

A visit to five contemporary architecture projects in Mumbai that would otherwise not be easily accessible to the public led

to many insightful and perceptive conversations. Text by Ekta Idnany Photos by Sahil Latheef

The Mumbai Architecture Open that was held over the weekend of 10 and 11 February 2018 was in many ways an extremely encouraging event. Organised by ThreeFlaneurs in cohorts with the Urban Design and Architecture section (curated by Kaiwan Mehta) of the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival in Mumbai, we extended the boundaries of the discussions and the precinct to involve the city, and the practice of Architecture in the city at large. The event called for the participation of a carefully curated list of five projects that had been recently completed and would otherwise be inaccessible to people without permission. The turnout of people to view these projects as well as the participation from the architects and clients to allow access to these buildings alludes to the generosity that this city and the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival is famous for. However, if one were to extend that discussion to the city and its architectural practices, the similarities and differences that emerge are worth exploring in detail. As an architect in Mumbai, opportunities to engage on institutional projects in the city are few and far between, and most young practices find themselves working on interior decor projects or residential projects; hence it was interesting to be able to find five institutional projects that were extremely varied in nature. The patronage of institutions in India at large has shifted from the state to non-governmental stakeholders like private educational trusts, and therefore the client is an equally important participant in the architectural production of institutions in the city. Moving on, the projects that we looked at over the course of two days ranged in programme from two educational institutions (Green Acres Academy

school and KJ Somaiya IT college extension) to a private office (Synergy Lifestyles) and a neighbourhood development (Godrej Trees) – both engaging the ideas of adaptive reuse in the city, and lastly an architect's residence (Smriti 57) that was a commentary on the nature of residential redevelopments taking place in the suburbs. In all the projects, one could read the underlying nature of responsibility that was attempted towards the users of the project as well as the city of Mumbai.

Both the educational projects looked at challenging the typology of such institutions. At Green Acres Academy, architects Tushar Desai and Associates attempted to blur the rigid boundaries of learning and circulation spaces within a school by allowing flexibility of programme and encouraging imaginative use of the expanded circulation spaces. Clearly the building has skillfully dealt with the unforgiving mathematics of Floor Space Index to its advantage to be able to achieve the above goals. Similarly the KJS IT extension by Sameep Padora+ Associates is surprisingly humane in scale and sharp in its contrast to the ubiquitous verticality of buildings in Mumbai. It was designed to meander between trees and hug the ground. The heart of the project lies in how it connects to the green spaces of the central courtyards. In the Green Acres School, pause spaces travel through the building vertically, while in the IT extension pauses punctuate the project horizontally, accentuated and modulated by the large parasol-like roof that dances over the building. Another striking similarity between the two projects was the deliberate and responsible adoption of green building technologies to increase comfort and reduce operational



## Acts of viewing



bottom-right: Images of Green Acres Academy, an educational institution where architects Tushar Desai and Associates have attempted to blur the rigid boundaries of learning and spaces within a school by allowing flexibility of programme and encouraging imaginative use of the expanded circulation space. Bottom-left: The KJ Somaiya IT College extension was designed by Sameep Padora and Associates in a way so that it meanders between open, green spaces

energy costs. At Green Acres, the architects have actively investigated and adopted cross-ventilation throughout the project, thereby eliminating the need for air-conditioning. The Somaiya IT College has embedded chiller pipes into the floor to air-condition the classrooms. The experience of user comfort could be felt first-hand by the visitors. Finally the use of material in its most natural and honest form is what completes the similarities between the two projects. Exposed finished concrete is used in the school as a way to control economics and the college uses exposed brick infill in between a completely The next two projects challenged the ideas of conservation and adaptive re-use – the Synergy Offices at Kalachowki by Shimul Javeri Kadri Architects and the Imagine Studio in Vikhroli which was a collaborative effort by the GPL Design Studio and Studio Lotus. Perhaps in both these projects it is impossible to draw the line between the architects' and clients' vision. One is a paean to the history of Mumbai's textile industry and the latter pays homage to the local history of the client's manufacturing businesses. At Synergy, the project deals with the neighbourhood in a sensitive manner by completely avoiding an ostentatious façade and simply retaining the old structure while manipulating the roof for natural light. The internal floor-plate and structure has been retained in order to avoid engaging building with muted monochromatic palettes, earthy materials, and carefully crafted details in sync with the

manipulated abundance of natural light. At Vikhroli perhaps, the client-designer partnership is completely fluid with the GPL design studio acting simultaneously as designer and client whilst mentoring the aesthetic vision of Studio Lotus that gives the renovation its character. GPL Design Studio chose to retain the defunct industrial buildings and rehouse their marketing functions within, so that the site could retain its history as well as context and was not just relegated to a tabula rasa. The project is intended to later be handed over as a legacy to the future community that would inhabit the site. Perforated Corten steel is used to punctuate the industrial character of the past but also highlight the trees which form the concept of the project with neutral materials of natural stone and glass. The final project that we visited was Smriti 57, the residence of architects Nitin Killawala and Nimit Killawala. The house is situated in the dense suburban Juhu Scheme which is, in many ways, a victim of the careless and expedient redevelopment policies encouraged by the BMC that benefit only developers. The project is a commentary on the changing needs of a growing suburban family, neighbourhood, redevelopment economics, and building technology to expedite construction. It is unique in that the architect is his own client and that came across in not just how the project is designed but also in the documentation of the construction process that the Killawalas were gracious enough to share. They several times acknowledged the co-operation they received from their neighbours and community during the process of construction. The project is a panoply of minute and painstaking

details that one discovers around every corner, and is characteristic of the architect's oeuvre.

The conversation between the designers and the visitors was not merely critical or complimentary but truly about the toil of the craft; the challenges of building; sharing of new technological ideas; and detailing. It was refreshing to find architecture with a soul once again within the noise that one encounters every day in the city. The overwhelming takeaway from the Architecture Open was the responsibility that the profession feels towards itself, its projects, and the city. We hope to undertake more such discoveries in Mumbai and other cities in India in the near future.



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*This spread, clockwise from above: The participants at Sinrifi 57, an architect's residence that was a commentary on the nature of residential redevelopments taking place in suburban Mumbai; Synergy Offices by SJK Architects deals with the neighbourhood sensitively by avoiding an ostentatious façade and retaining the old structure; Imagine Studio in Vikhroli, a collaboration between GPL Design Studio and Studio Lotus, challenged the ideas of conservation and adaptive re-use; Participants at Imagine Studio; the façade*

