



# CLUB class

**A group of six youngsters has taken clay modelling to a new level with a range of furnaces to turn out a variety of different finishes in bowls, statues, and other objets d'art**

## SEKHAR SESHAN

**C**ollaboration, according to Nikunj Vakani, is a lot of learning. “The six of us keep learning from one another, every day!” says Nikunj, a graduate of the School of Architecture in Ahmedabad’s CEPT (Centre for Environment Planning and Technology) University, who is one of the driving forces behind Clay Club Innovations Pvt. Ltd. Four of his ‘club mates’ - Pranav Gajjar, Heena Kokel, Vishnu Kolleri and Maulik Oza – are also CEPT graduates, while Fulchandra Patel has been professionally trained as an interior designer from NSID in Rajkot.

“When you work with CLAY CLUB, there is you and the team of designers which becomes your team of designers,” says their Website [www.clayclub.in](http://www.clayclub.in). “We put together various vantage points and thereby operate as a seamless creative unit. And we develop real connections with our projects as well as our clients. So expect a very committed partnership that accomplishes your

The Clay Club team believes in experimentation as a means to learn





goals - and then some more.” And while each of them has his or her own area of strength, Pranav - who is technically the Managing Director and spokesman for Clay Club - explains: “We no hierarchy or bureaucracy here. Within the team, each of us is a lead designer, a critical reviewer, a communicator, a facilitator and an arbitrator. As a team, we manage ourselves in a way that balances the spontaneous, inherently rebellious intensity of creativity with the discipline

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methodology of production.”

Together since 2005, all six friends work so well together that they all think on the same lines without even talking about something. “This collaborative approach benefits the clients, and the end result is always richer than each one’s individual work, says Pranav. “We keep developing,” adds Heena. “We have no fixed product range. Someone comes to us with a sample and asks us, ‘Can you make this?’ we try our hands at it and produce it.”

All their backgrounds, and their reasons for doing what they are doing, are different. Pranav, who has been associated with both for-profit and non-profit organisations and has a keen interest in marrying design and social innovation to an entrepreneurial approach, says his approach has been shaped by his fellow-students, professors and researchers at CEPT with whom he mingled. An active member of the Ahmedabad Chapter of Swiss ecological land management group oikos, he was elected to the Executive Board of oikos International for 2012-13, and has won awards for Clay Club in various competitions.

Heena, who has also won awards for architecture design and published architectural research papers, believes that design is an activity that translates an idea into something useful – a building, a graphic, a machine, a service or a process, whether it’s a scientist inventing technology, a manufacturer making a product, an engineer making it function or a marketer selling it. She loves learning new skills, as well as practising illustrating and graphic and web designing.

Maulik is very interested in ceramics, and has set up a clay and paper



workshop with his friends at CEPT. A cooking and baking enthusiast, he has built many kilns including wood-fired pizza ovens. Nilkunj, born in a family that makes stone replicas of traditional Indian sculptures of different periods, likes working with ceramic and clay. “My family were traditionally potters, but no-one else among us has connected back to that,” he says. He believes that architecture is the link between nature and human nature, and has developed since childhood drawing skills as a medium of expressing thoughts. He has explored tectonics through different materials, especially handmade paper, clay and stone, and studied architectonics through the dwellings of the stone craftsmen of Dungarpur in Rajasthan.

Vishnu, the son of practising professional artists, developed a hand at drawing as a child and developed this through his student life to express and document thoughts, processes





### Clay Club team

and observations on paper. He is also fascinated by sound and its interaction with material and space hall acoustics, and plays the guitar and a slew of traditional instruments professionally. “We once organised a concert with various musical instruments made of clay,” he says.

Interior designer Fulchandra, for his part, comes from a farmer family, and loves to practise this when he visits his Visnagar home. He started on a veterinary science course after school, but moved to CEPT because he wanted to come to Ahmedabad. Having worked on various kinds and scales of residential, commercial and institutional projects in his earlier four years of practising architecture and interior design, he is the only one in the group who has worked for someone else. He is also a partner in another venture: fashion house ASA, started and run by Shreya Oza who worked with them (see Business for all, July 2014).



Along the way, the sextet got into handmade paper, which they fashioned into bags. They are now in the process of setting up a joint venture with a Kolkata-based expert in the field, Anupam Chakraborty who is the founder and creative director of the Nirupama Academy of Handmade Paper. This project, coming up on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, will multiply Nirupama’s production from 50 sheets a day by 10 times, and will also make ‘archival paper’

– which, Pranav explains, is very expensive as 80 per cent of what India’s requirement is imported. “It will be one of its kind,” he says. “We’ve been working on it since Diwali last year and done market studies. We will be in production by next Diwali.”

And while they have no fixed range of products, their catalogue lists bags and wallets, furniture, lamps and fabric made of handmade paper, as well as architectural elements, musical instruments, sculptures, vases and vessels.

Clay Club is also involved research, training and consulting - three primary mandates that ‘support and rectify each other’, its mandate says. These contradict ‘capital market short-termism’, which arguably constraints free enterprise to do what it does best: investing in innovation, taking beneficial risks, creating valuable products and

investing in people. “Our aim is to be able to benefit society through our work. The idea revolves around the ‘logics’ of social innovation, a solution that addresses societal challenges in a way that is contextual, targeted and promotes common welfare, increasing the ‘adaptive efficiency’ of society.”

Its members have conducted a programme at a home for differently enabled youth in Navsari – from which they plan to get 70 per cent of their staff for the new paper venture – as well as in their own premises. Last year, they conducted a fortnight-long workshop for 30 students from Singapore. And in April 2014, they had two- to four-day summer workshops in terracotta, ceramics and handmade paper that offered ‘an opportunity to make your summer break real fun’ - for children or adults to ‘hang out, have fun and learn’.

With India today undergoing major changes, the group finds itself ‘at the crossroads of this change’ and trying to find ground in this realm that Clay Club. “We believe that we learn by experimenting, making mistakes and then trying another approach... We have faith that we can do it step by step, using all our skills. We as an organisation believe that the key factors to our way of operation are access to leading scientific research, a skilled and creative product development team that communicates the strength of product, and establishing a reputation for quality and innovation,” the mandate adds.

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