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Date: 19 February 2014

Interviewer: Gill Maxwell

Interviewee: Mehul Ruparel

GILL: It's February 19th, 2014. I'm Gill Maxwell conducting an interview with Mehul on Stepping Into Diversity project. We're in the West of Scotland Regional Equality Council premises. Mehul, could I ask you please to start by giving us your full name and spelling it, and saying where and when you were born?

MEHUL: My full name is Mehul Ruparel. That's spelled M-E-H-U-L and the surname's spelled: R-U-P-A-R-E-L. I was born in Bombay, now called Mumbai, on 30th September 1978, I think around forty past ten in the night.

GILL: Thank you. Thank you very much. Could you tell me, please, Mehul, about your experience of coming to Glasgow?

MEHUL: Coming to Glasgow was a planned decision and I finished my graduation in architecture I was looking for doing a Masters', or taking a further study course and was looking up schools and came across the Mackintosh College of Architecture at the Glasgow School of Art and in terms of the course structure it was what I was looking at, and it was offering quite a comprehensive course for a year. It kind of fitted well with the amount of money I had and the time I had to finish it so... that was basically the informed choice more than anything else. It was primarily focused towards education, rather than the city. I got to know the city after I came in.

GILL: When did you come?

MEHUL: I started... I came on 17th September 2005. It was my first flight out of India. In fact, it was the first flight I ever was on so... It was quite a long flight for a first time, I think. So, yeah.

GILL: And what happened on that day? Can you remember your feelings?

MEHUL: I left... Even though I was born in Bombay I actually lived about 150 miles north of Bombay in a small town called Vapi. That's where I grew up and went to school et cetera. I left home when I was seventeen and a half to pursue my graduation in architecture, so my university town was about a good six hours on the train, another 280-odd miles from where I was bred. So, although I was away from home for quite long, the feeling you get when you're taking your first flight, which is 5,500 miles away, it's very different. And being the only child, I was feeling the detachment coming in. It was not a very good feeling leaving, especially I also had my girlfriend of six years, who I was leaving behind, as well. So, a lot of question marks before leaving, so it was a



SID-0012X0001M0

strange kind of a feeling. A wee bit sad but exciting at the same time.

GILL: How did you go about settling in to Glasgow?

MEHUL: I was told it was going to be very very cold, but, to be honest, when I came in, the first thing when you step from the plane, you feel a sudden waft of cold around you. The air around you is very cold. But, apart from that, the first impression was when I was taking the bus from the airport to Paisley city centre, where my friends lived who were putting me up for a couple of weeks, I felt: Where is everyone? The streets are very quiet. So that was the first kind of... Not shocking, but it's more surprising. I left Bombay where it's chock-a-block. I landed foot in Paisley, I came out and there was about three or four people on the entire bus. I was looking out on the streets, middle of the afternoon, and there was hardly anyone. And I was like, "Where is everyone?" [laughs] The first impressions are that it was really quiet. Not very cold as I thought it would be, but it was very quiet.

GILL: Did you have any particular expectations of Glasgow, apart from weather, maybe?

MEHUL: No, blank canvas pretty much. I think the time when I was leaving, 2005, even though there was plenty of access to the internet, I refrained from looking at... except for course-related structure and course-related stuff on architecture, I kind of refrained from looking at images and building up a mental picture as to what it would be like. I just wanted to be open about what I'm going into so it was... I had no kind of preconceived... how do you say, emotions of what it might be like. Neither had I tried too hard to see what it's going to look like. I'd seen brochures and stuff from various education fairs that people hand out to you when you're looking at studying abroad, and I did come across the University of Glasgow brochure which had generic images of Glasgow and Scotland and beyond. That was about it, so...

GILL: As time went on, and once you got used to how relatively quiet the streets are, was there anything else about Glasgow that stood out for you?

