

# Studio Mumbai

architects, Mumbai

## between the sun and the moon

arc en rêve centre d'architecture bordeaux



exhibition organised and designed by  
arc en rêve centre d'architecture  
curator  
Michel Jacques, architect, artistic director  
assisted by  
Ludovic Gillon, architect, project manager  
and Cyrille Brisou, designer

THANKS to Studio Mumbai  
Bijoy Jain, architect, founder of Studio Mumbai  
and Mitul Desai architect, project manager

Aquitanis • Château Chasse-Spleen •  
Fondation Bouygues Immobilier • Texaa •  
Tollens Materis Peintures •  
support the initiatives of arc en rêve centre d'architecture

18 12 2014 → 31 05 2015

ê

Since 1981 arc en rêve centre d'architecture has elaborated a cultural awareness-building strategy focusing on contemporary architecture and extending into city planning, landscape design and object design, aimed at broadening perceptions of a changing world.

Its internationally recognised programme features exhibitions, lectures, public discussions, publications, workshops for children, seminars for adults, visits to buildings, city tours, and planning experiments.

arc en rêve centre d'architecture bordeaux  
arcanreve.com Entrepôt, 7 rue Ferrère F-33000 Bordeaux  
info@arcanreve.com T +33 5 56 52 78 36 F +33 5 56 48 45 20



The Indian sub-continent boasts some truly impressive statistics: a population of 1.2 billion, gigantic cities, and unprecedented economic growth. Although its ancient culture is shrouded in a mystical aura, thanks to Le Corbusier, it also features some masterpieces of modernist architecture dating from the second half of the twentieth century. On the phone with the founder of Studio Mumbai, we explore some of the contrasting realities of modern India where architecture may have a role to play.

Félix Mulle: The population of Mumbai is estimated at 22 million, twice that of the largest European cities. Can you say something about the specifics of this context?

Bijoy Jain: **We're experiencing a very radical change. Large cities such as Mumbai are growing at an incredible rate, and the same phenomenon can be observed in the smallest out-of-the-way towns: it's becoming more dense, larger, more "urban" in a way. But although mindsets are becoming more urban, migrants continue to function in the same way as in their native regions and bring rural practices and atmospheres into the heart of the metropolis. A sort of cross-pollination is taking place, and the frontier between the rural and the urban remains very indistinct. If you add up the populations of the country's five largest cities, you get a total of maybe 100 million people. But we're still talking about a society of 1.2 billion individuals! Overall, we can't talk about a predominantly urban environment, but profound changes are afoot.**

FM: The way society is organised leaves a lot of room for informal initiatives. A recent film, "The Lunchbox"\*, shows the meal delivery system in Mumbai. Immense and completely informal, it actually turns out to be very effective...

BJ: **There's a special way of working here that integrates chaos. As a country, I have the impression that we need this kind of indeterminacy and fuzziness, and that these are not destructive or limiting things, they're also what makes us what we are. A lot of tourists experience this feeling of uncertainty when they arrive in India: they ask a question in the street and they get a kind of ambiguous nodding by way of an answer. They don't know if it means yes or no, and communication has to take place via an interpretation of gestures. As an architect trained in the West, I had to learn to work "between yes and no", hovering between two conceptions of time and efficiency. On one side there was what I call "Greenwich time", globalised, highly codified, based on the course of the Sun, and which India has integrated via its colonial history; and on the other side there's the time of the Moon, based on the fluctuations of water, tides and monsoons, which remains very influential in our pagan society. There's a huge potential to be explored in the way these two ways of operating come together. That's the meaning of my work, and it explains the title of the exhibition, *Between the sun and the moon*...**

Francine Fort general director, arc en rêve centre d'architecture

FM: Was it your awareness of this potential that prompted you to create Studio Mumbai when you came back from London in 1995?

BJ: **Actually nothing was planned in advance: things just developed as time went on. In the beginning, I worked in a pretty conventional way and my initial projects weren't all that successful. I would compile a series of plans and technical descriptions and hand them to the workers. They were really gifted craftsmen coming from long lines of artisans, but they had absolutely no idea of how to read a blueprint. So we needed intermediaries on the building site, and I had to spend a long time explaining what I wanted, mainly using gestures. I also realised that my reflex was to try to get across the modernist idiom I'd learned at college. The result was details that were complicated to execute, whereas the artisans had a much simpler and much more optimal way of responding to the questions I was asking myself. I learned a great deal from them. After observing this for a while, I came up with the idea of setting up a studio where designers and builders would work in tandem so that the learning process would work in both directions, so that I would understand them and they would make the effort to understand me. In a sense I had to abandon the culture of architecture in favour of a very practical culture of construction. It was only after a while that all this resolved once again into architecture.**

FM: Your early buildings were mainly beautiful houses in superb natural settings. Today there's a sense that you're starting to work on a new scale. Can you tell us about your latest projects?

