

# An Interview with Bijoy Jain and Mirko Zardini at the CCA, Montreal

BY SOFIA KOUTSENKO

*In November of 2014, Rooms You May Have Missed opened at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. It paired architect Bijoy Jain, born in Mumbai in 1965 with Umberto Riva, born in Milano in 1928. What brought these two together? And what does their work tell us? Sofia Koutsenko took the opportunity to experience the exhibition alongside curator Mirko Zardini to get to the bottom of these questions and more. Later, it was into the ears of Bijoy Jain himself that Sofia Koutsenko's questions began to flow. They catch the reader up on Bijoy's thoughts for this exhibition and the current trajectory of his work.*

## SOFIA KOUTSENKO LOOKS MIRKO ZARDINI IN THE EYE

*Sofia Koutsenko: What first interested you about Bijoy Jain's work?*

Mirko Zardini: Bijoy is able to incorporate local practices, construction know-how, the different social components of the building process, client expectations, and daily life in a very strategic way, with a brilliant use of resources and the capacity to direct them in an unexpected direction. Bijoy says, "I'm like an orchestra director." It's true, but it's not only that—he also understands the reality in which he is operating, and finds in this reality the resources and the best strategy to achieve a certain kind of result very economically. I find this kind of strategic approach

quite interesting because it is a way of doing things that could be replicated in many different contexts.

*SK: Why is this kind of approach important to the North American context?*

MZ: The idea of the interior was the starting point. It was a way to explore the different strategies that are available to look at problems, or ways to incorporate different realities. These open up a series of possibilities, and attempt to offer alternatives. To show that there are very different ways that one can deal with a contemporary situation in varied contexts. We have a lot to gain and learn if we look at their ways of thinking and not at the specific results of their work.

*SK: More at their approach...*

MZ: Yes. In the case of Bijoy this means incorporating the reality of local practice into the process of the project, and for Riva, transforming banal functional elements like drain pipes and door sills into architectural features that contribute to the articulation of a space. Both of their work dismantles our traditional ideas of living, in terms of the attention that they pay to the users without becoming picturesque. Perhaps most importantly, you see that there is an interest in habits, the practices and gestures that make up our daily lives.

*SK: This exhibition comes directly after the on-going exhibition series Archaeology of the Digital. Can you talk about the need for this sudden shift to "examine alternative architectural strategies and specific, regionally influenced production methods" of Bijoy and Riva?*

MZ: I'm fascinated with tools. Their transformation has been incredible. I think that there is never

one tool. There are plenty of tools and you use the one that is, you feel, more strategic in a specific situation and condition. Perhaps you use different tools at the same time. I'm interested in the digital transformation that has been shaping architecture in the last twenty years. At the same time I'm fascinated by these alternative tools that both Bijoy and Riva are offering us in developing a different kind of thinking.

*SK: So you don't see the digital in contrast to Bijoy and Riva's approaches?*

**MZ:** No. I only say that I don't want everything to be reduced to the digital. I feel that Bijoy's strategy is incredibly interesting in incorporating different know-how and different tools—and also interesting in that Bijoy never uses one



Rooms You May Have Missed, exhibition view. Photo courtesy CCA.

tool. He uses a little bit of digital, a bit of sketching, and then the tape drawings, and then there are the models—so you see the variety of tools he uses to understand and produce architecture. Many of these tools are coming not from Bijoy directly but from laborers and craftsmen who are involved in the process. And it's similar, though perhaps in a more traditional way, for Riva. He makes drawings which are a kind of continuous, ongoing dialogue with the craftsmen and eventual inhabitants of his architecture. Many of his lamp designs, for instance, are based on his thinking but also deeply rely on the know-how of the craftsmen involved in the process.

#### SOFIA KOUTSENKO WALKS THROUGH THE GALLERIES TOWARD BIJOY JAIN

*SK: Hi Bijoy. Can you talk about the role images play in your work?*

Bijoy Jain: For me, being here in Montreal, it's more about images as documentation or image as documentary; seeing a situation that draws my attention. Sometimes it can be work that is ongoing with some kind of connection, or there are times when I document purely for what I am experiencing. There may be no specific motivation, or the motivation may be just to document pure observation. Often times that observation would sit latently as a digital file or printed image where there is no specific intention behind it. Sometimes three years later there is a connection to that experience that one has had and in some way it connects to a research or an inquiry that is ongoing. Those are the connections that begin to happen. For example in the room here on the Ahmedabad

House we included a book on bricks—documentation on bricks that has been ongoing now for 10 or 12 years. What I am discovering is that an idea may have began way back, but there was a gestation period before it began to actually unfold into some work. So it's this movement between the very clear intention of why the image would be taken or a moment when an image is taken and there is [the] realization of seeing something else beyond the image. Something else appears that one was not even looking at while capturing the image. For me this idea of images is more to register an experience. So it's a documentary or a sort of way that one, by looking at that image, can recollect a specific experience or an intention at that point in time.

