Of colours her world!

A tiny studio apartment set in the heart of Delhi is home to designer Sunita Kohli’s love for creativity, cherished objects and colours!

Text: Susanne Bajaj
Photography: Aarti Mehra

A Nayar warrior sits coy in the Coromandel glass painting white Bedouin tent hangings try to screen the sleeping area, rich in its use of Marquetry and rush. Stained glass work by E. Pearson/McNeice hides the loft space. Judy Perrett’s ikat work adorns the walls with the much loved and well-thumbed leatherbound books seen in the Edoardo Revealing bookcase. In the foreground is a 19th century English chair.
The entrance offers a choice between a hop over a park fence or a short walk through a cluster of kuchta-puccah houses. I prefer the latter! Between sniffing meals being cooked for lunch and hearing snatches of daily chit-chat in the middle of a village in the heart of Delhi, I walked up the steep stairs of a building and into a studio apartment that had an image akin to one in downtown New York!

Nizamuddin village, a locale that designer Sunita Kohli describes as, "The greatest place of pilgrimage among all the historical places in Delhi", plays host to her own reclusive getaway - the studio apartment. Minutes away from her residence, it is a place witness to her time being well spent concentrating on writing or listening to great vocal artistes like Mallikarjun Mansur and M S Subbalaxmi without the constant ring of the telephone. And indeed, she could not have asked for a better atmosphere...quiet for most part of the day, the air is suddenly rent pious with the azaan calls from the nearby mosques beckoning the faithful to their prayers; taking Sunita Kohli back to her days in Lucknow.

A calm descends following these five punctuations; the intervals accentuated by sounds from the closely located madarsa. Adding to that are the weekly gawwals at Nizamuddin Aulia’s tomb and the proximity of kebab joints, a reality that the connoisseur in her relishes! In fact, the interesting ambience has made her hope that more designers and artistes move into this locality, turning it into a little Mecca for artists.

Sunita Kohli went about transforming the original apartment with its tented ceiling and yellow walls into a self-sufficient unit that is young and contemporary and mostly filled with 19th century furniture! Clever planning allows for the single longitudinal space to allow for varied settings. A quiet working corner, a central living space, a tucked-in sleeping area, an extremely functional kitchen...it’s all there! A Lazarus breakfast table is coupled with Sheraton chairs. Bowls of olives find themselves placed on a camphor chest from Pondicherry and in the company of old English chairs and a big contemporary sofa, following Sunita’s belief in bigger furniture being better suited to smaller spaces! A traditional Coromandel glass painting of a Nagpur lady playing the veena is teemed in the bedroom niche, with an Edwardian clotheshorse! A love for art sees a cross section of work ranging from the ‘sophisticated’ palette of Eric Bowen to Greek water colours of icons to a yet-to-be-hung Catherine Young.

Every corner is turned interesting, with colourful wooden tulips from Hongkong in a Gujarati vessel atop a Michael Aram bracket sprucing up one, and an Edwardian revolving book-rack with well thumbed leatherbound books of drama and poetry, Sunita’s two great loves, in another. And most of the things seen here, be they furniture or objects, have charming tales associated with them that makes each of them a comfortable and mnemonic item. The Bedouin tent hangings that screen the sleeping area were a gift from Shahira Mehrez, Egypt’s queen of handicrafts, and are hung on old South Indian weighing scale rods acquired years ago in the Jewish market.
in Cochin. Or the Mussoorie sofa armchair that is a reproduction of her late father’s favourite furniture back in their Mussoorie summer home. Even the kitchen items have quaint tales. The wire egg basket was bought from a little village in France and the coarsely hewn wooden jug and spatulas, from a mountain village near Olympia in Greece. Stemming from the fact that she hates things that are purely decorative and believes that everything should have a use, a beautifully carved Tamil Nadu coconut scraper occupies attention as a side table!

“I love colour!” And although there is no deliberate design process that dictates the styling of her studio apartment, that one statement of Sunita Kohli’s sums it up! It sneaks up from the walls of its lime green basement with mad red niches, where she plans to set up a Lutyens’ archive, past the wooden birds on the first floor landing and the peach walls of the stairwell to explode into multiple-hued variations in the second floor apartment itself! One notices colour transitions ranging from an aquamarine ceiling, that stretches like a fabric with gold stencilled birds, poised and in flight, taking cue from similar motifs seen in a silver picture frame inset with a cherubic grandchild, to a sun yellow and white striped wall. It spills over to the book spines, the Judith Freirer leather, Kutch mirrors and even the chopsticks that are colourfully wrapped in straw. The rich maroons and rust of the Turkish kilim and the Kurdish runner join forces with the pastel shades of aromatic candles from Anita Lal and the glittering tones of a plethora of glass objects; a material that Sunita loves. The apartment sees a profusion of glass, from European studio glassware to old Czech lotas picked up in Karaikodi to brightly coloured glass tableware from Ferozabad. Stained glass panels conceptualised by Sunita Kohli in a geometric 1930’s style and executed by E Prasanneshwari, hide a loft space and are also used in the bathroom and kitchen windowpanes. And so, even the reflections are rainbow derivations! Of course, the changing patterns of sunlight make it even more magical. An interesting chessboard done in unusual squares of lapis lazuli and cornelian seem to illustrate that fact exquisitely. And once dusk sets in, the colours of the apartment change again with the many lit candles, contemporary lights and an old Lucknowi lampshade that casts filigree shadows on one wall.

There is really no other way to put it except that this place is about colour. Not only in the figurative manner of speaking, but in a manner that imbibes it from all aspects of Sunita Kohli’s life, loves and interests.

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**Details**

- **Client and Designer**: Sunita Kohli
- **Location**: Delhi
- **Approximate Area**: 400 sq ft
- **Duration**: 1 ½ months