



Riley Smith Photography

He's been described as one of the world's top architects and one of Canada's most influential citizens. How did 37-year-old Omar Gandhi utilize Dalhousie University, rural Nova Scotia and modest local projects to catapult himself to the top of his profession? *Atlantic Business Magazine's* Stephen Kimber explains



Submitted photo Omar Gandhi



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Applying to Dalhousie University's school of architecture was, Omar Gandhi freely admits today, his "big Hail Mary."

Having failed to get into architecture school at the prestigious University of Waterloo in Kitchener, Ontario ("it was the only place I applied to from high school, so I was heartbroken"), Omar initially settled unhappily for less-best: a theoretical Bachelor of Arts in Architecture *Studies* program offered by the University of Toronto.

It was a new program and there were kinks. "We felt like guinea pigs," he remembers. Worse, the four-year program, which advertised itself as "a broad design, arts and humanities-based lens through which students gain a rich foundation in architecture, urbanism, and visual art," was little more than a way station on the road to Omar's real destination: becoming the conceiving/designing/building architect he'd dreamed about since his first days at Mayfield Secondary School in Caledon, an arts-focused high school in the far western suburbs of Toronto.

Omar already understood that, even if he reeled in his BA in architecture studies, he'd still find himself competing with hundreds of his fellow architecture studies grads — "it was a very good class" — for not nearly as many places in U of T's two-year professional Master of Architecture program. Which meant he would have been stuck inside university classrooms for six years before he could become a practicing architect. Omar was impatient.

By the end of year two, "I had decided I needed to think strategically." He began to research other options. That's how he stumbled on Dalhousie University's School of Architecture in Halifax. "I knew nothing at all about Halifax," and not much more about Dal.

But he liked what he discovered about the way Dal approached architecture. "Our school values hands-on experience in drawing, modeling, and building," the web site said. "We value the integration of design, humanities, technology, and professional practice. We also value local projects that are informed by international and historical insights."

Better, Dal offered the kind of hands-dirty co-op program that had attracted Omar to the University of Waterloo in the first place.

Best of all, Omar discovered he could apply to Dal's Master's programs after completing only two years of his undergraduate degree.

So, during his third year at U of T, Omar applied. And — Well, he admits with a smile, he was not welcomed as the prodigal son. "I finally got accepted just before September," he recalls. He believes he "probably" was on a waitlist and accepted only because others who'd been admitted turned down their place in the program at the last minute.

No matter. Hail Mary pass thrown... and caught.

The rest, as they say, is architectural history that is still very much being written.

THOUGH he is just 37, Halifax based architect Omar Gandhi has already cemented a place for himself as one of the rising stars in the world of international architecture. The *Globe and Mail* called him "Canada's next top architect." *Wallpaper Magazine*, one-upping the *Globe*, included him on a list of the world's top 20 architects. Last November, British-based *Monocle magazine* named him to its list — forget just architecture — of the 20 most influential Canadians, a list that also included such luminaries as Adrienne Clarkson and Galen Weston.

In 2016, he won New York's Architectural League Emerging Voices award. In 2015, *World Architecture News* shortlisted him for its "21 for 21" award as one of 21 architects worldwide who could become "the leading lights of architecture in the 21st century." In 2014, he was named winner of the Canada Council's prestigious \$50,000 Prix de Rome prize to research the ways in which precipitation can shape design. By then, even though he'd only opened his own practice in 2010, he'd already also won two provincial Lieutenant-Governor's Design Awards for Architecture, in 2012 and 2013.

To put all of that into a regional but also a global context, Omar Gandhi is, according to the *Globe*, among the "steadily growing ranks of elite Atlantic Canadian architects who are boldly contemporizing east coast building forms, redefining the region's design aesthetics in the process." And making the

architecture world sit up and take notice.

Not bad for an "almost second generation" Indo-Canadian kid from a Toronto suburb who, 15 years ago, couldn't even have identified the locations of some of his signature architectural projects — Liverpool, Hunts Point, Hubbards, Purcell's Cove, or Inverness — on a map.

ALTHOUGH Omar Gandhi's parents were Indian, they both came to the west when they were young: his mother to Montreal at four, his father to London at seven. His father eventually became a microbiologist, his mother an emergency room nurse. Omar was the eldest of their three children, and only son.

"You won't find many people from my [Indian] community in the arts," Omar explains. "Engineering, medicine, law, business... but not the arts."

His own interest in the arts, he says, was a gift from his father, an avid painter in his youth who eventually abandoned that passion for the security of a respectable job and responsible career. He recommended architecture as a potential vocation for his son, in part because it was in the arts but also because it offered the possibility of combining his creative side with a professional career.

The best thing Omar remembers about his secondary school — an arts high school you had to audition to get into — was that it forced him to "continually produce and present my work, which was a terrifying experience" for a self-described "shy" boy from Brampton.

The University of Toronto helped pull him further out of his shell. "People were unhappy with the way things were going in the [architecture studies] program — I think the university saw it as a bit of a cash cow — and so I took on a leadership role trying to make the program a better experience for everyone. It was," he says now, "a turning point in my life."

