

# GRAPHTTT

The Telegraph Magazine 27 August 2006

Interior designer  
Sunita Kohli  
is putting her  
signature on  
India's most  
famous  
addresses

## Designing dreams

Sunita Kohli with son Suryaveer and daughter Kéhelika

**INSIDE**  
**ZUGZWANG**  
CHAPTER 24  
A serial murder mystery  
by Roman Bennett

# Designing dreams



Sunita Kohli started out by making 18th century reproduction furniture. Here she's sitting at her favourite Queen Anne Secretarie

Interior designer Sunita Kohli is putting her signature on India's most famous addresses, says **Samita Bhatia**

Sunita Kohli is on a roll. India's best-known interior designer is just back from Lahore after being invited to check out an ageing *haveli* that overlooks the Lahore Fort and the Badshahi Mosque. Restoring the crumbling facade will be a mammoth task but Sunita's heart has always been in crumbling monuments and she has never been one to shy away from a challenge.

She's also been making flying trips to Sri Lanka where she's putting her stamp on a boutique hotel and adding finishing touches to the home of Mohan Tissanayagam, a connoisseur of contemporary Sri Lankan art and owner of prized Dutch furniture. Tissanayagam is a descendant of the Rajas of Jaffna and his wife is the great-grand niece of Ananda Coomaraswamy, who's considered the father of Indology.

Sunita is no newbie to overseas assignments, having created interiors for hotels in Egypt, India House in Aldwych, London and closer home, a hotel in Kathmandu. "Every new project I undertake only adds to my learning curve," she says of her repertoire.

Back home, Sunita Kohli's fine hand can be seen in the staterooms of the Rashtrapati Bhawan and the Prime Minister's Office. Other heavyweight clients include the ministries of defence and external affairs, the Parliament Secretariat and the governments of Bhutan and Egypt. Her credentials are impeccable and she's even dressed Air Force aircrafts and a battery of hotels for the Oberoi Group, ITC Hotels and Bharat Hotels.

In fact, as the Indian middle class gets more conscious of aesthetics and its surroundings, Sunita's projects are getting bigger than ever before. One that's particularly close to her heart is the conceptualising and designing of the Rajiv Gandhi Memorial at Sriperumbudur, done with colleague and art connoisseur Romi Chopra. The monument has been rated as one of the finest of its kind in India but she's unaffected by such praise. "A designer is only as good as his or her last project. One has to continuously strive to better one's work," she says.

Besides breathing new life into heritage buildings that are going to seed, she's bristling with ideas on how to add smarter touches to some of India's richest homes (including those of Naveen and Shaloo Jindal, Lalit Thapar, Sidharth Shriram and Sunil Munjal).

In between all this she's working hard to expand the spec-



Sunita Kohli's home, with its mix of the contemporary and the classic, is a showcase for her sense of style



trum of the Sunita Kohli Furniture line, examples of which are strewn artfully around her home. The Queen Anne Secretarie (a writing desk that also doubles up as a cabinet for books) is a favourite and that's where she settles down to read — or write. She has seven books in the pipeline, after making her debut as an author by writing a chapter in *The Millennium Book on New Delhi*.

Today, the 50-something interior designer has a greater zing in her designer step. She has recently forged new professional partnerships — not just with clients overseas but with her design consultant son, Suryaveer and her architect daughter, Kohélika. Together they intend to make a

formidable trio. Here's how: Sunita brings to the table her skills as an interior designer with a high-powered roster of clients. She's currently also spearheading an ambitious project, the Indian Museum for Women in the Arts.

Her 26-year-old daughter Kohélika comes with a degree in architecture from the hallowed Pratt Institute, New York. She returned to India two years ago after several years of studying and working in the UK and US. Already her appointment diary is filling up and her company, Kohélika Kohli Architects is making the blueprint for the German School in Delhi, a country house in Shenfield in England and an apartment in Mumbai. And she's determined to bring new design concepts into play in all her projects. "It's imperative for my generation of architects to set new standards in design," she believes.

Then there's Suryaveer, 30, a globetrotter who enriches interiors for his clients with pickings from some 70 top-end



Kohélika is teaming up with her mother and hopes to set new standards for design

international brands for lighting and home accessories from across the globe (yes he can source signatures like Italian Versace and Pykaleone and more).

He makes sure to turn up at the most prestigious design fairs in UK, the US and Europe (especially those in Milan and Paris) and comes back with more ammunition for his company, Suryaveer Kohli Home that takes on at least a dozen homes a year. But he doesn't necessarily endorse over-the-top expensive accessories, furniture or light set-ups. "It could be something that's modestly priced, but it must be a perfect fit with the client's lifestyle," says he.

Kohélika is also known to play with inlay and mother-of-pearl embellishments while her designs celebrate the lotus in different materials like steel and brass. The trio is also likely to convince you that your home has to be a reflection of what you really are. "The home must reflect one's lifestyle and traditions," she says.

The three have now come to the same drawing board for a boutique hotel in Colombo where each is taking on different aspects of the project. Meanwhile, Sunita and Kohélika also will be dividing their time between the Colombo hotel and a private country retreat in Sri Lanka's hilly region, Kandy. Kohélika catches her mother's train of thought (they do that often) and says, "The structure of the building and its design should make its own strong statement and create the ambience while the interiors — the furniture and fittings —

should lend the character," says Kohélika.

