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04	Introduction: Dinesh Vyas, Senior Vice President - Marketing, H & R Johnson (India)	110	Pedagogy: On Contemporary Design Education: Suprio Bhattacharjee
10	On Sustainability: Architecture and Practice Dean D'Cruz	116	Prototyping and Product Design: Aziz Kachwalla / At-tin
22	India & the World Exhibition: Somaya and Kalappa Consultants	128	Public Sanitation Infrastructure: RC Architects
34	Architecture of Institutions: Studio Advaita	144	When is Space? Exhibition, Jaipur: Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty
50	Studio: The Practice & Process of Architecture BRIO	156	Polemics: 'Indianness': Jay Thakkar, Shimul Javeri Kadri and Tony Joseph
66	Collaborative Architecture Projects: MOAD	166	Ceramics: Applications & Processes: Swagata S Naidu
82	Jai Jagat Theatre: SEAlab	176	Values & Identity: Conversation with Vijay Aggarwal, Managing Director, Prism Johnson Limited
98	Dialogue: Elements of Perception: Sanjay Mohe	202	Directory of Contributors

DESIGN AS A FUNCTION OF CONTEXT

At Matter, we have been discussing the role of critical thinking in the design process. Why does one make a design decision in the face of many other equally valid alternatives? What guides these decisions and why do they serve the central purpose of design - to look for eloquence in problem-solving? Is design art? Is it philosophy? Is it technology? We want to run an enquiry into the process of design to understand the generalities of large ideas and specific issues that a project deals with. In this endeavour, we partner with H & R Johnson to bring you the second issue in the series of professional journals with an intent that each will add to the insight on contemporary architecture and design practice in India.

The opening essay by Dean D'Cruz deals with architecture and its close interface with the environment within which it is designed, and the environment that architecture is generative of. In the 'Space' section of the book, we discuss the design of India & the World' exhibition by Somaya & Kalappa Consultants; Jai Jagat Theatre in the historic environments of the Gandhi Ashram by SEALab, and projects by MOAD that interface with a narrative programme.

The 'Studio' editorial tries to decipher the three key domains of exploration in the works of Architecture BRIO - drawing, model-making and the site. Sanjay Mohe of Mindspace talks about the idea of architecture as a haptic experience in a conversation that tries to untangle the many influences one has to deal with while practising in India. In the 'Object' section of the book, the office of Aziz Kachwala and the experiments therein are revealed to us. We also discuss the public restrooms designed by RC Architects, and another exhibition - When is Space? - curated by Prasad Shetty and Rupali Gupte where architecture becomes the content and the object of that unfolds in the historic Jawahar Kala Kendra designed by Charles Correa. In the 'Surface' feature, Swagata Naidu authors a piece on studio ceramics with contributions from Kavita Ganguly, Mamta Gautam and Ruby Jhunjhunwala. A three-point conversation between Jay Thakkar, Shimul Javeri Kadri and Tony Joseph on the ides of 'Indianness' touches upon the concepts of visual appeal and issues of making design in our context. Suprio Bhattacharjee's essay on the contradictions of contemporary design education in India highlights the broad and urgent questions that we must confront.

In a detailed discussion with Vijay Aggarwal, Managing Director of Prism Johnson Limited, we speak about the many qualities that enable H & R Johnson to keep pace with the rapidly changing world of design. The richly illustrated interview touches upon many brands, initiatives and innovations of the company. The conversation also touches upon projects in the public domain that H & R Johnson is involved with, thus highlighting the significance of patronage for industrial research in India. We also speak with Mr. Aggarwal about the values that are intrinsic to their organisation and the way these deep foundations hold them on solid ground as they shape the future of their organisation.

As we proceed further with the series of [IN]SIDE journals, it is important for us to reflect upon the significance of this medium and the luxuries it affords. Today, we can celebrate the resurgence of the journal as the cornerstone of professional thinking. We also indulge in the wonderfully tactile pages of this book marvelling at type and images: the fantastic chemistry that enables ink to set on paper ■



Ruturaj Parikh,
Matter



Right: In conversation with Sanjay Mohe
at the IIM Bangalore campus

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IDEA-LED, PROCESS-DRIVEN

Critical tools of the practice of Architecture BRIO

Drawings and Images: ©Architecture BRIO; courtesy Robert Verrijt and Shefali Balwani



Architecture BRIO is one of the most versatile amongst emerging practices in India. Working from Mumbai, their studio has been able to create works of finesse with a refreshing sense of newness and surprise. This piece is an attempt to understand the key ingredients of their design process with an emphasis on the act of drawing as a negotiator of ideas.

Above: Detail of the model for 'Sara' Residence: for Architecture BRIO, models serve better as communication tools than design tools

Facing Page Right (Three Images): The stage-wise disassembled model reveals the primary strategies of design

In 2006, Shefali Balwani and Robert Verrijt established their practice - Architecture BRIO after returning from Sri Lanka where they had been working with Channa Daswatte. Their initial projects were designed for Magic Bus - a non-profit organisation, and entailed very efficiently resolved simple structures that enable ideas of play and interaction to manifest. Since then, their practice has engaged with works of various scales and typologies with sites in the peri-urban region of Mumbai, across India and South-East Asia. The portfolio is significantly diverse, with common themes that concern tectonics of site, formal and spatial explorations of architecture, critical reading of the programme, systems thinking, and clarity of material and detail that have characterised their work.

