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A flexible artists' retreat in an idyllic coconut grove in Mumbai Bay

Light touch

Set in an idyllic, perfectly pristine seaside spot outside Mumbai, The Other Side Studio is a newly completed artists' retreat, with a particular focus on art therapy. 'The owner [an artist herself] realised there weren't many places in Mumbai to work with art,' says architect Robert Verrijt. 'Mumbai real estate is very expensive and pushes artists to the margins. This site is easily accessible by boat from central Mumbai.'

The retreat's design is the brainchild of India- and Netherlands-based studio Architecture Brio, led by Shefali Balwani and Verrijt. It was conceived as a response to its context and draws on South Asian building traditions.

'During heavy monsoon rains, the palm orchard floods, and more recently seawater has also been coming in due to climatic changes,' says Verrijt. 'Because of the ecological sensitivity, you shouldn't build anything permanent there.' This prompted the team to create a mini campus of smaller buildings, raised on stilts and designed as lightweight, temporary structures that can be easily disassembled and moved to a different location if needed. As long as buildings were impermanent and under three storeys, there were few restrictions as to where to build within the site. The complex includes accommodation for

artists, a canteen, and a flexible central space to host workshops and residents' activities. The workshop space is the heart of the design. It is divided into two similarly shaped, adjacent volumes with interiors that can be left flowing and open, or adapted to different uses through timber screen partitions. 'The workshop's form comes from the idea of a Sri Lankan *ambalama*, a beautiful, delicate pavilion, traditionally used as a rest stop for travellers,' explains Verrijt. 'We wanted to create something light, with a simple framework of columns, and a roof that is very dominant, almost like an industrial space; and we put in skylights that capture the north light.'

The south side of the roof has integrated solar panels, the main building frame is steel, while most of the remaining structure is created using inexpensive, off-the-shelf products. The roof is made of a bamboo framework. It is a traditional construction craft that is disappearing in India, says Verrijt. 'At most, homebuilders use it in the informal sector in rural areas. We wanted to reintroduce bamboo as a construction material to normalise it in the formal construction industry, as it has so many benefits as a sustainable structural material.' architecturebrio.com; othersidestudio.com

Photography: Edmund Sumner