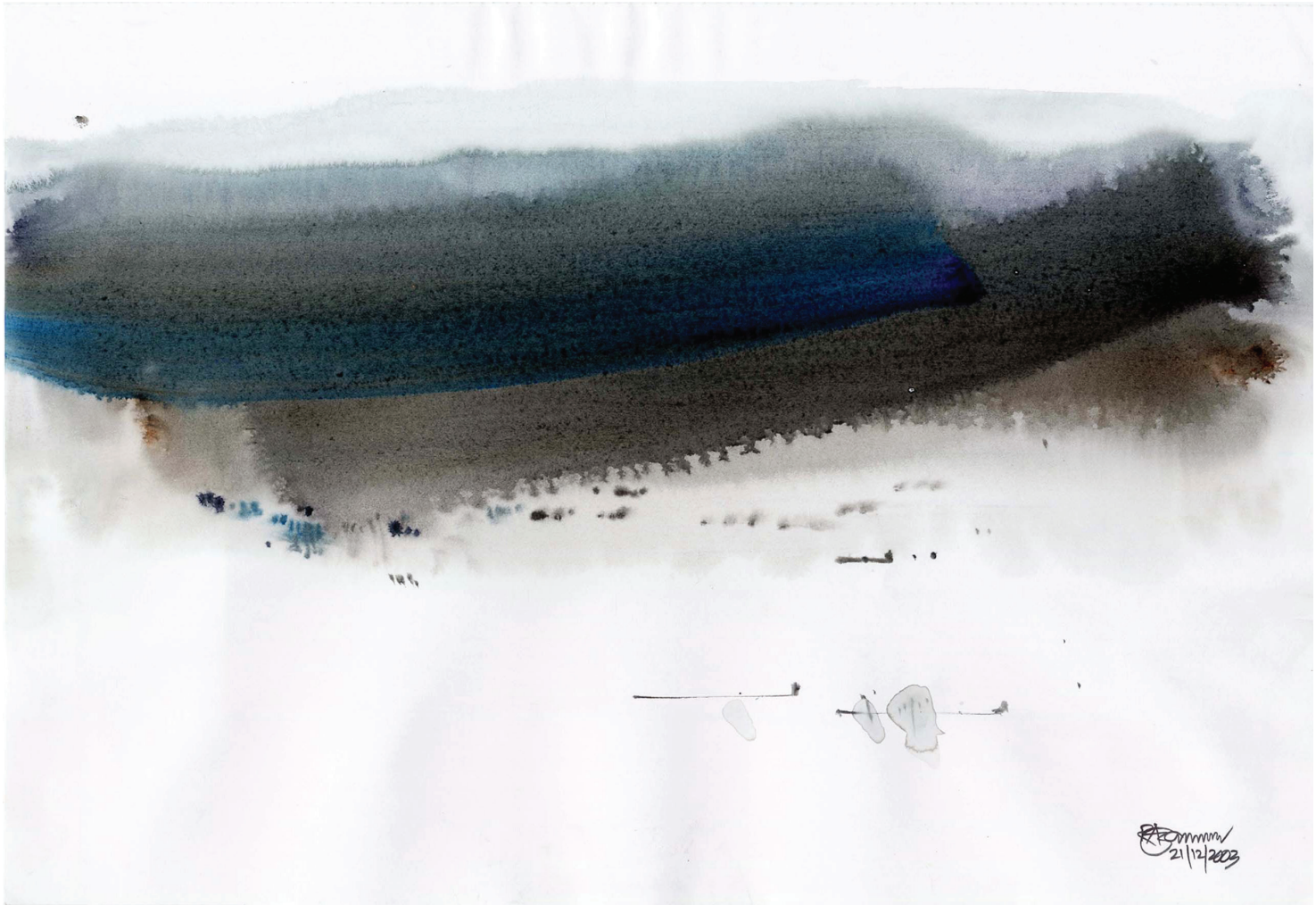
My approach to architecture is similar to my approach to watercolour. Watercolour has the quality of transparency; you put one layer of colour on top of another. You can see the layers; the soft, watery quality is visible through each layer; unlike that of oil painting which is 'heavy'. I try to practice architecture that is as transparent, light and Green as possible.

**IA&B: You have stated that, "Architecture is all about creating a place of desire for hopefulness and memories". Can you say something about this?**

**RA:** After the death of my father in 1984, our 75-year-old house was in need



# let's partner



of renovation. We are nine siblings and we needed more rooms. Moreover, three of my siblings were getting married and we required a home that would accommodate the festivities and the new family members.

I was in my third year of studies at BUET during the time and I went to the same architect my father had consulted years ago, to make the required changes to our home. Our home had a small courtyard and garden which my mother had tended to with utmost care. The new plan for the house left her devastated. She longed for the courtyard and the garden where she had many fond memories, gardening with my father. She said, "I have lost my husband and now this house will make me lose my memories, too."