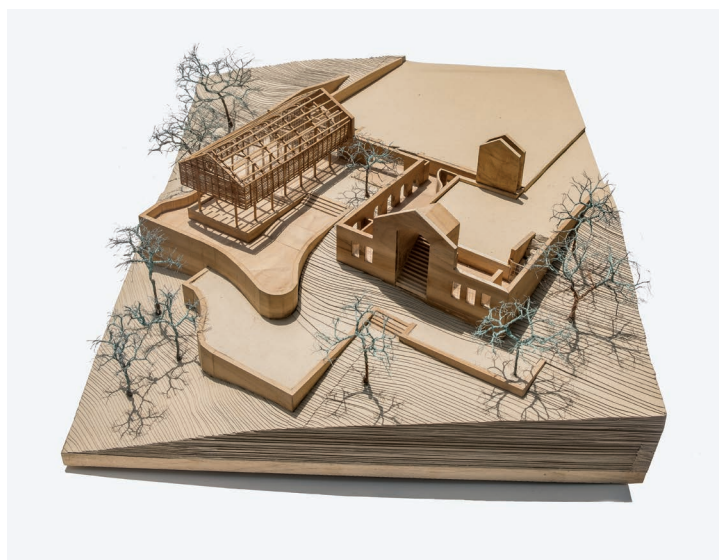
POTENTIAL OF THE SITE

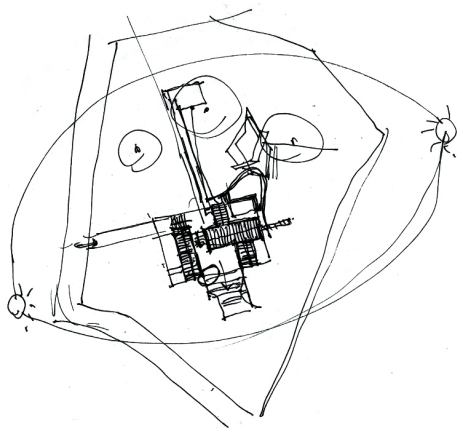
Being an urban practice, the work of BRIO draws keenly from the specific context of each project. The site plays a critical role in informing the course of design. The projects emphasise on the potential of the site and are constantly informed by the terrain, the qualities of the land, the vegetation, the opportunity for vistas, and the nature of the building processes that are connected with the site. Robert Verrijt articulates the initial phases of design for any project: *"...through asking the right questions, formulating ideas on the project, conversations with the office, understanding the site. One by one the endless possibilities of ideas and concepts are filtered down and a few potential approaches appear."*

It is important to observe the constant presence of the site in the architectural process. One can realise the emphasis on sometimes mundane elements found on the site in the initial drawings and it is these elements (a tree, a stream, a rock) that become pivotal moments of the eventual buildings. The buildings also respond to more abstract and experiential ideas - the climate, the material, the landscape and the sky.

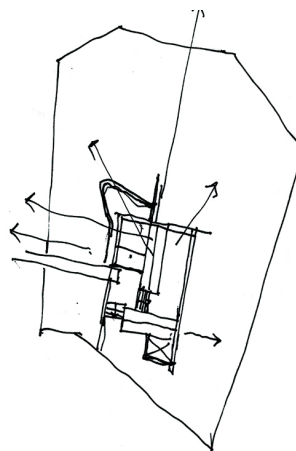
DRAWINGS

The consistent process of drawing forms the core of the Architecture BRIO design process. Sometimes sporadic and sometimes planned, the pencil drawings sketched from the last page to the first in a tracing-pad sketchbook, evidence the sequential resolution of design. Much before drawing, the project is evaluated in discussions and

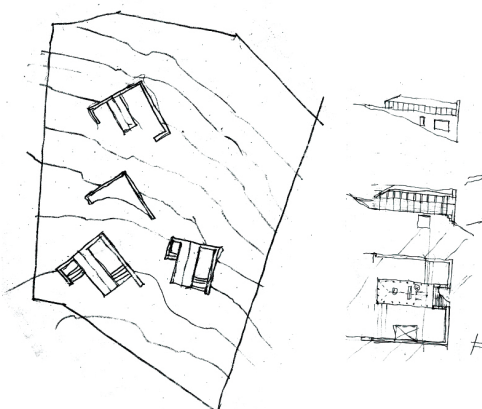




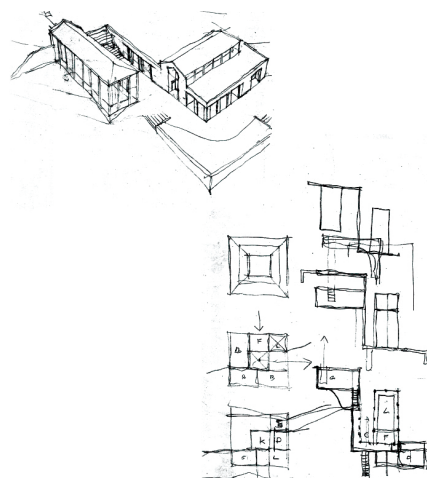
01. Schema: drawing the built on the site with no emphasis on the programme - an exercise in appropriating the built.



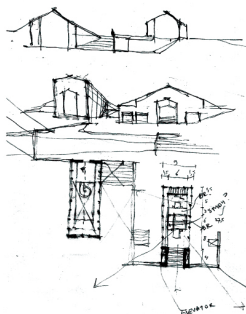
02. Initial drawings represent two "barn-like" structures perpendicular to each other, a formal set of connecting plinths and traces of a fluid waterbody. The organisational elements respond to the vistas from the site.



