

A degree from Harvard. A career at Vera Wang, New York. And then, a sudden switch of paths. Mital Shah tells SOHINY DAS the tales of her many journeys – career, life, destinations – and about her stylish brainchild, Well Souled

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERALD FORSTER AND MARK LEIBOWITZ, FOR WELL SOULED.

SOMETIMES, INSTINCT is all you need. What starts as a faint murmur in your mind, acquires a voice so strong that it drowns everything else around. Nature's compass leads you, and all you can do is follow. So goes the unusual story of Mital Shah, with twists, turns and unexpected detours.

Born and raised outside Boston, with parents who had emigrated from India in the 1970s, Shah "grew up balancing two cultures and appreciating how unique my life is because of this". While studying for a degree at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, the campus ambience created by the "incredible mix of international students" fuelled her desire to learn more about "how we are interconnected versus what divides us", and she caught the travel bug.

Assignments and internships abroad were exciting and demanding, but Shah realised that finance was not her destination. "My innate calling, it seemed, was to bridge business and art," she recalls. "This led me, in 2001, to the world of luxury fashion, which sits squarely at its intersection." The new role of being the assistant to the president at Vera Wang, New York, required a Jack-of-all-trades approach. "I was exposed to every aspect of the business," Shah tells us. She acquired a skilled eye for detail and aesthetics, along with being "pry to critical decision-making". But the most important point to learn was acknowledging "the power of an emotional experience" – the key to a successful bridal couture company – and this seeded Shah's 'soul' theory.

An MBA from Harvard followed, but when she returned to Vera Wang, post graduation, things



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: STREET STYLE- JOHANNESBURG; A TOWNSHIP SALON, THE HEART OF SA STREET STYLE; WALL PIN-UPS AT A HAIR SALON, YEOVILLE; A STORE OF VINTAGE COLLECTIBLES.

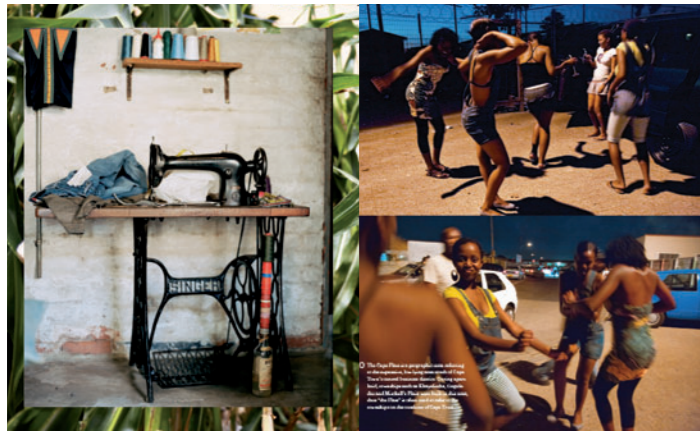
were different. "My dear friend and mentor (the company president) died of AIDS in April 2005," she remembers sadly. "I felt empty. The 'soul' of the experience for me was closely tied to my mentor. I felt an incredible pull to do something about AIDS, because it suddenly had a face for me." But at the same time, "I didn't want to walk away from the world of style."

Many spans of pondering and reflection later, a "big, loud, powerful bang!" heralded the birth of her brainchild's concept. The wise words of a friend – "you've identified all the ingredients, now just go and mix them in your own way" – proved to be the catalyst to her thought process. Almost like instant nirvana. ("One moment I was in a coffee shop in New York...the next I was on a plane to Johannesburg!") Thus, her design company, Well Souled, was born. "Inspired by well-travelled, well-heeled, well-read, well-dreamt..." Shah explains. Nice touch, quite succinct. "It is a new design label bridging travel, style and philanthropy."

Interesting, but how? The answer lies on the coffee table in front of me. Well Souled's first venture is a five-part book series, integrating local art and culture, street style, fashion, destinations, people and more in a unique volume. *South Africa* – simply entitled by the country name – is the first offspring (not just a book, but a 'conversation piece'), to be followed by India, Brazil, Turkey and Vietnam. "As established travel destinations, they are familiar to many, but as global style influencers, there is still much to be explored." She elaborates, "Each book is a unique mix of sophisticated, fashion-inspired design and interwoven, first-person narratives, documented by a 'map of threads' which illustrates how the journey unfolded." Shah is not speaking only of icons, society, runways and glamour; nor does she want to portray exoticism – whether through location or costume. "Each (country) represents the tension between luxury and grassroots that Well Souled seeks to capture."

For street style, Shah has aimed to go beyond the images presented by popular international style blogs, which largely focus on urban centres. Shah does have her favourite cities though, and she notes distinctions, "Johannesburg is raw and edgy, Durban is Bohemian chic, Cape Town is savvy."

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: 'RAW BEAUTY'; A KWA MASHU TAILOR'S HOUSE; AT CAFE MZOLI IN GUGULETHU; SA FASHION WEEK, MARCH 2007.

But the book also travels past metropolitan/cosmopolitan arenas into 'real' and rural South Africa, in search of not only nature and culture, but style. Among the trickle-up/trickle-down trend cycles, which is more predominant? "It flows both ways, although it skews towards trickle-up," she answers. "The luxury/ high-end space there... draws on history and cultural renaissance for inspiration."

Quite similar to our nation. It is not a surprise then, that Shah, thanks to her ancestry, familiarity, exposure and travels, has slated India as her next release. "I cannot think of another country...where traditional and global fashions commingle so effortlessly." She picks out music as the single most identifiable aspect of Indian street culture. "Everywhere and anywhere, you hear music." She also notes that Indian fashion is not only about heritage and costume anymore ("particularly the evolution of silhouettes of non-traditional pieces"), and is eager to present a realistic, contemporary view.

Bearing in mind the importance of connecting with a varied set of readers, Shah has aimed to amalgamate photography, graphics, texture variations, layering, colours, moods, content and presentation – points of interest for everyone. This aspect reinstates the fact that Well Souled is about complete and detailed design and everything from scratch to finish has been processed in-house. "At times, this was challenging, given my business training and financial investment," Shah speaks of her personal career switch, or rather, evolution, and trying to form an entrepreneur-creator balance, which are often contradictory in ideologies. She acknowledges her creative team. "Collectively, our background, skills and experience allowed us to support this organic process with structure and real-time planning."

For *Well Souled*, the book series is the "couture, meant to inspire other product collections in the future". Packaging and stationery, perhaps? From the inside of a box to the ribbon bow, from tags to gift cards – understated detail and quality speak. The same rule applies to items of Shah's personal attire. "Each piece usually has a story," she says. "A green raincoat from Buenos Aires, a recycled rubber bag from Rio, a gold cuff I found in Mumbai. In a broader sense, my style is defined by intuition. I go with what feels right." **V**

WELL SOULED IS A NEW YORK BASED DESIGN LABEL, WITH A FOCUS ON SUPPORTING CHILDREN ORPHANED BY AIDS. THEIR PRODUCTS ARE AVAILABLE AT WWW.WELLSOULED.COM.
