

# Rochelle Santimano – Breathing Life into History

**Nilankur Das**

For Rochelle Santimano, Goa is deep, Goa is timeless. Growing up between Bombay and Goa, Rochelle's journey is one of duality: the vibrant, urban pulse of Bombay that shaped her education and career, and the gentle, rooted essence of Goa, which gave her purpose. Her love for heritage, old homes, and architecture isn't just a professional pursuit—it's her *ikigai*, her reason for being.

"Ever since I was little, I've been inclined towards arts and crafts," Rochelle shares. "Through school and college, I was constantly toying with art and design in different forms. Once I learned that architecture was a blend of design and technicality, I couldn't see myself doing anything else." It was this inherent love for creation that led Rochelle down a path of discovery, where she found her craft and her place in preserving Goa's cultural legacy.

Though born and raised in Bombay, Rochelle's ties to Goa run deep. Her family's roots in Colva meant that holidays were spent at the ancestral home, soaking in the rich history of a land that was as much hers as her present in Bombay. She recalls being spellbound by the grand churches she visited as a child. "Some of my best childhood memories were the times spent with my cousins and family at our ancestral home in Colva. As a child, it was always the grand churches that captured my imagination... I find myself in awe of the high ceilings, crystal chandeliers, mosaic tiled walls, decorative altars, and stone flooring. It instantly transports you to a different era."

This awe, this connection to the past, lingered with her well into adulthood. It became clear to Rochelle that her future lay not just in designing new structures but in preserving and restoring those that held stories within their walls. A fellowship from the Charles Correa Foundation cemented her understanding of Goan architecture and its cultural significance. It was a turning point. "One of the projects that stood out to me at the time was the detailed documentation of the heritage structures in the city of Panjim," she says. The intricate work of documenting these old homes opened her eyes to the importance of preserving such buildings—for their aesthetic value and importantly, for the stories they carry.

Rochelle's formal initiation into restoration came when she branched out on her own in 2020. Her first project, Villa Saudade, was a reflection of her respect for history. "The brief was to design a homestay within the 4,500 sq ft house that belonged to a renowned Goan historian and author. With Villa Saudade, our interventions were quite simple because I knew that I didn't want to take anything away from the majestic piece of art



that this 400-year-old home was." The result was a stunning preservation of the old home's soul, with minimal alterations and a reverence for its original form. "We even maintained the white and blue colouring of the original façade," she adds with pride.

For Rochelle, restoration is a technical challenge as well as an emotional and intellectual one. "As a restorer of old houses, the key idea is to retain the home's bones in a way that preserves its heritage charm and distinct architectural features, while also considering the needs and wants of 21st-century living." This balance—honouring the past while making spaces liveable for the present—is what excites her most. She speaks passionately about the challenges of modern living in old homes. "We want comfortable bedrooms, ensuite bathrooms, large open kitchens, swimming pools, work-from-home corners, and areas to enjoy watching football on TV. All of these wants didn't exist back when these homes were built."

The unique challenge of restoring century-old homes lies in harmonising the historical and the contemporary. "Every old house has its own story to tell," she says, "and if you listen closely, the space itself reveals what it needs." Her approach is not about forcing change but rather about revealing the inherent beauty that already exists. "I try to draw inspiration from within the same home but refrain from mimicking the old style. I stick to a palette of natural and handmade materials—materials that our ancestors would have used back in the day, such as lime plaster, mosaic, terrazzo, cement oxide, wood, and stone."

Currently, Rochelle and her team are working on a 130-year-old home in Parra, as well as family homes in Moira and Panjim, each one offering its own set of challenges and revelations. "All of these houses are over a century old and have unique characteristics and personalities of their own," she says, excited by the possibility of what lies ahead. For Rochelle, every restoration project is a personal journey, an intimate conversation with the past.

The importance of preserving Goan architecture, according to Rochelle, goes far beyond aesthetics. "Much like arts, crafts, cuisine, and music, the architecture of a region plays an important role in defining its cultural identity." These homes, built centuries ago with local materials and designed to withstand Goa's tropical climate, reflect the state's history and cultural fusion. "For me, restoring old homes is a personal journey to contribute, in my own small way, to the rich cultural heritage of Goa."

However, she is acutely aware of the challenges heritage homes face, especially the ever-present threat of neglect. "A drive through any Goan village will show us at least a handful of properties crumbling down, dilapidated, disputed. Once we lose a structure, it is impossible to go back in time and revive it." Yet, there is hope. "Thankfully, people have started to understand the value of our heritage homes, and I feel lucky to be practicing at a time when I can help transform these old structures into functional spaces."

Rochelle emphasises that finances are often the biggest hurdle in maintaining old homes, but creative solutions like adaptive reuse can open new possibilities. "Owners today have alternative options such as creating home-stays or renting out their homes to restaurants, cafés, or co-working spaces." This allows heritage homes to serve new functions while maintaining their integrity. "Heritage homes do not have to be restricted to the function of living—they can also accommodate other functions such as working, dining, shopping."

In a world increasingly obsessed with modern trends, Rochelle is a voice for balance. "Modern skyscrapers can be found in any part of the world. Goa's traditional architecture is something you will only see in Goa and nowhere else." Her work shows that progress and preservation can coexist, and that the future must be built with respect for the past. "500 years from now, if all our homes were replaced with modern skyscrapers, we will have no physical evidence of what defines the unique architectural fabric of Goa."

For Rochelle, restoration is a profession—it's a love story. Through her hands, Goan homes are given a new lease on life, their stories interlaced into the fabric of the present, with a promise and a hope that future generations will have something tangible to connect them to their roots.

## Close Encounters of the Goan Kind