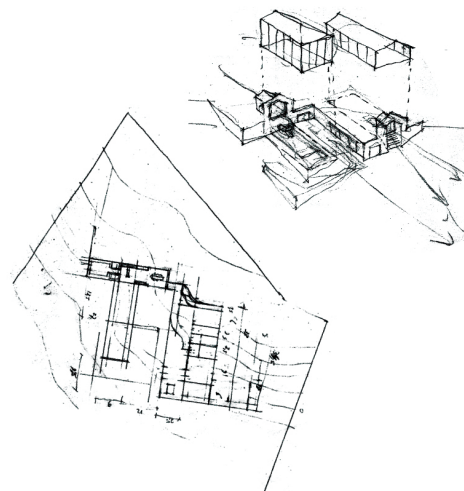
05. The hill and vantage point vis-à-vis the platform: the conflict between the desire for flat land is resolved by the plinth forming the 'base' of the two barns.



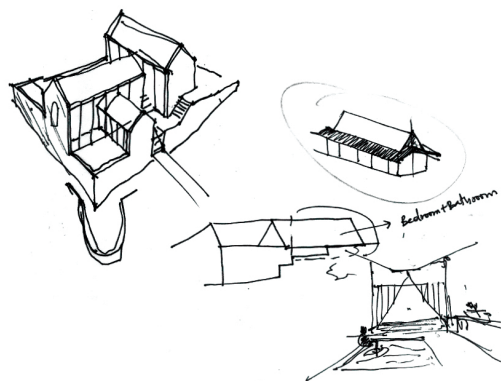
06. "We sketch from the back to the front of the sketch book. This way every conceptual sketch forms the underlayer of the next one, suggesting a sort of evolution in the process."



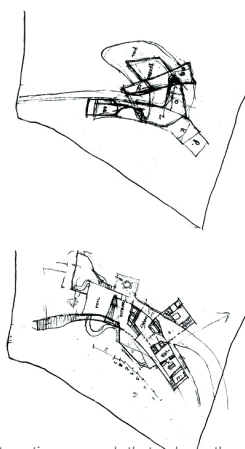
09. A Breakthrough! - The parallel orientation of the two "barns" allow the private spaces to look over the distant landscape. Volumetric studies try to articulate the visual impact of the same.



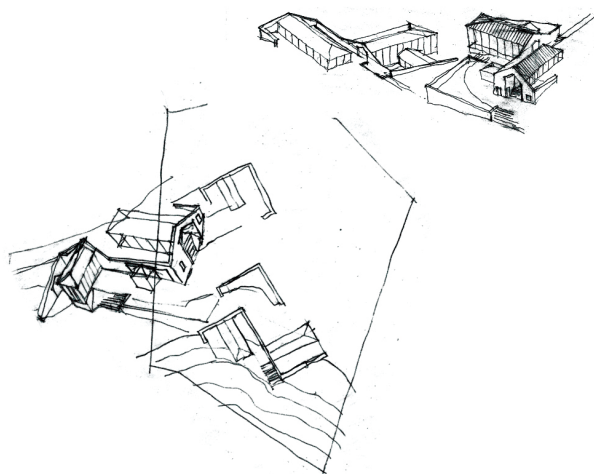
10. Every so often, a sheet with a grid lineout gets introduced to create rhythm and order and refine the proportions of the spaces. The contour drawing as an underlay keeps a check on where every floor plan intersects with the original contour.



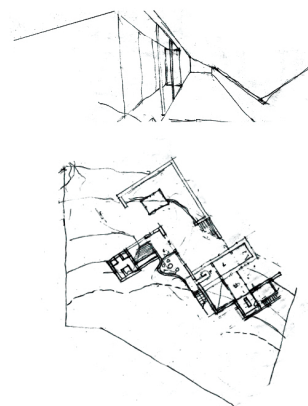
03. In between the two "barns", a formalised landscape in three different levels with a multitude of staircases negotiates the sloping landscape outside of this plinth.



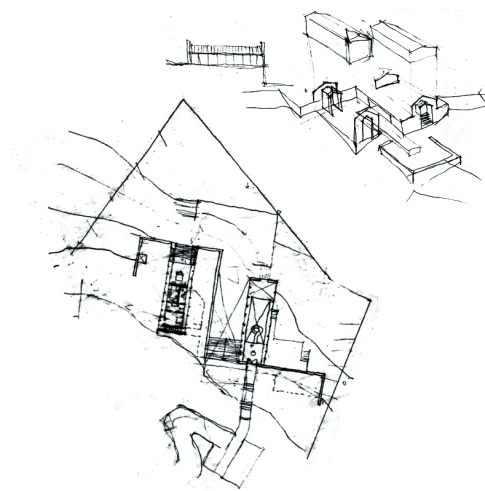
04. An alternative approach that reduces the number of levels, is a long linear plan that hugs the contour and emphasises the panorama. However, it results in a rather long stretched-out composition.



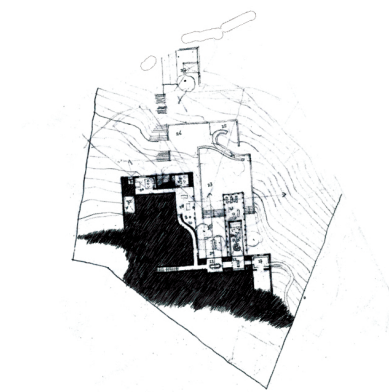
07. Several ways of organising the two "barns" on the site: the programme now is visually broken down into two precise masses.