MEHUL: I mean, because you're freshly out of architecture school you tend to notice your surroundings more keenly than anything else. You notice people around you in terms of behavior and stuff. That I think you're noting subconsciously but you're making a very conscious effort to see your built environment around you because you do realize that as soon as you step into university, your projects and your assignments and your papers et cetera have a lot of influence from Glasgow. It's just one of those things you're - how do you say? - trained to do, so I was looking very closely at the buildings and it was very fascinating because the sandstone and the yellows and the reds, it's something that you see a wee bit of it in Victorian architecture back in Bombay but it still is quite different. So it was fascinating, as far as I can say. I did see a wee bit of derelict buildings, especially in Paisley, because I spent my first two weeks in and around Paisley, and I didn't really go out to Glasgow until the day of induction, which was, I think, two weeks after I came to Glasgow. So my first impressions of Glasgow were more kind of about Paisley. And I thought for a moment that Paisley was actually just a suburb of Glasgow, and it is essentially Glasgow, so... "Things are kind of broken down. What's happening here?" But then when I came down to Glasgow eventually, in the city centre and around the Glasgow School of Art, it was nice. As far as first impressions, it was more about the lanes and streets that I found quite interesting and very very nice.



SID-0012X0001M0

GILL: Can you explain a bit more about the part of Glasgow you now live in?

MEHUL: I live not very far from the Glasgow School of Art, at the bottom of Renfrew Street near Charring Cross. I moved there in 2012. Before that for four years I was near the Kelvingrove Park so not very far away again. So I've moved... within the span of six years I've moved maybe half a mile, so it's essentially all the same area for me. I find it very... quite active, the area. Even though I'm on the quiet street, Renfrew Street is away from Sauchiehall, not too far away but you can feel that it's relatively quiet. But as soon as you step outside your house, you can feel the city comes alive. Day or night there's people around. Subconsciously that's the kind of life I'm used to, because when I was in India there was always people when you went out on the streets There is always somebody; you're never very quiet. That's the kind of environment I'm living in just now. It's a tenement, Victorian tenement block. It's four storeys high. The immediate neighbours I know. As soon as you come out there's people on the streets; it's mostly students, or there are shoppers, people who are in the city centre doing their shopping. But that's the kind of environment I'm living in just now.

GILL: Thank you. Since 2005 when you first arrived, what stands out for you in terms of cultural similarities and differences?

MEHUL: A very interesting thing was when I was leaving India my Mum packed a lot of home-made food and spices various bits because I was under the impression that it would be very hard to find Indian food or Indian raw food which I would be able to use to cook, myself, but it was quite surprising when I came in, starting from Paisley onwards and then Glasgow, that there is so much available and so easily. I was really scared unnecessarily because there is so many Indian restaurants and so many Asian shops, or Indian shops, that probably I could find more spices and essential stuff for my cooking than I'd probably find in a corner shop in India. It was very very surprising the variety you could get, because you were not only getting Indian but Middle Eastern and from Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. Culturally speaking I was thinking that I'm going to a completely brand-new culture, so to speak, but it was a good mix, in a sense. I was never far away from a temple or gurdwara. At the same time, I was never far away from what is a Scottish institution – a nice pub. So, it was a good mix. I was very happy to kind of see that. I was not expecting that but I was very happy to see that. So culturally I was... well settled, actually. Nothing shocking.

GILL: From what you've said you assimilated and got used to it very quickly.

MEHUL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GILL: Thank you. Can we move on to work, your experiences of work beyond graduation.

MEHUL: Yeah. When I was studying you're allowed to work 20 hours a week. Very interestingly, my sixth week into my being in Scotland I got my National Insurance number and my first job was as a wine waiter at the Marriott at Anderson? Yeah, Anderson. Surprisingly, me and my flat mate and another flat mate, the three of us, basically, got hired on the same day. It was an open kind of pre-Christmas hiring. We were all hired as wine waiters. It was quite amazing because it's something we could not have done back in India. Being architects, trying to get to do something which is completely outside of your comfort zone, so to speak... We got trained but... It was a brilliant exercise because you're wine waiting and most of the clients being Scottish or



SID-0012X0001M0

locals it was a good chance to interact on a completely different level, in a sense. You're not interacting as friends but more like a service provider and somebody who you're serving. That's the time when you realised that people from Glasgow, or, say, Scotland, they came across as very very friendly. There would be instances of spilling beer or wine on somebody and they would not be mad at all, so that's something that got us kind of quite close to... how do you say, understanding how Scots behave or the locals behave. It was something that we took on board and we were quite happy about it. And then, moving on, I also got the chance to work in a call centre for a bit and that's when I came across various dialects from Ireland and south of England and Midlands. It was very difficult for a bit so I worked for about six weeks then I had to let go. Not because of the dialects but because I was kind of enjoying more, I had more fun being a wine waiter or a bartender. I was really enjoying that because the staff is all very friendly and we're all students just like me at that time.

