

Meet AnantU: A design university mooted by billionaire Ajay Piramal and Pramath Sinha

BY SATISH JOHN, ET BUREAU | AUG 18, 2018, 11.00 PM IST

"It is not a good sign for a country that has such a rich culture and tradition of design and planning," says [Ajay Piramal](#), chairman of [Piramal Enterprises](#).

"See how our towns and cities have grown. There is no thought behind it. That's not good." The billionaire, whose companies have developed several [real estate](#) projects that now dot Mumbai's skyline, is in a candid mood as he reminisces about the Bombay of his youth. He talks about how the Yogakshema, the curved building of Life Insurance Corporation that came up in the early sixties, was a welcome change to the [skyline](#) of the business district. The distinct signature made the building stand out.

"Everywhere in the world, when you travel, you see structures that stand out. Historic structures and new structures. But in India, I don't see anything that stands out. No iconic structures are being built," Piramal rues.

Mumbai's skyline is now changing again, mainly because real estate developers, including him, are cashing in on an opportunity to provide homes and offices in the commercial capital. Piramal is also working on a project that involves construction but has nothing to do with his business of high finance and real estate. He has joined hands with [Pramath Sinha](#), the founding dean of Indian School of Business and the cofounder of Ashoka University, to build [Anant National University](#) in Ahmedabad. The aim to have a world-class design university in India, a first.

AnantU, as it is being called, wants to take a multi-disciplinary approach to harness the power of design to solve complex challenges facing society. The university started as Anant Institute of Architecture in 2011. It was affiliated to Gujarat University. Subsequently, Anant Institute for Planning and Anant Institute for Design were set up in 2014 and 2015, respectively.

Anant National University was set up in 2016 as an independent varsity specialising in design and architecture. It then had 500 students across three streams. In the 2018-19 academic year, it has 650 students and 50 faculty members. The university expects to have 5,000 students and 250 faculty members in five years. In 2018, AnantU added additional specialisations and introduced a new master's programme in integrated product design in partnership with the University of Pennsylvania. It now has undergraduate programmes in architecture and design (with multiple specialisation options), two postgraduate programmes, a one-year Anant Fellowship and a two-year master's in design programme.

Over the next five years, it wants to offer additional specialisations in design at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and also short-term courses in architecture, design, real estate and heritage management, among others. The faculty, Piramal and Sinha say, will be leading global academicians and practitioners.

"We are getting good people as faculty. There are people who want to be involved in projects in India but have not found a way to do it," Sinha says, adding the university is attracting people from Spain, the Netherlands, the UK and the US. The governing body has Adil Zainulbhai, chairman of Network 18 and the Quality Council of India; Abhishek Lodha, managing director of Lodha Group; SK Jain, director of IIT Gandhinagar; and Pankaj Patel, chairman of Cadila Healthcare, among others. Piramal and Sinha got together for this project by chance.



Ajay Piramal, chairman of Piramal Enterprises

2011
Anant Institute of Architecture
gets affiliated with Gujarat
University

2016
Anant National University set
up and gets independent
university status

2018
University introduces degree
and master's courses in design
and architecture, respectively

650
students admitted to courses
this year

50
faculty members



Pramath Sinha, founding dean of Indian School of Business and cofounder of Ashoka University

“It was the University of Bombay (now known as the University of Mumbai) that got us together,” Piramal says. They were part of a committee, set up a couple of years ago to do something with Piramal’s alma mater, the Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies.

Bombay University wanted to give autonomy to the institute and the university dean was keen that industrialists like Piramal contribute to expanding the institute. However, bureaucratic red tape ended the idea of an autonomous educational institute.

Sinha and Piramal had by then decided to partner for a project that would be unique to India. As Sinha points out, developed nations lay a lot of stress on design thinking.

Singapore, for instance, progressed from a third world country to a financial capital because the leaders there knew the importance of design thinking. In India, the only city that was planned was Chandigarh.

Design thinking is going to be the crux of taking ideas and converting these into reality, Sinha says.

A university with iconic buildings and a faculty from foreign universities will cost a bomb.

“Setting up a world-class university is a multi-year project and requires continuous flow of funds. We have started our journey and are raising funds as required. Work is going on to build a campus and hostel,” says Sinha.

Piramal and Sinha are sharing their vision with friends in the hope of raising money. While it is clear what Anant will stand for, what does the word mean? It means infinite in Sanskrit, says Piramal.

Perhaps it is a reference to what the students of the institute would hopefully do — go beyond the limits and reach for the stars to create worldclass products and buildings in India.