

EXPOSED PRÀXIS

DISPLAY

Exposed Pràxis.
The Studio and Other
Crypto-Exhibitions
of Architectural Poetics
and Intentions

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Rooms with a View. The House-Atelier of Bijoy Jain, Studio Mumbai

BY

Giulia Setti

The poetic of Bijoy Jain, founder of Studio Mumbai, is captured in his intimate and sensitive connection with materials and an artisanal approach to architecture, characterised by the production of unique, often unrepeatable, objects and spaces. The design research of Bijoy Jain is centred around the role of the architect as a sensitive artisan; it is a practice that should be intimate and attentive to environment, materials, inhabitants and the possibility to build an architecture that is as inclusive as possible¹.

In 2011, Bijoy Jain began the construction of *Saat Rasta*, a typological experiment built in the heart of Mumbai, which reclaims an old and abandoned warehouse experimenting with new ways of collective living². *Saat Rasta* is not only Bijoy Jain's house, but it is also his atelier: a collective workspace, a space for building and imagining architecture, but also experimenting with materials and objects. In this hybrid place, Bijoy contaminates the living personal spaces, with the ones for the making of and the more public for the display of models, architectural pieces, and objects directly made there, in his atelier. Thus, the architecture becomes a space devoted to exhibit the outcome of a craft work, often incomplete and partial, scrupulously followed by Bijoy Jain who lives in one of the housing units obtained from the existing structure where private domestic environments alternate with more collective spaces. *Saat Rasta* hosts, in fact, seven houses, designed to be independent and flexible thanks to the presence of movable partition walls.

The domestic space, each developed on two levels, reinterpret the typology of the house-patio and overlook an intimate garden, an internal tree-lined road, that ends in the largest space of the intervention: Bijoy Jain's atelier. The atelier is a double-height space, with large windows that open onto the courtyard and from which Bijoy can continuously observe and direct the production

1. F. Serrazanetti, M. Schubert (edited by), *Studio Mumbai. Inspiration and process in architecture*, Moleskine, Milan 2013.
2. S. Dalvi, *Bombay mix: Saat Rasta housing, Mumbai, India*, by *Studio Mumbai*, in "Architectural Review", 1443, 2017; <https://www.architectural-review.com/buildings/bombay-mix-saat-rasta-housing-mumbai-india-by-studio-mumbai> (accessed April 29, 2024).

and activities of his workshop³. The sequence of courtyards, which overlook the various spaces, creates an ‘open-air museum’, where the results of ongoing projects, study models and fragments of materials, that have been partially worked on or discarded or that still need to be discussed with the architect, are exhibited. It is an informal, unorganised and constantly evolving exhibition space, where models and objects sometimes pile up, sometimes, instead, are arranged in a more regular manner. The materials exhibited in the courtyards of Saat Rasta show the direct association between the artisans, who make them, and the design poetic of Bijoy Jain, becoming the most direct expression of the *modus operandi* of Studio Mumbai and of the intimate vocation of Bijoy who never separates himself from his obsessions: architecture and matter⁴.

The atelier and the surrounding spaces are well-lit and, at the same time, protected by the system of courtyards that bring light and air inside, and collect water from the monsoon rains. In the atelier of Studio Mumbai one can grasp the desire to build a continuous link between soil, light and air, bringing nature inside the house and workspaces: an oasis of peace in a dense and chaotic city like Mumbai. Bijoy Jain returns to the city, to Mumbai, after more than twenty years of work and life in Alibag, a remote place, not easily reachable and immersed in nature; it is in Alibag that Bijoy Jain’s design research takes its first steps, developing a delicate and personal way of treating materials and of bringing architecture back to an authorial and artisanal fact⁵. However, while returning to the city, Bijoy Jain tries to preserve the poetic and suggestions of Alibag’s office, contaminating this knowledge with the most frenetic aspects of city life.

