

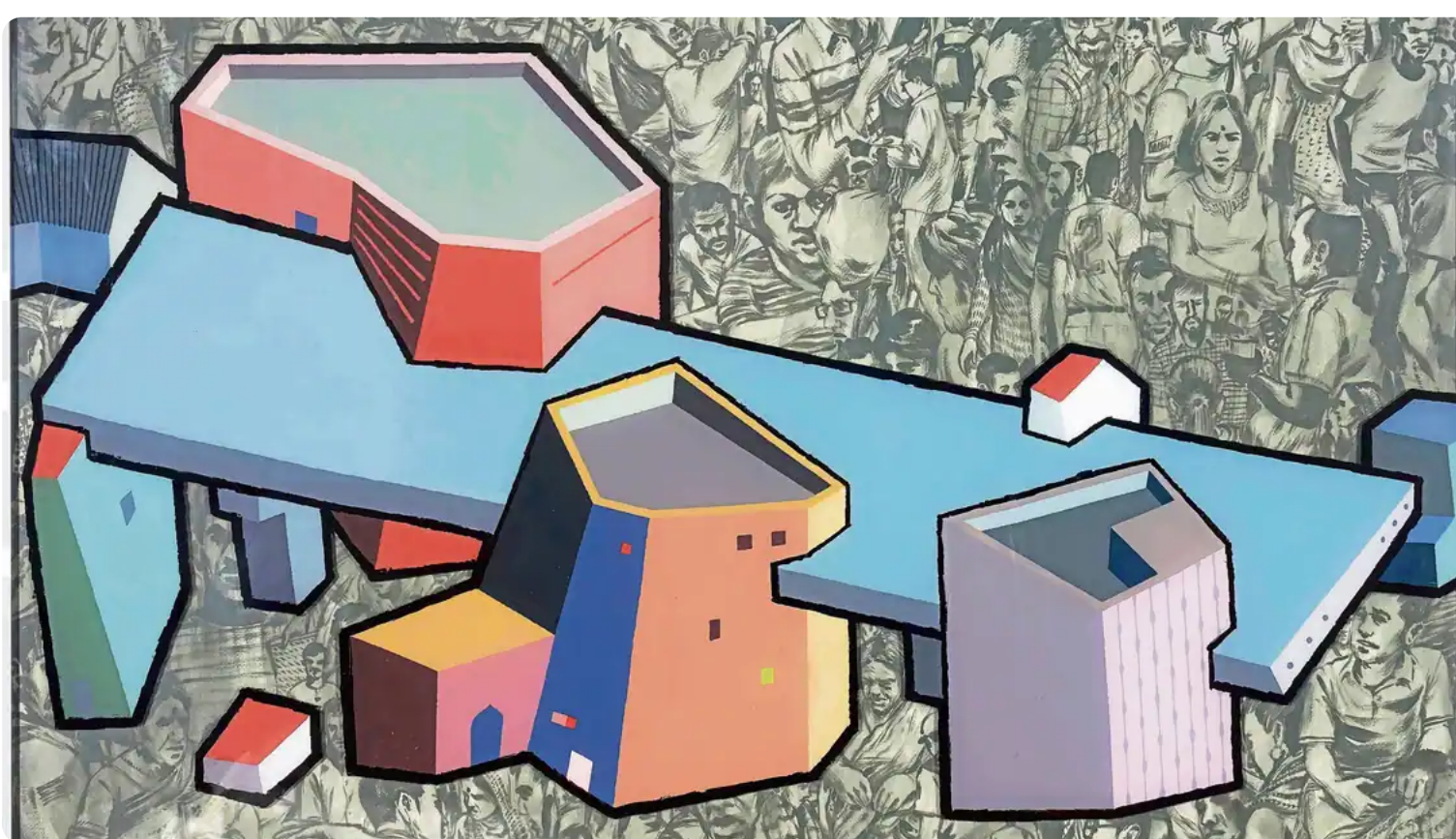
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Art meets architecture in Tarq's new space

The contemporary art gallery opens its new space with a solo by Sameer Kulavoor, in which he continues to explore cityscapes



'Dense City: Elevated Corridor', 2022.

By **Avantika Bhuyan**

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As soon as you enter the 100-year-old KK (Navsari) Chambers in Fort, Mumbai, you experience a sense of lightness. Sunlight streams in through the street-facing windows, while strategically placed steel frames open up the space. Designed by the Mumbai-based Japanese architect Katsushi Goto, this is the new home of Tarq, which has acted as a laboratory-incubator for young contemporary artists since 2014. There are whiffs here and there of the gallery's older space in Dhanraj Mahal—such as the use of wood—which act as threads of continuity for the viewer. “While briefing Katsushi Goto about the space, I told him that I wanted the warmth to remain. I would like to believe that the spirit of Tarq is the main continuing element,” says Hena Kapadia, founder of the gallery.

