

# DESIGN MATRIX

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PEOPLE • LIFESTYLE • DESIGN • INTERIORS

## Reboni Saha

„Sometimes a casual discussion could lead to brilliant designs%”

## Dean Dêcruz

„At Design Valley, we aim to create an alliance of creative minds for functional solutions%”



Cover  
story



# TWO TO TANGO

Their professional ideologies fit together perfectly like the pieces of a jigsaw. Dean D’Cruz and Reboni Saha of mozaic design combine reveal to Babita Krishnan, their dreams of creating a Design Valley in Goa – an alliance of creative minds from varied fields to give functional solutions.

**Words: Babita Krishnan;  
Images: Tushar Rao & (projects)  
courtesy mozaic design combine**





**Babita Krishnan:** How did you gravitate towards your chosen professions?

**Reboni Saha:** I was fascinated with machines and aero modelling and greatly influenced by my travelling. Also, I have a thing for 3D; so the closest I could get to converting my dreams to reality without becoming an engineer, was product design.

**Dean D’Cruz:** The intention was to do engineering since my dad was an engineer. I applied for IIT but couldn’t get in. So sought out whatever had free forms available (laughs), and as I was always good at drawing, sailed through the entrance exam. I dabbled at all sorts of subjects – from science to commerce and hoped to join my dad’s shipping business. Architecture being very unconventional as a course of study, was an eye opener for me.

**BK:** Both of you have done your professional courses at landmark institutes. How was the experience?

**RS:** NID was one of the only two design institutes in India till the 90s. Its focus was on real-life experiences and the most prized take away was the design process – a method of creative discipline and problem solving.

**DDC:** JJ was great with its beautiful campus right in the middle of the city. I remember my dad coming to college one day after about a year. I was with friends in the canteen and someone recognized the car and told me. So I bumped into him in front of the Principal’s office as he went in for a meeting that lasted precisely ten minutes. He was informed that his son will be in the canteen and probably learning more there than he would in the class. He couldn’t believe it! We were very chilled out towards academics but there was an eagerness to learn, which sadly seems to be missing now.

**BK:** Dean had his roots in Goa, but Reboni, what prompted you to move here?

**RS:** I generally don’t like to follow the crowd. So after NID when everyone started moving to bigger cities, I zeroed in on Goa because I could set my own pace and agenda here. People were not demanding. Though I could have moved abroad given my background and training at Bosch-Seimens Hausgerate, Germany, I decided to stay back as it was the fantastic possibility to bring some conclusions to the chaos that is India that attracted me. Satisfaction comes from making a change and I knew, I could do that.

**BK:** So are the perceptions about product design changing?

**RS:** Yes, they slowly are. Product design is like an orphaned baby. While other design faculties have the support of the industry, media, public, etc. – be it fashion, IT, interior design, nobody quite knows where to fit product design, even though it has the most advanced curricula of teaching.

**BK:** It must have been really difficult initially.

**RS:** Yes, simply because it was the bastion of engineers and there was a general feeling that we were trying to venture into their territory. We would face hostility and disinterest in anything new. In



fact, initially I had to overstep my boundaries. Unlike abroad, where you just design and then pass the baton onto the engineer, here I had to do the detailing and the engineer's job as well, just to prove that it can be done. You need a bit of pigheadedness and that got me through (smiles), though many times the products morphed into something I hardly recognized. But the work I'm doing now is more socially relevant and closer to my heart – gives me satisfaction as a designer. Though they might not be beautiful in the printing sense (laughs).

**BK:** Dean you have become synonymous with the beautiful Goan architecture and its conservation. How is it different from Portuguese Architecture?

**DDC:** Goan Architecture has been around from before the Portuguese came. It has developed climatically like Kerala Architecture – small dark spaces, closer to the land, very agrarian in its approach; Portuguese Architecture, on the other hand is more lively, showy, with high plinths, etc. But due to the local craftsmen working for the Portuguese, what came out was a very beautiful combination. For example, the cherubs have very Indian faces; in my own house, the columns have cobras, which is very Indian. It is more like a Goan interpretation/adaptation of the Portuguese idea.

**BK:** Is Goa also facing the loss of heritage buildings to builders due to commercial/economic pressures like Bangalore?