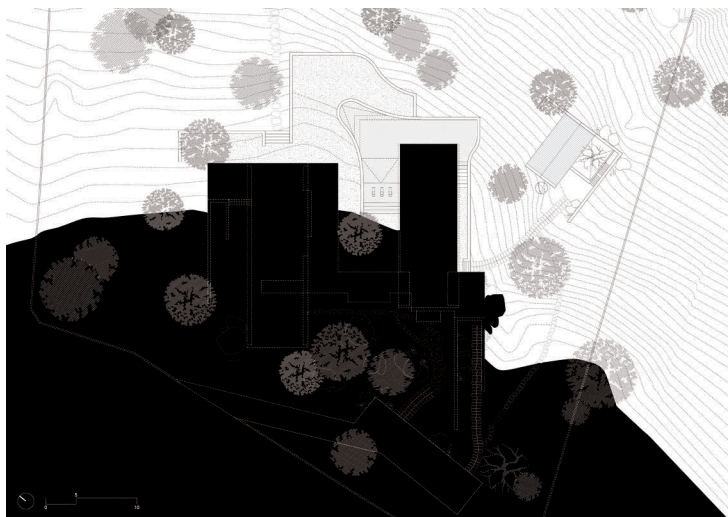
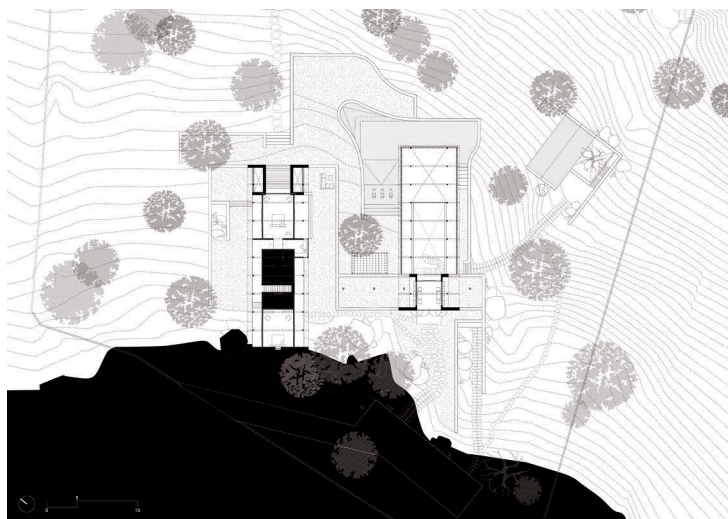
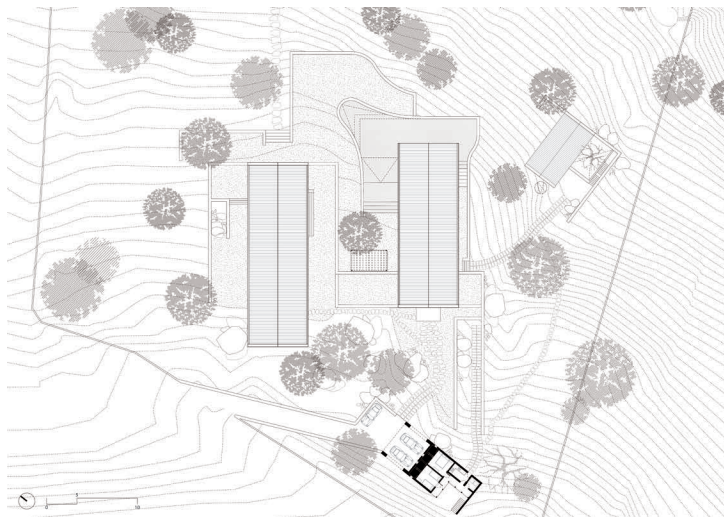
08. Learning from Geoffrey Bawa: the importance of spatial sequencing and the building up of anticipation as one descends the site.



11. Refining hierarchies in organisation of spaces that are experientially significant - the process of drawing is expressive of the quality of spaces as well.

