

domus

INDIA051LA CITTÀ DELL' UOMO



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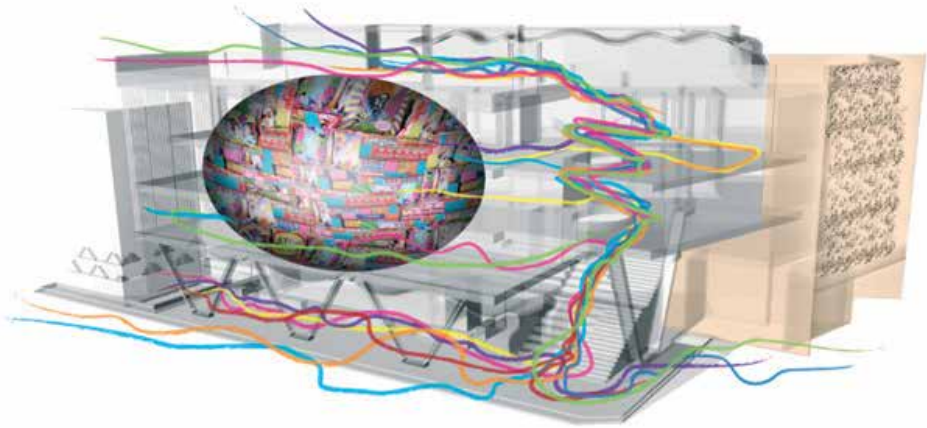
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Author	Design	Title
Kaiwan Mehta	18	Editorial Forms of practice, fields of action
Ekta Idnany	20	Zaha Hadid Architects
Kaiwan Mehta Nondita Correa-Mehrotra	28	Charles Correa Foundation
	38	Nehru Science Centre
Sharmila Chakravorty Suprio Bhattacharjee	44	Architecture Week – KGAF 2016
Vijay Narnapatti	52	IIA – Karnataka Chapter
Suprio Bhattacharjee	62	Urbnarc
	68	Domus MILLE
	102	Rassegna Colour
Rachid Andaloussi	108	Feedback Rachid Andaloussi's Casablanca



Cover: A collage of various iconic archival cover images of *Domus*, as the March 2016 issue marks the 1000th issue – *Domus onethousand*. This issue of *Domus India* documents the evolution of *Domus* over the years, as well as the evolution of design.



Cross-sectional view of the interior space at the India Heritage Centre in Singapore designed by Urbnarc

FORMS OF PRACTICE, FIELDS OF ACTION Kaiwan Mehta

This is a special moment for us at *Domus India* – this is our 51st issue, and in here, we are also celebrating the 1000th issue of *Domus* (international). So it is nice that this issue features much on forms and modes of discussing design and architecture histories, critical approaches to the lifetime of practices, and debates on how design development shapes a building, and the lacunae in design approaches. Various interesting forms of writing on architecture are also beautifully evident in this issue.

Writing on architecture, in India, has undoubtedly been under serious stress and in crisis over the last few decades. At one level the writing on architecture turned into making pretty notes on buildings and interiors, absolutely uncritical and using adjective after adjective to comment on the building; simply eulogising a building without really producing any knowledge about the building, its design development, or generally the field of architecture. On another level, the writing became contrived in the pressure to connect with the global space of theoretical writing – even if often done with genuine concern and academic intentions, this kind of writing appeared contrived as it was unable to understand that theory is contextual, and not universal; hence models often were discussed without bringing their relevance to the case study at hand. Critical thinking or forms of critiques that the Humanities produced in understanding artistic production, social and cultural contexts, roles of author and critics, etc. were not appropriately understood in writing on architecture. The worst thing that happens in this process was taking us away from the object of our concern – the building, the design, the architectural object; we lost a grip on the fact that the object at hand – the building, the object – had ways of telling you things, once you had ways of viewing it. To produce ‘thick descriptions’ of the architectural object is something that is missing – and one would see that as a crucial component of criticism. There always seem to be a preference for what I would term ‘proxy description’ whereby to discuss a building many other issues would be discussed, but without primarily engaging with the materiality and form of a building itself – and that would be a problem.

To engage with the flesh and blood of a building – its materiality, its structure, its elements of design, form and weight, its physical existence within a context – are the real stuff of architecture, that need to be engaged and wrestled with. Often asked, while producing a thesis on architecture, what are your primary references and sources – one replies with conviction, that the building

is one’s primary reference and source of producing thinking on architecture. Clearly there is a process in this and that process has to be understood and elaborated at all times, but it is an important understanding when writing on architecture. At least three features in this issue engage hands-on with the architectural resource – the building, the visual content of buildings, their form characteristics, and their structural affinities within their own histories. The discussion on the works of Zaha Hadid, as well as the India Heritage Centre in Singapore, directly looks at visual histories, cross-fertilisation of formal ideas, and their journeys through functional programmes of a building. Similarly, the exhibition on the un-built works of Charles Correa looks carefully at the shape of spatial ideas, their form in building-volumes, and the architectural terrain of every project – to develop a thesis and a framework on viewing a body and biography of work; the same set of notes again also apply to the feature on Zaha Hadid.