**DDC:** In towns, yes; but not so much in villages. Goa has already lost its cultural identity owing to apathy of the authorities and people, and what we have today is just marketing gimmicks. That whole lifestyle is now lost. There are a few groups working towards maintaining what is left, I'm also part of them. We are trying to do our bit towards getting landmark judgments against mining, introducing composting, taking care of the environment, etc. I'm now working with the government on town planning and it is another

learning experience because it is very difficult to predict how future development will take place. You just put in those checks that allow discerning future development and hope for the best. (Laughs)

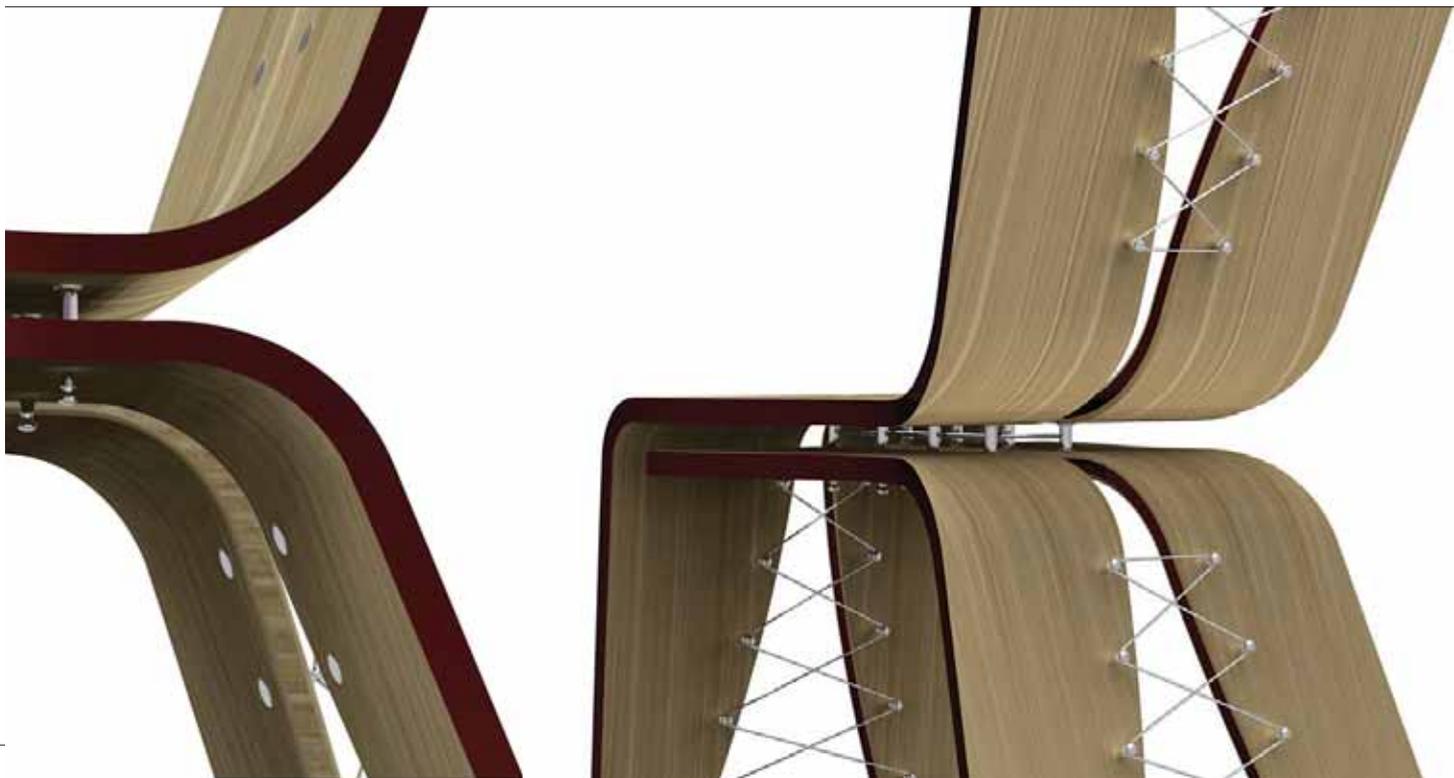
**BK:** This being your adopted home, are you also part of this movement?

**DDC:** Oh, she is the face of the Goa *bachao andolan*...

**RS:** I actually got dragged into it by just looking at the tip of the iceberg. We were able to pinpoint what was going wrong but realized that people across the country did not comprehend the magnitude of the problem – Goa was just a tiny spot on the map! So in desperation, I thought let us hit where people will understand it most – we took images of places that were close to everyone's hearts; what tourists knew, and work on them. For example, Baga Hill across Panjim, where one is used to seeing the green spread; we took it away and photo-shopped it with buildings. The impact was tremendous and I couldn't believe that something done in such a hurry could work that well. It galvanized this whole movement. I came to know a lot of interesting people who cared and had connections and as a spin-off, each one has gone back to their own area of expertise to contribute. They are looking at garbage, women issues; somebody has a foot in the Govt.; so that helps in getting sanctions when required.

