Founded by the Sagars, Total Environment wants to be the ‘Ferrari of Homes’ with meticulously designed, robustly built apartments that bring the outdoors in. PAGE 28
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Cover Story
Built on Bricks, Grit and Beauty
Shibanee and Kamal Sagar’s Total Environment, a real estate development company, has constructed both new designs and business rules for itself. But their unconventional ideas didn’t come in the way of raking in sales worth ₹170 crore and above last year.
BY SHREYASI SINGH

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The Don’t-Do Lists
Most of us keep to-do lists. But don’t underestimate the importance of what you don’t do. We ask 16 business leaders and experts what they assiduously avoid doing—on sales calls, at business meals and more.
BY JENNIFER ALSEVER AND ADAM BLUESTEIN

Start-Up Diaries
They call themselves the travelling circus but there’s nothing flippant about One Step Up, a career counselling start-up for schools. Their mission—helping every student make the right career choice. Plus, an update on Coco Loco.
BY ROHINI BANERJEE
Built on Bricks, Grit and Beauty

With Total Environment, the Sagars have paved a new kind of business path.

BY SHREYASI SINGH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY S. RADHAKRISHNA
The Quintessential Builder

It's buildings, not business that takes up most of Kamal Sagar's time.

The "Details" Goddess

Shibanee Sagar knows her apartments—sometimes right down to where the flour is kept.
In 1997, while working on their second project, *Green is the Colour*, a residential complex of 44 apartments on Bengaluru’s Bannerghatta neighbourhood, Shibanee and Kamal Sagar, the project’s architects, decided they wanted each flat to have a garden. “An apartment without its own garden just didn’t feel like a home,” says Kamal. So, the duo added floor area to their units, and gave every apartment a cantilevered terrace garden, essentially a little sit-out with a patch of green. Each garden was designed to be of double height, facing different directions on different floors so that each got enough sunlight for the plants to grow. The only hitch: customers had paid up according to the square footage of the original design, and refused to fork out

Kamal and Shibanee Sagar have truly taken the road less travelled. Founders and principal architects of Total Environment, a Bengaluru-based real estate development firm, this husband-wife duo certainly aren’t your regular builders—both by design, and by nature. In an industry that thrives on mass-scale housing and broken promises, the Sagars’ business foundation is laid on attention to detail, unprecedented customisation and an unyielding aspiration to make homes, not houses. That this took them to a turnover of ₹170 crore last fiscal, from sales of 109 apartment units, is incidental, they insist. Even after 15 years, sensitively designed, well-built and lived-in homes continue to be their only vision.
more money. Still, the Sagars didn’t budge. “We actually did it for free,” they say.

The decision squeezed further the tiny profits— ₹8 lakh—they ended up making on that project. It wasn’t an easy call, especially because Green is the Colour was to help recover the ₹20 lakh plus they had netted in losses with their first project, Cirrus Minor, a year before. But design trumped commerce. They brought the outdoors in, and planted deep roots for their firm’s ethos, aptly named Total Environment.

A terrace garden might be almost mandatory for upmarket residential projects today, say the Sagars. But, in 1997, no residential complex boasted of a terrace garden in every apartment, anywhere in the world, they claim. “We introduced the concept. It sounds dramatic, but it isn’t. It’s a simple idea that is quite easy to implement.”

Since then, every Total Environment home—600-plus over the past 15 years—has come with a garden. “We just don’t build without one.”

Much like the way that tiny patch of green has flourished into larger, more innovative gardens in their subsequent projects, Total Environment has also blossomed beautifully. Last year, the 365-person company, which has till now completed more than 28 residential and corporate projects, notched sales of more than ₹170 crore. Though its footprint is mostly limited to Bengaluru, with recent forays into Pune and Hyderabad, the Sagars are now being noticed as builders of high-quality, award-winning homes.

The Foundation
The au contraire streak of the Sagars has been a constant companion for Total Environment. Co-founded in 1995 with three of their friends (all of them were in their mid-20s), the company was laid on a simple foundation: to make homes worth living in. Young and idealistic, they managed to sell out their first project, a residential complex of 12 apartments called Cirrus Minor, within a month, mainly because of Kamal’s impressive work at the Poonawalla stud farms in Pune, right after his architecture degree from IIT Kharagpur in 1992.

Each flat in Cirrus Minor was sold for around ₹10 lakh. But the young entrepre-
Shibanee Sagar

Early designs

The events, inspirations and experiences that have shaped Shibanee Sagar

She might not have known then that she would eventually be an architect but Shibanee Sagar began thinking about spaces even as a child. “I spent my early life living in places which weren’t originally designed to be a home. My grandmother’s house in Ambala, for example, was a strip of shops with extraordinarily high ceilings. It was converted to function as a home,” Sagar remembers. “It got me thinking about how space could be converted and used.”