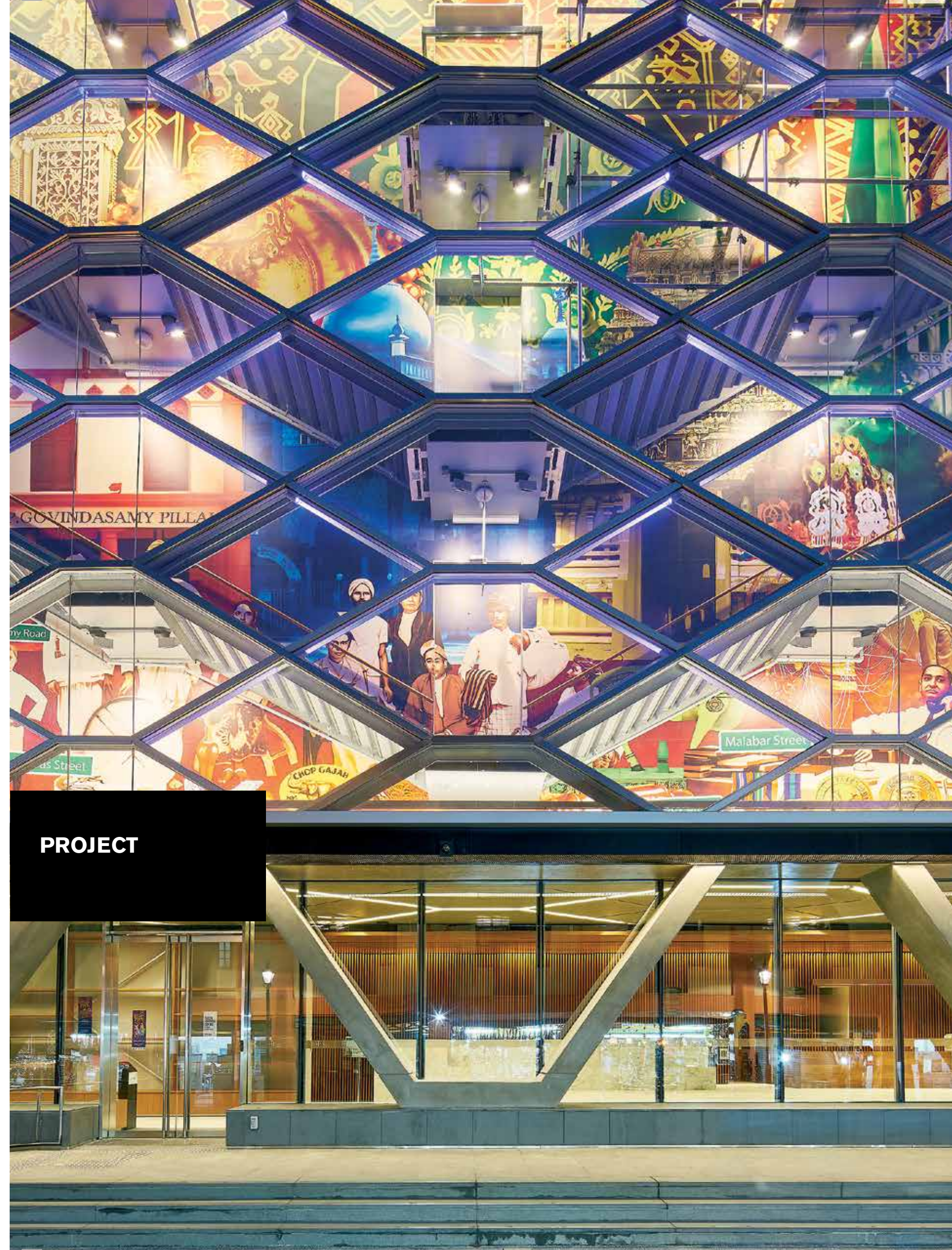
Two other features are interesting examples of how the debate on materiality of production – the understanding of everyday life of practice – is absolutely crucial. The unique event put together in Bengaluru by the Indian Institute of Architects – Karnataka Chapter and the Architecture Week in Mumbai, jointly organised by *The State of Architecture* exhibition and the Kala Ghoda Arts Festival this year – are forms of active engagement with practice, the idea of work and production that goes into the making of buildings and architecture. Once again, an investment in understanding another primary resource as far as architecture and design are concerned – the studio and the design, and construction development process. In understanding the life of a pioneering engineer like Sir MV (Sir Mokshagundam Visvesvaraya) one is indeed looking at the coming together of intellectual content, and material practice of engineering in a wider historical context – a clear reason why we would bring extracts of an exhibition on Sir MV organised under the aegis of the Nehru Science Centre (National Council of Science Museums, Ministry of Culture, Government of India) into the pages of this magazine.

