

Agreeing to disagree

Autor(en): **Jain, Bijoy**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich**

Band (Jahr): - **(2014)**

Heft 25

PDF erstellt am: **28.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919472>

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AGREEING TO DISAGREE

A CONVERSATION
WITH ...

Bijoy Jain

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transRedaktion (tr): Bijoy Jain, the impulse for founding Studio Mumbai was that you discovered that practicing architecture in a Western manner did not work satisfactorily in the Indian context. You speculated that moving from the classical top-down relationship between architect and craftsman to a more open-ended process would be more productive. Did you perceive this step as a particular risk, or were you sure of its success?

Bijoy Jain (bj): At the outset of Studio Mumbai, it wasn't a question of success or failure simply because I didn't have an agenda or manifesto. I was ignorant, so there was no risk at all. For me what was of primary concern was finding the way to mediate the nature of an architectural practice, to find a way to be able to really produce what one could possibly imagine, transferring it back into a physical expression of form that we're defining as architecture, in addition to all variance that is involved in the production of that. So it was really that singular motivation. And mediation can be from top-down or bottom-up, but it can also be from the middle – both ways, right? It's a question of positioning.

This idea of positioning comes from what I call a 'system a priori', where in the flux of making everybody does something with a certain viewpoint. So it's really about negotiating that aspect, about creating awareness towards what the collective is doing.

tr: This raises two related points. Firstly the architect as the mediator and secondly this very close collaboration between craftsman and architect coming from different backgrounds of training and thinking.

bj: We don't come from different backgrounds. At the end what is important is to mediate the possibility, meaning imagination, which is required from the entire set, the collective. And naturally we will all have our own point of view. The idea is to find a space where we can collectively agree to disagree. That's very important.

tr: In terms of a real-life building, however, you as an architect have an understanding of what spatial qualities you want, the 'essence' or 'concept' if you will, whereas

the craftsman would have his or her knowledge of shaping materials.

bj: That's not true! In my view that undermines what it is to be human. We require five senses to register and understand space, and to say that a craftsman or the architect does or does not have five senses would be our folly. So it is just a different point of view of the same things. And that's when I say, «can we come together in a place of making and creating where we can agree to disagree?»

tr: This brings to mind a kind of arena in which you collectively decide on a course of action.

bj: No, this is not the case. Someone has to make the decision at the end. Someone needs to drive the car. Someone has to orchestrate.

tr: And is that the architect or is it the craftsman?

bj: You know, it could be anybody, whoever is willing. And in this case, because, for me the interest lies in the possibility, and so I have to take the entire responsibility. There are so many moving parts in this field. I think it is like the conductor of an orchestra. Who is responsible, the conductor or the musicians? Can you isolate that? That's why I say it's a 'system a priori', that while one conducts it also requires the others to participate in a very specific way to work the possibility of the expression of the imagination.

tr: So there is some kind of structure that needs to be established?

bj: Everything needs structure, no? For me it's important we have the ability to move between order and chaos, the defined and the undefined, between the predictable and unpredictable. They're part of the same structure. And yes, to play the game you need some framework, but once the game is evolving the framework can be moved around, based on what we all collectively agree or disagree on. For me, what is peculiar about this process is that it is a constant negotiation, first with yourself, most importantly.

tr: Here in Switzerland there is the impression that architecture is practiced in a very formalised framework, as opposed to your case, where you can directly engage with the construction of a building.

bj: No, I think that's misrepresented, this idea of the construction site, that I can change and do what I want to. It's a question of how one writes the software for the hardware – how one maintains some kind of gap for negotiation that is constructive, as opposed to finalised or requiring too much time in the process. I mean there is a whole space between a decision taken twelve months ago and something that will unfold in twelve months time that can only be anticipated and considered in all its variants.

If I understand correctly, you also mean to say that here the person paying the money is at the base of all decisions?

tr: Yes.

bj: If this is the priority in every decision, then sure, this gives a certain framework that will dictate how things will unfold.

tr: There is a discussion here of how in the last thirty years architecture has been 'commodified', something many architects would like to change. For instance being able to engage with questions concerning architecture and society rather than managing budgets.

bj: You have to be willing to put your money where your mouth is, no? I think it is a cultural issue, and the nature of what it takes to be an architect. You know, Vitruvius wrote that the architect should be a master of botany, even the most expert person in botany itself – but not only in botany, also in astronomy, geology... the list goes on and on. I often wondered about this, because it's not possible. But what I think is possible is the endeavor in that pursuit. It's a question of how wide we want to open our field or point of view.

And architecture is not just about bricks, mortar and our understanding of physical space. Of course it's important to truly understand politics, economics, tectonics, history, geography – the entire list. One

needs to keep attention to all these moving parts before responding in terms of what one does. I think that is the best way one can be constructive to what you are calling society, fundamentally becoming an observer that takes a position of neutrality.

tr: Can an architect, who also envisions the future, remain neutral, or should he or she choose a side or position?

bj: (pauses) I prefer <anticipate> over <envision>. To anticipate, one has to take a neutral position, because it allows one to respond to what is about to unfold – what we're calling the future. It's like a martial art or dancing.

tr: Is that what architects were doing in the sixties, responding to the optimism?

bj: I'm sure there were many architects doing this. You also have to consider that we had just been through the Second World War. There were so many things that required a very specific response at that point in time. Given where we are today, we should use the basis of the past as a way to understand what is unfolding now.

