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'Edifice Complex': Drawings of architecture that reveal socio-economic reality

Edifice Complex, a solo exhibition by Sameer Kulavoor at TARQ gallery in Mumbai, gives an insight into our contemporary socio-economic and political reality.

by [Rahul Kumar](#) | Published on : May 25, 2023



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Sameer Kulavoor's practice encompasses his unique observations of spaces, structures and geographies. These nuanced compositions, featuring sequential drawings and reverse painted transparent sheets, underscore the **contemporary artist's** affinity towards cities and their multi-layered identities. In this **art exhibition, architecture** is once again the main protagonist. The city in question is an unnamed, ubiquitous entity. A place where **design** and architecture are born out of responsiveness and resourcefulness rather than a result of extensive detailed pre-planning.

The **Indian artist** borrowed the title *Edifice Complex* from a phrase coined by Behn Cervantes, a Filipino activist writing in the time of the autocrat Ferdinand Marcos. It references the phenomenon where individuals, organisations, or governments become obsessed with building grandiose structures to give an impression of power, status or progress, often at the expense of more pressing needs. Kulavoor's works explore this theme, particularly in the context of post-independence aspirations taking the shape of structures built in tier-one and tier-two towns across **India**.

Kulavoor's **solo exhibition** displayed in **TARQ's** new home and with **lighting design** by Tripti Sahni of Studio Trace, this body of work places urban structures firmly in the foreground transferring the focus from the people that inhabit the city to the city itself.



Tech Park - 01, 2021, acrylic paints and solid markers on acrylic sheet, acrylic paints on Canson Heritage cold pressed paper

Image: Courtesy of TARQ

I speak to [Sameer Kulavoor](#) on his engagement with the urban construction and his practice.

Rahul Kumar: Your recent work explores the urban city as a living being of sorts, one that has an organic amoebic mutation. What in particular interests you about this phenomenon? How did you arrive at the title, *Edifice Complex*?

Sameer Kulavoor: While one sees the urban city as a living being undergoing an amoebic mutation, the most interesting aspects are the factors that come together to cause this mutation. These factors range from lack of space and time, real estate regulation policies, aspirations of people, easy availability of labour, power lobbies and the ingenuity of working around these restrictions and working with available resources. There are ever changing hierarchies or power structures at, both, micro and macro level, that come together to decide how spaces and structures are built and how they function. For example, the ruling party of a state or nation makes decisions on how infrastructure projects or legislative buildings look/work and which architect/contractor gets the tender. At a micro level, the most powerful member of a family or the owner of a land could decide how they'd like the family home to be built, who is commissioned to build it, what the home should feel and look like, etc. In both cases, there may be grand personal aspirations or ambitions to project a certain image—in order to give an impression of power, status or progress, often at the expense of more pressing needs. These factors collectively combine to this phenomenon of mutation. The title *Edifice Complex* is borrowed from a phrase coined by Behn Cervantes, a Filipino activist writing in the time of the autocrat Ferdinand Marcos. The Marcos administration used publicly funded grandiose construction projects as political and election propaganda.

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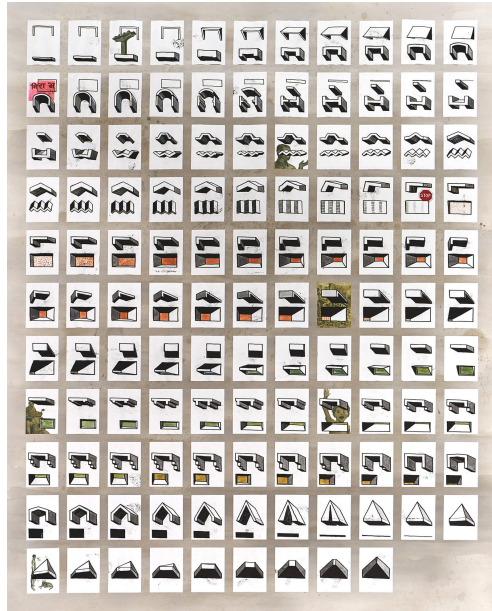
*Outside the gated community 1, 2, 3, 2021, acrylic paints on glass and Gouache on paper
Image: Courtesy of TARO*

Rahul: While you live in a metropolis and several of your works have referenced it too, there are images that juxtapose small-town architectural sensibilities. Please talk about how this happened and also what was special about Memphis Milano's post-modern inspirations?