What one is asking for here is a conscious understanding of the modes and methodologies of criticism and writing. Histories of thinking, genealogies of knowledge-production, and the vast landscape of subject-knowledge that we all inherit and work within have to be studied, understood, and accounted for in a methodical and structured way; but these should in no way become limiting on current ways of working, but rather provide the necessary launch pad for research, criticism and further for education.

Indeed education is the other important space where professionals would structurally engage in questions of practice and criticism, an aspect we do not seem to completely appreciate in the way pedagogy is structured as of today. Criticism and theory, within the education of an architect, are often treated as an extra form of knowledge, or a form of knowledge that allows a deeper understanding of architecture – while the latter is a useful approach, the ideal approach would be to see criticism as an integral form of knowing a subject. Actually criticism should be understood as an integral approach to understanding the world at large through your subject-sphere – then criticism become a mode of knowledge reception and perception.

Often writing and criticism are seen as activities that engage with esoteric and abstract forms of ideas and knowledge – while theory does deal in abstraction, one should know it is always rooted in context. Writing and criticism are rooted in contexts of actions, of practice. The study of theory and criticism is not about only understanding a history of movements and texts, but it is the contextualisation of theoretical ideas, structures, and histories. Criticism is, and should be, and one should not forget this, an active engagement with the world and its politics at large through your field of practice. Being an academic or an editor one is constantly engaged in a form of practice, that tries to understand the field of action at hand (architecture, design, art) and the production of our social and cultural space at large. The maker of buildings, the designer of objects, needs these larger frameworks of understanding as much as the editor or educator, while the educator or editor is also the practitioner who in every act of writing or lecturing is producing the field and the objects within it.

The history of *Domus* magazine over the last 1000 issues is evidence of some of the issues this editorial raises – where the magazine and the editorial is not simply a reflection or reporter on the field of design and architecture, but in fact it has actively produced that field. It has been heartening to see how the work of *Domus India* over the last 51 issues has encouraged interest in theory and criticism, as well writing on architecture, in India – what this interest would need is a channeling of energies through formats of education, exhibitions, and discursive platforms. *Domus India* remains committed to working within the field of writing and thinking, making architecture as well as design sites of action and engagement with the everyday world that we all occupy in complex ways. **km**



PROJECT

Urbnarc

DESIGN STRATEGIES: ASKING QUESTIONS

A new building in Singapore aims to pay homage to the history of people from the Indian sub-continent – a glass latticed enclosure, a ‘living museum’, floating above what will be the colourful and festive ground space for a variety of transitory urban events. While the Indian community within a foreign land has rarely had the opportunity to be represented by an urban gesture as significant as this – making the Heritage Centre an important marker – the aesthetic invites much debate on questions of regionality, and programmes such as cultural representation

Text Suprio Bhattacharjee
Photos Aaron Pocock





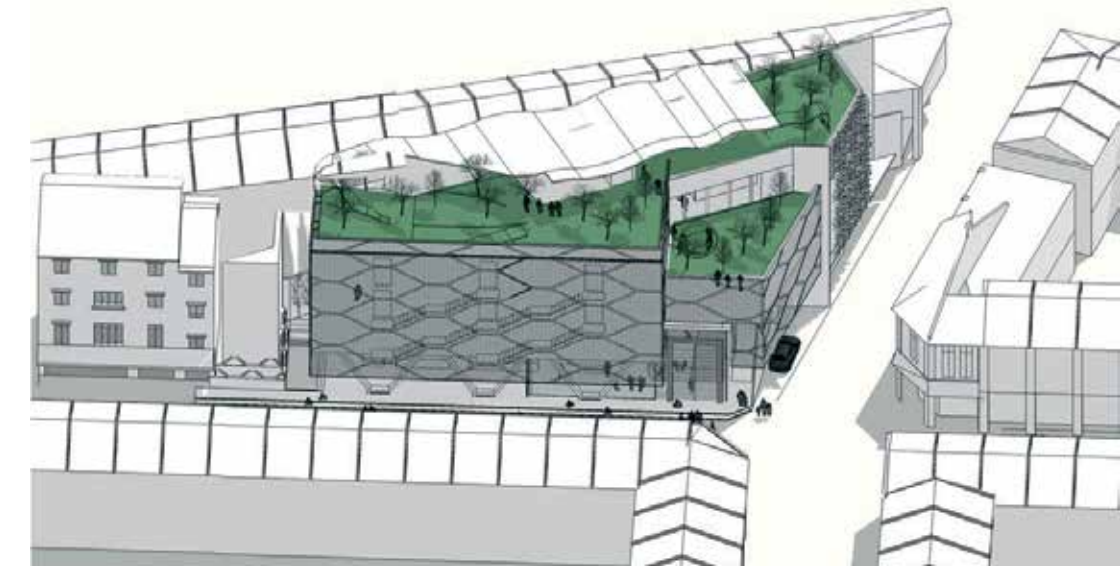
Previous spread: Little India in Singapore, the dense low-scaled urban fabric of shop houses (a protected precinct) plays host to the Heritage Centre, a fairly large symbol of community pride. **This spread:** the building attempts to fit into its setting by a strategy of fragmenting its constituent volumes into a lower two-storey high shop house across the intersection and a higher four-storey one on the other side of its primary building facade. Most public areas are arranged along the main street frontage and the intersection