**BK:** So what drives you?

**RS:** As product designers, we need to look into the minute details as well. We can't just design and leave it to a fabricator, we need to look for material that is functional and looks good so that people like using it as well. It is not a fashion statement. Like this composting machine that we have developed as an experimental project, is shaped like a mushroom. I saw the way people treat garbage. That is a huge problem not only for the authorities who are not interested, but also for people because otherwise how do you



encourage them to separate garbage? I realized that people feel a little eeked-out with this whole business of separating wet and dry garbage and the fact that it starts to smell after a while. Being a product designer, I decided to make something that was not eekey and a fun element; so we made it like a mushroom where the top lid can be spun to air the garbage and this takes care of the smell. All you do is spin it every now and then. At the end of the day, you just open a little thing underneath and scoop it out. It is at the testing stage right now.

Another area that interests me is the idea of compost toilets. Based on the premise that we are using water to clean something that we consider dirty and the same water is then purified as drinking water, is precious. The initial concept and mechanism is ready and I'm going to install it in my new house for testing so that it is accepted by the middle class without being patronizing, rather adopting it as way of life. If I can slip it through the mind block of people towards something new, then I have won as a product designer. I don't believe in creating something touristy but more relevant to the environment around me. I put design in two boxes now – design as an end in itself, and design as a means to an end.

**DDC:** Right now there is this green agenda that we are working towards and I feel it is something that needs to come from within. All these ratings etc. are all still very new – every building should be green. One might think it is a new concept, but traditional Indian architecture was always green. I wish there was a process where architects went through something like priesthood so that they don't get into the business mode. If your daily needs are taken care

of, you can concentrate on creating what you really believe in. It should become a vocation like Gaudi or in the times of kings, who were patrons. Most of us are so caught up in other mundane issues that there is little time for creativity. And that is where collaborations come in. Any project is never the work or vision of any one person. Not that the clients don't have a vision; but they have a very narrow spectrum, so we are trying to create a setting where everyone is able to collaborate at what we call the Design Valley, because architecture is no longer intuitive.

**BK:** How do the synergies work when both of you work together?

**DDC:** There was this project that we did for The Taj where we developed the brief together with the client, who was very demanding but educated about where each aspect of design came from. We all got together, discussed and realized that the end result was much better, much more polished and refined. Design is not one dimensional; there are so many aspects and it is better to involve everyone to ensure a richer product. Having a team like this ensures that I will not miss out on anything because of my own blindness.

**RS:** The ideal situation would be to get a client who understands the importance of both, otherwise one tends to get overshadowed. We have to take cues about what needs to go where in a building; that needs research, which is part of my training and thought process. That is my value addition to a project. Then of course comes detailing – the spaces and the kind of feel we want to





Exchanging ideas could lead to innovative product designs like this switch board.





The top lid can be spun to air the garbage and this takes care of the smell.





give, textures, etc. So giving shape to these requirements is where the architect plays a role. Also in interiors, there are many requirements where practical solutions are needed from a product design perspective. Dean can probably make a sketch of what he needs but the actual feasibility is what I have to design.

On the other hand, there is a great synergy in terms of ideation. Dean is really great at concepts and ideas; so whenever I get stuck, I call him in and he just throws the problem open. Similarly, I can give a product thrust to his buildings. Many times architects get so involved in the materials and other practical stuff that smaller details get lost. So I just step in, give a whacky perspective and that adds to the overall effect. Sometimes ideas just crop up out of ordinary chats. A few months back over lunch, Dean mentioned how disappointed he was with the designs of switches in the market –

the same old square or rectangular box, and that got me thinking that we should try and design a switch box that becomes a part of the aesthetics. We have just finished prototyping this new design and it is very exciting. The most important thing is communication.

**BK:** Is that how the idea of mosaic came about?

**RS:** Mosaic is a design that is created by the coming together of different tiles – each independently beautiful but part of the whole pattern. Some years back, Dean had to shift out of his office and we saw a couple of soul-less places. So we decided to start from scratch – land was cheap enough, and we just bought into it. Also, as designers grow older you realize that richness of ideas comes from interaction, and sharing administration is an added bonus (laughs). So there is architecture, interior design, product design and



“We decided to make a design centre; other like-minded people bought into the idea and it just started rolling on its own. We all have a common value system, a common sense of where design should be.”



now with the mozaic Design Valley, we aim to bring different design genres under one roof to give complete solutions.

