

# RAISING THE BAR

FROM A HOLE-IN-THE-WALL RESTAURANT TO POPULAR HANGOUTS IN THE PARTY CAPITAL, SUMESSH MENON HAS COME A LONG WAY

BY CAROL FERRAO & MARIA LOUIS



**H**is first independent project may have been named 'Hole in the wall', but Sumesh Menon's portfolio is no longer just a collection of "small dingy bar/restaurants." If 2016 has been any indication, Menon is steadily making his mark in the hospitality industry with an enviable project portfolio that includes talk-of-the-town hangout spots like Harry's, Mr.Baozi, Koko and the soon-to-be opened restaurants/lounges Papaya and Playboy. "Over the years, I have realised that the hospitality industry is one design arena that lets you explore creativity to the fullest," maintains the founder of Sumesh Menon + Associates, who along with his firm has established a reputation in high-end and bespoke residential, corporate and hospitality interiors.

Since creative design always intrigued him right from the start, making a career of it was a natural result. "Preparation for this industry came only through actual hands-on experi-

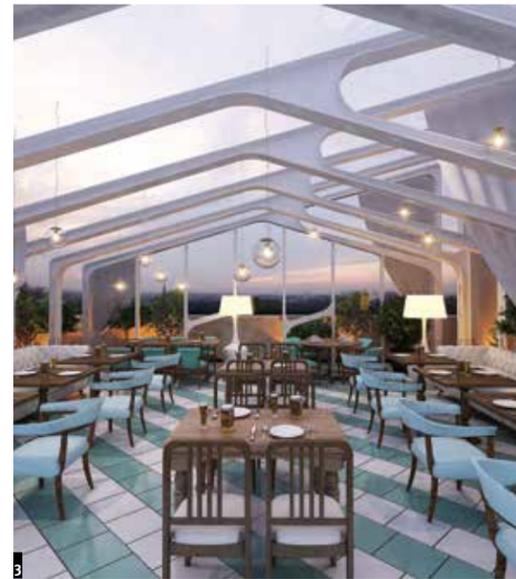
ence and site work. Travelling a lot has also helped in preparing for a more open outlook towards designing," shares Menon about his early years as a designer. A self-taught designer, Menon has built his firm through perseverance and continuous learning engagements; and his only formal training in the field has been through a design course in New York. In the end, it is his innate understanding of design and unhindered commitment to individual projects ("every project is personal to me and gives me a sense of ownership," he says) that has enabled him to become a design force to reckon with, especially in the hospitality sector.

It all began a decade or so ago with a small 400sq-ft place – almost living up to its name Hole in the Wall – in New York. This mini takeaway restaurant turned out to be big break in Menon's career. "(It was) a landmark in my design journey. From then on, the transition to restaurant design has been inevitable," he says. There was no looking back after that,



1. Self-taught designer Sumesh Menon has made his mark through sheer perseverance.

2. Mr.Baozi, the most recent addition to Mumbai's eating-out scene, combines local and Asian influences into a raw, earthy look with contemporary touches. The rope installation cleverly creates a private nook.



## MATERIAL LOVE

In a market saturated with design materials, Menon gets to work with many and explore each one's creative potential in different ways. Lately, he is most keen to work with woven wire in varying interesting patterns. "It works beautifully for many applications, both indoors and outdoors. A number of my recent projects exhibit the versatility of wire meshes explicitly," he states. At Harry's Bar and Café, the columns are wrapped up in delicate mesh and backlit; different types of mesh screens can also be found throughout the restaurant. In a different interpretation, wire mesh fixtures lined up against an art wall mark the cosy booth seating space at Mr.Baozi. Besides being fascinated by the different uses of mesh, Menon also finds pre-fabricated houses/buildings to be the most efficient innovation. "It's what everybody is now looking forward to. It heralds the dawn of the DIY (Do It Yourself) era that's efficient, time-conscious and instant," he believes.

with more opportunities to design in New York and across India. His design genius has been sought the world over – whether for residential villas in Dubai and South Africa, or for restaurants in Mumbai, Delhi and Pune, among other cities. "I have evolved and matured through (these projects) and, thus, each has proved to be a milestone for me," discloses Menon about his journey so far.

When it comes to inspirations, the Sydney Opera House never fails to amaze the designer. It is the structure's geometry and intricate detailing that has always awed and intrigued him. "I have often found myself going back to it time and again for inspiration," he explains. For someone who enjoys modern architecture, it is no surprise that he also admires James Law for his futuristic designs. It is the Hong Kong-based architect's Cyberecture concept – merging urban design with technology, which Menon finds particularly fascinating. He also mentions Zaha Hadid, Hiroshi Naito and Marcel Breuer as other constant sources of inspiration.

