

# ARCHITECTURE+DESIGN

A N I N D I A N J O U R N A L O F A R C H I T E C T U R E



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# THE AYODHYA AIRPORT: PROMOTING CULTURE AND CONNECTIVITY

PROJECT: Maharishi Valmiki International Airport, Ayodhya. ARCHITECTS: STHAPATI. PHOTOGRAPHS: Noughts and Crosses

The Ayodhya Airport emerges as an infrastructural marvel and a promise of holistic community development and cultural enrichment

Interview: Seema Sreedharan

The Maharishi Valmiki International Airport has put Ayodhya on the map. In a short span of time, the Ayodhya Airport has emerged as an architectural marvel which not just takes its cues from the context, but the culture and heritage of the city. The airport stands as a testimony to the cultural heritage of the city. Beyond its physical dimensions, the airport, with its GRIHA 4-Star Certification, stands as a testament to India's commitment to sustainable practices, heralding a new era in environmentally conscious aviation.

With a peak-hour capacity of 750+ passengers, it will cater to a large population and accommodate the continuous expected growth. A two-storeyed structure, the Ayodhya Airport is adorned with elevational elements depicting the sacred city's rich history. In a detailed interaction with architects Vipul B Varshneya and Harsh Varshneya of STHAPATI, we decode the symbolism, the context, and the architectural design of the airport. Here's an excerpt.

**Designing an airport for a culturally rich state, with equal amount of history and mythology attached to it, must have been a daunting task. Tell us how you approached the design? Did you have any apprehensions? Tell us more...**

**Vipul B Varshneya (VV):** Designing an airport for a culturally rich state like Ayodhya was indeed a challenging yet rewarding experience. Our approach to the design was deeply rooted in respect for the city's heritage and a desire to create a modern facility that

pays homage to its past. We conducted extensive research into Ayodhya's history, mythology, and architectural styles to understand its design principles and aesthetic language. Although we had some apprehensions about striking the right balance between modernity and tradition, we were confident that our approach would result in a design that resonated with the city's residents and visitors. While we were mindful of the significance of the history and context of Ayodhya's culture, we sought to integrate elements of its history into the airport's design in a subtle and respectful manner.

**The architecture and design must have been heavily influenced by The Ramayana. Take us through your design process?**

**Harsh Varshneya (HV):** The design of the new terminal building at Ayodhya is, in fact, a non-direct translation and is influenced by the stories and rich historical significance that Ramayana brings to us. Starting with identifying and studying key places mentioned in the Ramayana, such as temples, their features, grandeur, mythological references, and their significance in today's time, all these aspects were carefully analyzed and reinterpreted on the drawing board to give shape to one of the most iconic buildings we have today in aviation history. Features such as "Toran Dwar" and Stepped Shikharas, with inscriptions reminiscent of entrances to historical temples, were redrawn and reimagined to suit modern needs while retaining their historical essence and enhancing the user experience.







**VIPUL B VARSHNEYA**  
Director - Chief Architect, STHAPATI

*With Masters in Urban Planning, Architect Vipul B Varshneya's stellar vitae says it all: From being a Professor-Design Chair at University to designing & executing some of India's most renowned projects—resettlement of Brij after earthquake to designing India's highest altitude airport, a township outside Mumbai for an urban diaspora to Government Buildings and Hospitals, this multi-talented architect's portfolio covers a wide range of projects in India as well as Mauritius. An awardee from Government and various organizations including Heritage Award from U.P Govt at Ganj Carnival, U.P. Ratan 2013, Shakti Samman 2015 from Governor U.P, awardee of A3 International Foundation—Excellence in Architectural Journalism 2016, Women of the year-2004 award in creative field by Sahara welfare foundation. She has almost 25 awards in her possession till now.*



Designing an airport for a culturally rich state like Ayodhya was indeed a challenging yet rewarding experience. Our approach to the design was deeply rooted in respect for the city's heritage and a desire to create a modern facility that pays homage to its past."

—VIPUL B VARSHNEYA, Director - Chief Architect, STHAPATI

Throughout the design process, the primary focus was to elevate the passenger experience to the highest levels, seamlessly integrating rich mythological references from Ramayana into the airport's architecture. This approach pays tribute to the city's cultural heritage and ensures that the terminal building is a timeless symbol of India's mythological and historical legacy for future generations.

**Religion, politics, and the collective emotions of people, there were way too many factors influencing this project. How did you navigate this difficult landscape?**

**VV:** We approached this project with a thoughtful, strategic and sensitive approach and by prioritizing the core values that define India on a global scale: 'Diversity' and 'Equality'.

Our guiding principle was to respect and honour the significance of Ayodhya as a place and within its cultural context. Our aim across various projects in India and globally has been that each project should follow the 3 Cs: Culture, Climate, and Context. This framework ensured that every design decision was grounded in the rich cultural heritage of Ayodhya, sensitive to the local climate, and mindful of the broader context of the project.

By keeping the importance of this historic city at the forefront, we have been able to navigate through the complexities of religious diversity, political sensitivities and the deep emotional connection the people of India have with Ayodhya. This approach has allowed us to

create a modern airport building that not only meets the practical needs of travellers but also serves as a source of pride for the people of Ayodhya.

**How did you translate the life of Lord Rama into the design language?**

**HV:** In translating Lord Rama's life into the airport's design language, the approach was to encapsulate his famous principles of simplicity in life, equality, and brotherhood. The design of Ayodhya Airport aimed to seamlessly integrate these ideals into the fundamental aspects and features of the airport building, enhancing the overall passenger experiences.

