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ROAD BUILDING EQUIPMENT ■

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ELEMENTS OF style

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BY JAYASHREE KINI MENDES

Making high-stakes business decisions has always been hard. But in recent decades, as the complexities of commerce have deepened, it's become tougher than ever. The choices facing real estate developers and the data requiring analysis have multiplied even as the time for analysing them has shrunk.

One decision-making tool—human intuition—seems to offer a reliable alternative to painstaking fact gathering and analysis. And that is what Navin Makhija, MD, The Wadhwa Group, has always relied on.

Consider this: At a time when developers are dragging their feet on arranging the Occupancy Certificate (OC), The Wadhwa Group has acquired 11 OCs in 18 months! Makhija attributes it to experience, insight, and analytical skills of the team. The company is also launching eight projects this financial year, and that is no small feat.

THE RIGHT ELEMENTS

The Wadhwa Group has several mantras it lives by. They believe that offering the right elements is what makes them distinct. Houses may be looked at. Eventually they are to be lived in. The Group believes that housing is part of the atmosphere. So talk of sufficient air, ventilation, natural light and the height to facilitate these functions. Elevations and





▲ The Capital showcases a contemporary facade, while its interiors feature a rich palette of colors and textures.



▲ Atmosphere is 2 & 3 bed residences in Mumbai's central suburb, Mulund.

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façades are all very well. That's outside in. Makhija is into inside out. It's about people living in a house, not about just admiring it from the outside.

Naturally, Makhija is sort of married to the profession that believes in atmosphere. After being an integral part of The Wadhwa Group, he is today at the helm of affairs. He has come a long way since 2001 in the art of construction to establish himself among the heavyweights, and learnt that at a certain point it is an art. After that it is money.

Makhija goes down memory lane. He has a lot to tell, but he likes to begin at the beginning: "I would say from 2002 to 2006 I was only learning. I spent time with various departments in the organisation right from planning, sales, construction, marketing, contracts, and everything in between. It was only in 2007 I started looking at individual projects. I absorbed anything that came my way and learned the nu-



▲ At W54 (above) and across properties, The Group incorporates the group's proprietary design philosophy of VentilLit.

ances of real estate and how businesses are run."

The Wadhwa tradition believes in certain principles which Makhija follows without compromise. He attributes his gains to Vijay Wadhwa, chairman Emeritus, and his mentor, who took him under his wing and tutored him on all aspects of real estate. His receptive mind soon found favour in Wadhwa who then made him son-in-law.

Makhija believes that learning involves getting the basics right. Real estate has several spectrums. Most important is planning. He says, "The Group has built a reputation for the way houses and buildings are designed. For us, function follows form. I realised its pertinence when I saw how buyers considered this parameter when buying homes. Earlier, buyers looked at the outside elevation, the landscape and amenities. But now they look at homes inside out."

BUILDING CREDIBILITY

For the soft-spoken Makhija, on time delivery of projects is just as important. Giving credit where it is due, he says he acquired this trait from his mentor. "Just launching a project with fanfare and deferring delivery is pointless. He is one of the few who stressed on completing projects before time. He knew where the shoe would pinch six months down the line and spent time addressing each one of them."

Of course, the real estate business is not what it used to be. For instance, a few years ago developers went scouting for land and sought out prime locations. "Today, land own-





3.37
million sq-ft delivered
over one year.

▲ Wadhwa Pristine, in the heart of Matunga West, overlooks the Bandra-Worli sea link.

ers, bankers and other developers approach us with land parcels what with the churn in the industry. "The dictum is not what or where you build. It's whether you have completed with the right quality and ensure it is saleable. The excel sheet might tell you about gaining enough margins, but at the end of the day what matters is gaining financial closure, assured sales and customer interest that will pour in equity into the project. Mindless borrowing can only harm the interest of stakeholders in the long run. Last, but not the least, is the sense of dealing with the right people throughout the execution of the project," he adds.

For long, developers have harped on location, location, location. Makhija is turning this principle on its head. He believes in cultivating the right partnerships. "The partner could be a land owner, banker, or a co-developer. When a situation goes awry, an ideal location coupled with a flawed partner will not help the project. But an imperfect location and competent partner will tide your way through," adds Makhija.

It is probably the reason why the developer has not thought of looking outside Mumbai. There's enough to do here. He points out that it was their strong hunch that led them to areas like BKC when none had given the area a second look. Similarly, with Navi Mumbai and Ghatkopar. The Group believes that locations should command a premium based on the time it takes to reach there and the multiple modes of transport available. It entered Panvel with Wadhwa Wise City knowing that when the new airport comes up, the area will demand a premium. An airport cannot survive on its own and will need infrastructure to make it a 'hot destination'. The strategy for them is



▲ Every project The Group has executed has seen much thoughtfulness behind it in terms of space and light.



▲ Prima (The Address) offers select furnished residences ensuring residents enjoy luxury outdoors and indoors.