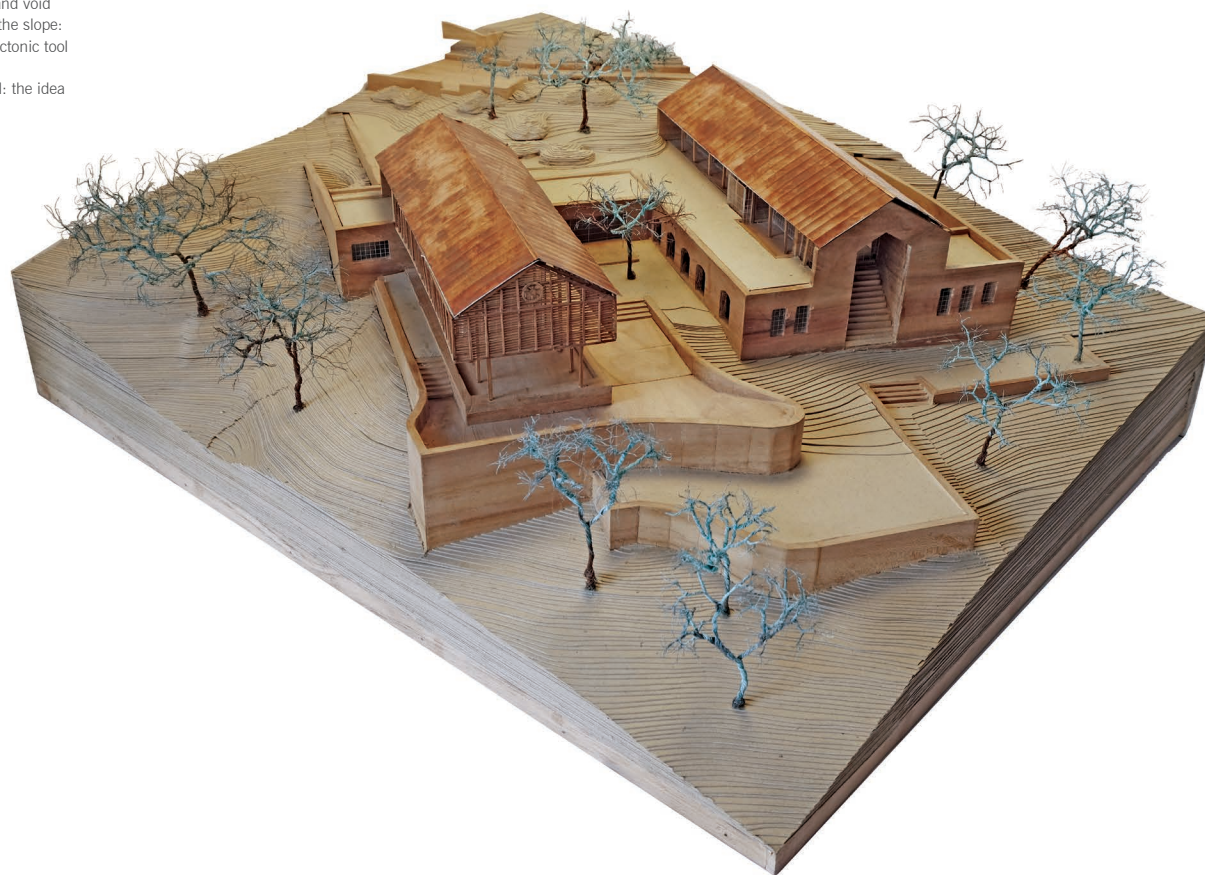


12. "Suddenly, the underground passage also falls into place." Once the scheme is clear, the layout changes marginally and the effort moves from form-finding to resolution of spaces and detail.



Facing Page (Six Drawings):
As the house hugs the site,
sequential drawings reveal
the spaces - solid and void
- as one descends the slope:
the drawing as a tectonic tool

Right: 'Sara' model: the idea
and the site



in the act of 'asking the right questions'. This initial framing of thoughts enables Shefali and Robert to articulate the core concerns of the project by eliminating the weaker ideas from the many potential possibilities and approaches. The processes of drawing are an investigative tool in the Architecture BRIO studio. *"Sketching starts with procrastination"* says Robert.

As the thoughts on a project become clearer, the pencil is employed. The sketches evidence two parallel processes. The process of intuition resembles important moves and exploration of ideas that may or may not work and the process of strategic planning that forms a conceptual underlay. Ideas that concern scale of the built form, the proportions of the form against the site and the context, and the impact of the project on the site are drawn. The design evolution concerns itself with the negation of the built form against the site conditions. Evident in the way the spaces are sequenced in their projects in an act of 'building up anticipation', is Shefali and Robert's background of working in Sri Lanka and their encounter with the

works of Geoffrey Bawa. Once in a while, the process drawings represent a breakthrough - a point of clarity and perhaps the defining moment in the design process where the scheme and the trajectory of the architecture becomes apparent.

While design development drawings have their specific role in the process, the presentation drawings of the project have a distinct purpose and therefore, an independent language. Mostly monochrome, these drawings make explicit the design and to a certain extent – its materiality. The multiple layers of these drawings are read as overlays in plans, and the line-axonometric is often employed to clarify the intended construction system. The drawing layers are specifically helpful in understanding the project on contoured sites. Once the scheme is clear, the resolution of detail happens at a much larger scale and in this shifting of scale, the drawings become more intricate revealing the complexity of detail in material junctions, structural joints, water-proofing, roofing etc.



Left and Facing Page: Sectional models for a proposed Artists' Residency - an alternate idea where a model of a certain legible scale contributes to the design thinking

MODELS

"Models are great tools to communicate," states Architecture BRIO. The role of a model in the process of design is to add clarity to a resolved design. The slowness of the model-making process, for Architecture BRIO, goes against the purpose of using them as design-aids. Rather, a model makes the design much more accessible to the clients and collaborators on a project. They depend more on their ability to visualise three-dimensional space in a two-dimensional drawing for design development as drawings are immediate, quick and more intuitive modes to access ideas. Architecture BRIO also make sectional models in scales close to 1:50 which enable them to imagine junctions, and structural and construction details with greater clarity. These models do contribute to the refinement of design as they render the architects an insight into the system with much greater resolution. Robert explains: *"A construction detail that is being discussed on the meeting table can immediately be referenced to its location and interrelation to the other components of the project with the sectional model next to it."*

Nonetheless, the models do serve a larger purpose. From the perspective of an outsider, they present a quick insight into the work of Architecture BRIO as one can appreciate the complexity of space and detail in their models. The ability of a model to open and dismantle enables one to quickly realise the intent of design. They have a quality of a well-articulated idea.

SITE

In India, sites can be places where one can 'improvise'. Owing to immediately accessible skill and a certain degree of craftsmanship on construction sites in India, an often-romantic notion of being able to 'collaborate' with the people on the site takes over imaginations of many architects working in the tropics. For Architecture BRIO, this approach is not an ideal one. *"In the best scenario, this encourages collaboration with highly skilled craftsman and workers and uses the principles and logic of 'the process making' to inform the design itself"* says Robert. BRIO argues that while some experiments on the site are serendipitous, one cannot resolve ideas on the site. For a clear, workable detail, while one may collaborate with a contractor or skilled workers on the site, in Architecture BRIO's view, there has to be *"great emphasis in the resolution of our construction details"* in the studio.