The programming will continue to focus on contemporary art, which looks at pushing the possibilities of both medium and concept. It remains to be seen how the larger area will challenge the artists to innovate with exhibition design. The new Tarq space has been divided into a main viewing area, a conference room and a smaller viewing area for clients, who wish to see works other than those part of ongoing exhibitions. “At Dhanraj Mahal, if a client was interested in another artist's work while a show was going on, we would have to place those pieces either in the viewing area or in my office—both of which were interruptions for the show. Now we have separate spaces for those. Another highlight is the custom-designed storage to best accommodate all the artworks,” elaborates Kapadia.

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The new gallery space has opened with a solo by Sameer Kulavoor, titled 'Edifice Complex'. In this new body of work—featuring six series of sequential drawings and reverse-painted transparent sheets—the artist continues his exploration of cityscapes and the people that inhabit them. “Kulavoor’s innate approach is to constantly note and understand the impact that time, culture, politics and socio-economic conditions have on our visible and invisible surroundings. His works often address how and why cities look and work the way they do by filtering, dissecting, documenting and defamiliarizing commonly seen subjects and events,” states the gallery note.

In this exhibition, however, the focus is firmly on architecture—mutating, growing, adapting structures unfold their stories in a storyboard-like format, offering a glimpse of the lives of the people that dwell within. This kind of shift in the treatment happened during the covid-induced nationwide lockdown in 2020, when Kulavoor would step out to get groceries only to find a metro station completely deserted. It almost came as a shock to see a public space which was always buzzing so bereft of activity. “As a result the structures and the built form became very amplified for me. That was the point when the external material structures in the city started to become fascinating. Architectural structures are a manifestation of humanness and how we function and live as a society. And I started to look at the different ways that one could read into those built forms,” he elaborates.

This has resulted in multiple approaches in his art practice. For instance, there are sequential drawings, titled 'Drawn Timelapses', presented along with a video in which Kulavoor reflects on the idea of condensed time and structures in a state of flux. “Here, the artist shares a zoomed-in experience of elements that form complex city structures and their temporal progression. Each drawing on a single page is created in relation to the one that came before it, thus developing a moving image,” states the gallery note. Then there is 'Discomfort', which looks at a home morphing from one form to another, both in terms of the physical transformation as well as the lived experience.

The title of the show, 'Edifice Complex', is drawn from a phrase coined by Filipino activist Behn Cervantes. It looks at how architecture becomes a symbol of power, status and progress, “often at the expense of more pressing needs”. Kulavoor explores this idea in the context of homes built post-independence in tier two and three towns in India. When he visited towns like Alleppey in Kerala last year, he found independent homes from that period still standing, which seemed like a direct collaboration between a contractor and the owner, designed without any intervention of an architect. “They were Modernist and yet had elements of playfulness. Take, for instance, a strange colour palette of pink with a neon-like bright yellow, which showed the aspiration of people to have their house stand out from a set of older homes,” says Kulavoor. He came across certain motifs and elements, often jutting out or asymmetrical, which had nothing to do with the functionality of the house.

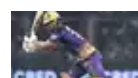
This reminded him of the work by the Milan-based architecture and design group Memphis Milano, which in the 1980s looked at countering the strictness and seriousness of Modernism and Bauhaus. “Their work has now found resurgence again in design and architecture. The point is that one can see this cross-continental influence at play in these structures across India, and it’s fascinating,” he adds.

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In a first, Kulavoor has created reverse painting on glass sheets. Earlier he used to work primarily on canvas, and for the last show had created some works on paper. However, he was seeking a surface that he could respond to differently. After testing different materials, he came across glass sheets, which had an interesting quality of smoothness. The medium challenged him as well as he had to constantly second-guess what the work would look like from the front. The sheet also alluded to the glass sheet cladding that we now see in structures across cities, giving them a homogenous look. “The works point to the transformation of these structures from opaque mirrors of their surroundings during the day to transparent windows at night,” states the gallery note.

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While 'Edifice Complex' can be viewed till 10 June, Tarq already has new shows lined up after that—solos by Parag Tandel and Savia Mahajan. "There is a lot of sculpture coming up, and it will be interesting to see how the artists use this space. The possibilities are interesting," says Kapadia.

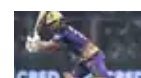
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