

'She championed hands-on kind of architecture, privileged the handmade'

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NEW DELHI, JULY 5

DELIA 'DIDI' Contractor was an artist, designer and a self-taught architect. For over three decades, she worked in Kangra valley, Himachal Pradesh, promoting the need to live and build sustainably. She died on July 5 due to age-related ailments at her home in Sidhbari, aged 91.

The only child of a German father and American mother, Didi made India her home in 1951, when she married the late Narayan Ramji Contractor. Through her husband's friend, Maharana Bhagwant Singh Mewar, the Maharana of Udaipur, she had the opportunity to deco-



DELIA 'DIDI'
CONTRACTOR
1929-2021

rate the Lake Palace Hotel in 1961.

Her interactions with social reformer Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay gave her impetus to pursue new learnings in traditional Indian crafts, which led to design textiles, furnishings and furniture. She was

deeply influenced by philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy's ideas on art and swadeshi, and Gandhian ideas of appropriate technology. It gave her a vision of "what India could be and what was fast disappearing".

Didi's predilection for rural life brought her to Andretta in Kangra in the '70s, where she observed and learnt the nuances of local construction with sun-dried mud bricks, bamboo and slate, and began designing solar cookers in mud and glass.

In an interview to *The Indian Express*, Didi had said, "Technology should also be consistent with a humanistic agenda of making people comfortable with themselves, with one another and nature."

Through her own life, Didi showed what it meant to live sustainably — the way she recycled materials in her home, the clothes she wore, the food she ate. In her first project in 1995, a community clinic in Kangra, she used local materials, adding her own ingredients to traditional techniques.

Didi was awarded the Nari Shakti Puraskar in 2019 for her work in promoting local skills and innovating new techniques using traditional materials.

Bengaluru-based architect Chitra Vishwanath, recalls, "Didi championed the hands-on kind of architecture, where she privileged the handmade. She revolutionised the use of mud, taking care of every contemporary need, with more light and air."