From exteriors to interiors, and from the city side to the airside, every element is designed to reflect the ideologies of Lord Rama and their significance in today's time. When viewed from the City side, which is the departures area, the building serves as a poignant farewell to Ayodhya, capturing the essence of the Ramayana and Lord Rama's story through intricate interior spaces. Artworks depicting the story of Lord Rama adorn the check-in hall area, guiding passengers through the security hold area and enriching their journey. Similarly, on the air side, for a passenger looking out of an aircraft window, the first glimpse of the building from the apron is an attempt to translate to let the passenger know where he is. The significance of the place amalgamates with the design language in bringing a wonderful passenger experience as he steps into the building and Ayodhya.





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—HARSH VARSHNEYA, Principal Architect, STHAPATI



**HARSH VARSHNEYA**  
Principal Architect, STHAPATI

*Harsh Varshneya is the Director and Head of Design at STHAPATI, an award-winning multidisciplinary architectural practice headquartered in Lucknow & Delhi. Their globally recognised portfolio spans a spectrum of building typologies, from individual dwellings to large-scale urban developments.*

*Harsh graduated as a triple Gold medalist from the prestigious Sushant School of Art and Architecture in Gurugram, marking the beginning of a remarkable journey in architecture and design. His pursuit of excellence led him to the world-renowned University of Nottingham, where he received his master's in sustainable tall buildings, accredited to CTBUH, Chicago.*



**Could you take us through the design language? How did you integrate the historic city's heritage into the architecture?**

**VV:** Departing from the conventional glass box architecture, each facet of the airport, from its towering roof to the intricate columns, has a historical and spiritual significance. The airport's architecture weaves together history, tradition, sustainable practices, and mythological stories—a deliberate departure from minimalism and the coming together of cultural expression and modern innovation.

At the main entrance of Ayodhya Airport, a grand stepped shikhar stands tall, adorned with brass. This architectural masterpiece follows the Nagara style, outlined with scriptures, presenting a majestic and culturally rich welcome to the passengers. The city's heritage and story unfold through intricate columns, each laden with profound symbolism. The mega columns supporting the terminal roof symbolize the Kandas of Ramayana, blending cultural richness into the airport's architecture. The Khandika, symbolizing impermanence, coexists with the Deva Gana Patta, embodying divine features. Every column narrates a story of dedication, courage, and spirituality, weaving the city's essence into the very fabric of the airport. The 'Toran dwaras' stand out remarkably, especially at eye level. As people stroll by, they effortlessly command attention, truly captivating the onlookers. These intricately adorned entrances serve as a nod to mythological references, creating a symbolic connection to the region's rich heritage.

The terminal building is a canvas of profound messages. The Bow and Arrow mural symbolises the courage to confront untruth, while hexagonal light particles embody the eternal triumph of truth over hierarchy. From arrivals to skylights, artworks intricately depict the timeless tale of Lord Rama from the Ramayana, creating an immersive, sensory-rich experience beyond traditional airport designs. Strategically placed skylights serve as guiding beacons, enhancing wayfinding and offering a sensory experience for passengers.

**Did you incorporate any Indian art forms/ collaborate with local artisans for the project?**

**VV:** Yes, we collaborated with local artisans and craftsmen to incorporate Indian art forms into the project. We were inspired by the rich tradition of Indian art and sought to integrate elements of this tradition into the airport's design. For example, we commissioned local artists to create murals and artworks that reflect Ayodhya's cultural heritage. We also used traditional techniques such as stone carving, woodwork, and mural painting to create a sense of craftsmanship and artistry in the airport's architecture. By collaborating with local artisans, we were able to create a design that is not only visually stunning but also deeply rooted in the cultural identity of Ayodhya. In a departure from minimalism, the airport captures the essence of India's vibrant history, fostering a revival of local artistry.





The most challenging aspect of designing this project was balancing the need for modern facilities and functionality with respect for Ayodhya's heritage and cultural significance. We had to find a way to create a state-of-the-art airport that meets the needs of today's travellers while preserving the city's historic charm and spiritual essence."

—VIPUL B VARSHNEYA, Director - Chief Architect, STHAPATI

The airport embodies a commitment to sustainability through modern advancements while providing a platform for traditional craftsmanship to thrive. It's a harmonious integration of the old and the new, a beacon of cultural resurgence in modern India.

#### Can you elaborate on the sustainable building methods you opted for this project?

**HV:** The Ayodhya Airport emerges as an infrastructural marvel and a promise of holistic community development and cultural enrichment. Beyond its physical dimensions, the airport, with its GRIHA 4-Star Certification, stands as a testament to India's commitment to sustainable practices, heralding a new era in environmentally conscious aviation. Embracing carbon neutrality with eco-conscious GRC materials, the design pioneers sustainable practices in aviation. Ornamental work, meticulously crafted in Glass Fiber Reinforced Concrete (GRC) after extensive research and technical precision, replaces traditional stone facades and significantly contributes to environmental sustainability, resulting in substantial carbon emission reduction.

#### What was the most challenging aspect of designing this project?

**VV:** The most challenging aspect of designing this project was balancing the need for modern facilities and functionality with respect for Ayodhya's heritage and cultural significance. We had to find a way to create a state-of-the-art airport that meets the needs of today's travellers while preserving the city's historic charm and spiritual essence. This required careful planning, stakeholder collaboration, and a deep understanding of Ayodhya's cultural and architectural heritage. Despite the challenges, we are proud of the final design, which we believe strikes a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity, reflecting the spirit of Ayodhya. ✨

#### FACTFILE

**Design and Architecture by:** STHAPATI

**Design Team:** Vipul B. Varshneya, Harsh Varshneya, Khushboo Bansal, Anuj Varshneya, Manish Gupta, Saurabh Sharma in collaboration with the Airport Authority of India (AAI) and their planning and design team.

**Build-up Area:** 8000 Sqm

**Master Plan Area:** 336.99 Acres

**Cost:** 250 Crores