

# STYLIA

MARCH 2021

**INSIDE**  
THE  
CLIMATE  
GUARDIAN

**PLUS**  
COVID  
SHEROES

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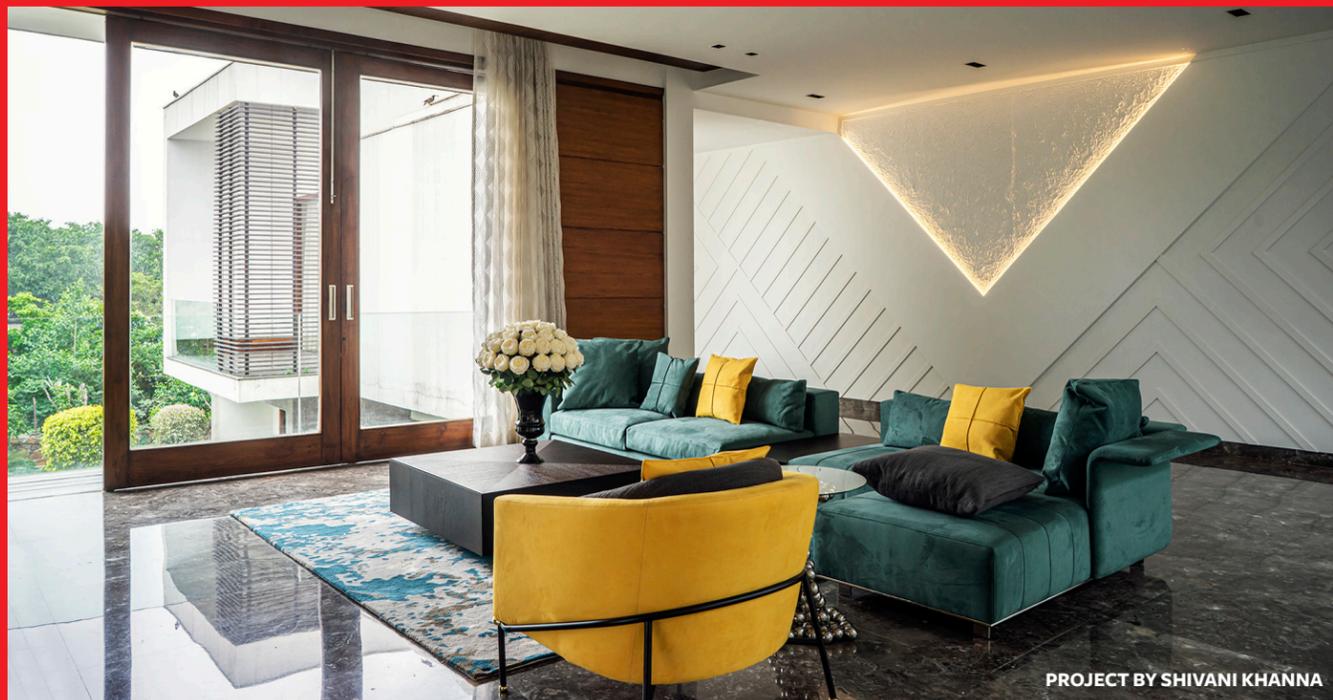
WOMEN  
ACHIEVERS  
FROM MUSIC,  
FOOD &  
SCIENCE

Authentically  
**HERSELF**

**TINA SUGANDH**



# Choosing to Challenge



PROJECT BY SHIVANI KHANNA

## WOMEN ARE LEAVING THEIR IMPRIMATUR ON ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

### BINDU GOPAL RAO

**C**ome March and the buzz around International Women’s Day gets louder. And women who need no one day to celebrate their femininity are breaking gender stereotypes, becoming entrepreneurs in traditionally male sectors. We speak to three such women to understand their journey and the lessons they have learned.

“As a child, I loved to design new things and come up with ideas to tackle problems at hand uniquely... My love for all things new and artistic was passed down by my mother. She encouraged me to think outside the box and tackle all issues with a touch of inventiveness,” Chadha says.

But it was her own experience while getting her house designed by an interior designer that sent her down another path in design.

“The field needs a robust level of professionalism and transparency, which, we have observed, is missing,” Chadha says, describing the stress she experienced 12 years ago when getting her own house done.

So she and her husband started ‘The KariGhars,’ a company that does turnkey projects for villas and apartments. They also customize wardrobes, entertainment units, modular kitchens and built-in furniture to fit the space and style of a project. She admits that when she started a decade ago, it was tough to get people to take her seriously.

“It was an uphill task to make the men, especially laborers and craftsmen, take orders from a lady boss,” Chadha says. “But now things have changed significantly, and women are being heard. What you bring to the table is important, and gender bias is definitely a thing of the past.”

Celebrating the freedom to #ChooseToChallenge she says that she would challenge the existing gender norms and dichotomies that exist in the world.

“Being successful in my professional

while balancing it with my personal life and family is a testament to the fact that women are more than just pretty faces who also do household work,” she says.

As an entrepreneur and interior designer, she plans to focus on implementing sustainable and eco-friendly designs in every home.

She tells young women seeking to be entrepreneurs to not shy away from risks if they really believe in what they do.

“Shed your inhibitions and conquer the world with your skills and humility,” Chadha tells them.

Still, it has been a stressful year, one dominated by the pandemic.

Chadha says that over the year she has learned to “live in the moment. The future, whatever it may be, will be good only if we make the most of the present.”