▲ Platina is a commercial haven situated in the heart of BKC.

“COSTS ARE CONTROLLED BY WORKING BACKWARDS. A BLANKET POLICY IS TO GO AHEAD WITH A PROJECT ONLY IF IT'S GOING TO BE A SURE-FIRE SUCCESS IN TERMS OF EXECUTION AND SALES.”

not to build affordable but look at locations that will appreciate over time. “Affordable housing may sell, but we prefer to build what buyers want. For instance, if I had told buyers that 10 years later Panvel will be the BKC of Mumbai, they wouldn't have believed me. We started Phase I, which now seems affordable, but the plan is to create a township that will be self sustainable and self-sufficient,” he adds.

But he does admit that with the way residential developments have been causing some grief, commercial buildings are easier today. REIT is also paving the way to encourage development of commercial properties.

Intuition for him also works in the way The Group looks at design. Be it luxury homes or affordable ones, Makhija ensures that its architects design inside out. “We build for the people who will occupy those homes. Though elevation plays a key role, it's not the most important factor. Our unique design philosophy 'Ventilit' celebrates height, light, and air. Each home has higher floor to ceiling height and thoughtfully provided to add to the grandeur and space to every home. Houses are built to maximise cross ventilation and natural light. This philosophy extends not only to the living room, but also the kitchen, washroom and even the maid's quarters,” says Makhija with a hint of pride. The planning team is given the directive to finalise the plan and hand it over to the architects, who then move ahead with the design. There's a sense of Indianness Makhija portrays when he speaks of The Group's strong inclination to work only with Indian and local architects. Commercial buildings sometimes might demand an international MEP Consultant considering it will be inhabited by international clients, but that's about it.

Interestingly, The Wadhwa Group is perhaps one of the few developers who refrain from developments that could



▲ Once the planning of the project has been finalised, the developers do not go in for frequent changes.

TRACK RECORD

Sq-ft completed: 3.37 mn sq-ft delivered over one year
Projects under construction: Wadhwa Pristine, 25 South, Wadhwa Wise City (11 buildings), Elite - Platina A & Solitaire B, Aquaria Grande, Crown Residences, Chembur Commercial
No. of residential projects under construction: 7
No. of commercial projects under construction: 1

BRANDS USED:

Plumbing: Gebriet [for drainage], GI pipes, CPVC pipes
Flooring: Kajaria, Nitco, Johnson
CP Fittings: Grohe, Kohler, Toto, American Standard, Duravit, Hindware
Paints: Asian Paints, Dulex
Cement: ACC, UltraTech
Façade: Reynaers, Schüco, Geeta Aluminium
Construction contractors: Capacit'e Infraprojects, L&T

become nightmares for its residents a few years down the line. Makhija says this from the maintenance point of view. Call him judicious, but Makhija admits that planning and designing is done with a personal interest "as if I would be living there with my family". So none of the accoutrements and bits and bobs that have become the trappings in mod-

ern edifices. It also offers more liveable space and Makhija's concern is that residents should enjoy living in those homes two decades later too. This principle is followed across developments without differentiating on its stature.

MEASURES OF WELL-BEING

As a developer known for premium properties, Makhija keeps a sharp eye on the overall business. Ask him about the rampant cost overruns that most developers talk about, and without batting an eyelid, he says that overruns are not on construction costs per se, but on the numerous premiums imposed extempore by the government. "One may face cost overruns on projects that have not been thought out well to the last detail, but that would be a mere 5-7%. Legislation costs or policy changes by banks or raw material volatility is what causes anguish. On our part, we work out every aspect of the project, down to the last installation, well in advance and a strong procurement policy keeps our costs in check," says Makhija. Once the plan has been finalised, there's no looking back.

Costs are also controlled by working backwards. A blanket policy is to go ahead with a project only if it's going to be a sure-fire success. It is probably the reason the developer has fought shy of redevelopment, SRA projects, affordable housing and government related projects.

Business plans are executed with the help of NBFCs such as Piramal Finance, HDFC and banks like Stanchart, SBI, Kotak, who have been with The Group for some years now.

Speaking about construction methodology, Makhija says it goes with the current trends of Mivan, Jumpform, Tunnel form, pre-cast, among others. Digressing to a compelling method the company adopted, Makhija says that when they were constructing a 43-storey building in Mulund, it designed the building such that parking and basement were disjointed thus enabling them to complete the structure faster. This brought in the required cash flow as buyers saw a quick handover.

Today The Wadhwa Group is launching two project every quarter. It will announce Phase 2 of Atmosphere, second project of Wadhwa Wise City Phase 1, another launches in Kandivali and Chembur, among others.

Makhija seems poised when he says that an overall young team within the organisation seems to have worked wonders for them. Quick decision-making, execution and a self-reliance is helping it to catapult to new heights. A transparent nature, lack of bureaucracy and lean nature is what Makhija is banking on to stay in the good books of its customers and partners. **EW**