The combination of his hands-on learning and iconic inspirations has helped him develop sensory-rich projects, where a modern mixture of found objects, repurposed materials, accessories and furniture made at the highest level of international craft are brought together with finesse. Care-



fully developing each project from concept to post-construction, Menon works holistically to realise each client's unique vision. He can create interiors that are tailored, modern and elegant with as much ease as those that are rough, sleek and bold. He is not defined by any one particular style, but his ability to meticulously craft each space with its own identity is his true USP. Menon's work is at once familiar, but also reveals surprises and new interpretations, embracing both the period and the modern.

Among the repository of well-loved projects, the designer picks Koko, Mr.Baozi and Harry's Bar & Café as his overall favourites. Greatly appreciated by the design-conscious, these three projects gave Menon the opportunity to explore various design concepts and materials. At MrBaozi, he has created a treasure trove of illustrative design ideas, fine craft and exceptional customisation. It's a lively, chirpy yet warm space with a refreshing new theme – raw earthy meets funky Asian. Finding a different approach to the Asian theme, he creates a subtle and yet evidently Oriental language for Koko, a pan-Asian restaurant. "The fact that all (these projects) are such reputed names to reckon with, make them significant for me. My most favourite hospitality project, so far, is Koko. The best one is yet to come," he declares.

2016 was clearly an eventful year for Menon. Not only did he get opportunities to explore many design themes, but it also set in motion new commissions in the hospitality sector – giving 2017 a brilliant head start. While we wait to see what clever renditions he will present in the upcoming restaurants Playboy, Papaya and One Above, for Menon this is only the beginning and the pathway to more cherished projects in the future. "Perhaps a resort in some exotic location, (it would be) a dream project for me," suggests Menon.

3,4&5. Sneak glimpses of Playboy, One Above and Papaya, which are set to further establish the reputation of SM+A in the hospitality sector.



## KOKO

When Keenan and Ryan Tham wanted to take forward their father (legendary connoisseur Henry Tham)'s illustrious legacy of transforming Asian food into a fine art, they had a mammoth task ahead of them. Thus was born their latest and most successful endeavour, Koko, located in the heart of Mumbai's commercial centre, at Kamala Mills, Lower Parel. In this haute spot that is known for its ambitious restaurants, Koko had to stand out among the crowd, especially in its interiors – a result that was guaranteed courtesy Menon and his team at SM+A. They were considered the perfect fit for the Tham brothers, mainly after Ryan happened to visit one of the New York restaurants designed by Menon.

This upscale restaurant draws attention rather immediately with its sophisticated façade that is clad with exposed red brick. Engraved in motifs and varying in sizes, the perforated bricks form an inviting exterior wall. The roof, too, is covered with different hues of red-to-brown bricks. The warm exterior cleverly veils the stunning contemporary interiors that one glimpses from behind the grand front door made of faceted bevelled glass with metal and wood.

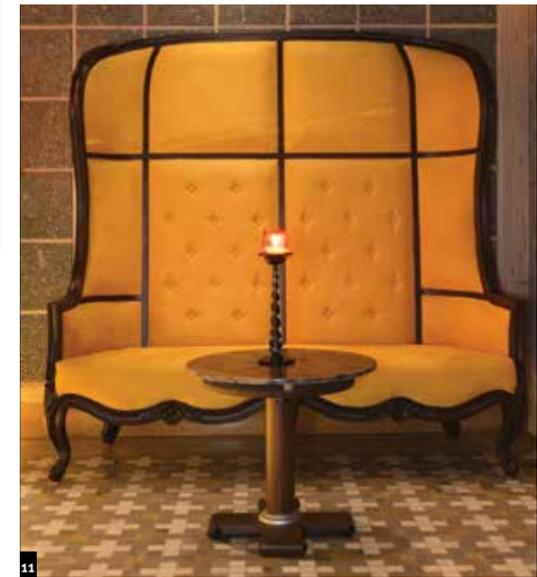
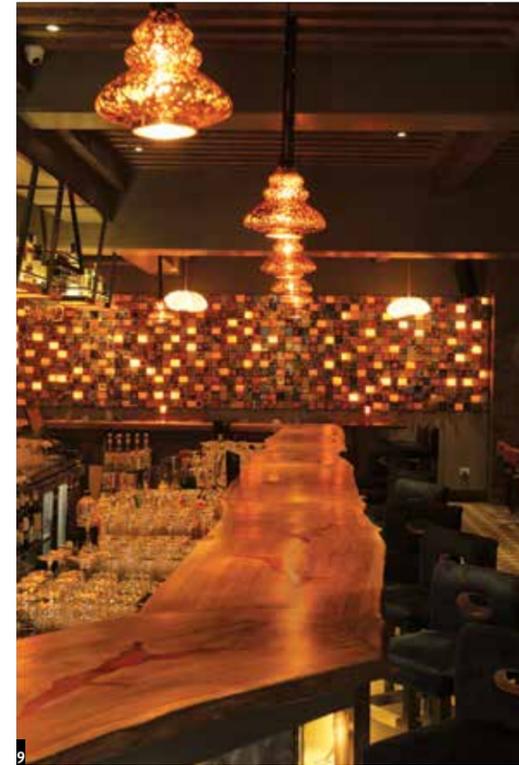
Comprising an outdoor seating area, indoor dining space and a separate smoking zone, the nearly 3,500sq-ft minimalist