A turning point that would lead him, after a few more twists and turns, to Dalhousie University — and to yet another series of key turning points.

The Halifax architecture school's approach, he says, was, unlike Toronto, "which was all about technology and complexity. Dalhousie was careful and thoughtful. It was not bombastic or

bold, so doing those kind of big, bold projects weren't necessarily going to get you good marks." Dalhousie, and Nova Scotia itself, began to shape Gandhi — and his approach to how he would practise his chosen profession. "I fell in love with the landscape. I fell in love with the vernacular. I'd grown up in this banal suburban life, and Nova Scotia seemed so much more authentically Canadian."

Despite all that, Gandhi did return home to Toronto briefly after he graduated in 2005, taking learning jobs with some of the country's largest and most prestigious architecture firms. But then, in 2008, when his then-wife, Elizabeth, was offered a job in Halifax, "we decided as a family to return. But my stipulation was that I had to find a job here. I didn't want to sacrifice my career."

He quickly found a position with Bryan MacKay-Lyons at MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects Limited in Halifax.

It should have been a collaboration made in architecture heaven. It wasn't.

In many ways, Brian MacKay-Lyons is an older, more established version of Omar Gandhi. Like Gandhi, MacKay-Lyons is also an award-winning, regionally-based but internationally acclaimed architect whose work, according to Canadian Architect magazine, "deftly navigates between the twin poles of tradition and modernity."

Unfortunately, neither MacKay-Lyons nor Gandhi could "deftly navigate" their own professional relationship. "He was not a very easy person to work with," Gandhi says today, "especially when I disagreed with him — vocally." The arrangement ended after just a year and a half. "It was a mutual decision for the most part," he explains, though he later tells me he was "let go... or I left."

In the end, it didn't matter. It was March 2010 and Omar Gandhi was sitting home alone in his attic, trying to figure out how to re-assemble his hopes and his dreams.

“Omar is quite different than any other architect I’ve ever worked with... his ego isn’t as big as other male architects.”

Deborah Herman-Spartinelli, owner, Trunnells and Tenons Construction

WHICH is where Lynda Earle and her husband Andy Blakadar enter the frame. Two young family medicine specialists, they'd grown up in small towns in Nova Scotia and had recently returned to the province to launch not only their own family practice but also their own family. The couple owned a century-old home in Liverpool, a small town near the Mersey River on Nova Scotia's south shore, that was in need of both modernization and expansion. So they enlisted the aid of their friend, Omar Gandhi, an architect then striking out on his own as Omar Gandhi Architect Inc.

Gandhi and the couple soon decided on a grander vision than a simple renovation/addition. The project would become known as "Cedar in Three Textures." Opening up the existing house "along its southern flanks to bring in natural light and views, previously unexploited, of the nearby Mersey River," they agreed to use local building materials in the construction, re-covering the existing exterior with unfinished Eastern White cedar shingles, and cladding the new, river-facing addition with two different widths of Eastern White cedar boards. And they also agreed all the interior carpentry should be made from local birch and maple, fabricated right in Liverpool.

The question: who could translate that handcrafted local vision into reality? They interviewed three contractors, Omar remembers, "but the third one blew everyone out of the water." Her name was Deborah Herman-Spartinelli, the owner of Trunnells and Tenons Construction, an experienced and well-respected Queen's County building firm. Fifty-four-year-old Herman-Spartinelli, who'd begun as a labourer at 27 — while still juggling toddlers at home — and earned her journeyman carpenter's papers by the time she was 37, was a traditionalist when it came to building. She insisted, for example, on using hammer and galvanized nails rather than air-powered hammer guns to create what she believed was a "much stronger product."

Her obsession with such detail dovetailed nicely with Gandhi's own construction world view. "Deborah is extremely knowledgeable," he says today. Equally

important, she wasn't judgmental. "I could say I don't know something, and not worry about having my ego in it. She became a mentor of mine."

Herman-Spartinelli was equally complimentary. "Omar is quite different than any other architect I've ever worked with," she would tell the *Globe and Mail*. He not only showed up frequently to the construction site, she says, but "his ego isn't as big as other male architects."

They ended up collaborating on several local projects, including Shantih, a spectacular Hunts Point beach cottage for which Gandhi would win his first Lieutenant-Governor's architectural award. That created plenty of local buzz — "it felt like people there were cheering us on" — but it didn't do much to spread his reputation beyond the local community.

When you ask him about how he transformed himself from independent local architect into international "starchitect," he demurs. "Marketing seems like such a weird word," he says. Architects aren't supposed to advertise, but they do share their good news. "You do your best to put yourself out there," he explains, "online, among journalists."

Which led to one of his greatest coups. He talked about the Cedars project with Lisa Rochon, one of his former professors who was then writing the CITYSCAPE column for the *Globe and Mail*. Rochon was especially intrigued by the collaboration between a young male architect and an older woman contractor in a world in which "most practising architects are men — white men — and almost every one of them relies on a male contractor to build his stuff."