So, it's hard work in the sense that you're stood up on your feet for about eight hours at a stretch but time used to fly. But I used to work in a call centre maybe three hours and it used to drag, so I let go of that and continued with bar tending. And then I finished my graduation. One of the my professors put me on to, or referenced me on to, a small architectural practice in Edinburgh. That's where I got my first architectural job which was in January 2007. I'd been back home between my post-graduation and getting a first job for about two months where I prepared my portfolio and sent it out and stuff. So getting into this first architectural job there was a few bits to learn in the sense that a practice works very differently from the way it does in India. The fact that building regulations to start with were something brand new to me because things don't happen that strictly in India. Whereas in Scotland, or in Glasgow, or in Edinburgh where I was working, you had to be very focused on what you're allowed to do and within those realms you had your freedom. So you were always kind of building regulations design went hand in hand, whereas in India you'd just design and not worry about any rules or anything and apply them towards the end. It was very strange but I really liked the fact you were working within a strict code of conduct and its deeper implications of Health & Safety and generic wellbeing, the environment and social conformities. I started understanding the importance of these aspects towards work, but I was mostly doing drawing work and I was always being guided because it was my first job in Scotland and obviously the drawings that I did were always approved by a senior before they went out. And they were very patient with me.

It was a small office – husband and wife and a senior architect, so three and somebody on reception, so there was only four people. So it was very close-knit and they were very patient with teaching me the ropes, so I'm quite grateful the way things were done. Just before, they were seeing the decline... they were close to retiring, they were both 60, the husband and wife partners who were running the show, so they gave me good notice in the sense that, "You should start looking out." I liked the aspect of transparency. They would not keep anything from you in the sense that they told me exactly what was happening with the office periodically. When the time came they gave me ample notice to kind of... help me out in the sense that "You should start looking out to see where you can go again." Initial experience of work was very very positive. And then I came to Glasgow. I joined Hypostyle in April 2008 and I've been with Hypostyle since then, close on to six years now, come April. Again, experience at Hypostyle has been extremely... how do you say... very very positive. Gradually I've been stepping up in terms of responsibilities. There have been small factors which have been hindering, which is your immigration statuses and visa and stuff. Every step of the way Hypostyle has been very supportive and I'm forever grateful for something like that because I don't think many



SID-0012X0001M0

employers would have gone out of their way to do what they have done, basically, so it's been a very very positive experience. Not just architecturally, but on a very personal front so it's...

Sorry if I've gone too far away from the answer. Basically, overall work experience in Scotland has been quite amazing. One very crucial thing I've noted is that, at least in my experience, people's work relationship and personal relationship, there's a very good... how do you say? Not behaviour pattern but it's like... Back in India you tend to kind of mix your personal relationship with your work relationship and that sometimes is not very good. Or most of the time it's not very good. Whereas I've noticed that people tend to draw a line quite well in the UK, or say in Scotland, where I've had experience. If you have say... If you don't get on well in terms of design, or say architecture, it doesn't mean that you cannot go out on Friday and have a drink and talk other things and still be good friends. So that's something I really cherish. I wish that would happen more often back home. It doesn't happen that way. The experience I've had from working in India is that if you don't agree on work, chances are you will not agree on personal terms as well. You won't be really good friends or you won't be able to talk other things, but it's slightly different here. I quite like that. It does mix up sometime but not phenomenally to affect your other relationships. It's quite good.

GILL: Thank you. Thank you very much. That leads us very nicely into the topic of your interaction with other cultures, both in work and away from work. Anything that comes out for you there?

