



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Step 1 Build four walls using baked bricks and cement, Punch equally spaced holes for windows. At bottom center take hole all the way to floor. Once walls have set place concrete lid above. Add steps to front door if desired, Preheat oven



Time travel

Our new travel column promises to unveil the world of art and architecture through the eye that wields a powerful lens, or, maybe, it is the other way around, to give us an exclusive opportunity to view the world in full colour

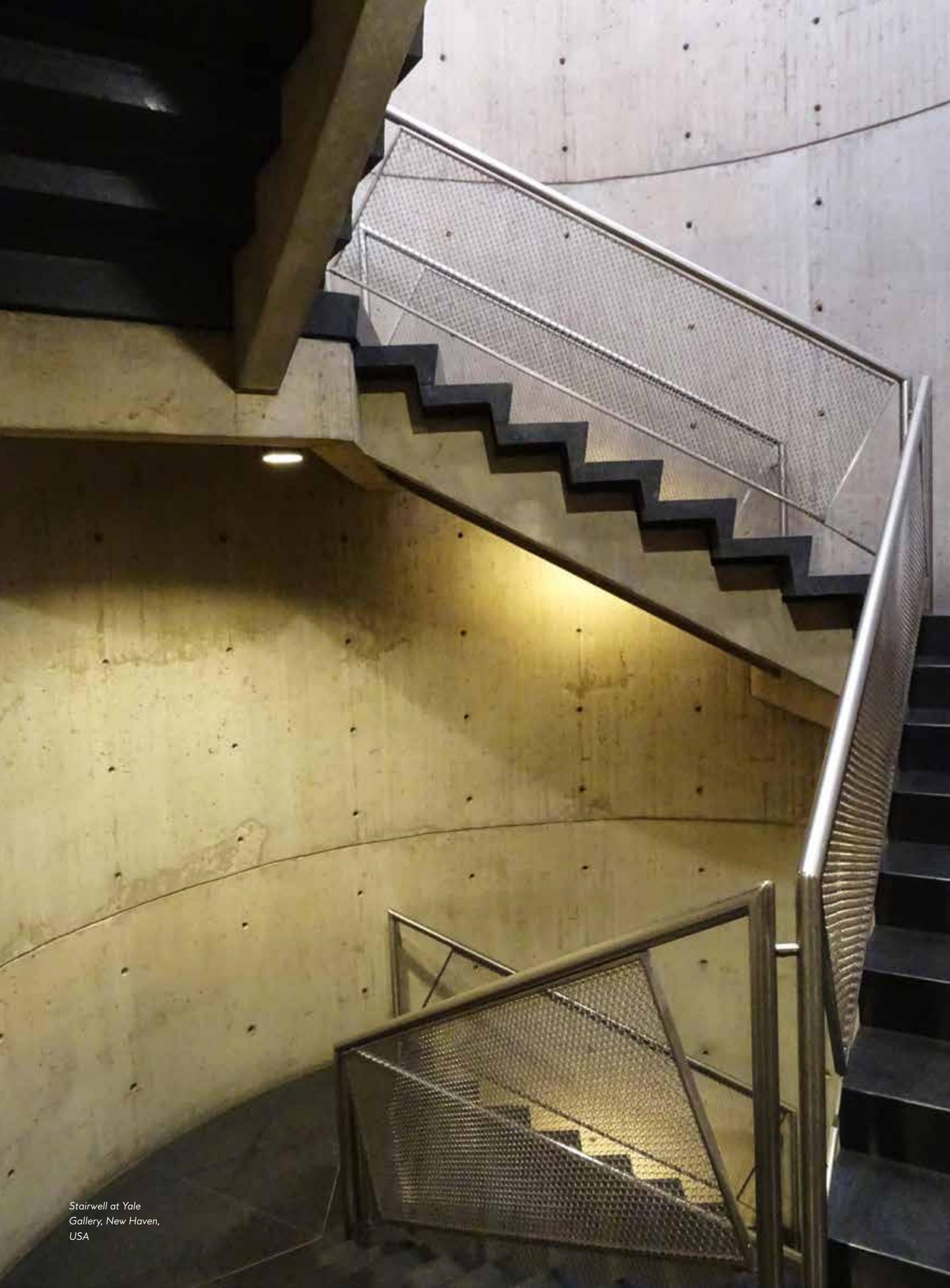
SIDDHARTHA DAS

Writing a travel column is like a bizarre time travel. All the imageries seem distant and the amnesiac brain struggles to remember, as fingers awkwardly dance on the keys. The past slowly starts to come back. I look back at my travels as a child, at what now feels like an epic journey, going from Delhi to Rishi Valley School with my schoolmates on a 42-hour train journey in second class, reading Salinger with the world comfortingly whizzing by. It feels like a scene from an old Truffaut film – real, layered and in black and white. I remember being on a flight with my mother and sister, looking incredulously at the firefly of a city beneath, and wondering what if the world and gravity had a different plan for us.