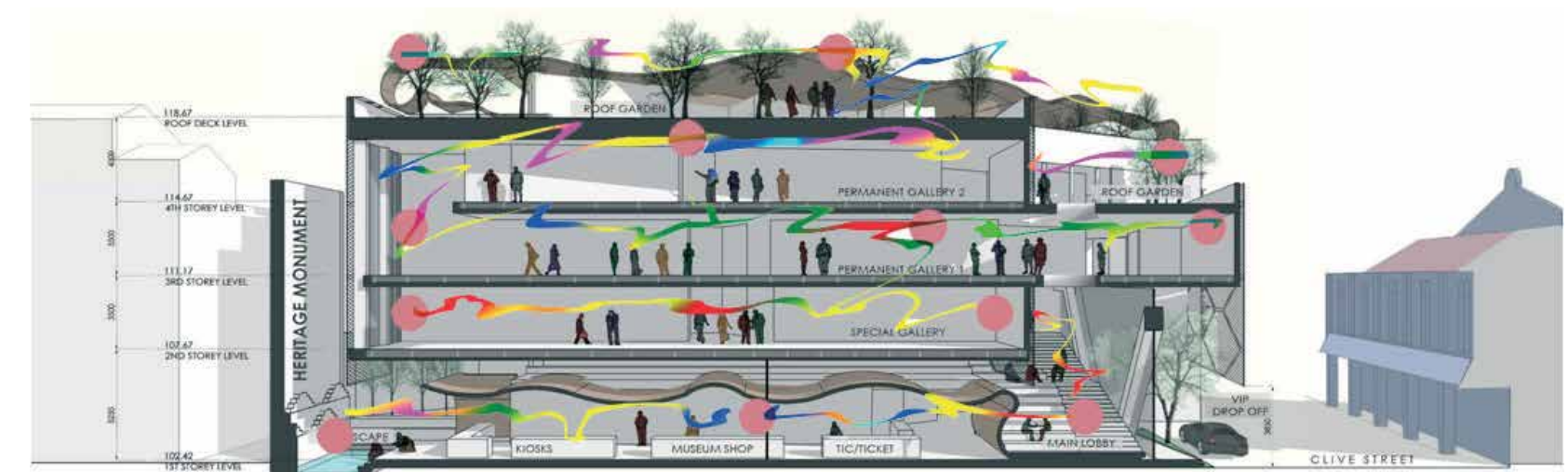
Singapore has a sizable Indian population (a little less than 10% of its total, making it the third largest ethnic group) and Tamil is recognised as one of the city-state's 4 official languages. People from the sub-continent began to settle within the territory almost two centuries ago – an ethnicity that has since diversified. It has also been made to spread (as part of the city-state government's focus on avoiding the formation of ghettos – something that has also affected its social housing program, but this is another conversation) beyond its nerve centre in what is popularly known as 'Little India'. Today, the dense low-scaled urban fabric of shop houses (a protected precinct) plays host to a fairly large symbol of community pride – a building known as the Indian Heritage Centre (essentially a museum) – designed by local practice Urbnarc (led by Gaurang Khemka), located on a formerly open parcel of land at the intersection of two streets belonging to the government authorities. Like many small practices in their nascent stages, Gaurang and his team at Urbnarc had to associate themselves with a larger firm (Robert Greg Shand Architects – an office engaged in the design of luxury villas) to participate in the competition for the project in 2011.