It was then, for the first time as a student of third-year architecture that I realised that architecture is all about creating a place of desire, for hopefulness and memories. I promised my mother to give back her gardens and court; her cherished memories.

**IA&B: 'Shatotto' means continuity. How does your practice relate to this?**

**RA:** I started my studio in 1995 and was thinking of a name for the studio. Conversations with my wife, Afroza, led to the name 'SHATOTTO architecture for green living'; it was my wife who actually named my studio. We both agreed that creation and innovation are two continuous processes of life, along with life itself. The relation of architecture to the environment is similar;

it is also intertwined and continuous. So when my wife suggested the Bengali name Shatotto from the poem, "Kopotaksho Nod" by Micheal Modhushudhan Dutta, I felt it was a fitting name.

**IA&B: Your watercolour works are enthralling. Can you tell us how, as an architect, you got into painting and literature?**

**RA:** I think it is the other way around – a painter got into architecture. Since my parents, particularly my father, was not happy with my wish to be an artist, I ended up getting admitted to Bangladesh University of Engineering Technology, but at the Department of Architecture. That is why I often say that I am an architect by chance and a painter by conviction.

**IA&B: What can we know as the philosophical core of your work?**

**RA:** Many a times, I say, "If you wish to be an architect, please get out of architecture." I feel that being submerged in Architecture will eventually develop a tunnel view. Architecture needs to be seen from the platform of the 'Arts'. We need to think about the 'Art of Architecture' where poetry, painting, literature, sociology, psychology, semiology, physiology, climatology, ecology and so on, interact, intertwine and intermingle to generate spaces for living.

The yellow harvest field and dense green, the vast sky and moving clouds; the breeze flowing over the water and swampy land; the midday sun stretching its last light to twilight; thousands-of-years-old ruins and





history, coming back as mystery, memory and melody – all these are my source of inspirations.

When the 18<sup>th</sup> Century mystique minstrel of our land Lalok said, “If there is not one thing inside the body then it is not outside the body either,” or Descartes said, “I think therefore I am”; or when I read Rabindranath Tagore, Kazi Nazrul or Jibanananda Das – they all inspire me. When I walk through the architecture of Mazharul Islam, I feel the whispering of the wind. When I see a small hut of a farmer, I sense the humanity; when I hear the music of Ali Akbar Khan, I lose myself into the nothingness; when I see Van Gogh’s ‘Potato Eater’, I feel the pain. When I look at Kahn’s parliament complex, I hear the silence . . .

**IA&B: You have worked on the Bangladesh High Commission in Pakistan. The countries are connected by a great past. Can you elaborate on the experience?**

**RA:** For me, site visit is like a pilgrimage – it is important and it is what tells me how to proceed with a site. ‘Site’ is the story teller. To take part in the competition of ‘Bangladesh Chancellery Building Design Competition’, we were the only team that visited the site. For me it was the amazing Regal Margalla Hills close to the site that helped me understand the scale and proportion of the project. Our team then visited Mohenjo daro in Pakistan and historic sites of Bangladesh. So our response to the project was very critical; where the land belongs to Pakistan and the building belongs to Bangladesh.

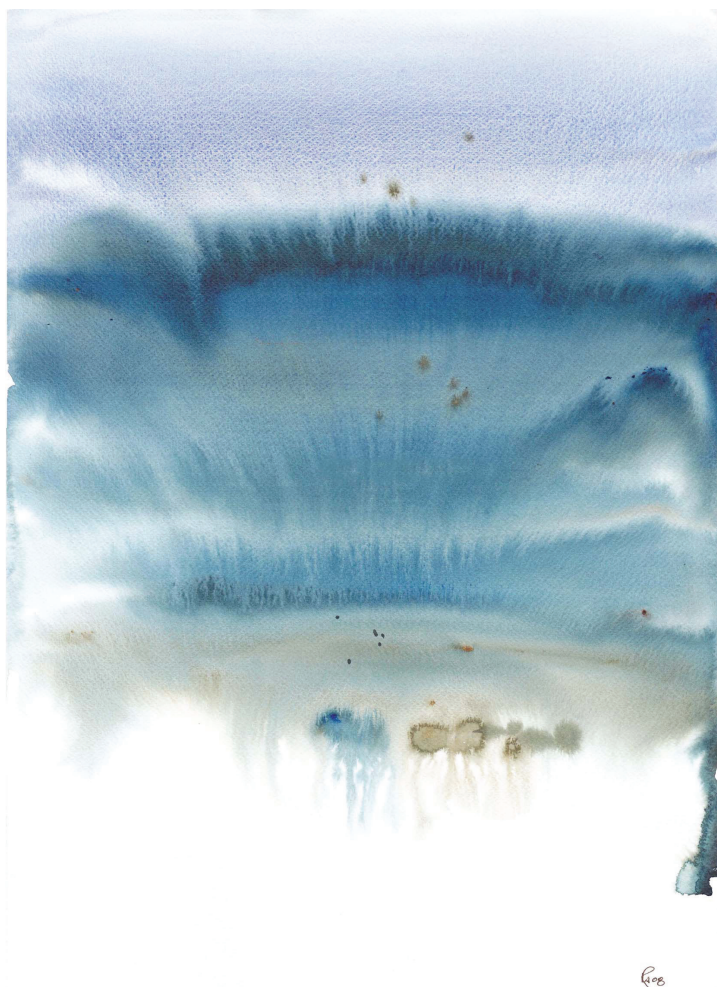
When two countries open their diplomatic missions to one another, it is as though they open their doors to one another. Friendship begins and, as architects, we wanted to enhance the ties for a better future. Here the design concept started with looking for similarities rather than differences. We started looking at the great past of the two countries. We considered the adjacent vertically of Margalla Hills, we considered the flat landscape and the deltaic conditions of Bangladesh. Here we suggested an ‘Archeological Landscape’, rather than a building. On one hand we considered the land a meeting ground of two great civilizations and on the other hand, a flat, humble, beautiful structure showing the advancement of Bangladesh after the Liberation War of 1971.