BJ: **For example we're currently working on a small high-rise in Mumbai, 34 storeys and 70 metres tall. The idea is to make use of the most influential weather feature in this country, the monsoon, and to make a building that is responsive to the rain and that knows how to interact with it. Most of the time, buildings in the city seek to protect themselves from the monsoon. But on the contrary we should negotiate with the monsoon, because climatic conditions are very favourable in this period in terms of temperature and air quality. Our building will act as a rain filter; it will slow down the wind but allow it to enter. Also the patina will be active, bearing the marks of the passage of time. In Mumbai, all the buildings are very grey: you could repaint the entire city and one monsoon later it would all be grey again. So instead of resisting this climatic phenomenon, we turn it to our advantage so that the appearance of the building can change with the rain and the seasons. It's also a way of saying that, even in the very heart of a city of 22 million people, we can forge a link with nature.**

FM: A project on this scale must also affect the way you build...

BJ: **It does. Of course I have to work with engineers and construction firms. The idea is that the reinforced concrete superstructure of the tower is symbolically anchored in the formal organisation of the city, in the "Greenwich time" we talked about earlier. What fills this structural frame, which is lighter and will be built by the Studio Mumbai craftsmen, is rooted in the most informal and loosely determined aspect of our culture. It's the "time of the moon". Once again, it's very interesting to organise a convergence between these two city-building philosophies.**

FM: India is also a country marked by deep-seated inequalities and, at the urban level, by the development of huge slums. Does architecture have any chance of having an impact on the city? Can architecture solve problems?

BJ: **In my view, architecture is all too often reduced to problem-solving. Today, I don't try to tackle these problems head-on; instead I look at the meaning we can give to the way our culture is evolving, in the twenty-first century, at this crucial moment in time. In Mumbai, I'm not surrounded by architects but by creative people in a wide range of fields: music, fashion, and so on. The issue is very far-reaching and concerns our overall cultural future at a time when the frontiers between genres and places are very porous. I try to make each of my buildings easy to reproduce so that it doesn't remain an isolated experiment, so that it proliferates, but I know that takes time: enough time for new ideas to spread and be shared more widely. Architecture in India is most often considered as a mere amenity; a lot of work needs to be done to get people to accept it as an expression of culture. And all these changes happen so fast... How is it possible to make meaningful buildings while taking this rapid change into account? For the moment I can't answer that question, but I see it as a genuine challenge.**

\**The Lunchbox*, Ritesh Batra, 2013

**Bijoy Jain**  
interviewed by Félix Mulle, architect,  
for arc en rêve centre d'architecture,  
Friday 21 November 2014

**Bijoy Jain** was born in Mumbai in 1965. After graduating from Washington University in St-Louis, USA, he worked in Los Angeles (with Richard Meier) and in London from 1989 to 1995 before returning to Mumbai where he founded Bijoy Jain & Associates in 1996. In 2005, he changed his production model and created **Studio Mumbai**, a "human infrastructure" taking charge of both design and construction. Studio Mumbai has its offices at **Alibaug**, two hours' drive from the city centre, in an area that is still partly rural. Around a large courtyard in which building materials and design models are stored, artisans and architects can be seen hard at work, all collaborating in their own way on project development. Thanks to two private dwellings, Tara House and Palmyra House, and the Leti 360 tourist resort, all patiently constructed buildings that showcase the inventiveness of traditional expertise and engage in a sophisticated dialogue with the surrounding landscape, the firm gained notoriety and was awarded the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture in 2008. Following an invitation from Kazuyo Sejima, Studio Mumbai took part in the twelfth Architecture Biennale in Venice 2010 and was awarded a Special Mention. Striking out in a new direction and aiming at more international and large-scale production, with projects in Japan, Spain and China, Studio Mumbai will soon be opening a second studio, **Saath Rasta**, this time in the very heart of Mumbai.