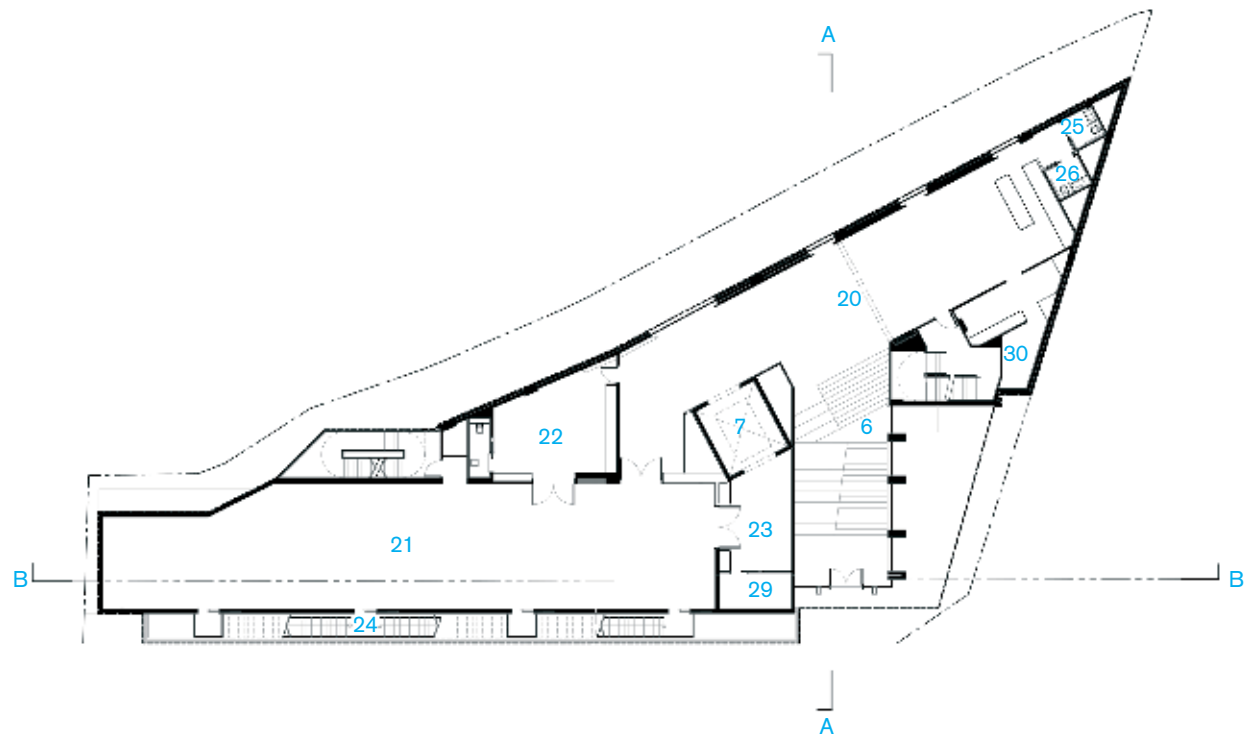
With a proposal that amalgamated a number of compelling ideas into a building body upon a tight site of difficult proportions, the jury was unanimous in its choice of the eventual winner. Urbnarc's project suggested these important design strategies – the base of the building envisaged as a colonnade open to the street (suggested in their proposal to be made pedestrian and transformed into an invented public realm) to form a vibrant 'bazaar, an entrance stairway that became an amphitheatre filtering out onto the street, museum circulation inspired by the cascading stairways of step-wells (social collectors of yore) that would loop visitors descending from the upper level into and out of gallery spaces by thrusting them repeatedly onto the outside and over the rooftops of Little India (a 'living museum' as Gaurang calls it) with a large three-storey-high multi-coloured pop-art mural as a backdrop and terminating metaphorically into a light court with a water body, and a public route that would take the vibrant atmosphere of the street-level bazaar to the rooftop public space (perhaps filled with food kiosks offering Indian delicacies surrounded by plants native to the sub-continent). All this, encased in a lattice box patterned in the rhythmic,