MEHUL: Nothing that I've had to do some kind of soul searching about. Sometimes when you go back home and you have to ask the question: Is it me? Nothing like that has really happened. It kind of also does take me back to my university days because the school I went to in India, it was in the west of India in a city called Ahmedabad. The architecture school there is quite good because I think at the time when it was getting founded in '64 it was a very famous, or a very well-known architect, based in that city who had worked with the likes of a French architect called Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn from America. So he had travelled a lot and he came back and he had thought of establishing a school of architecture in his home town. When he was doing the course structuring it was quite influenced by the Western structure of teaching the Bauhaus school of design, based in Germany. There was a lot of influences, and from then on the teachers that came in to teach at the school that I went to had travelled a lot or worked abroad and come back. So to speak the fact that... They were very aware of design and the effect of social life on design. Not just in India but also, say, in the Western world, or the developing world. So, you were quite exposed to... or at least to an idea of the work culture that goes on beyond your university grounds or beyond your cultural confines, so... Sorry, I'm moving away... What was the question again? Sorry.

GILL: Your experience of interaction with different cultures.

MEHUL: Yeah, yeah, so, every now and again we had faculties from abroad who used to come and deliver lectures and talk about their design methodologies and the way they design in their office, whether it was in America or England or Germany or Japan, you would have these really good architects come in and deliver, or show their work. So you had an idea of various work cultures. When I came to Scotland and started working within the culture here, or my interaction, it was nothing that I was not expecting. It was something that I was subconsciously ready for. It was... Am I on the right line here?



SID-0012X0001M0

GILL: Yes.

MEHUL: It was something I was quite ready for. It was nothing like... Then I eventually had a one-on-one with my immediate colleagues or seniors or, say, even super-seniors, say, the directors et cetera, it was not something that I was not ready for. And I think linguistically, as well, because growing up I went to a school, it was a Catholic school, so throughout my education was in English but it was only the teacher-student communication was in English. You tend to with your friends speak the vernacular, but between teachers and students it was all in English, so in terms of language also it was quite comfortable blending in to the work culture here, so it wasn't very difficult, I would say. It was fairly all right, yeah, yeah.

GILL: Thank you. Thank you very much. Can I ask what languages you speak?

MEHUL: I speak English and I've started speaking... The more I've started speaking I think... There's a very famous question: What language do you speak in and what language do you think in? I think gradually between leaving my primary and high school school, moving on to my university and then moving on to Glasgow, I think there has been a flip. I tend to use English as often as I can here. I think in English as well. Sometimes I think back in vernacular. So I speak English and I speak Hindi, which is the national language of India, and I speak a regional language, which is Gujarati.

GILL: Is that the vernacular you referred to?

MEHUL: That's my family language, so I speak Gujarati with my parents, my relatives. With my cousins and people I speak English because they all went to schools where the mode of communication was in English, so I speak English with them because they are quite comfortable in English as well, but with my Mum and Dad, or, say, my grandparents... Unfortunately the last grandparent left in December, with everyone I speak Gujarati. When I go back home, my immediate neighbourhood or people I know within my social circle, elderly, a generation upwards, I speak Gujarati. And I speak Hindi, as I said, which is the national language. So that's one common language which you will speak pretty much anywhere you go. And I also speak Marathi, which is... India has states, like is Gujarat, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Punjab. So every state usually has a language of its own, so Maharashtra has Marathi, which was a neighbouring state to where I went, where I was brought up in, which is Gujarat. So I speak Gujarati and I speak Marathi which is an immediate neighboring state, so... English, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi. And within Gujarat, sorry, within Gujarat there are regions. My forefathers came from a region called Kutch, which is on the extreme west of India. It's a desert state, or a desert district. They had a language which was Kutchi. It doesn't have a script so when you speak Kutch... When you write it, you use the script from Gujarati but you speak it totally differently, so I can speak Kutchi because a lot of my relatives can speak Kutchi as well. So I can speak five languages, I can write in three. It's just part of growing up. I knew all this before I even left my home, but after that I have not picked up any languages. It's been English all along.

GILL: I wonder from that how you see your personal identity. How do you describe firstly your nationality and then yourself within that nationality?