space brings together a diverse selection of natural materials and blends them rather seamlessly. The custom-made flooring in grey, white and yellow mosaic was brought in from Jaipur and complements the massive slate-covered columns. Gradually, the mosaic flooring transitions into Chevron-patterned wooden flooring, a contrast that was executed beautifully. Black marble sourced from a quarry in South India is used on the staircase that leads to the washrooms and administrative offices on the level below. Heavy wooden blocks that were originally columns of an old warehouse, were repurposed to clad the ceiling at the restaurant level.

6. Menon relied on the different hints of colour in the largely grey overtones to reflect Koko's theme.

7. Asian-inspired shadow art creates an interesting backdrop to the space.

8. The grand front door, made of faceted bevelled glass with metal and wood.



Clichéd Asian references were consciously avoided in the design process. But the pan-Asian restaurant still sings of Oriental flavours in its interiors. Menon relied on the different hints of colour in the largely grey overtones to reflect the theme. Shadow art on the red wall continues the theme without coming across as mimicky. Next to the DJ console, on a shelf, are Chinese warrior figurines in different poses. A Reza-inspired creation (made of Siporex, wooden blocks and a solid glass block, which have been inscribed with abstract patterns) forms a feature wall in the space. Some of the blocks carry the Yin-and-Yang inscriptions, in keeping with the Asian theme.

Even though there is a rich material palette at play here, Menon managed to accessorise the place without hampering its sophisticated charm. We find vintage-inspired furniture blending harmoniously with modern, minimalist furniture, all this amidst a dominating yellow-and-grey colour palette. Besides adding aesthetic value to the restaurant, the different choices in furniture also visually demarcate each area – such as the private dining spaces that are marked by its curved crown-like sofas and high backs.

In the main seating areas, the red dining tables in PU lacquer with coffee-coloured base are paired with bar stools in velvet upholstery. It is hard to miss the imposing yellow

## MATERIAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Lighting:** Purple Turtle

**Furniture:** The Rocking Chair Company

**Wall partitions:** Siporex, wooden blocks and solid glass block; brick facade by Folds

**Wall textures:** 3D cement casting tiles by Bharat Tiles

**Flooring:** Grey/white/yellow mosaic; Chevron wooden flooring by Beautex

**Art:** Ajinkya Warekar

## PROJECT DETAILS

**Name of the project:** Koko the Contemporary Asian Gastro Pub

**Location:** Kamala Mills, Lower Parel, Mumbai

**Client:** Henry Tham

**Design firm:** Sumesh Menon + Associates

**Design team:** Sumesh Menon, Nishant Desai

**Total area:** 3,500sq-ft

**Date of completion:** June 2016

**Photography:** Anand Diwadkar

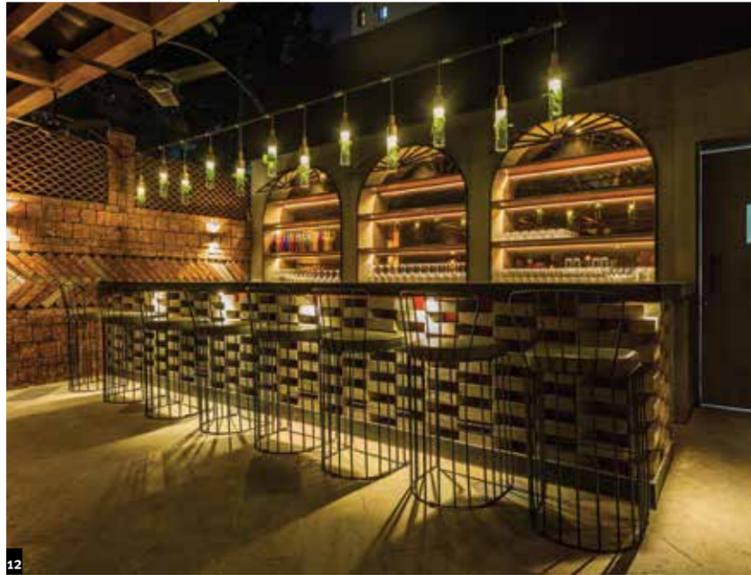
velvet wing-back chairs in the dining area that contrast the grey walls in the background. What sets the elevated private lounge area apart in this setting, is the wall composed of diagonal Siporex blocks that appears to have an artsy quality. Light from the passion-flower-style fixture in this area creates an interesting play of shadow with the blocks.

The bar is defined by its blown-glass, teardrop lights that the designer felt resembled 'Indian Muranos', whereas the seating area is illuminated by floral-inspired lights made of crushed fabric/paper. In the lounge area, an array of bulbs drop down from the ceiling and gently light up the space.

9. The bar at Koko is defined by the blown-glass, teardrop lights. Notice the long and rugged-looking bar table.

10. The elevated private lounge area at Koko gets an artsy feel with a background wall composed of diagonal Siporex blocks.

11. The hard-to-miss imposing yellow velvet wing-back chairs in Koko's dining area.



12

## MR.BAOZI

Located in the affluent suburban neighbourhood of Juhu, Mr. Baozi is the latest Asian treat venture by Mihir Desai, owner, Corum Hospitality. Designed by Sumesh Menon and his efficient team of designers, the restaurant combines local and Asian influences into a raw, earthy look with contemporary touches. The sprawling area of nearly 5,000sq-ft has been generously apportioned to outdoor and indoor areas with an assortment of informal and formal spaces. Partially concealed from street view by a rustic yet eye-catching terracotta red wall crowned with a scallop-shaped trellis, the entrance promises an enthralling visual feast within its veiled façade.

Beyond the walls, a warm, rustic combination of pinewood, stone and earthy brick creates a resplendent yet cosy outdoor space nestled within a richly-patterned exposed laterite façade. The raw appeal of these materials is contrasted by the bright yellow and turquoise chairs, creating an element of surprise that underlines the distinctiveness found in a space designed by Sumesh Menon.

The al fresco section of Mr. Baozi has a mix of custom lounge seating, bar-style elevated seating, regular chair-table affair and a custom wooden pod seating. To the left of the entrance is a pergola-covered seating with pinewood tables and stacked-up planters that create a cosy island dining space. Beyond the pergola is the outdoor bar area with its croc finish grey stone countertop customised in Jaipur, perfectly set off against a custom cement block patterned apron with a red painted backdrop. At the far end of the outdoor space, a set of elevated seating arrangements is edged up against the backdrop of a beautifully-patterned grey wall with staggered wood and greenery interlaced in between. The raw brick and

12. The outdoor bar area at Mr. Baozi has a customised croc finish grey stone countertop brought in from Jaipur, set off against a custom cement block patterned apron.

13. The raw brick and cement sequence sets the tone of the entire outdoor space at Mr. Baozi.

### PROJECT DETAILS

**Name of the project:** Mr. Baozi  
**Location:** Juhu, Mumbai  
**Client:** Corum Hospitality  
**Design firm:** Sumesh Menon + Associates  
**Design team:** Sumesh Menon, Ruchita Jain  
**Total area:** 5,000sq-ft  
**Date of completion:** November 2016



13

### MATERIAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Lighting:** Purple Turtle, custom-made lights  
**Tables and chairs:** Custom-made on site  
**Sofa/soft seating:** Custom-made  
**Wall partitions:** Siporex with red silicone filling, exposed bricks and laterite  
**Wall textures:** Siporex with red silicone filling, IPS wall finish  
**Flooring:** Stone by Bhartiya Marble Industries, tiles by Shree KumKum Designer Tiles  
**HVAC:** Acme Aircon  
**Art:** Roopvalay Studio

cement sequence that sets the tone of the entire outdoor space, is reminiscent of legendary architect Charles Correa's designs.