3. G. Setti, *Domestic Commons in Mumbai and Auroville*, in “Techne”, n. 24, 2022, p. 99.
4. C. Fernando Márquez, R. Levene (edited by), *Studio Mumbai (2012-2019). In-Between Spaces*, in “El Croquis”, n. 200, 2019.
5. M. Zardini, *Rooms you may have missed: Umberto Riva, Bijoy Jain, Canadian Centre for Architecture*, Lars Müller Publishers, Montreal, Zurich 2015.

The atelier thus becomes a place much more dedicated to production than to contemplation⁶; it is a visitable space, where Bijoy welcomes visitors and enthusiasts of his idea of making architecture. Walking through the alleys of Saat Rasta, in fact, one meets students, artisans, designers, architects, scholars and collectors, people who observe what is produced and exhibited here and who can see directly the works of Studio Mumbai in the intimacy of the place where they are imagined, conceived and built. Projects, models, semi-finished materials are often displayed on the threshold between outside and inside, some of these objects are exposed outside in the open-air courtyards because they need air to dry, other materials or small maquettes are, instead, arranged inside, leaving free only the spaces necessary for the passage between the worktables. In the courtyards there are objects in clay, plaster, but also wooden study models, while on the walls of the atelier are displayed prototypes woven on site, with rudimentary looms, which explore the consistencies and transparencies of different yarns. Particularly, the models are not only reproductions of projects developed by Studio Mumbai but are the expression of a formal research on the relationships between lights, textures and surfaces⁷.

The poetic and practice of Bijoy Jain and Studio Mumbai was recently displayed in a solo exhibition dedicated to the architect-artist, and curated by Bijoy Jain himself, at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporaine in Paris opened on 9th December 2023. The spaces of the Foundation were conquered by objects, drawings, fabrics, materials and shapes made with different techniques and, in some cases, designed specifically for the Parisian exhibition. An invaluable work, to which Bijoy Jain has dedicated so much energy and passion, with the aim of showcasing the care, precision and devotion of his design production⁸. The exhibition *Le souffle de*

6. C. Van Gerrewey, T. Vandeputte, V. Patteeuw, *The Exhibition as Productive Space*, in "Oase", n. 88, 2012, pp. 1-4.

7. R. Pommer, K. Frampton, S. Kolbowski (eds.), *Idea as Model*, Rizzoli International, New York 1981.

8. B. Jain, Studio Mumbai, *Le souffle de l'architecte / Breath of an Architect*, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporaine, Paris 2023.

l'architecte / Breathe of an Architect reconstructs, on a 1:1 scale, the idea of atelier-workshop that the architect founded. The projects, and all works made of Bijoy Jain, studies the relationship between man, nature and environment, exploring the links between art, architecture, matter and building a poetic world, while visitors could contemplate the objects produced in his atelier. Perhaps, more than many words, the film *The Sense of Tuning* shot in occasion of this exhibition by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine tells the magic about the figure of Bijoy Jain, his way of understanding architecture and the care and attention he puts into the genesis of his works. The movie, in fact, takes us back to Saat Rasta and plays on the dichotomy between the suspended time, that is perceived inside the house-atelier, and the contrast with the incessant noises that the city of Mumbai produces⁹.

Bijoy Jain's sensitivity shines through the essentiality of his projects, where the architect decides not to add but, on the contrary, to subtract to emphasie the pure and necessary elements of his poetic. Subtraction is the key factor to understand Bijoy Jain's design and it is also applied in the definition of his domestic spaces; the construction process is reduced to its main elements, the frame or the skeleton, renouncing to decorations and ornaments. A fascinating and mysterious journey where the house-atelier becomes a place to display, to study and to live, where research is combined with the definition of an attitude and a way of shaping the art of construction.

9. I. Bêka, L.Lemoine, *The Sense of Tuning*, video, 1 hour, 39 min, 2024. Trailer available here: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/thesenseoftuning> (accessed April 29, 2024)



Saat Rasta, Mumbai.
Bijoy Jain fonds; © Canadian Centre for Architecture; photo by Srijaya Anumolu
(2014), courtesy of Bijoy Jain.



Saat Rasta Building.
Photos by Giovanni Hanninen.





Saat Rasta Building.
Photo by Giovanni Hanninen.



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