**IA&B: Tradition or nature; what is closer to your work?**

**RA:** I am from a land of poetry and toil intertwined.

Each year we are faced with natural disasters; cyclones such as Aila, Sidr come and go but we continue to move forward. Through the last thousands of years we have developed not only resilience but also a friendship with nature. Every year we overcome, we adopt, we rebuilt and we dwell poetically. In Bangladesh, water is most precious and abundant, with life subtly woven within it. This is what makes her a country of poetry. Bangladesh is the largest delta on earth with 52 major rivers that carry water from the Himalayas in an intricate pattern to the Bay of Bengal. During Monsoon these rivers inundate





two-thirds of the country's land, making water the major element of the landscape. When the water recedes, it leaves a fine layer of fertile alluvial soil and the entire landscape is transformed into large patches of paddy fields that dance with the winds.

I can never separate tradition and nature. It is not only tradition and nature but culture, history, archaeology, anthropology – all of which is intertwined and intermingled.

**IA&B: Masters & Mentors - as an architect practicing in a developing country, who were and are the people that influenced your work?**

**RA:** Oh, there are quite a few architects whose works inspire me; Geoffrey Bawa and Glenn Murcutt are the most humble, in demeanour as well as in design. I am fascinated by Geoffrey Bawa – other than him, nobody else has put me in awe till now. I met Bawa and saw his works and visited his office – I feel very fortunate. Glenn is my Guru, he taught me how to look at architecture with humanity; how to deal with the land when land is 'Ma'. I learned from Prof. Shamsul Wares, who taught me how to look at architecture not as a building but as a phenomenon. There are other architects that I am inspired by, like Kerry Hill, Peter Strutchbury, Richard Leplastrier, Kashef Mahboob – to name a few. I love all of them actually; they are all unique people and I learn from them.

**IA&B: You have received your architectural education from Bangladesh. You have also lectured at several international platforms. Do you think architectural schools do justice to education?**

**RA:** I can tell you, I learnt architecture from my mother. Of course, school taught proportions, scale, measurements and the other mathematics, but the essence of architecture – that, I learnt from my mother.

I think young architects are hungry – they want to learn. I have visited a few countries and I have taught and lectured at different universities too; I saw young people – particularly in this part of the world – they are eager to learn. Their eyes are always asking questions. Not their mouths, but their eyes are asking questions. But there are very few people to answer these questions.

I feel that we need to learn about our own country, where we are working, our landscape, our people; history, sociology, psychology and typology; how history produced architecture earlier, and the transformations – it's not just copying the old thing into new – we need to learn how to transform things into the contemporary world. And it also connects the whole world. So it is a huge responsibility for the architects now.

Like the Hindu scripture says, only he who is the most knowledgeable person in society, can be the architect. So an architect must be a knowledgeable person. So are we giving them proper knowledge at schools? I think that our part of the world, the subcontinent, has ample opportunity and scope. We have history, we have romance, we have fantastic climate, landscape, people...but I feel that we are not giving them proper education – the answers to their questions. That is why I think we need to reshuffle our curriculum, make it more open – encourage questions and discussions. Like Louis Kahn said, a classroom may be one where, "a man under a tree who did not know he was a teacher discussing his realisation with a few who did not know they were students." ■

*To know more about the work of Shatotto and Rafiq Azam, refer to the story titled 'The Soul of a Space', on page 52.*

*All watercolour paintings are reproductions from Rafiq Azam's original work.*

