THE LATEST IN RUGS AND DESIGN OBJECTS  RAINFOREST, INNER-CITY AND COUNTRY LIVING ACROSS SOUTH-EAST ASIA  THE NEW SHAPE OF COFFEE TABLES  RELAXING SPACES IN NEW ZEALAND  FASHION PARTNERSHIP IN MELBOURNE  INDIA’S DESIGN MASTER  AFFORDABLE AND SUSTAINABLE HOUSING  ACTOR’S RETREAT IN THAILAND

MAKING SPACE PERSONAL
Mumbai

And Beyond

Indian architect, Rahul Mehrotra, is celebrated for the way he has been able to reconcile tradition and modernity, reinterpreting vernacular forms and devices to meet contemporary needs. Mary N. Woods explores Mehrotra's residential work and discovers the inspiration of Mumbai as a linking thread.
Slumdog Millionaire made us feel we know Mumbai (formerly Bombay) intimately, from its dense slums to its glittering hotels, and melodramas worthy of a contemporary Charles Dickens do play out here – if rarely with slumdog Jamal Malik’s fairytale ending. Rahul Mehrotra understands this city of extremes, where improvised urban villages take root just below gleaming modern apartments. But he also knows the subtleties of what he and his collaborator, Sharada Dwivedi, called “the cities within” in their 1995 history of Mumbai. The city, he writes, is about “a coming together and a moving apart of the past and present”. In a remarkably multi-faceted practice, Mehrotra projects us into possible futures for built environments there and elsewhere.

Established 19 years ago, his practice, Rahul Mehrotra Associates, now builds throughout India – but, as Mehrotra pointedly says, he works in Mumbai. The city is a laboratory, he asserts, from which the practice extracts a wide range of lessons. Since the 13th Century, Mumbai has been a city of gold for immigrants from across India and the world. This tradition of cosmopolitanism, Mehrotra believes, frees architects from conforming to any one cultural identity or regional identity. Mumbai guarantees, he believes, “a degree of conceptual freedom that permits a modulation and response to particular problems without the baggage of stylistic consistency”.

Working in Mumbai has also led Mehrotra to understand both the ‘static city’ of formal spaces with imposing monuments and the ‘kinetic city’ of spectacle, movement, and ephemeral structures. In a Mumbai of startling adjacencies and unprecedented densities, a festival immersing a huge idol of the God Ganesh in the Arabian Sea beside the business district brings these two cities together. The procession blurs the boundaries between sacred and profane, nature and urban edge, and class and caste. Here, Mumbai
"softens the thresholds", Mehrotra writes, where "you can begin to accept these dualities or seemingly conflicting issues as being simultaneously valid". Probing dualities becomes, paradoxically, a way of expanding social interactions and cultural meanings and of re-imagining architectural types and forms.

Born in New Delhi in 1959, Mehrotra chose Mumbai as his home. After graduating from Ahmedabad's renowned Centre for Environmental Planning & Technology's (CEPT) School of Architecture in 1985, he received a master's degree in urban design from the Harvard Graduate School of Design two years later. He worked with Charles Correa in Mumbai from 1988, forming his own practice in 1990. After seven years on the architecture faculty at the University of Michigan, he joined the M.I.T. as a full professor in 2007. Yet he has always worked in India from his Mumbai office.

Designing in this city of multiple and conflicting realities teaches him, Mehrotra says, "how spaces can be used and therefore reinterpreted". Designing with a "divided mind", he blurs his identities as architect, historian, planner, teacher, and preservationist. Can such a practice, he asks, sustain and express diversity and coexistence in a designed built environment? Can it create a visual equity that contributes eventually to a more just social and economic order?

His 2001 weekend house for a film-maker in Alibaug (once a village, but now an exclusive enclave across from the harbour of south Mumbai) and the Magic Bus Campus (completed in 2009) for children from the slums in Karjat, an inland town to the east, seemingly engage the extreme dualities of Slumdog Millionaire. Yet Mehrotra bridges the differences with a shared vocabulary of form and material. In both projects he uses walls of local basalt stone laid up as rubble. Flaring metal roofs on slender supports shelter outdoor living spaces in both the house and dormitories.

At the clerestory level, wooden louvered panels filter light into the interiors. And cool, polished cement floors lead to rooms shaded by deep window reveals and thin bamboo reed screens. Although he chooses inexpensive cement, stone, wooden planks, and corrugated metal at Karjat because they are materials familiar from the slums, Mehrotra treats them with the same passion, elegance, and sophistication as the palette of the Alibaug house.

Mehrotra also subverts presumed dualities through his recasting of type and program. He ingeniously transforms space from private into communal at the film-maker's house. Sloping roof's channel rainwater into a well, supplying the household and there is a public tap near the outdoor living room. The villagers use this veranda for weddings and other ceremonies.

He reinterprets the colonial bungalow and the traditional haveli (courtyard) house in a weekend home outside Ahmedabad. This sleek, minimalist villa sits within a mango orchard. Cruciform in plan, it pushes outward like a contemporary Palladian country house, yet the house is also about the haveli's interior worlds. The living room and guest quarters look out to an open-air courtyard. Here a blue ribbon of water, the lap pool, creates a modern oasis within the house. When the family leaves the house, the courtyard takes on another identity. Wooden shutters secure the living room, and workers enter through a heavy wooden door to wash mangos in the lap pool.

At the Corner House, Chennai, completed in 2003, the courtyard proves an especially supple type for a young couple's rich and complex program. Wrapped around an elongated courtyard, the house provides the privacy an urban corner plot would not usually afford. The house climbs dramatically from street below to terraced garden above, but the courtyard anchors its steep ascent. Depending on function, the rooms overlooking it present opaque, transparent or translucent surfaces. Platforms outlined with stones float within the courtyard's reflecting pools. In the house, Mehrotra melds traditional and industrial materials through exquisite

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close up

rahul mehrotra — MUMBAI, india
craftsmanship. While modern artisans work in glass, steel, and concrete, temple carvers create a stone frieze of flowering lotus and cavorting monkeys in the courtyard. As a private retreat, the house has a meditation space and terraced garden filled with Indian antiquities, but it also morphs into a performance space for music and dance accommodating 300 visitors.

The ongoing Hatigaon elephant stable near Jaipur proves Mehrotra's mastery of designing with a divided mind. As both the project advocate and architect, he transforms what was just a government commission, a stable for elephants vital for heritage tourism, into the regeneration of a desert landscape and low-cost housing for Muslim mahouts (elephant caretakers). Excavated pits in this former sand quarry now catch the precious monsoon rains, and plants, people, and elephants are all sustained by this new waterscape of pools. Courtyard houses wrap around the stables so the mahouts are always near their animals. Families can retreat into a central courtyard because a lowered gateway prevents any rampaging elephant from entering. Once again Mehrotra bridges dualities to create elegant design, rich materiality, and nimble functionality. Clearly, his practice is also about designing projects that are socially as well as ecologically sustainable. Inspired by Mumbai, his architecture is needed in India and beyond.

Probing dualities becomes a way of expanding social interactions and cultural meanings...

05 Magic Bus dormitory.
06 Magic Bus Campus, Karjat, 2007, view across playing field to dormitories.
07 Hatigaon elephant stable, entrance façade.
08 Film-maker's House, view across teak trees to basalt rock-face wall and outdoor living room.