The indoor dining space entirely weaves a magic of its own, with the complete span of the edifice lined with an arcade of exposed brick openings. With its striking custom wooden door set within a multi-arched doorway, the imposing Asian influenced artwork that scales an entire long wall, the sculptural light fittings and the handmade tile inlaid tables, the entire space is a splendid synthesis of patterns and textures that dominate the space and, yet, are seemingly understated. Menon's forte is comprehended by the attention to detail cleverly imparted to every nook and cranny of the space without it being too overwhelming.

While the outdoor lighting is kept deliberately subtle with natural materials used, the bejeweled indoor lighting design consists of stunning molecular light fittings that literally crown the entire space. The whole place is high on warmth and energy. Talented artists have contributed to bringing alive the walls with artwork ranging from larger-than-life paintings, Chinese inscriptions and even FRP masks. Just when you think you have absorbed the space in its entirety, you notice one entire wall in exposed fly ash with red silicone filling oozing out of its edges adding a raw earthiness to the room, while the flooring is laid out in an interesting staggered pattern with rainforest marble defining its edges.

Cosy booth-style seating with wire-mesh fixtures are lined against the entire art wall, while rubber wood tables with charming handmade tile inlays are paired with wooden chairs in the centre of the room. Spoilt for choice in the variety of seating arrangements available, the pièce de résistance, however, is the grand 8-seater round table complete with a Lazy Susan installed in it. Menon has effectively managed to scoop out a perfectly round private nook from a square space with a finely-crafted curved rope installation that cleverly grants privacy without cutting its occupants off from the allure of the restaurant.



14

## HARRY'S

Touted as one of the best bars and dining joints for beer cocktails and modern comfort food, Harry's Bar + Café combines a delectable menu with gorgeous interiors envisioned by Sumesh Menon. Located in the premium location of Juhu, Harry's Bar + Café's newest outlet is an expansive 3,500sq-ft space with an enormous half tonne rock signage that welcomes you in. The custom main door that is fabricated from a patterned metal screen with bison and floatglass inserts, lets you in to the café. An airy white mesh screen leads you right into the al fresco section of the restaurant. The white screen entrance is flanked on either side by a sculptural brick wall that is patterned out of solid and cored bricks.

Once inside, a long monolithic bison clad bench lines the periphery on the left; while on the right, there is an arrangement of dining table and chairs along with standalone high tables enclosed by a large art wall flaunting an elegant Japanese cherry blossom painting. Intriguing design elements have been added even to the corners, with one end wall lined by a floating ledge with handmade tile inserts, while in the other corner one chances upon an adorable Koi fish pond – which sets off the outdoor dining experience to perfection.

A delightful private pod seating flanks the opposite side of the high tables with the same white mesh screens cordoning off the rest of the area and creating a cosy outdoor alcove seating. The charming mesh screen doubles up as a biophilic design element and displays a variety of fresh herbs that give off their exotic aromas, adding a sensory dimension to the decor.

The interior dining space offers a more intimate experience and is accessed through a sleek vestibule. Facing the main door, a stunning custom couch in the Harry's trademark

### PROJECT DETAILS

**Name of the project:** Harry's Bar + Cafe  
**Location:** Juhu, Mumbai  
**Client:** Rahul Mehta  
**Design firm:** Sumesh Menon + Associates  
**Design team:** Sumesh Menon, Ruchita Jain  
**Total area:** 3,200sq-ft  
**Date of completion:** December 2016  
**Photography:** Nisha Drego



15

### MATERIAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Lighting:** Purple Turtle  
**Tables and chairs:** Repurposed and custom made  
**Sofas/soft seating:** Custom designed  
**Wall partitions:** Different types of metal mesh  
**Wall textures:** Distressed paint finish, combed texture effect  
**Flooring:** Wooden flooring and tiles by Vyara  
**Art:** Ajinkya Warekar

shade of red, stands out appealingly. A rather noteworthy highlight of the indoors – the visually striking existing columns that have been wrapped in delicate mesh and back lit, lend an ethereal feel to the whole space. With a plethora of exquisitely-crafted design elements that delight the eye, the magnum opus of the designer, however, is the stunning 30ft-long bar counter with a crimson tile apron behind a router-cut patterned bison screen.

Adding chutzpah to the bar is the lighting installation made of 130 Edison bulbs poised above the counter. Continuing the glam quotient is another pair of striking light fixtures perched above the indoor dining seats. A large communal table to the side displays more handmade tile inserts, balancing the look from the outdoor section. An entire window wall is lined with booth style seating, underlining Menon's signature style of blending assorted seating options. ■

14. The visually striking columns at Harry's are wrapped in delicate mesh and back lit, lending an ethereal feel to the space.

15. The quaint outdoor seating at Harry's is marked with aromatic herb planters.