**SHIVANI KHANNA, CO-FOUNDER AND PRINCIPAL ARCHITECT, STUDIO CRYPT**

The institutional and residential architect has made a name for directing an environmentally conscious architectural practice, producing aesthetically versatile architectural spaces, emphasizing an understated luxury, while still being mindful of the need for sustainability. Armed with a master’s degree in sustainability from the University of Auckland, Khanna’s interest in entrepreneurship in architecture and design was sparked in high school when she saw her father begin constructing his house.

She was hooked by architecture



**AASHITA CHADHA, CFO AND CO-FOUNDER, THE KARIGHARS**

Before co-founding The KariGhars, Chadha, who has a bachelor’s degree in electronics from the University of Pune, worked as an engineer in reputed IT firms such as Tata Consultancy Services.



SHIVANI KHANNA

and design when she realized its significance. Studio Crypt was established in 2018.

“We intend to break the misconception of ‘luxury for the rich,’” she says, describing her team members as holding their high in a male-dominated field. “The team at Studio Crypt is on a mission to design affluent buildings and spaces. We also undertake development in rural areas, with the most recent being designing the Sainik Dwar for the village of Kutubpur in U.P.” As an architectural practice that celebrates sustainable construction design, Khanna’s firm provides environmentally sound, energy efficient, solutions that keep climate change in mind.

As someone who believes that a good entrepreneur needs a good support system at professional and personal life, she says her family is her cheerleader.

Her inspirations are other noteworthy women architects, such as Anupama Kundoo and Brinda Somaya. “My greatest learning comes from working with noted architect Sanjay Prakash in my formative years,” she says, adding that she

learned many unwritten rules of business from her father.

Her advice to young women who are aspiring entrepreneurs is to be a disruptor, saying, “You need to be an element of change since women are intrinsically perfectionists and efficient multi-taskers.”

**SUJATA CHITALWALA, PRINCIPAL DESIGNER AT DESIGNERS GROUP**

Chitalwala initially trained as a textile designer when she graduated with a degree in interior designing from Rachana Sansad college in Mumbai, India.

“I always had an eye for aesthetics and a flair for people management,” she says. “This has helped me position myself perfectly in the Designers Group, managing and guiding the design team.” Her work ethic resonates with the values she learned in childhood: to hold on to her roots and practice pragmatism.

“This has led me to appreciate a simpler approach towards design,” she says. “I firmly believe that simplicity creates a space for creativity to shine.”

She started Designers Group in 1989 with her husband Khozema Chitalwala, aiming to make it a holistic consultancy for the hospitality sector.



SUJATA CHITALWALA

Being a principal female leader is a challenge, Chitalwala says, adding that defying social expectations, and balancing work and family life are questions that need to be addressed.

“Women entrepreneurs are still way too few in architecture,” she says. “The perception in the industry about women has seen a massive transformation over the years. I realize it was a culture that has been hundreds of years in the making, but it only takes a few progressive thought leaders to fix it in their office.”



# On the Bleeding Edge of the Pandemic

## SOPHIA FRANCIS, A REGISTERED NURSE, ON SOLDIERING ON AT AN UNDERSTAFFED HOSPITAL DURING A PANDEMIC

NIRVANI WILLIAMS



Registered nurse, Sophia Francis, does not want to be called a hero. She just wants you to wash your hands.

“There have been times where I’ve come home from work and my hands are burning because I washed them so much,” she says. “It shouldn’t be this extreme for everyone, but you should wash your hands before or after being out in public. That’s number one.”

She confronted Covid right after the virus landed in the U.S. last March. She was then working at Holy Cross Hospital in Silver Spring, Maryland, when the first patients were rushed into the intensive care unit, coughing profusely and gasping for air. Doctors and nurses were not just scared and overwhelmed, they were merely trying to stay alive.

By March 26, 2020, the United States officially became the country hardest hit by the pandemic, with 81,321 confirmed cases and more than 1,000 deaths. This was more than the number of reported cases in China, Italy, or any other country.

While terrified at the number of Covid patients coming in, Francis persisted through the bleakness with inadequate personal protection equipment, better known as PPE, to fend off the virus.

“There were several shifts where we would have to reuse the same

isolation gown. They’re supposed to be for one-time use, but we would have to carefully put them on and take them off because there was not enough PPE,” Francis said on a phone call with SEEMA.

As happens in many Indian families, she lives with her elderly mother, who wanted her to quit her dangerous job, but Francis was determined to keep working. “I can’t just leave my co-workers hanging like that,” she says. “When it comes to health care workers, we all tend to [look] for our team members... They’re going to be short another nurse. Before the pandemic, hospitals always needed more nurses... The pandemic just exacerbated that.”

In April, then President Trump announced that each state’s governor would “call the shots” on how to handle the pandemic and reopen. Maryland Governor Larry Hogan,



mobilized and provided hospitals in both Maryland and the Washington metro area with sufficient masks and supplies. These supplies allowed Francis to protect both herself and her mother.

While hospitals once competed for equipment, now they compete for nurses. Most nurses are leaving their permanent positions in hospitals to become travel contract nurses and get paid three to four times more than they did as staff. Now Francis works the night shift as a local contract nurse at Prince George’s Hospital Center in Cheverly, Maryland.

The surge in Covid-19 cases since the fall has turned hospital staffing into a national bidding war, with hospitals willing to pay exorbitant wages to secure the nurses they need. That threatens to send more nurses to affluent areas, leaving rural hospitals and urban public hospitals short-staffed as the pandemic worsens and others unable to care for critically ill patients. Francis says hospitals were always short of nurses; the pandemic just made the problem worse.

“Covid is real,” she stresses. “I’ve seen young patients in their 20s with Covid on life support. Health care workers don’t want to be called heroes. We want to see you do your part by social distancing, wearing your mask, and washing your hands.”