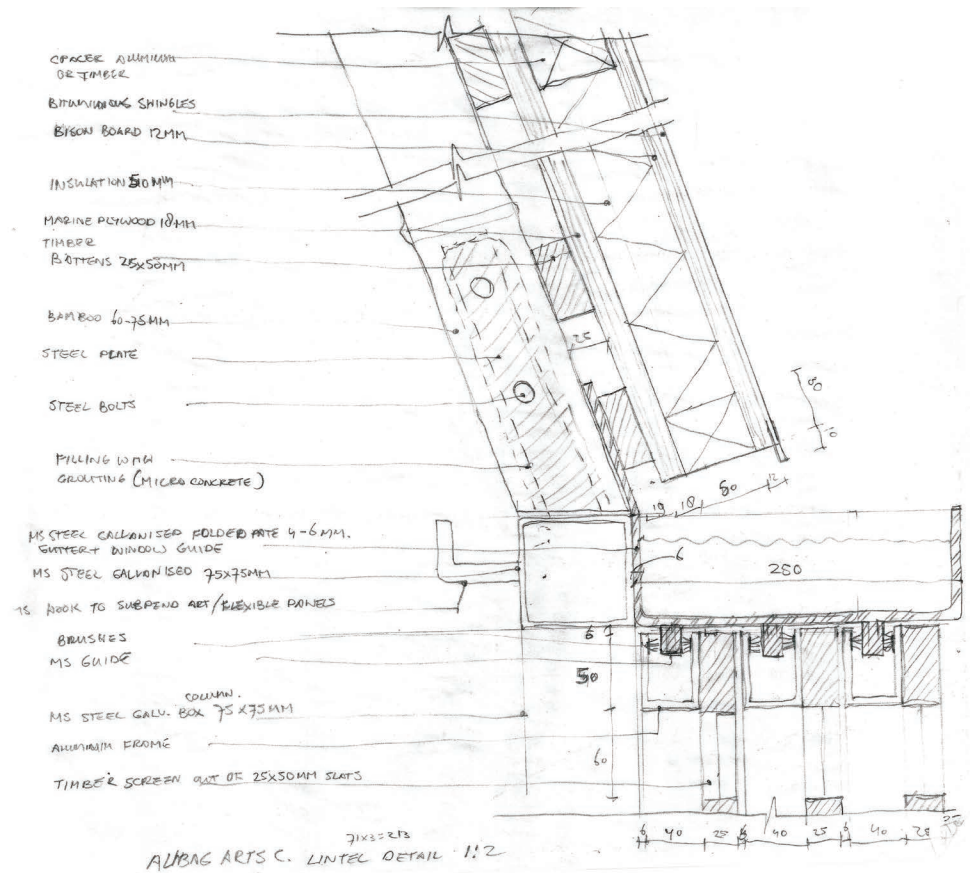
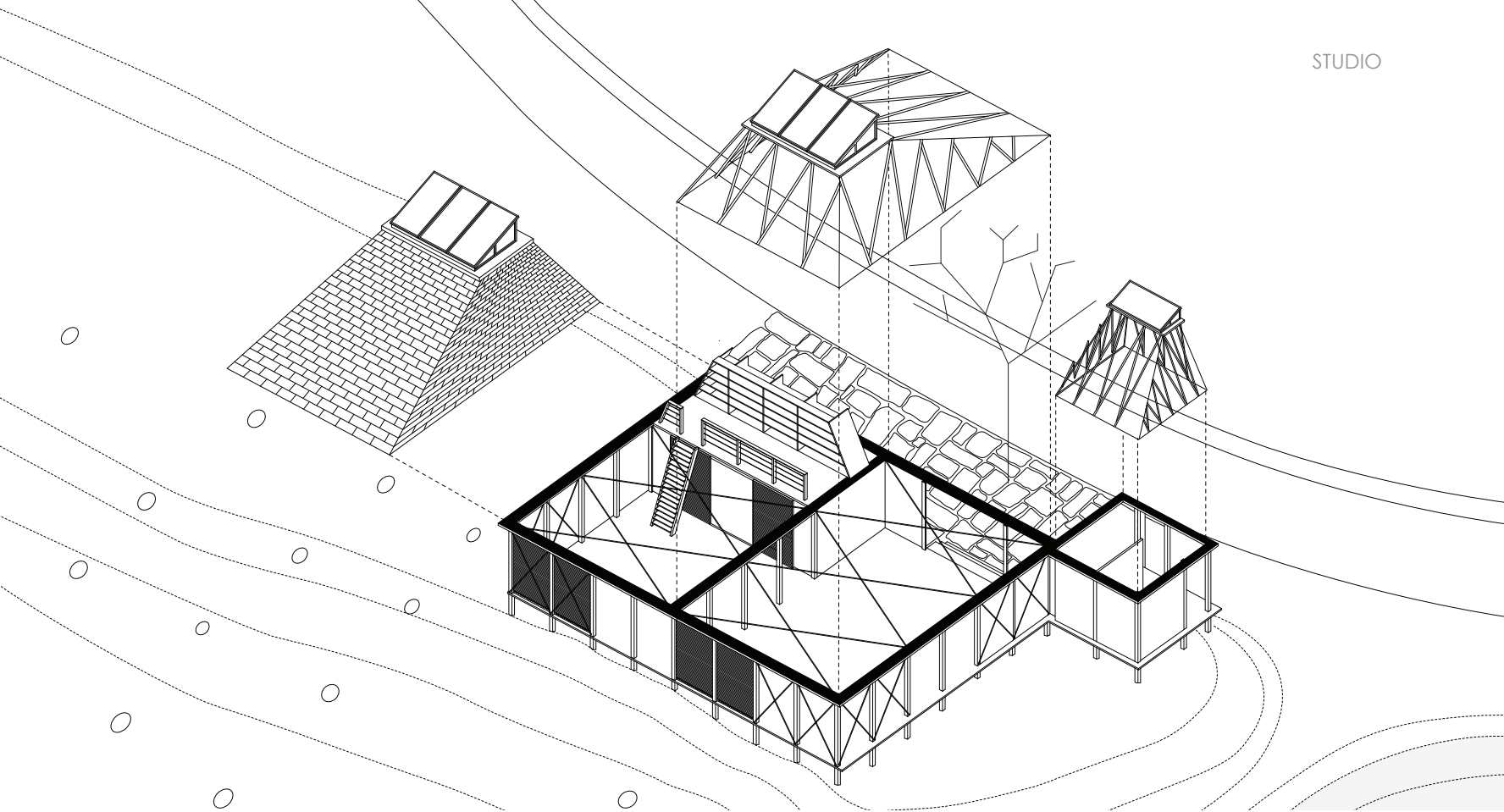