None of the thrill of travel has diminished over the years. As a designer and visual artist, my travels mean a lot more to me than mere nostalgia. Being amnesiac has many shortcomings, but not for me as a traveller. All the experiences have the allure of the first memorable journey, though with an incredible sense of déjà vu. I hope that within this space I can share not just my bumbling journey through life, but one place at a time and the incredible experiences that came with it.

With a writer for a mother and a painter for a father, my sister and I as children were sponges for words and images, and the arts in general. Music, theatre, dance, painting, literature, food and nature that inspires it all, morphed into one joyous experience. My veering into the arts

was not a conscious decision. Over the years, I have developed an eye for detail, my bane and my boon! When I am at an airport I am drawn to the web of metal and concrete holding together the building shell, or the details of the seating joinery; at temples the way the water spouts are seamlessly integrated into the fabric of the building; or on a road by the signage structure; observing details has now become instinct. In fact, I have picked up most from my travels, experiencing different cultures and developed a way of seeing that finds its way subliminally into my work. This subconscious assimilation has made me celebrate processes, the material and media while I have worked across the world, be it on an installation in London or a



Stairwell at Yale
Gallery, New Haven,
USA



●
Louis I. Kahn's
Yale Gallery,
New Haven, USA

●
Frank Lloyd Wright's
Falling Waters, the
Kaufmann Residence,
Pennsylvania, USA





● Eero Saarinen's
'Whale', Yale University,
New Haven, USA

● **The Kroon Hall**, Yale
School of Forestry and
Environmental Studies,
New Haven, USA



museum in Bhubaneswar. If anyone had told me as a high school student that being in the arts will take you to places, way beyond your economic means and wildest dreams, its seduction would have been undeniable. However, over the past few years I have embarked on a smart little plan – to lecture at many of the places where I would have loved to study! I now live that student life vicariously for a few days every few months. For instance, I lectured at Yale University last month. Two fellow South Asians took it upon themselves to take me on an architectural walk around the campus. I visited many of the iconic buildings I grew up reading about like Louis Kahn's Yale Gallery and Eero Saarinen's 'Whale' skating rink, and public art like the red mobile by Alexander Calder.

The highlight of the tour was seeing The Kroon Hall, which sets a high benchmark for responsible design and is Yale's highest certified green building with a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Platinum rating. It produces, on its curved roof, most of the electricity it needs. No surprise then that it is part of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies. The building does not stand out in the urban-scape of New Haven; but as you walk into the building, it is a complete visual treat. Large wooden beams in a sinewy fashion create the curvilinear roof. The warm wooden interiors let in speckled light into the open study areas and lecture halls.

*Alexander Calder,
Gallows and
Lollipops, steel
kinetic sculpture,
Yale University,
New Haven, USA*

It has the same restive and yet nuanced feel of a Japanese monastery or the pavilions in Fatehpur Sikri. All poetic architecture seems to play with light and form in an effortless way.

A few hundred metres away is the modernist Eero Saarinen's 'Whale', as people of New Haven call it. This sculptural building, with its futuristic-looking cantilevered metal arm that projects into the sky, is in complete contrast to the Kroon Hall. The Whale, a public skating rink, is made of exposed concrete and metal; and instead of blending into its surroundings, it completely owns it.

In the following week, while lecturing at Pittsburgh University, a professor generously offered to take me on the 100-mile drive from downtown Pittsburgh to Falling Waters or the Kaufmann Residence, located in southwest Pennsylvania's Laurel Highlands and designed by architect Frank Lloyd Wright in 1935.

The house sits in a scenic, wooded setting. My pictures do not do justice to the experience of seeing Lloyd's building from across the stream and taking in the timeless beauty of the building he conceived above the waterfalls, with the poetic stillness of an Ozu film. Nothing the cold wet morning near Pittsburgh could diminish. Strangely enough, it somehow reminded me of being similarly transfixed while being at Tadao Ando's Benesse Art Site on the little island of Naoshima in Japan.

Both buildings are perched near a jewelled water body, like a wondrous Hokusai painting, and are larger than the relatively diminutive people who built it. Both exist in their milieu as if they were meant to be always there. They play with the elements and take in the sweeping vistas, bringing the outside in.

At Falling Waters, it did not matter that I was only one in more than five million visitors who had come there over the past 52 years. Standing there, you did not need the enthusiastic guide, George, to tell you how Wright proportioned the table or divided the spaces between the sitting and dining spaces in just the way he placed them. You just knew it. It is not surprising that Falling Waters is among Smithsonian's Life List of 28 places 'to visit before you die.'

I hope that over the months and across columns, I can share my journeys and travel experiences, all different and yet bound by the same incredible creative spirit. These artistic manifestations are as thrilling to witness as they are humbling. Architecture and art, crafts and design, all are juxtaposed and not bound by narrow distinctions. The places, people, music and smells, all have that uncanny ability to transpose us to a different world.

J. Krishnamurti once said that you discover yourself through the relationships you have. It seems like it is the same with places.

All images courtesy of Siddhartha Das.