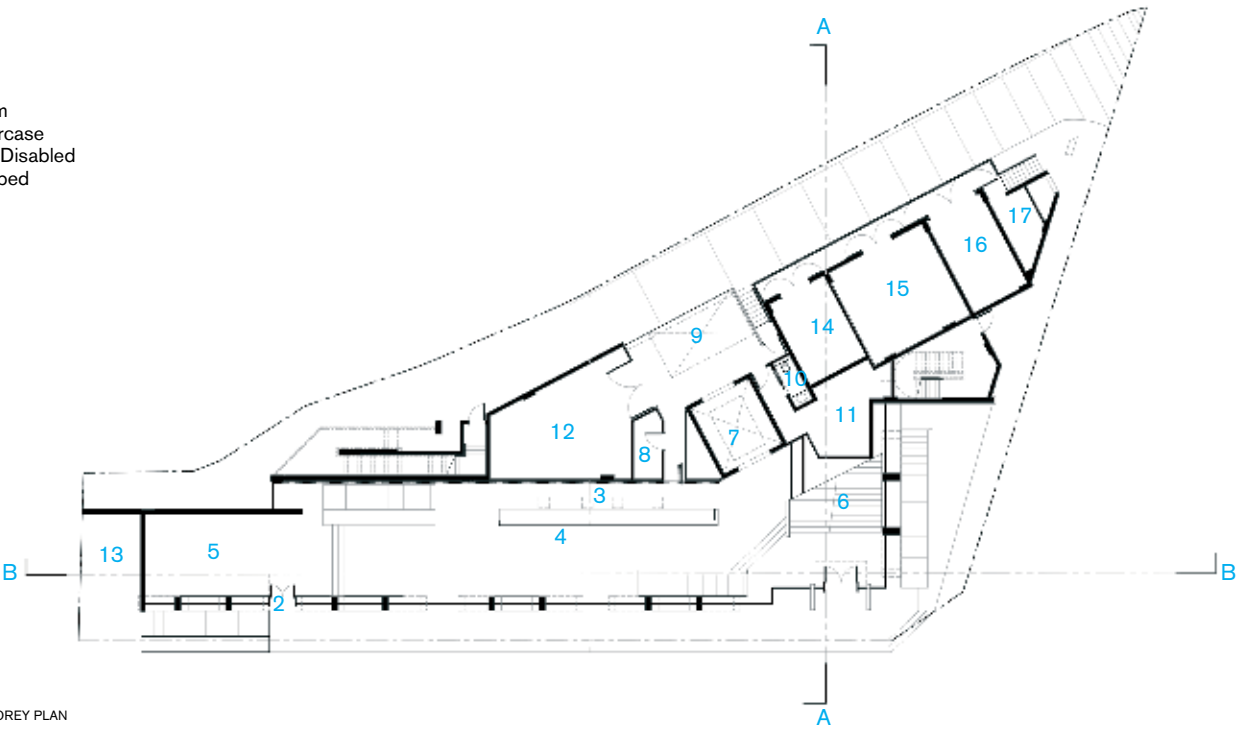
Opposite page: detail of the glass latticed facade, and view of the mural wall within. This page left: 3D view of the building as it sits on the site, within the adjoining streetscape. Below: rendered sketches of the various spaces within the museum. Far below: sectional view of the building showing the different spaces within