*SK: A kind of incubation period...*

BJ: Yes, that's why I use the word gestation. It is a certain motivation that I'm not even aware of at that point in time.

*SK: How does the image find its way into your work—or specifically—into how you construct spaces?*

BJ: Let's take this research room (Demolition Series). Things being torn down and cut away, and which one experiences for example here in the west. It is ongoing anywhere and everywhere. My fascination toward what I was observing was this other layer that is being opened up, knowingly or maybe unknowingly. So if I take that image there—the pink one straight ahead (and that one has preoccupied me now from the time I captured it, trying to translate it into a physical project). I don't quite know how to do it, but the idea is that you keep your eye on that image.



Studio Mumbai Architects. Weaver's Studio. Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India. 2014. Image courtesy CCA.

So while one is doing the project or while one is developing the work, for me the intention there is the sort of opening up a particular kind of sensation—like light, and the method in which it has to be done is what substantiates the design process.

*SK: What I find interesting is that even your construction sites look like the site of an archeological dig...*

**BJ:** Yes. This idea of archeology; but again, it is through this process of archeology to displace time itself. There is an ambiguity for me of not knowing at what point is the beginning and the end—if there is the beginning and the end to a project. So there is not a way to really understand the structure, despite the obvious fact that there is a structure to the project. So for example, in the Weaver's Complex, if in a certain way one had to do a dissection or a cross section in plan and in section, it becomes quite difficult to decipher why specific materials are chosen or the way they come together. In many ways they are not meant to be connected the way they are. But again this is not one that comes from an architectonic or aesthetic approach, but more from conditions that are prevalent at the point in time when the project is unfolding.

Again in the case of the Weaver's Complex, in the main workshop, the foundations of the main workshops were originally to be done in stone. That was the way it was planned all along. What we discovered as the project was being built, the time at which we were to lay the foundations was close to the times of the rains—and the stones come from the riverbed. In this particular case, the rains came much earlier than originally anticipated, so they had to shut the river bed. So access to the stones was no longer available. In that

case we had two choices: either wait until the monsoons were over and then dig in the foundations. That would mean that we would be set back not just by the time of the monsoons but because it takes time for the water to recede immediately after rains. So there is a larger gap that is created; in some ways everything would come to a halt. What was available was brick.

It's common, it's manufactured in an industrial process. I use the world industrial, but it's quasi-industrial, it is all produced manually there. My interest was to look at the phenomenon of masonry. The idea of thickness, mass, weight, and to find a replacement to a condition which was actually closing down. With the stones we would have somewhat sabotaged the project by elongating the time it took to construct, which would then mean that there would be more exposure to other forces which were still unknown. And it was very easy for us to just transfer from stone to brick, in that specific case. Then immediately adjacent to that there are foundations being built in stone, because we already had those. So if one has to trace why a shift in this particular case—where logically, if you look at a large part of the project, all the foundations are in stone. This idea of being open to forces that sometimes enable or disable certain actions that need to be taken in the process of the building.

Most of our buildings are tied into seasonal changes or to seasonal flux, so we have to work with the rhythm of the seasons. For me, I'm very much interested in the idea of flux and seasonal changes and how those in some way influence or shape the form of the building. It always leads to something you don't quite know, but you can only anticipate.



Studio Mumbai Architects. Saat Rasta. Byculla, Maharashtra, India. 2012–2014. Image courtesy CCA.



Studio Mumbai Architects. House in Chennai. Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. 2014. Image courtesy CCA.



Studio Mumbai Architects. Migrant Housing. Surat, Gujarat, India. 2014. Image courtesy CCA.