Although focusing on that, Rochon also wrote rapturously about Gandhi's own architectural vision. He "thinks about architecture as beginning like the first 30 beats of a simple, raw song, or like stories that start dead simple. The suspense then gets brushed in, and heightened with shadow, before allowing for the drama to begin," she wrote, adding "Gandhi's homes are modest in scale and keep to the traditional, timeworn truth of locally sourced materials."

Finding himself featured in the *Globe and Mail* less than a year after he'd hung out his architect's shingle wasn't just gratifying; it also helped spark more business.

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Lisa Rochon, columnist, *Globe and Mail*

ONE afternoon in the winter of 2011 Peggy Moore greeted her husband Garth's return home from work with a confession. "Remember that story in the *Globe*, the one about the architect and the woman contractor," she said. "I emailed him today. I told him I'm not sure we can afford you, but we like your aesthetic."

Her husband laughed. He had sent his own email to Deborah Herman-Spartinelli, asking if she might be interested in building a house for them.

Garth and Peggy were empty nesters, artists who'd given up their art to earning a living and raise a family, but were now eager to resurrect those long forgotten dreams in a new space all their own.

They'd moved from Alberta to Nova Scotia a few years before to be with Peggy's dying younger sister, and then decided to stay. They'd spent two fruitless years looking for a house to fit their dreams before their brother-in-law came up with a solution: build your own.

Although they'd recently bought a deeply-forested chunk of land between the ocean and a lake on Nova Scotia's Aspotogan Peninsula, 45 minutes south of Halifax, they continued to live in a north-end Halifax flat while they figured out what to do with their new land.

When they met with Omar, they walked the land and talked about what they liked — and didn't — in houses. "There were lots of meetings," Peggy remembers. Adds Garth: "Omar is very passionate. He puts his heart and soul into everything he does. He doesn't settle. So it was a positive, exciting experience."

AFTER their meetings, Gandhi came back to with two "very rough drawings," for them to consider. "The problem," says Garth, "was to pick one. They were both awesome."

In the end, their 1,500-square foot home nestled into the side of a hill features a two-storey kitchen framed by second-floor his-and-hers artist's studios. Continuous windows overlooking the property dominate the main floor, opening up the space to the outside. Given the Moores' two dogs and their desire for durable, comfortable livable spaces, Gandhi designed the house to be left "exceedingly raw" with concrete floors and plywood walls.

Herman-Spartinelli didn't end up building this project. It turned out to be too far from her home base. But Gandhi was able to find another builder — Mike Burns of Halifax-based MRB Contracting — who was just as passionate and just as committed to traditional building aesthetics.

On the final build day, Gandhi remembers, Burns, his foreman and most of the members of the building crew brought cameras to the site "because it wasn't just another job. There was an immense amount of pride. They understood modern architecture as well as old world craftsmanship, and were collectively as excited about the final product as I was. Most of them were in their twenties, and this felt like... this is your shot."

Perhaps more importantly, five years after they moved in, Garth and Peggy Moore remain more than satisfied with their new house. "It feels like us."

WHEN most of us think of architects, we tend to visualize big projects — public spaces like the new Halifax library, corporate head offices, or university complexes. Although Gandhi likes the idea of "making spaces that everyone can enjoy," and has designed a number of larger projects, including villa residences and retail spaces at the Cabot Links golf course in Cape Breton, most of his projects have been small-scale homes for individuals.

That's partly simple reality — "big projects are hard to get; houses are small and clients come to you" — but it also fits nicely with his own architectural world view. "Every project is a one-off that reflects not only my vision, but also the landscape and the clients," he says. "I don't want people to ever say, 'Oh, that's an Omar

project. I don't want to do any 'bread-and-butter' projects just for the sake of the money."

That's not to suggest Gandhi's services come cheap. "I made clear from Day 1 that I was going to be pretty expensive," he says today. "It was about self-worth in our profession. It's important to charge a premium for what you do."

That certainly hasn't deterred would-be customers. Work continues to "flood in." And not just to his Halifax office in a nondescript waterfront warehouse. In 2016, he opened a second office in Toronto, and now splits his time between the two cities.

The move is partly professional. "I'd been receiving so much good press it seemed like this was that time to do it." But it's also partly the result of his own changing personal circumstances. Omar and his wife are no longer together, though they amicably co-parent their five-year-old son. "And my parents are there, so Toronto has felt a bit like going back home."

But that raises professional questions too. Given his unquestioned success creating architectural magic by working within and reflecting Atlantic Canada's natural environment, can he now translate his east coast architecture aesthetic into urban Toronto, "a city," as one magazine put it, "tangled in power lines and too close neighbours?"

"It's definitely a question people have been asking," he acknowledges. "I put pressure on myself too. I'm looking deeper, looking around, trying to understand the history before there was this 'generic modern' style... Making a building cool or trendy is easy. I'm looking for a deeper meaning, a way to tie a building to people and place and stories. Toronto," he adds, "also has these old neighbourhoods, with their own scale, their own nature. How much difference is there really between Cabbagetown and Liverpool?"

He is about to find out.

But Gandhi says he has no plans to abandon Halifax entirely. It is where he got his start, where he developed his style, where he earned his reputation. "As long as there are people here interested in what I have to offer, I'll be here."

That shouldn't be a problem. •

FEEDBACK

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