Left: The site for the Artists' Residency - a found landscape that features in many Architecture BRIO projects as a major contributor to the process

Below: The intervention on the site - a process in which architecture enhances the potential of the land and complements the found space





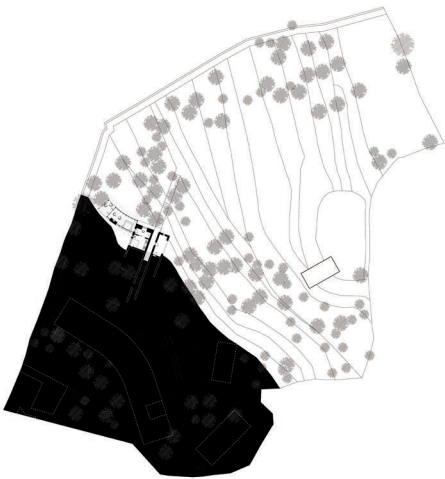
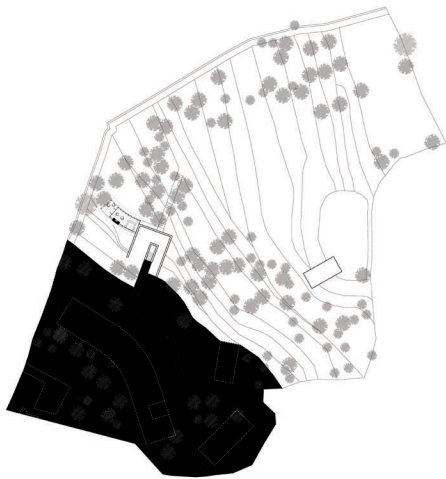
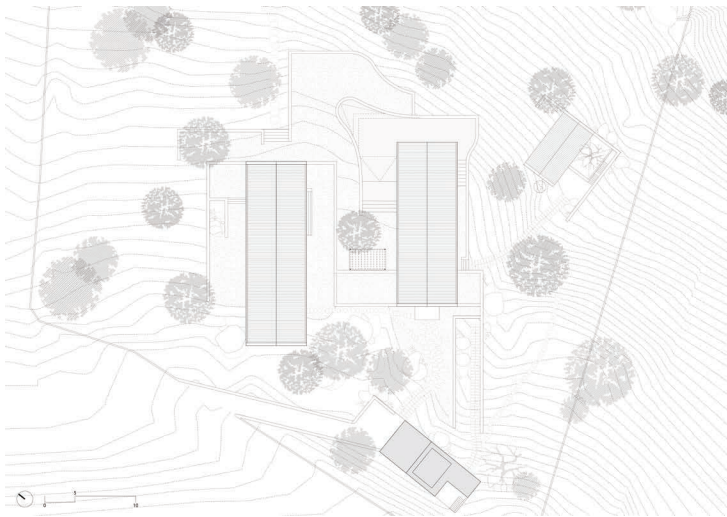
Above: Exploded isometric of the design: drawings like these imagined as tools to communicate and clarify the design intent; in this case - the parts that make the whole

Right: Sketch of a detail: while they may not serve as execution drawings, these enable the designers to imagine the detail in its complete eventual form

Below and Facing Page: 'Sitla' in Uttarakhand: Sequential schematic sketches and plans at multiple levels - drawings that render a certain clarity to the design process and its eventual outcome

Overleaf: Site - the domain that informs the design process as a place for material and construction experimentation but does not serve as a place for design thinking for BRIO







