



HOME RUN

In her single-minded determination to build a pristine store, Simone Arora borrowed from nature and weeded out the chaff, finds **Sonam Savlani**

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Simone Arora's new concept store in Mumbai is nature-inspired, but not all "icky-freaky nature," she says, as we settle down in her office. A large white desk sits between us; it's plain, except for a block of driftwood at one end. (I'm terrified about shedding a hair, or dropping cookie crumbs.) I'm thinking: high-

maintenance. But Arora prefers serene. Her eponymous venture is an extension of her monochrome-loving self (her house in suburban Mumbai is all white too, which allows for the few hints of colour to pop). It features modern furniture and accessories — trays embellished with woven leather, votive holders, platinum-lined crockery — and

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Armaan before getting back to work). They were able to suss out the eccentricities of different markets: "We went with vibrant colours for America, more vibrant for Europe, gold for the Middle East; India was leaning towards earthy colours in those days," she remembers. Now, of the two million metres of fabric they make, they ship about 70 per cent overseas. Her big take-away? Learning to provide value, which is why she offers enough things in the region of ₹ 20 lakh a pop, and you'll also find you can walk away with a classic Simone Arora if you have just ₹ 750 to spare. "Ajay always tells me 'You can build a Taj Mahal, but if people don't come, it won't sustain itself,'" she says.

In 2011, when Arora seriously began exploring the idea of her concept store, she struck upon real-estate gold: a neglected heritage site in South Mumbai, which looked "as if it was bombed in World War II". Several friends advised her to find a bigger space, closer to her home in the plush, nouveau suburb of Juhu. But she was deeply fascinated by the European model of setting contemporary designs within a heritage plot — "You walk into this old-world building with a modern Dolce & Gabbana or Prada and you're just amazed by the contrast." It was a wise investment too, she says, "I was sure that if I transformed the property its value would appreciate."

She and architect Vikas Dilawari would only begin restoring it a year later, after all the permits came through. ("The Chief Minister reinstated the heritage committee which had been dissolved prior



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to me purchasing this property.") The shoddily placed columns added by MHADA, some of which were between arched windows, were rearranged with the help of a structural engineer.

She did away with the mezzanine floor entirely, which meant getting a higher ceiling but sacrificing half the shelf space. "I had a choice, I could look at the commercial aspect, or look at the larger picture," and she went with the latter. She recast the slab between the first and the ground floor (so it wouldn't cave). Then she undertook a job she didn't have to: like cleaning the stone façade (three storeys instead of the two her store occupies), restoring the trellises and arched windows around the front and back, replacing the paver blocks with cobblestone — "the chandeliers, the wrought iron grill... we had it all done like it was 100 years ago".

Arora pretty much eliminated whatever had the potential to cause dissonance. For instance, the playground which would have been visible from the floor-to-ceiling windows at the back, stands blocked by blinds that run from the floor up. The result? Plenty of light, just the leafy tops of trees and none of the chaos from the playing field. She also moved a bus stop which was obscuring the façade. "We did it for safety reasons," she says, explaining her concern about visiting clients spilling on to the street. She had 40 people immediately impacted by the move (residents and neighbours) write in to petition, and had it nudged by a few metres.

It was agonising, to say the least. "We reached a point where we seriously wondered if it would ever take shape," she says. "But I've always believed nothing good comes easy." And rightly so; the end result is pinch-me perfect. ●



bed and bath linen, among other things that perk up a home; all very quiet and elegant. You don't miss the contrast between Arora and her sister Sussanne Khan's styles; the latter confidently clashes colours and combines Gothic and baroque influences.

This is new terrain for Arora, who is also the creative head of D'Decor, that giant home fabric manufacturer that is now the third largest producer in the world. And she's made good strides. The space is home to some of the brightest brands from around the world: Italian furniture giant B&B Italia; French crockery label Bernardaud (with over 150 years of history); celebrity-favourite metal and furnishings designer Michael Aram from the US; South African wildlife photographer Caroline Gibello; and another 35-odd brands that will be on rotation.

Simultaneously, Arora's been crafting a new line of fabrics made exclusively for her showroom. "We've kept it muted, worked with a lot of textures: cotton, polycotton, sheers, velvets, a combination of yarns in matte and glitter." And colour? It's lurking in the catalogues, for those who want it. "I won't display it in my shop. I've created a concept here, which seeks to merge the products with the interiors." It's already a hunting ground for architects like Talati & Panthaky, Hafeez Contractor and Phiroosa Neterwala, who have been sourcing from her store regularly since it opened.

In the course of putting her project together, Arora worked in reverse (and also notched up some serious frequent-flier miles). The shopping bags and logo were hashed out first — the well-etched brand identity actually helped her sign on an assortment of labels at design fairs like Salone Internazionale del Mobile (Milan) and Maison & Objet (Paris). In Cape Town, she shot her brochure with a team of Norwegian photographers. "We rented a beautiful villa in the Camp Bay area, with the sea on one side and mountains on the other," she recalls. In Lisbon, she worked with a light designer who gave her a masterpiece for her showroom. "It's a chandelier that's like a branch with ice, and covers a 25-ft drop



by the stairway," she says. (Its three parts took eight days to install.) All of this was made possible by the experience she gathered at D'Decor — over 20 years, to be precise.

When Arora, the daughter of interior designer Zarine and actor Sanjay Khan, married entrepreneur Ajay Arora at 21, D'Decor didn't exist. "It was a textile company called DC Mills that made womenswear and suits for men," she says. It was Zarine who nudged Ajay to explore home textiles. Then in 1999, when they went to Frankfurt to participate in a fair, the less-than-lukewarm response forced them to rethink. "It opened our minds to the possibilities; we bought our very first second-hand loom and artwork from Como; I was inspired by the way they brought colours together," she says.

The first 10 years involved working at a breakneck pace, travelling for fairs, finding new markets, shuttling between the city and their plants in Tarapur and Surat (she only took a 40-day break after the birth of her son >