MEHUL: I do feel... There is a lot I owe to my background. A lot I owe to my parents. A lot I owe to my school that I went to in terms of what it gave me. It kind of led me to where I am just now. So in terms of nationality I feel very attached to India and I do feel



SID-0012X0001M0

Indian. For whatever problems it has just now, I can identify with them as well but I dare not run away from it or I don't want to run away from it, because Scotland has a comfort zone that I'm starting to settle in. But I do feel attached a lot to Scotland as well, because I do owe a lot to Scotland in terms of the time that I've spent here has been... has kind of accelerated my growth, I would say. Whether it's professionally or intellectually, I feel quite obliged to Glasgow and Scotland and the place I work, the places I have worked and I went to study in. I find that I'm very selective in my loyalties but then I'm loyal 100%. I'm kind of 50-50, say 60-40, India/Scotland. At the bottom of my heart I do feel that I'll never change being an Indian but I do feel very Scottish as well because I feel obliged and I owe a lot to Scotland, so, yeah, part of my heart is in Scotland. When I go back to India I do miss Scotland. When I come to Scotland I do miss India as well. So it's like that at the moment. If that answers your question, I don't know.

GILL: Yes, thank you. You mentioned you went to a Catholic school.

MEHUL: Yeah, yeah.

GILL: But you also referred to a temple here. Can I ask about the role of worship in your life here, if at all?

MEHUL: Yes, yeah. Worship is... this is how it is. A lot of my... I kind of believe in sitting down quietly. I pray but I don't really pray to a certain god, as such. I'm not extremely religious as a matter of choice but I'm heavily influenced by religious buildings and what they do to your senses when you're present within them, being an architect. So if I feel like I need to be quiet or inspired by anything at all, it doesn't matter where I go. I can go to a temple, I can go to a church and I can go to a mosque or a synagogue, for all I care. I really like the way these buildings are made and the kind of peace they bring to you, most of them, when you go in. And that's the kind of inspiration I seek so I'm not... even though I go to the temple quite often here in Glasgow, pretty much on Sundays because Sunday is the day they do the ... it's called the puja, which is singing of the religious rites and stuff like that, so I do go there on a Sunday. It's kind of nice to remember temples from back home in India.

But as an architectural student I've been heavily influenced by Islamic architecture, or Sufi architecture, which is extremely geometric and if you start connecting it it's not far away from Renaissance architecture, or Roman architecture, or, if you take it further back, not far from Greek architecture. So it has its kind of linkages. That's a design I really get influenced quite easily by. I tend to use it a lot in my work. So I'm going to say, for instance, Glasgow Cathedral, or even the (0:32:34:3 s.l. varanasi) church at the university, or any other church if you name it. The amount of peace and the quality of light, it has a power to transcend you into a space that usually you can't do at home, so I don't have any religious inclinations as such. I'm Hindu by birth, my Mum and Dad kind of follow Hinduism. But honestly I'm not... I'd like to take good out of every... I've been to a Catholic school so there was a church within the school so we sang our morning prayers there, pretty much. Our Father in heaven, holy be thy name. So it was a part of my upbringing and I kind of cherish it. For me, religion is a place where I can find some peace and be myself for a bit. That's essentially my prayers. That's essentially... I think religiously but nothing as such... in terms of whether I follow a particular book. I follow them all.

GILL: Thank you very much. Would you say you see yourself involved in



SID-0012X0001M0

communities, any communities in Glasgow?

MEHUL: There have been times when I've been to the temple and done voluntary work in terms of helping with, say... Because every Sunday they serve lunch, which is kind of community lunch, so everybody is welcome to come and pray or just have lunch if they like. So I've been a few times to help out in the kitchen but sometimes it also happens that it's hugely overstaffed in the sense that there are more people wanting to come in and help out than are needed, so you don't want to unnecessarily crowd around, but that's as far as I've been in terms of, say, working with a religious community. But I used to stay in the house before, where I am just now, there used to be a small... I think the Kelvingrove Parks community, so I've been to that, a few general meetings et cetera, but they're usually annual, so I would honestly say I've not been proactive at any kind of communal gatherings or groups or... No, I don't think so, no. Not in Glasgow, no.