A graduate of the JJ Schools of Arts, Mumbai, Shibanee values her professional education for showing her the path to walk on. Beyond that, a creative person is really the sum total of her life influences, she says. At college, that experience came from meeting a large number of very celebrated architects, many of whom came to JJ School as guest faculty. “That exposure was wonderful. These were successful people. They were secure and encouraging.” Yet, trawling through the pavement bookshops—for architectural magazines from around the world—in Mumbai’s Fort area is an equally cherished memory.

Favourite building

Farnsworth House, designed by Mies Van Der Rohe. It’s all about less is more—the building is very simple, functional, fits beautifully into the environment that it has been built in, and is still quite stunning.

Favourite architect

Bart Prince. His work is very organic and very relevant to its environment.
neurs had got the math wrong. Building to their specifications—mirror polished kota stone floors, imported craftmaster doors, form-finished concrete beams, wire-cut brick masonry from Kerala—the project cost climbed up to ₹1.32 crore without including team salaries, office rentals and other costs. Kamal, the group’s nucleus, was advised to tone down the specs and bring it within the ₹1.2 crore capital that they had. “But that seemed like a pointless way to go about it. We plunged right into it and built it the way we wanted to,” he recalls.

The losses hurt, but they also gave the company a fait accompli—build more to break even. “There is no idealism here. We have to sell, of course. But design has always been the priority. Commerce comes in second,” says Shibanee calmly.

Short of cash, they needed to sell the flats in advance to fund land acquisition and begin construction. At the time, Bengaluru was becoming a global technology hub. Kamal saw an opportunity here and made presentations to IT firms like Wipro, Infosys and others, offering to build housing for their employees. Employees of Microland and Sasken signed on Total Environment, and imaginatively-named projects like Green is the Colour and Bougainvillea followed.

Their aesthetic but functional, eco-conscious yet technically superior homes, undoubtedly pleased customers. And their idealism also found many takers. One of their early land sellers (for the Green is the Colour site) in the late 1990s, was amazed that they had sold the land they bought from him to Microland at exactly the same price—₹500 per sq ft—without any margin at all. He offered the couple (by then their other co-founders had amicably drifted to pursue other career options) two adjacent plots of land without an upfront payment. “Pay me from the proceeds of the sales in the project,” he told the young couple.

“So, the couple decided that after they had sold the apartment to a family, they would sit down with them to understand their specific needs and aesthetic sensibilities. These would be worked into the flat design and a new customised plan put forward. Their early customers, many of whom are repeat buyers, admit it has been this approach, more than anything else, that has made them Total Environment ‘converts’.

“I remember spending around three hours in a marble store on Hosur Road with Kamal and Shibanee. Even in choosing the colour of the laminate for the kitchen, they’d be involved,” says Jessie Paul (also an Inc. India columnist), who bought her first-ever home in Green is the Colour. Since then, she’s invested in other Total Environment projects like Free Bird, The Good Earth (where she lives now) and Windmills of Your Minds. In an era, when mass-scale housing is the real profit-spinner for construction companies, nobody allows you this level of customisation, Paul says.

Anand Sukumar, another Total Environment faithful, and CEO of GK Vale, an iconic chain of photography stores in Bengaluru, agrees completely. In 2004, when his family bought two 1,950 sq ft flats in Shine On 2, he gave the Sagars a wishlist—convert the six bedrooms into a four bedroom apartment. There were several columns on which the building’s foundations were supported and breaking them was problematic, he remembers. Some of them could be broken down, others couldn’t. Sukumar still marvels at how beautifully they adapted the flat.

“Today everything in the apartment seems like it was done by design, as though...
In perfect sync

Two creative people working together, as partners in design, and in the business is bound to be tricky. Does it make it easier that they are married? Or are the fault lines even more sensitive? Kamal and Shibanee Sagar tell us how they maintain a healthy distance, both at work, and from work.

Like many great companies, Total Environment also started at home. “The living room and the lobby was the office. The bedroom was home,” they recall about their start-up days in 1995. Gradually, the work set-up shifted downstairs to accommodate a growing team. But lunch continued to be served for the entire staff in the dining room. There were no work-versus-life boundaries. Kamal confesses this wasn’t because of lack of trying. “Initially, we tried consciously to keep a balance. There were big fights over work discussions post office hours.” Now, he adds, they don’t even bother. “We talk work all the time now,” they both say. Shibanee worked out of home a lot in the past few years, so that she could bring up their young children. And Kamal’s entire library is in their home office. “I manage to do a lot of the actual designing at home. There’s no peace of mind in office,” he says of their corporate set up in Whitefield, Bengaluru.