Studio Mumbai Architects. Onomichi Community Space. Onomichi, Hiroshima, Japan. 2014. Image courtesy Studio Mumbai Architects



*SK: Can you describe the idea behind the exhibition? How do the rooms in the exhibition relate to the projects?*

BJ: In terms of the way the rooms have been divided or subdivided, the interest was in some way to present the space that the project is being shown in, as the space of the project itself. For me the space is as real as the site in itself—so it is kind of doing the work of a mock-up. I would say that all these rooms are really mock-ups of the projects unto themselves. For example, this particular room (*points to the ground*), there is the idea that one be continuously connected to the project from a spatiality—that is experience through walking, sitting, sleeping, eating—there are the sort of day-to-day activities that provide you the time to observe, to reflect. I think at least that's where I observe architecture from. I often work to construct scenarios that can as precisely represent how I made them to observe what I'm observing. So the sequence of these rooms—like the last space (*eye-gestures to the left*)—the one with the Copper House project, is quite interesting because when I'm in that room I find myself in the project in its reality, in terms of its dimensions, proportions, how one observes the video, the film, the sketches. And this is how we would also set up the space within the studio. The studio is continuously being rearranged on an almost day to day basis. Things are not fixed in the studio, which also means that you have to continuously engage with everything around you, all the objects, materials and so on. If you're a farmer and you are cultivating, and you go to the field, there is a certain action that occurs that enables you to observe the nature of the field and the environment around it and the time that is acting on it.

The evolution from the seed sampling to finally harvesting. There are discoveries you make along the way that one doesn't quite know but can only anticipate. I'm being a little bit ambiguous here, but for me the whole idea of design as we call it or drawing a project is all based on this idea of anticipation.

*SK: Can you talk about the projects you're working on today?*

BJ: We're doing a project in Japan, which for me is of a particular interest. The idea of the project is to revitalize a small town called Onomichi in the southern part of Japan, in the Hiroshima prefecture. It is a public space and a private space, it's partly funded or supported by the local government or local prefecture and then there is a private company, actually a travel company. So they're trying to draw back the younger generation that have migrated to the bigger cities, primarily to Tokyo. To attract them back, even if it's just fleeting, and to re-introduce them to places that they have left behind. So the project is a 1960s concrete-frame social housing structure, that sits on a piece of land dating farther back into the Edo period. So there are many layers of time to see on the site, from the way the land was subdivided to the boundary wall, to the way it sits on the hill, the view to the town. If you are familiar with the Japanese filmmaker called Ozu—he did this interesting film called *Tokyo Story*, which is shot in Onomichi.

*SK: So it is an existing building?*

BJ: It's an existing building, but there are modifications that need to be made. So it's not just a renovation and then there is the adjacent land that is around

so there are some new buildings that are coming. It's quite complex because we're building five rooms, there is a restaurant, there is a bar, there is a public space that is open for the citizens of the town that can walk in and out at will. There is a small Japanese spa in the public space. There are two bathing spaces. Then there is a pavilion which really serves no function, but just a pavilion to actually observe the town and a movie theater, but it's outdoors which basically is playing *Tokyo Story*, so it's a mirror reflection of what you're seeing in real time. So the point of observation if you look to the left you see *Tokyo Story*, which is shot at a particular part of time and you see a similar landscape when you look right while you're looking at the view that you're seeing in real time. So there is the idea of the split image and to be able to stand in between this idea of the split image.

*SK: Are there any other place, where you're building now?*

BJ: We're building in Spain, just outside Barcelona, a place called Horta de Sant Joan. Picasso spent some time in this place recovering from a series of illnesses. It's about a five kilometer distance from Horta de Sant Joan. It's a small, I would say residence. But I look at that project more as a found (or fun?) project or a project where it is also a rest stop. The house is divided into two parts, there is a house that is inhabited and there is a mirror reflection of the same house that is not inhabited, it's just a shell, which enables... also it's the patio of the house that got split from the main house.

*SK: Are you using the same approach, working with the local builders?*

BJ: I'm often asked this questions of how I would build in Europe. So it's something I've been curious about, and it is similar if not identical to the way the projects you see here in the exhibition are built. There is a process. The project is loosely defined. It's all a question of navigating a way through all the so-to-speak mundane aspects of building like legal documents and permissions and all of that. So even within that we explore what are the gaps available in the process of trying to build a project. So that while it is definitive there is a certain looseness that is enabled in that definition or in that very specific sort of framework.

*SK: Does it require you to learn the local know-how as well, or do you work more closely with a local architect?*

BJ: There is a local architect, who is a very good architect. Working in this way, you need good collaborators. And when I say that I mean that this work is based on unpredictability and often times that is not a very comfortable position to be in because our immediate response is to close things down. Like you would have a starting point, an end point and you figure out how to get from start to finish.