For the right look, says Kohélika, "it's important to constantly update one's self on new trends." Which is why travelling is high on their list of priorities. China is the next halt where they will be culling ideas for the interiors of Sunderbaan, a boutique hotel, in Pune. Suryaveer adds that

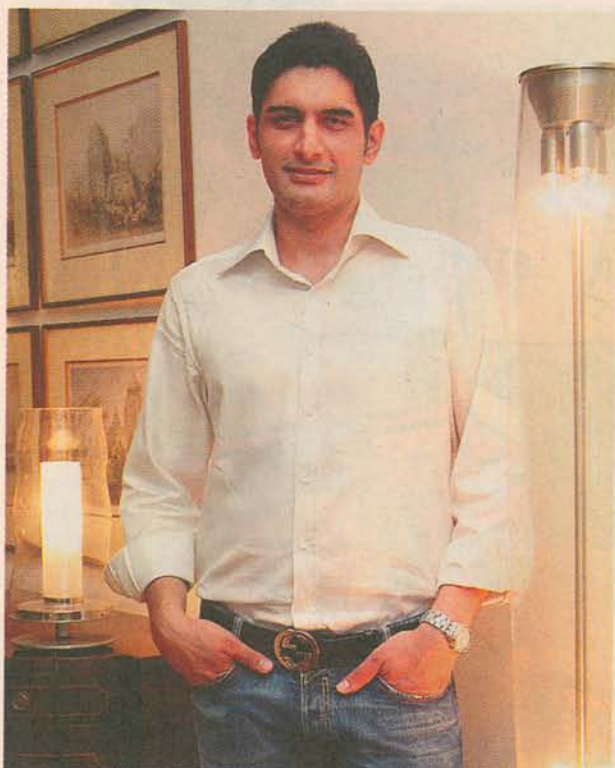
accessories are crucial for a well-appointed home. "They complete the picture," he says.

These were some of the elements the mother-son team pumped into industrialist Naveen Jindal's bungalow in upper crust Delhi's Prithviraj Road. Contemporary elements were juxtaposed with traditional Indian icons. For instance, Italian lights now sit cheek by jowl with antique temple lamps; Mughal carpets team up with brass curios in very 'today' world designs. Top on Sunita's agenda now is to put together a brick and mortar National Museum for Women

in the Arts, a sister museum to the one-of-its-kind Washington-based National Museum Of Women in the Arts. As of now it may be a "museum without walls", but a building will soon come up in Delhi with chapters in different Indian cities.

Sunita has come a long way from the time when her keen interest in restoring furniture was hammered into a full-scale business. She found herself reproducing 18th century pieces that sold faster than she could make them. Her interest

## Kohli is breathing new life into heritage buildings and adding smarter touches to some of India's richest homes



Suryaveer is into cutting-edge accessories and lighting solutions

in researching the period helped shape her design sense. This interest soon extended to restoring old buildings. She started her career with reproducing English classic furniture, but in recent years she has also broadened her horizons to include contemporary classic and colonial furniture. "One has to evolve all the time," she says.

Today she's frequently invited to talk about subjects like urban planning and design issues at prestigious universities like Harvard, or the National Building Museum in Washington.

Both Suryaveer and Kohélika agree that having "mom as our mom" meant that they very naturally gravitated into their chosen professions. Though, of course, they have chosen to cut the umbilical cord and work independently. But they are vocal about her contribution in shaping their interests. Through their childhood they travelled widely, visiting culturally and architecturally rich places in India, like Vijaynagar. They travelled with her through Europe, Egypt and Bhutan. Says Suryaveer, "At 18, I did an 18-temple town trip and when I was older mom encouraged me to travel to Africa and Australia."

So what makes the Sunita Kohli style so distinctive? Well, she is sure to leave her clients' home with a veneer of old wealth, but more so she's known for giving them "a background," that she can give them. But ask her what the Sunita Kohli stamp is and she shoots back: "No two projects of mine are similar. And I hope that each is completely different from the other." But above all, "I think I am best armed with my experience," she says. ◆

Photographs by Jagan Negi



Celebration offer

Let the celebrations begin with you!

Reema Ahuja lost 31 kgs. in 3 months!



After Before



Offer

Lose upto 10 Kgs

- + 5 Figure Correction
- + 5 Muscle Toning
- + Face Cleanup/Haircut

All in just Rs. 2990/-

No Medicines  
No Meal Supplements  
No Side Effects  
No Crash Dieting

Beauty Salon for Men & Women

- Facial
- Manicure/Pedicure
- Threading
- Bleaching
- Waxing

Special Package for

Rs. 599/-



Aroma Facial FREE

BEAUTY TREATMENT

- Double Chin Removal
- Acne Treatment
- Pigmentation
- Tan Removal
- Anti-Ageing/AntiWrinkle
- Glow Facial/Skin Lightening

Coloring, Straightening, Perming & Hair Treatment

- Hair Falling
- Dandruff
- Hair Regrowth



Bring a cutting of this & get a haircut free

\*Free Long Maintenance

Contact our counsellor more attractive offers Assured weight loss under Medical Supervision

Swarna World Spa



ISO 9001:2008 Certified Company



The Body Care

SLIMMING & BEAUTY CLINIC FOR MEN & WOMEN

Your health & beauty is our concern

\*Conditions apply. Result may vary from person to person.

Trimurti Apartment 97, Park Street, 5th Floor Kolkata - 700016  
Ph: 2217 2072/2076/7460