**DDC:** In fact, by understanding the client and his requirements, we aim to give him the brief as well, rather than it being the other way around. The aim is to involve all aspects/parties concerned, right from day one, so that there is minimum confrontation at various stages of the project and the delivery time is reduced.

**BK:** Design Valley sounds a very exciting concept. Do share more with us.

**RS:** We don't even know when it happened. There was this blank space where we decided to make a design centre; other like-minded people bought into the idea and it just started rolling on its own. There is no concrete plan but somewhere down the line we all have a common value system, a common sense of where design should be and the fact that we can pool our resources, draw from our experiences, and can hence, offer a much superior service.

**DDC:** Architects are actually just assemblers of material manufacturers, so we need someone to look at the finer details. It is always better when people from different design fields collaborate: like products, planning, graphics, a business point of view, etc., create informal environment for people to come together and work. We are building a design centre that will hold workshops, training programmes, etc. and document each event there. We've been collaborating with universities abroad for exchange programmes. It is also like a retirement plan (laughs), something to do in old age. But on a serious note, all this comes from having worked for so long and realizing the ego has been beaten down and the service aspect needs to come to the fore.

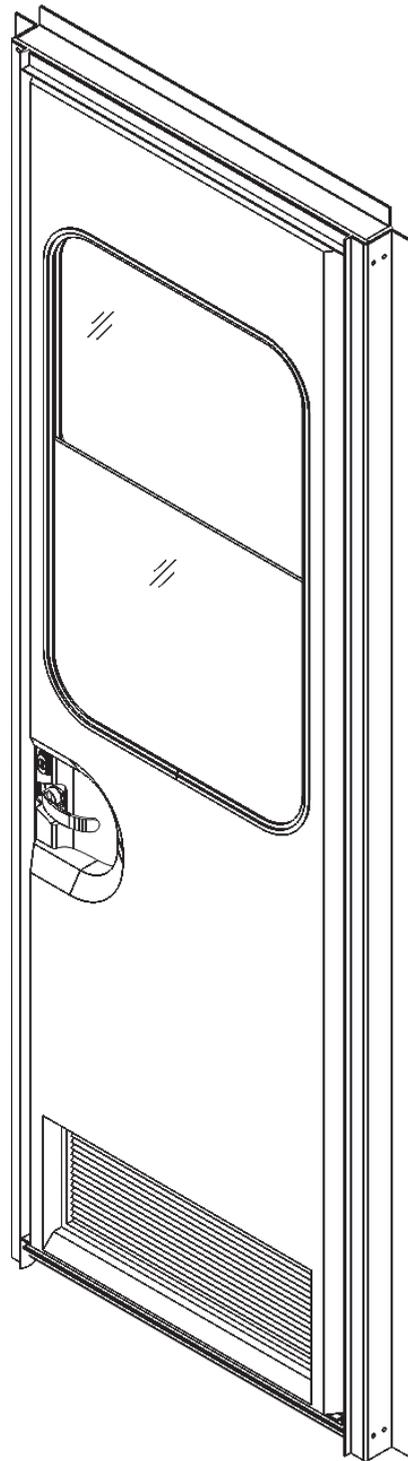
**BK:** Is design also being looked at as a commodity at Design Valley?

**DDC:** Yes, why not. We have a concept that is viable and functional; that can be sold to the industry. For example, we are working on this idea of pre-fabricated homes, which will give you tremendous economic and ecological benefits. The drivers of this project will be the people from design fields, and others like finance, etc. will be the support group. There is a need to reconnect art with the industry. You see it happening abroad, it's high time it happened here as well.

