Architecture becomes a vehicle for hope and reconciliation as a settlement is rebuilt through a deep dialogue with the village and the villagers following a devastating catastrophe.
For the houses, it was important for us to play a catalytic role rather than to force a top-down design approach. The most evident aftermath of the trauma was insecurity and fear and restoring confidence became central to all our endeavours. Some principles were laid out to ensure that the rebuilt houses perform well in the eventuality of another earthquake. The plinths were composed of random rubble and lined with an RCC plinth beam. The rubble mostly came from the debris. Three tie-beams were placed: one each at the sill, the lintel and the roof-base. The RCC members were braced with vertical steel bars in concrete at L and T junctions. All fenestrations were lined with RCC on top and bottom to avoid cracks in case of movement in the base. Sheer keys at critical junctions prevented displacement.

We encouraged the villagers to rebuild their own homes. To support this venture, the village reached an agreement with Sunil Dalal’s trust: The Pentagon Charitable Foundation. The trust would only procure and supply materials and the villages would provide the labour. Our reasons for advocating this methodology were two-fold. The first being to counteract the depression and listlessness that sets in after a major disaster. By helping the villagers to build for themselves, we were able to mobilise them for an occupation, which gave them a sense of purpose. The second was the lack of paid work available to the...
In 2006, we went back to the project and saw the transformation the houses have gone through. Many had expanded their homes by covering parts of terraces and domestic courtyards while the kernel of the original community spaces has remained integral to their life. By enabling the community to contribute to the rebuilding of their own spaces, we ensured that the community is empowered in the process. We visited the village again in 2016. It has now been more than a decade and a half since the project has been completed, and as I look at recent photographs from the village, my faith in this collective approach is reinforced. The village received an award for the way they have managed their green cover. Bhadli today exports bandhani fabric. One can see dish antennas, cars and communication systems, including the internet. The village is now connected to the world.

While we have done several community projects before and after Bhadli, some core concerns raised here remain persistent in my practice. From designing for the city in Colaba Woods to rebuilding shops for the flower sellers in the Nityanand Ashram Temple Complex, from a centre for VOICE to an Anganwadi in a slum in Worli; there is an engaging process that shapes my social projects and the conversations enrich the architecture. In all our projects, we insist on sanitation and fundamental human facilities for all the migrant workers who stay on-site, and I think these projects enable me to be aware of and sympathetic to those we are building for and those we are building with.

In my work, I don’t think images of inspirational views of the finished buildings appear in my mind when I look at the site. I work within the story that unfolds. A logical and sequential process follows involving understanding of context and the challenges of each project on one hand, and working on architecture that is contemporary and unique to the situation on the other. While there may be no apparent similarities in my projects, a hidden thread that binds all of them is this process. I realise that in projects such as Bhadli, which involve many stakeholders, the best solutions are brought about where we, as architects, planners, designers and professionals, approach the project as catalysts and not as brokers of change.