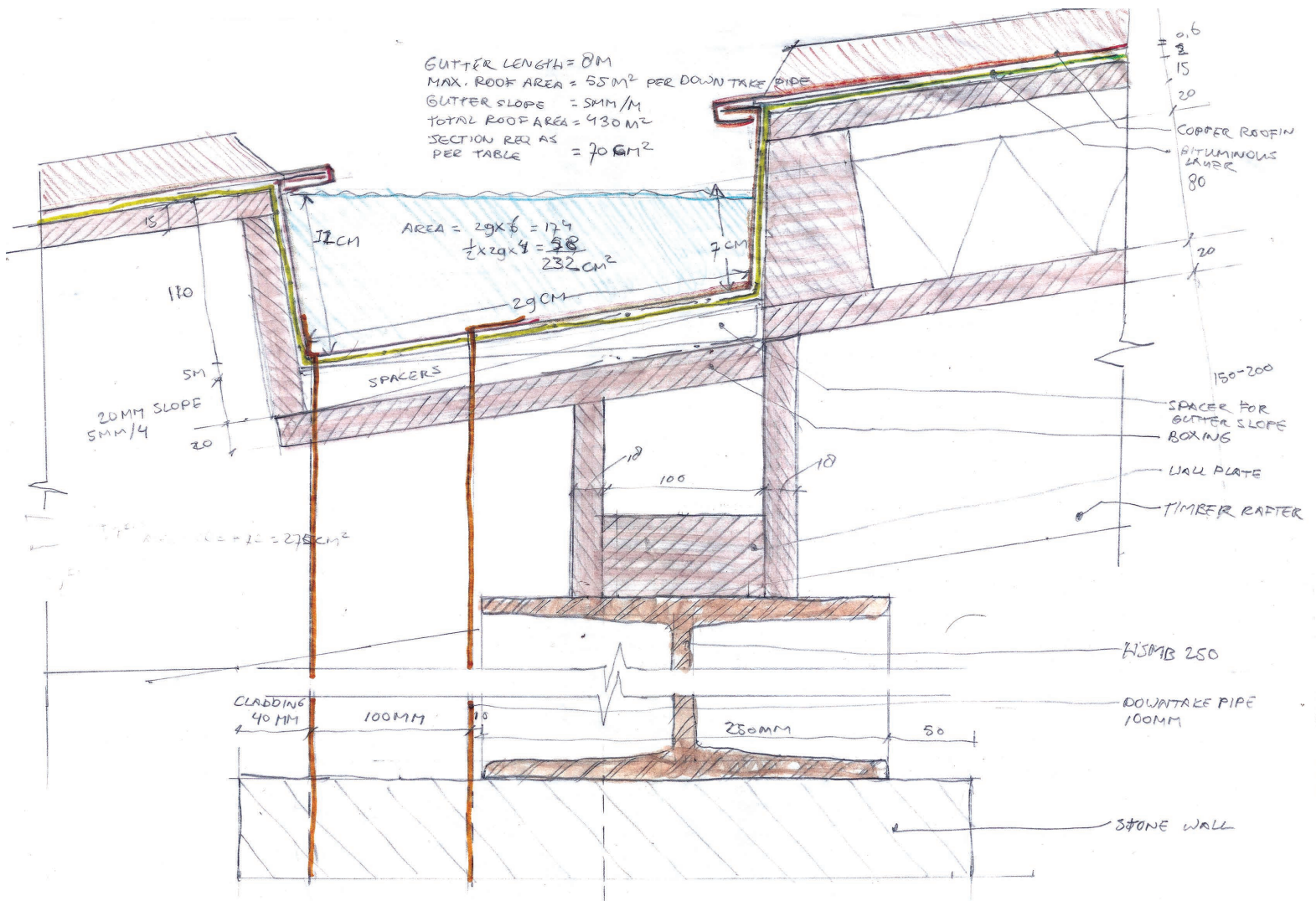


Particular aspects of design which pertain to 'sampling' depend on the feedback from the site. These include alternatives of a masonry pattern, the cleanliness of a junction between two materials, experiments with the strength and stability of masonry walls etc. Multiple test-samples on the site help decision-making in the studio. A sample detail on the site is also a tool to enable multiple agencies to understand the sequence and to coordinate better. Nevertheless, these experiments on the site are translated into a detailed architectural drawing as a precise, clear instruction. While the site does serve as a laboratory to a certain extent, Architecture BRIO acknowledges the limitations of working on sites in India.





Left and Below: The prototype detail and the sketch show a complex water-drainage channel representing the relationship between design thinking in drawing and the testing on site



SITLA GUTTER DETAIL 1:2

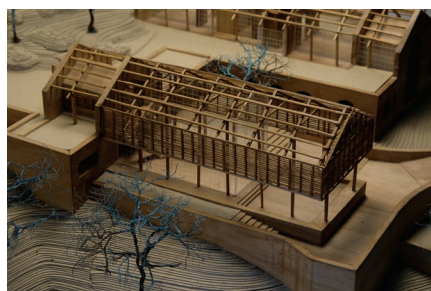
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PROCESS

The works of Architecture BRIO hinge on design development in the studio. This method appears non-negotiable and renders much clarity to the sophisticated buildings that they make. Shefali Balwani and Robert Verrijt acknowledge the potential of working in the tropics and in a landscape like India where skill and construction knowledge are both accessible. By keeping a certain distance from the processes on the site, the architects are able to articulate a certain formality and direction to the design process that is not interrupted. For BRIO, collaborations are *“only potentially as successful as the geographic location of a project (that allows one to work with these skilled craftpersons), and the budgets and time to do so”* – a luxury seldom accessible in mainstream practice.

Their work is a deliberate and rigorous development from the key ingredients that includes a detailed and considered reading of the site, an art of elimination of ideas during the initial conceptual development and an ability to envision detail. There is also a conscious distance in the works of BRIO from the concerns of design language. Their work draws from the ‘appropriateness’ of the scheme and its ‘response’ to the specificities of its context. Therefore, one can observe a refreshing variety of approaches in their work with a great sense of discovery every time a new project takes course. Their work is not limited by a specific set of materials or formal predilections.

A layer of anxiety, conflict, friction forms the underlay for the finely resolved projects of Architecture BRIO. It is this constant cycle of exploration, refinement, rejection and re-imagination that enriches the work of BRIO. Their architecture rejects the image in favour of a process that leads to powerful spatial articulations. One can read the concerns of scale, materiality and detail in their drawings while the built work represents their command on more abstract ideas and finer elements - light, volume, texture, contrast, proximity, intimacy, temperature and sound ■



ARCHITECTURE BRIO was set up by Shefali Balwani (CEPT University, India) and Robert Verrijt (TU Delft, the Netherlands) in 2006. Located in Mumbai, the practice is invested in finding contemporary ways of working with urban and peri-urban landscape often experimenting with approaches that deviate from the mainstream and yet, resist being set in a niche. With their background of working with Channa Daswatte, and studying Geoffrey Bawa's architecture, Shefali and Robert's work is influenced by both - an appropriate way of building in the tropics and spatial ideas that refer to the architecture encountered then.

The work of the studio addresses new ways of understanding the often contradictory interrelations between the city, architecture, landscape, and the world of interiors. Architecture BRIO is actively engaged in the creation of contextually appropriate, sustainable design solutions in an increasingly changing world.

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