Listen, this may appear a bit obscure, but in my view I am Nature and Nature is me. Taking the premise that Man is Nature, as opposed to Nature <and> Man, we are thriving in abundance, no? We clearly have the potential of abundance. The question is what do we want to do with it?

tr: Do you think our collective imagination is increasing with our number, that we're moving in a positive direction?

bj: I'm saying we have the potential! I'm not saying we are or we're not. There have been so-called <golden civilizations>, but what more advanced civilizations than us?

This is related to what I call <depth of field>, or our limited view of time which only stretches from the day we are born to the day we die. But if time exceeds that dimension, then the idea of <depth of field> is stretched. You know, I believe Shakespeare, Mozart or Freud are still contemporary and relevant. Their <depth of field> in what they were imagining or expressing

was specific to those conditions, but it transcended the physical expression, going beyond that.

tr: Is our civilization today the one with the largest <depth of field>?

bj: No, we are not, but that certainly is our capacity. We might need to recalibrate the frame of the <system a priori>.

Returning to the question of economics, I'm not saying it's not important, and maybe it should even be at the heart of all decisions. But if we make that the only recognizable force, then there is something to be concerned about. This issue requires a dialogue, one that catches attention and engages rather than concedes.

tr: Are we taking on our responsibility as architects at the moment? Have we receded too much into the intellectual sphere?

bj: Fundamentally our work considers all these moving parts, and this will delineate whether we are responsible or not. It's all relative – right and wrong, good or not good.

tr: Do you believe the number of moving parts has increased in the last decades with globalisation and the internet? Has complexity increased?

bj: I don't think the number of moving parts as such, but the rate of change of speed. So all it means is that we have to become more agile. It's an issue of agility, not the rate of moving parts. Regarding complexity, if Shakespeare is relevant today, then complexity during that time and complexity today is very much the same. It's rate of change which we understand as speed.

tr: Maybe not complexity, but the rarity of clear visions in existence today.

bj: But isn't it beautiful that it is not so clear?

tr: It's definitely challenging.

bj: Challenging it is, but nonetheless that's different.

tr: However, many architects dream that all parts would not be moving so quickly and they could concentrate on working with some in depth. Especially where the increased rate of change is concerned.

bj: It's a perception issue. What is required is the agility to anticipate, which means remaining neutral all the time.

tr: Could you give a very practical example in your work?

bj: One of our projects is in construction right now, and there is the basic issue of moving parts with the builders, the materials, the feasibility, economics, politics, the monsoon, and all other kinds of requests. But specifically, we are building in brick, lime and stone, an ancient method that still remains relevant and available. The stone comes from mines in a riverbed, which two weeks ago closed without notice due to the monsoon rains. What was important for us was that we remained in the process of building, meaning we had to change from stone to brick, which remains available. However, if I hold an aesthetic prejudice that it must be stone and not brick, then I cannot negotiate time and space. What was important for me was the sense of mass and weight, the inherent core structure of brick and stone in some ways being identical. The form maybe differs, but if I read the form based on all the moving parts, then I'm not in conflict with it.

tr: Is that also something you are able to teach?

bj: No, you can't teach that, you have to practice that. For me teaching is sharing what I experience, what insight I have gained and what insight I can gain from the person I engage with. So it's both ways. That's all I can really do. What else can I teach?

tr: Is this an organic extension of what you have been practicing in your studio? Is the interaction with the workers and craftsmen similar to that with your students?

bj: Yeah... (pauses) for me the most important thing is to extend the limits, but in space and time. That's how one remains

contemporary, being responsive. I believe that as architects we have two points of reference to understand and experience space, one of them always being yourself, the subject. You cannot extricate yourself from that frame of reference. So, starting with these two points of reference you can add a third, a fourth, a fifth, and a sixth – and increase your <depth of field>.

tr: <Depth of field> is a concept that comes from photography?

bj: No! It's time-based. So space is time and time is space. That's why I use Shakespeare or Bach or Mozart as an example – their <depth of field>. So what you're calling visionary wasn't visionary, that was their <depth of field>, their capacity to extend space from their point of reference to remain contemporary even today.

tr: Was that achieved by certain architects in the past?

bj: I think, yeah, the endeavor is there. There are many, not one or two, for instance Corbusier, Mies, Kahn, Saarinen, Ponti... the list is unending. Again it's a question of how you read it. Look at the cities of Italy, France, Germany... <depth of field>.

tr: What about the cities that were built in the last century, or extended in the last century?

bj: I think we have to be patient. There is the capacity to have that kind of diversity rather than exclusivity. There is no one way anymore. That's why it's important to agree to disagree.

Bijoy Jain, born 1965, received his M. Arch from Washington University in St Louis, USA in 1990. He worked in Richard Meier's office in Los Angeles as well as London between 1989 and 1995. He subsequently returned to India, founding Studio Mumbai. Studio Mumbai's awards and honours include the Global Award for Sustainable Architecture from the Institute Français d'Architecture (2008), a Special Mention at the 12th Architecture Biennale (2010) and the BSI Swiss Architectural Award (2012).

The interview was conducted and recorded by Samuel Aebersold, Janina Flückiger, Lex Schaul and Matthew Tovstiga in Mendrisio, May 2014.



LUST / LUST

trans magazin Nr. 26
Februar 2015

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