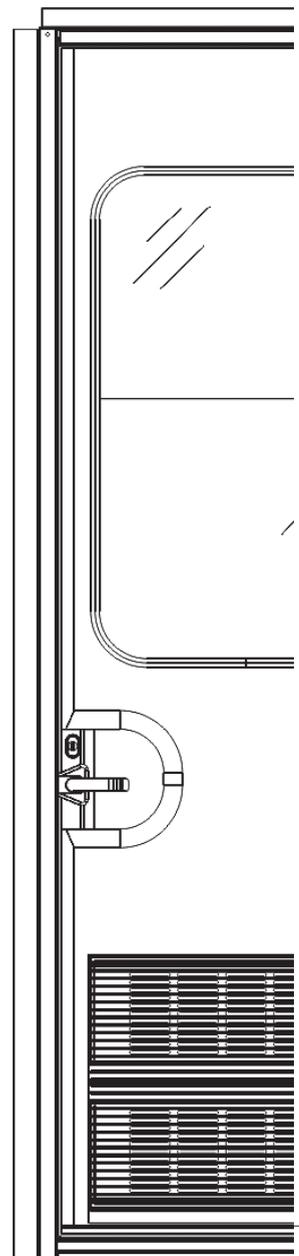
**BK:** Looking back, what would you rate as one of your most cherished projects.