Sameer: I spent a lot of time in the last three years helping my father build a house at our native place on the outskirts of Mangalore, which meant several trips there to meet the local contractor with our architect from **Mumbai**. Our local contractor had previously never worked with an architect, and had always worked directly with the owner of the land. I found his process and methods very interesting.

The contractors usually present a spiral bound portfolio with laminated printouts of 3D rendered homes to the owner who picks a reference house from the samples. These samples are often made by software savvy computer operators with little or no in-depth knowledge of architecture, space and materials. These 3D rendered homes have a strange appearance and bright colours, often with some post-modernist architectural elements, ornamentations and embellishments on the outside that have absolutely no function.

Many of these post-modern houses built from new money, together by contractors and owners (minus an architect) in two-tier and three-tier towns across India, reflect this kind of distinct visual language that reminded me of the works of the **Milan** based group from the 80s, Memphis Milano—a rambunctious counter to the seriousness of **Bauhaus** and **Modernism**. I later discovered that **Ettore Sottsass**, the founding member of the group, was, in fact, inspired by these houses on his visits to Tiruvannamalai, India in the 60s and 70s—before he founded Memphis Milano.



Timelapse: *Of class, cantilevers and chajjas*, 2022, ink solid markers, acrylic, gouache on acid free paper mounted on Canson Heritage Cold Pressed acid free paper

Image: Courtesy of TARQ

Rahul: I am particularly intrigued with the *Drawn Timelapse* series. You began with making these on post-it slips. It paradoxically combines analogue with the digital. How do you aspire the audience 'consume' this work?

Sameer: The 'ephemeral' nature of the post-it is linked conceptually to the nature of built environment and architecture—when you look at extended periods of time. Post-it notes (as a functional product) are also embedded with a function to link time and memory. The drawing process itself was largely unplanned, only working on one drawing at a time rather than pre-planning the whole sequence. Not knowing/planning what comes on the next page made the process exciting, challenging, liberating and sometimes messy. The drawing process was followed by disintegrating the block and laying out all the drawn frames in sequence on a sheet of paper. The sheet was then bleached to reduce the original paper colour of the post-its, stained with natural pigments and painted frame by frame with watercolours—reflecting sort of an urban decay and the impact of time on built structures. Once dry, the sequence was scanned page by page to maintain the registration and put together as a sequential film.

These two-piece works—sequential drawings and the film—are two different ways of looking at the same time period, the sequential drawings flatten time whereas the film version condenses time in a tighter chronology.



Timelapse: *Pillars and Portals*, 2022, pen, ink and watercolours on post-ts

Image: Courtesy of TARQ

Rahul: The curatorial note states: "... the basic shape of a home morphing from one uncomfortable form to another – examining its transformation through time – physically as well as through lived experience." Why do you term this evolution/transformation uncomfortable?

Sameer: I worked on a set of watercolour drawings called *Discomfort* when I had **Covid-19** back in 2020 and I was quarantining at home. While a 'home' is considered to be a space that is supposed to be about comfort, safety and warmth, many had different feelings about being 'stuck' at home during the lockdowns. There were reports of domestic violence, lack of space, claustrophobia and a host of mental health issues caused due to that experience. It's one thing to come back home and unwind after a long day at work, but a whole different thing to be locked up with cohabitants or alone in the same home for weeks or months. The same space can feel different at different times and different circumstances. The ephemerality of a home was also brought into sharp focus when many state governments were going on a bulldozer demolition spree of allegedly illegal homes—suddenly rendering several people homeless. Natural calamities that come unannounced, like the recent earthquake in **Turkey**, are also reminders that we are in a constant state of flux and the idea of a 'home' may not be as pleasant and permanent as one may like to think.



Timelapse *Discomfort: Malbe ka dher*, 2022, ink, tea and watercolours on post-its mounted on Canson Heritage Cold-pressed acid free paper
Image: Courtesy of TARQ

Rahul: You have worked across media, you have painted facade of an elite South Mumbai building, your works have adorned the façade of **India Art Fair**. What NEXT?

Sameer: I am glad that almost three years of work has finally opened to the public in the form of *Edifice Complex* at Tarq. Not much planned as of now. I like to take it one day at a time.



Exhibition view of *Edifice Complex*, 2022, Installation
Image: Courtesy of TARQ

Edifice Complex is on view till June 10, 2023.

About Author



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Rahul is responsible for curating the Art section. He has been a Consulting Editor with Arts Illustrated and has written for various publications like Mint-Lounge and Vogue. Before retiring from mainstream corporate roles, he led an art venture for NDTV and was also involved in its television...

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