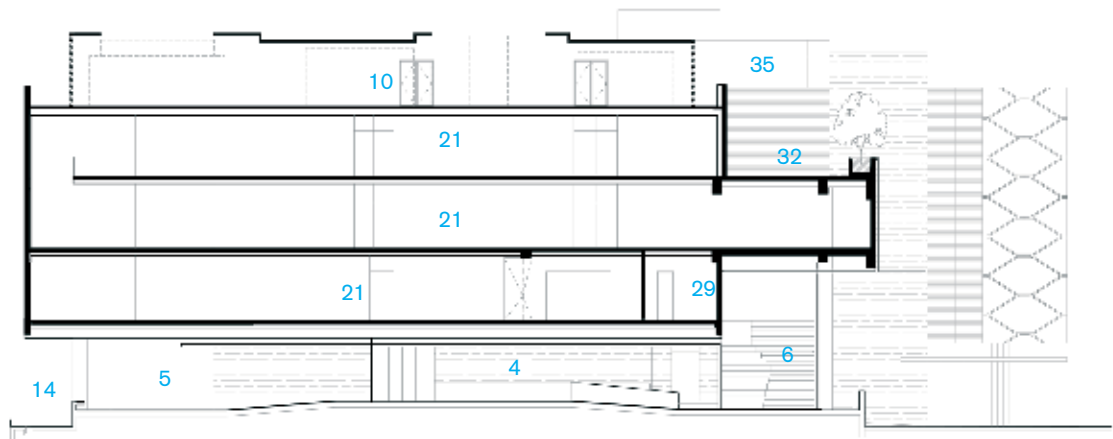


SECOND STOREY PLAN

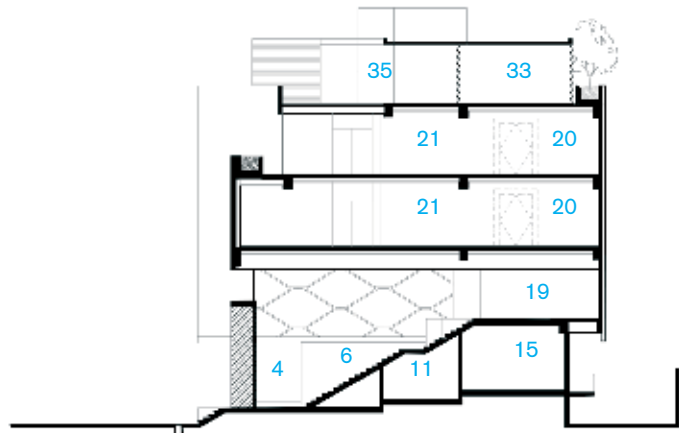
- 1 Main Entrance
- 2 Secondary Entrance
- 3 Ticketing Counter
- 4 Main Lobby
- 5 Museum Shop
- 6 Tribune Staircase
- 7 Passenger/Cargo Lift Shaft
- 8 Locker Room
- 9 Loading/Unloading Bay
- 10 Toilet
- 11 Security Room
- 12 Crate Storage
- 13 Storage
- 14 Outdoor Activity Area
- 15 Switch Room
- 16 Transformer Room
- 17 Mdf Room
- 18 Activity Area
- 19 Gallery A
- 20 Gallery B
- 22 Guest Room
- 23 Mount Making Room
- 24 Facade "Baoli" Staircase
- 25 Toilet For Ambulant Disabled
- 26 Toilet For Handicapped
- 27 Male Toilet
- 28 Female Toilet
- 29 Server Room
- 30 AV Control Room
- 31 Lift Lobby
- 32 Garden
- 33 M&E Services
- 34 Service Corridor
- 35 Roof Terrace



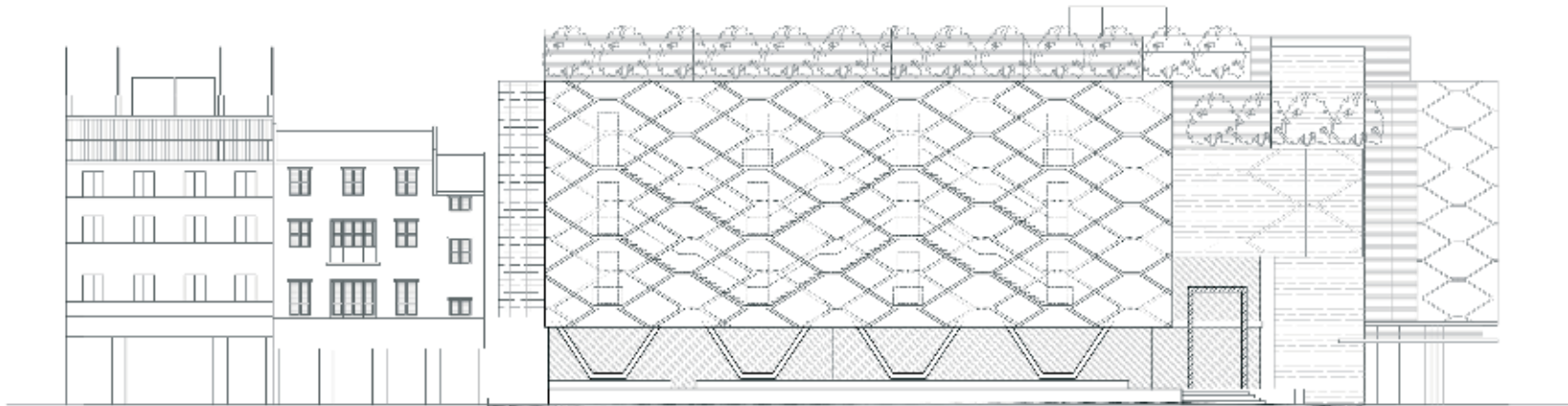
FIRST STOREY PLAN



SECTION BB



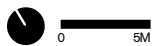
SECTION AA



SOUTH ELEVATION

Project
Indian Heritage Centre, Singapore
Location
Little India, Singapore
Client
National Heritage Board of Singapore
Architecture & Urban Design
URBNarc Pte Ltd in Collaboration with **Robert Greg Shand Architects**
Design Team
Gaurang Khemka, Greg Shand, Luther Maynard Sim, Avy Janda, Maverick Lariosa
Civil Contractors
Yong Xing Construction Pte Ltd
Structural Engineers
Surbana International Consultants Pte Ltd
M&E
Mott Macdonald Singapore Pte Ltd

Project management
SIPM Consultanst Pte Ltd
Facade Consultant
Passage Projects
Gallery Fitout Design
GSMPRJCT Creation Pte Ltd
Quantity Surveyors
Franklin + Andrews Pte Ltd.
Lighting Consultant
Ong & Ong Pte Ltd
Site Area
1033.8 m²
Built Up Area
3089.68 m²
Project Estimate
S\$16m (Architecture)
Total project cost
S\$ 26m
Initiation of Project
August 2011
Completion of Project
May 2015





repetitive lines of stairways within the aforementioned stepwells – a pattern that in modern times also reminds one of an expanded metal mesh – often used today as a facade scrim in many cultural buildings across the world. This facade would filter the views across the city for the museum visitor, an enthralling experience of space, circuit, surface and cityscape. The project had many stakeholders including members of the local community as well as representatives of the various Government departments (funding was shared between the Government and Community Donors). A complex, long-drawn design-development process involving a multitude of agencies and committee representations post the competition saw a number of turns that had an unfortunate impact upon the executed design – such as a later regulation that made it mandatory for buildings to be raised atop a plinth to avoid flooding that effectively severed the building's connection to the