GILL: Thank you. Could you explain a little, please, about your family in Glasgow and how you interact with family at home in India?

MEHUL: Well, the only family I have in Glasgow is my wife, so that is pretty much it. I've got a few friends that... who put me up in my first two weeks in Glasgow, or in Paisley for that matter, when I came to Paisley. There were four of them and two of them have left back for India, but two of them have settled down in Glasgow so I kind of meet up with them quite often. They are kind of like family, so... But in terms of blood relationship I've only got my wife in Glasgow. Nobody else. But I have friends, otherwise in Glasgow who I meet up with and have a social circle. In terms of interaction back home I'm quite close to my mum and dad so I kind of make a point to speak to them maybe a couple of times a week. They're not very internet savvy so I don't really see them on Skype or things that people see folk back home these days. I usually just phone them and that's pretty much it and I make a point of going back once a year to catch up, see how old they are. [laughs] And see if they're doing OK. Apart from that, I'm close to a few of my cousins who are single kids like me, so I'm quite close to them. I keep in touch with them over email, or phone them every now and again. That is pretty much it. I've got friends from university when I was doing my undergrad who are very close because we spent a substantial amount of time together, whether it's in the university or in the hostel where we lived. So I catch up with them every time I go back home or just email them every now and again, phone them. That's the kind of interaction I have with family, but, yeah, I live with my wife.

GILL: Thank you. When you go back home, do your parents ever comment on how you might have been influenced, or changed by, your experiences in a different country?

MEHUL: Not that I know of or they've told me about. But I wouldn't see why they would have reason... No, they haven't really told me anything at all or confronted me that, "You've changed in a certain way". Physical appearance maybe I've changed a wee bit but everybody does, but no, behaviour-wise, no, I don't think I've changed at all. I've become more... I think they complain about the fact that I maybe boss around a wee bit more but that's mostly to do with their health. They don't really look after themselves too much as they should for their age so I... I go back the first thing I complain about is their weight and their sugar levels and their blood pressure and stuff, and why it's not in check. That's usually my phone call. I'm trying to put a stick on their wrist, basically, like, "Come on". But that's... But mostly those complaints are mostly about the fact that I've become too bossy about their health. I should let them get on with what they do. But



SID-0012X0001M0

obviously I think it's for their own good but, no, apart from that... I suppose they understand where I'm coming from. But, no, otherwise, everything is the same at home. I don't think they feel that I've changed much, no.

GILL: Do you think you have?

MEHUL: I suppose not, no. I don't think I've changed but I've... I think I've become more... I've noted things that have changed in my interaction with my friends back home more than my immediate relatives like my parents. I think I've become slightly more patient in dealing with people, and my level of expectations in terms of how people come back to me has changed slightly as well. In terms.. The most [pauses] change I feel is in terms of value of time, I think. Back in India things happen a lot in grey areas where if you kind of expect somebody to do something, or when you are given deadlines et cetera, there are no fixed deadlines, there are... How do you say? There's a big transition deadline. Between such and such. Whereas, I think being here for so long, I kind of like to work with a fixed timeframe for everything. When you're dealing with, say, people back home, or when you arrange meeting up with somebody, say, for instance, with friends, and they say, "Yeah, we'll meet at maybe between seven and eight..." And I'm, "No. Seven or eight. Or half seven. Tell me a time." But that sometimes can cause... not necessarily with friends, but say you're dealing with people who are not your friends but say in an office or in a bank or at the doctor's, or at a garage, you start getting very annoyed and impatient when things don't move as the way you like them. And I think, every time I've gone back and I've started to tell myself that things are different. It is a cultural difference and you must understand that, so I've learned to grow patient. As soon as I go back and I step foot on Indian soil, I'm telling myself, "You must calm down, you must calm down." If things don't work your way, you must learn to calm down. Getting annoyed is not going to get you anywhere. But in terms of interacting with friends and family I think nothing has changed because I still love them so it's all good. [laughs]

GILL: Well, on that note, we'll finish there. Thank you very, very much.

MEHUL: That's OK.

GILL: That's excellent, thank you.

MEHUL: Thanks very much. Was I speaking too much?

Transcript ends 0:41:56:5