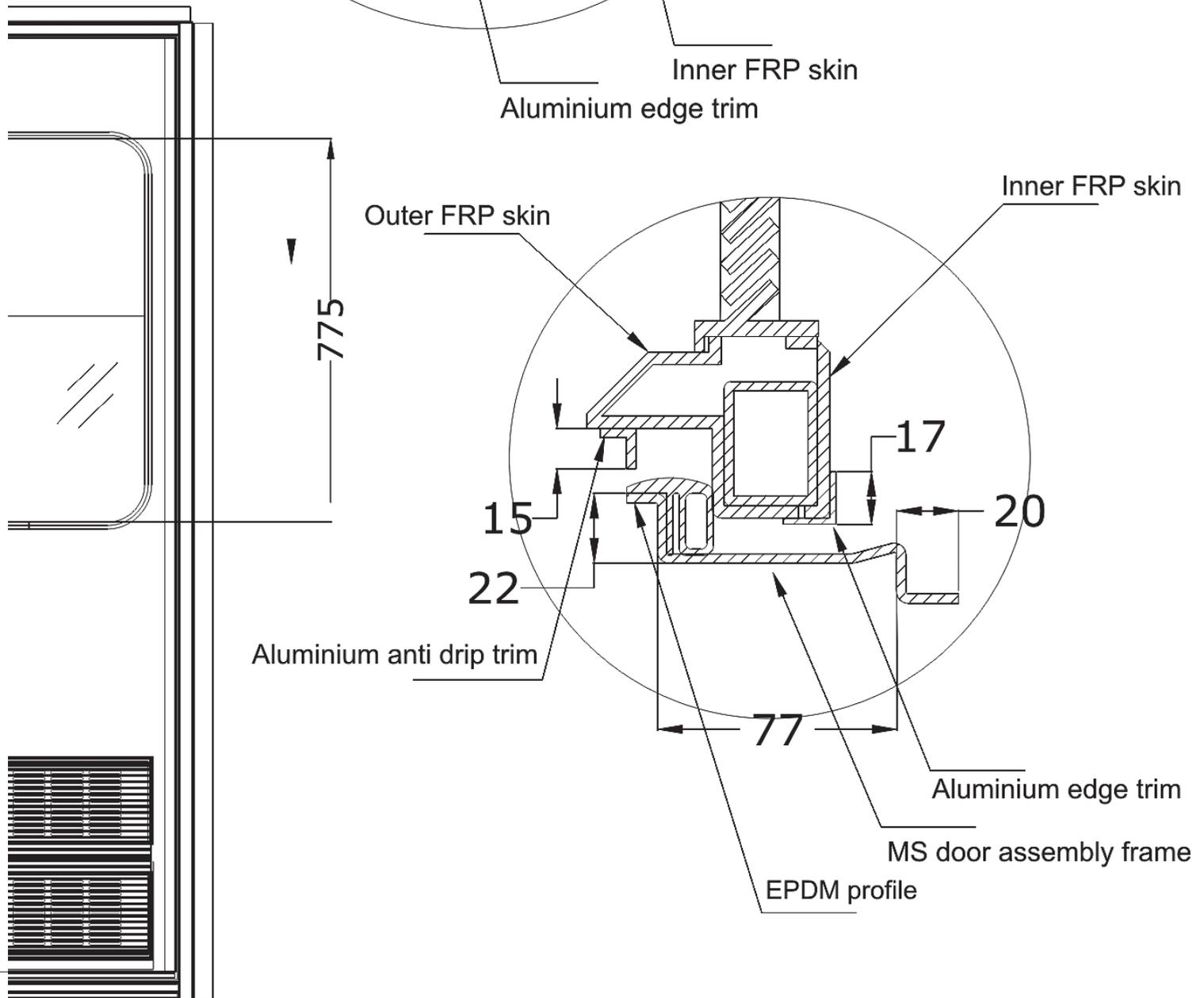
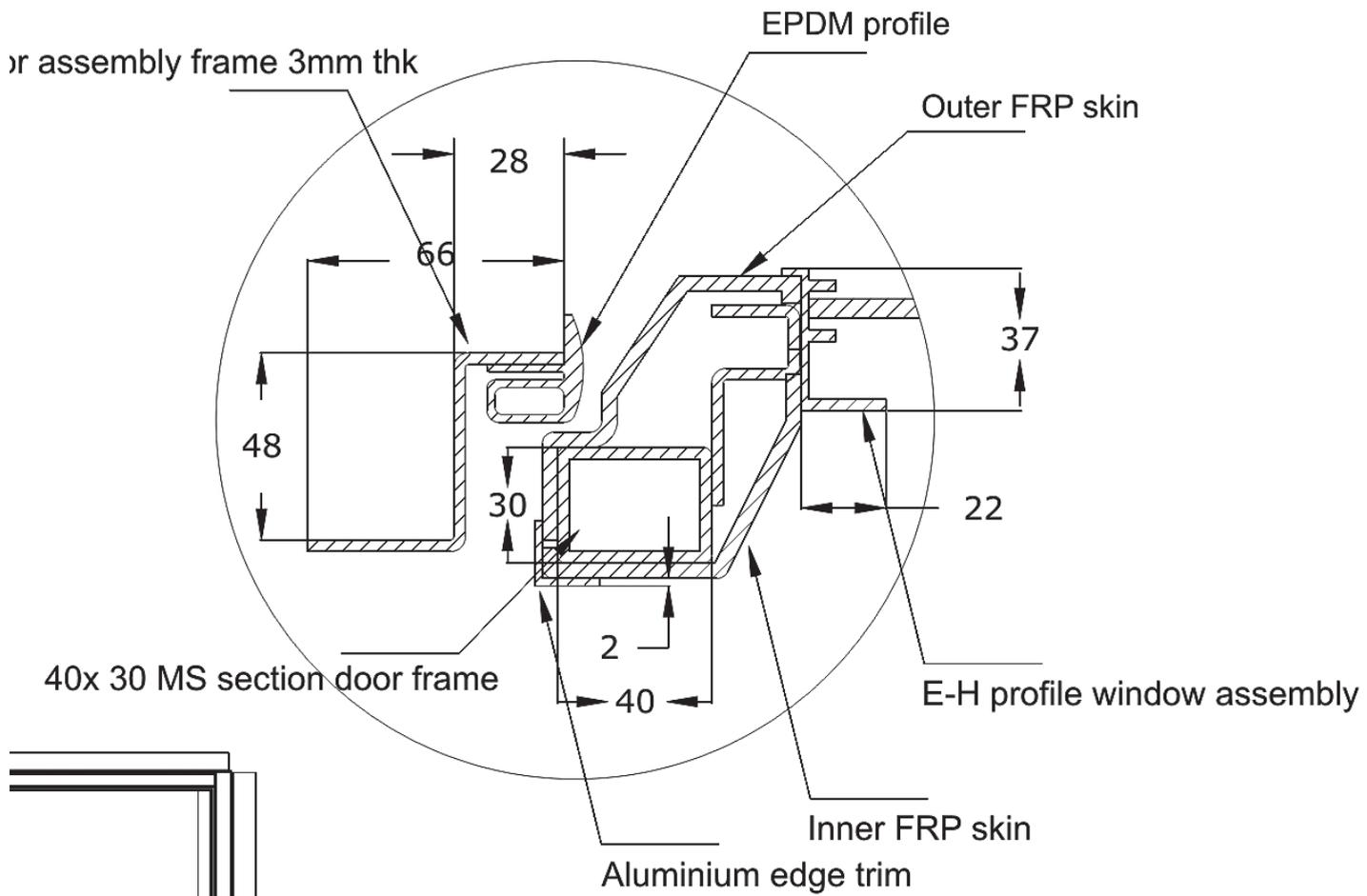
**DDC:** Each one has been a learning in itself. Sometimes there were lovely projects, but lousy clients or lovely clients who lacked vision, at others everything just fell into place. It has been more about relationships than anything else. I'm still servicing clients and projects 25 years later – maintenance issues, little touches here and there. It is wonderful.

**RS:** Every project that moves you out of your comfort circle is a challenge. But the greatest high was when I saw a train streak past me in Punjab with a 'mozaic' designed front end 🚂



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