street, the decision by the museum administration to cut off the public route to the roof for security reasons, the unfortunate directive to climate-control the ground level that killed off the bazaar, as well as the eventual rejection by the clients of the filigree facade in favour of a generic glass skin, resulting in a finished building that is shorn off much of the those design strategies envisaged by its architects that also led this to become a forceful vision of what a cultural centre in a place such as this could be. The finished building exudes a cool, almost business-like grey attire during the daytime, only to be transformed into a startling, festive, polychromatic lantern on its key street facade – the primary victory of the executed design. It attempts to fit into its setting by a strategy of fragmenting its constituent volumes into a gaggle of gestures that makes references to the scale of the immediately adjacent building volumes – a lower two-storey-high shop house across the intersection and a

higher four-storey one on the other side of its primary building facade. A glazed box at the intersection becomes the building's urban anchor and its public access – with a door set within a contemporary 'chaukhat' or portal reminiscent of those in traditional dwellings within the sub-continent (Gaurang mentions this being executed by master craftsmen from South India) – topped by a solid angular mass that pivots a blind narrower wall on one side, and the colonnade of V-columns holding aloft the aforementioned glass facade behind which is nested the stepwell-inspired cascading stairways and the mural wall (the architects were not involved in its design), becoming supergraphic-like within the neighbourhood when night falls and the colours shine through the otherwise daytime-reflection-obscured vitrine. The raised plinth now commands the length of the street (that the administration has, to their credit, pedestrianised – although the architects of the building were not directly involved in its implementation) – and, as

Opposite page: the vibrant mural wall besides the staircase, which sits next to the glass facade, provides views of the cityscape outside. This page top: The entrance is set within a contemporary 'chaukhat', as seen in most traditional dwellings in India. This spread: the interior aesthetic seems borrowed from the image consistent with that of the hospitality industry or say, a hotel lobby with its use of materials projecting luxury and corporate aesthetics





Gaurang observes, it serves as a 'katta' or bench or raised platform now; by accident, of course. He sees this change positively as it does bring back the possibility of becoming a social space activated by performances, kiosks, and street theatre. Internally, the services are relegated to what is the rear of the building upon the tight, wedge-shaped plot – ensuring that the public areas are arranged along the main street frontage and the intersection. The dramatic change within the executed design as compared to the competition-winning scheme becomes apparent on the inside as well – where the glass-enclosed ground floor now serves the generic museum function of reception and souvenir shop – with an aesthetic that is borrowed from the image consistent with that of the hospitality industry

or say, a hotel lobby with its use of materials projecting luxury and decadence; an aberration considering the building's stated purpose of representing a region's specific culture (Gaurang ruefully attributes the completed design of the ground level public spaces to the aforementioned collaborating office – apparently born out of a frenzy during the closing stages of the project where he and his team at Urbnarc were not fully consulted). The galleries offer a few windows that overlook the rooftops of the surrounding neighbourhood. Although from a museography perspective, the design of the displays and representation of the collections by the curators leaves much to be desired. Elsewhere, the severing of the terrace gardens from the public realm means that the vegetation now offers merely an aesthetic respite – although

one hopes that the museum administration will come around its decision. It is not often that an Indian community within a foreign land has had the opportunity to be represented by an urban gesture as significant as this – which perhaps makes this, as a project and an undertaking, an important marker. The architecture here (in both its conception and its final compromised actualisation), whilst making its forceful gestures, also evidences a certain heterogeneity that while it can be seen as a representation of the country's diversity, it can also become a trope that in its effort to represent 'the more' also begins to raise a volley of questions that bring to light a greater disconcert than an effective amalgamation; in this case, of course, something that the curators of the museum have a large hand in as well –

This page, left: the glass-enclosed ground floor serves the generic museum function of reception and souvenir shop. While curation could be the topic of another feature altogether, the architects were not involved in the process for this particular exhibition; from a museography perspective, the design of the displays and representation of the collections by the curators leaves much to be discussed and debated. Above: during the night time, colours shine through the otherwise daytime-reflection-obscured vitrine. Seen here is the graphic mural wall inside. Right: the latticed facade filters the views across the city for the museum visitor

especially for instance, in non-involvement of the architects in the design of the mural wall. To the credit of Urbnarc's initial ideas and what eventually succeeded in being actualised through an excruciating and compromised design development process, one can still imagine the delightful urban theatre of people traversing the cascading stairways framed by the polychromatic wall, floating above what will be the colourful and festive activated ground space of transitory urban events such as stalls, performances and food kiosks. @