While at work, they’ve devised a simple solution to keep creative clashes at bay. Each project is headed by one of them—the other can offer ideas and suggestions. Whoever owns that project takes the final call. “We haven’t had too many conflicts that way. If Kamal has a good idea, I support him. He does likewise for me. As long as we can figure out whose idea is better, we are fine,” says Shibanee matter-of-factly.

this is how it was planned to be. Also, our interaction with them was phenomenal,” he says. Though Sukumar continues to invest in residential and commercial properties by established builders (Mantri and Brigade) across Bengaluru, he says if he’s buying his home, he wouldn’t look at anything but Total Environment. “No one else can give you the feeling that you’re actually building your own home, like they can. It isn’t about buying into a project.” Shibanee, who Paul calls the interior design whiz of the two, says she has fond memories of these houses. In fact, she remembers being so involved in some of the apartments—right down to where the 10 kilo rice and wheat tins would be kept in the kitchen—that the joke in their office was, “If you can’t find the dal, you better ask Shibanee.”

Clearly, their gut proved right. Customisation became such a selling point for them that over much of the last decade, Total Environment has spent more than ₹10 crore in converting this insight into a software tool called eBuild. The software helps customers see for themselves what’s possible and what’s not, and how the changes—walls knocked down or moved around, flooring or kitchen counter material altered—that they want will eventually look. Every time the design is altered, eBuild also shows the subsequent cost impact. The software has helped them streamline the customisation process, and is less human resource intensive.

Neeraj Bansal, associate director in KPMG’s real estate practice, says customisation can definitely be a niche differentiator for a builder in the crowded residential market. He cautions though, that when trying to scale up, as Total Environment wants to, customisation requires a sound back-end and mature processes. “You have to get the inventory and procurement right,” explains Bansal. Total Environment is confident they’ve got that covered, thanks to the two key decisions they took early on: bringing all construction in-house and creating their own capability lines; and by taking on the unglamorous, messy job of managing their properties.

That’s smart thinking, KPMG’s Bansal admits. “Many prominent builders are now re-looking at their facility manage-
First among equals
Here’s the Sagars’ pick of projects that have been landmarks in Total Environment’s journey, and why:

1. The Good Earth, Bengaluru: “We integrated an existing gulmohar tree into the project. When we finished, the building and the tree looked like they had grown together. That was a huge high. This was also the first time we were able to use the special brick we’d been developing. Normal bricks are 9 inch by 4 inch. They look like blocks. But we like our buildings to be inviting, not intimidating. To achieve that, we needed to have more horizontal lines and do away with blocky, vertical lines. We worked with a brick-maker in Kerala to come up with thin and long bricks, 12 inches by 2 inches.”

2. Bougainvilea, Bengaluru: “As we customised and built more homes, we realised that we were ending up furnishing the apartments as well. But we weren’t able to benefit from economies of scale, since orders came in parts. Also, for customers, good furniture weren’t easy to find. Most of it had to be force-fitted. We decided then that we’d sell our apartments as completely furnished homes—with beds, wardrobes and entertainment units. We did this to an incredible detail like where somebody’s National Geographic collection would go, or where their ties and socks would be.”

3. Windmills of Your Minds, Bengaluru: “We had a large canvas of 24 acres. We wanted to provide a very different experience from anything we’d done in the past. The large 5,924 sq ft duplex apartments were inspired by Mies Van de Rohe’s Farnsworth House, a 1,500 sq ft glass box placed in the middle of a 60-acre property. We wanted to create that kind of feel in a multi-dwelling project with close to 400 homes. So we designed a large 1,000 sq ft garden complete with bamboo trees, a water body and a wooden deck. Every room in the apartment opens out into the garden.”

The Master Plan
Windmills of Your Minds, their 24-acre, 400-unit project in Bengaluru’s Whitefield is their most ambitious yet. Started in 2007, it was the prototype of the duplex apartment at Windmills—and its strategically placed advertisement in publications like The Economist—that first catapulted Total Environment to recognition beyond its hometown. “Every developer from around the country came to know of us,” says Kamal, admitting the attention took him by surprise. They’d build the prototype (where the pictures in this story have been shot) because they were finding it difficult to sell the large, 5,924 sq ft apartment, which today costs upwards of ₹4 crore.

The high-profile project has given them several sleepless nights too. During the recession in 2008, many customers backed out, and others defaulted on payments. Through its journey, stretched timelines have been Total Environment’s Achilles Heel. It’s an accusation the Sagars bristle at but can’t ignore. After the hype it had gathered, and the kind of clientele it had attracted, they knew they had to ensure that—sales or no sales—work continued on Windmills. So they approached several banks to invest into the project. In March 2009, after Kamal made a presentation to HDFC chairman Deepak Parekh, the bank put in ₹130 crore through a structured deal (part equity, part return). Today, phase one of Windmills is complete. Nearly 100 units, each one of them completely customised, have been handed over.

Along with finishing Windmills, they’re also excited about spreading their footprint to Hyderabad and Pune. “We’re looking at ₹250 to ₹300 crore in turnover in the next couple of years,” they say, after much prodding. “But that’s not a milestone. Numbers have no meaning. They don’t excite us at all,” claim the Sagars. Fortunately, some things never change. Hitting braver aesthetic milestones remains their only aim.