‘Immersive spaces’ around the V&A Museum, London

The conviction and resolution of small created worlds

1:1 – Architects Build Small Spaces

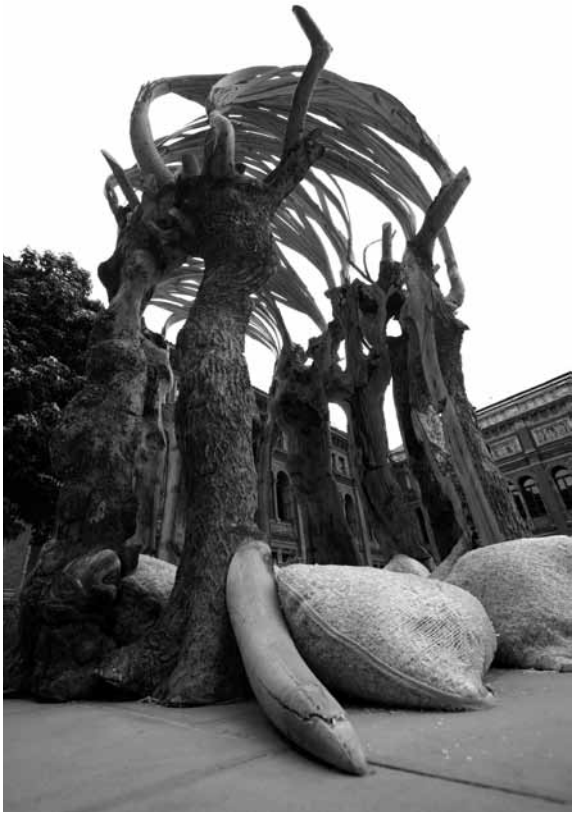
Mhairi McVicar

Squeezed into the narrow confines of a parasitic Mumbai dwelling; gathered around a ceramic tea-set in an elevated tea-house; trapped in the transparent void of a tree; and nestled in a vertical tower of fur, books and timber the *1:1 – Architects Build Small Spaces* exhibition offered a tactile and intimate encounter with the intense experiences and emotions evoked by a series of small architectural spaces. Installed throughout the Victoria and Albert Museum, the exhibition ran from 15 June – 30 August 2010.

Seven architectural practices and designers, selected from nineteen invited submissions, created full-scale installations throughout the galleries, stairwells and gardens of the Victoria and Albert Museum, and opened them up to visitors. The shortlisted practices and programmes – each of whom was building for the first time in the UK – were invited by the V&A to create immersive spaces for ‘encounter and reflection, refuge and retreat’. As the V&A’s brief highlights, architectural exhibitions typically consist of scaled drawings and models; rarely is the visitor to the architectural exhibition offered the chance to personally inhabit the spaces described. Equally rare, in contemporary architectural practice, is the architect given the opportunity to participate ‘hands-on’ with the intimacies of making. Instead, the architect’s experience is often limited to the scaled drawings and models through which they instruct others to build their proposals. Notably, each of the architectural practices and programmes selected within this exhibition embodies an ethos of making, experimentation and collaboration, demonstrating the ongoing potential for architectural practices to remain closely involved with the construction of architecture. *1:1 – Architects Build Small Spaces* encouraged direct



1 *In-between Architecture*, Studio Mumbai Architects, Mumbai, India



2 *Ratatosk*, Helen & Hard, Stavanger, Norway

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3 *Woodshed*, Rural Studio, Alabama, USA



4 *Woodshed*

engagement from each architect through a process of testing, editing, collaboration and fine-tuning. The results were evident in installations which in turn offered the visitor direct engagement and intense, unexpected experiences. Themes of playfulness and performance, refuge and exposure, and solace and density challenged the role of both visitor and architect.

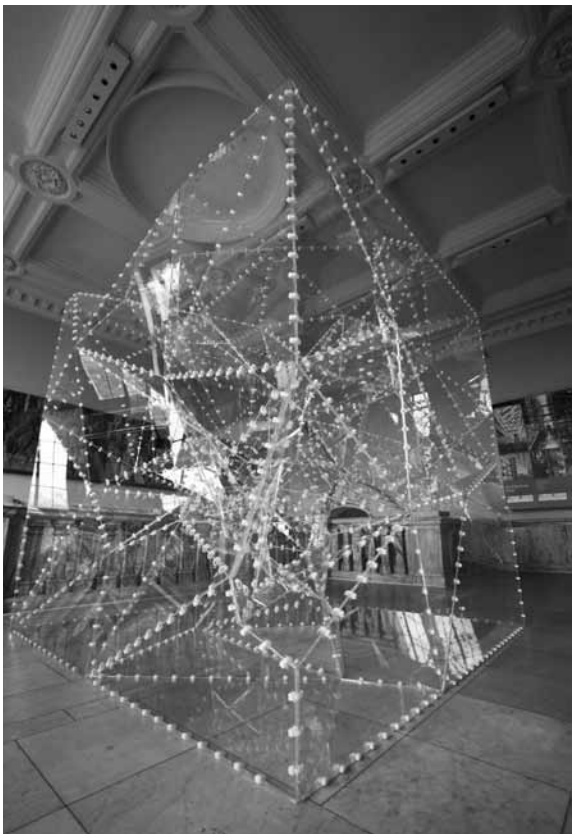
Particularly memorable was Studio Mumbai Architects' powerful evocation in the V&A's Cast Courts Room of *In-Between Architecture [1]*, a narrow labyrinth interpreting an existing parasitic dwelling, home to a family of eight, which appropriates the left-over space between the practice's offices in Mumbai and an adjacent warehouse. Such spaces, illegally constructed throughout the city and unrecognised by official census surveys, might readily be dismissed as undesirable and inhumane slums. *In-Between Architecture* provocatively highlighted the surprising beauty and humanity contained within one such unauthorised dwelling. While Studio Mumbai recalled the original dwelling as a rich tapestry of materials 'dredged from the city', their interpretation in the V&A was limited to a palette of rough and smooth plaster, a move which reinterpreted the surrounding plaster casts of the Cast Courts, and which redirected the visitor's focus to the qualities of space and light within the structure. A dense sequence of narrow corridors, dimly-lit interior rooms and tiny overhead lofts, opening into shared top-lit exterior courtyards, revealed the surprising diversity of spaces, and quality of light, which can be compressed into the smallest of sites. Views between and through the courtyards and lofts hinted at the sense of community created within, while a whimsical playfulness emerged from unexpected sources: a plaster-cast tree growing within the courtyard, the head of a cast of Michelangelo's *David* appearing unexpectedly through a loft window which overlooked the Cast Court exhibits. The richness of this project arose from the careful observation and appreciation of such chance encounters. Studio Mumbai describe themselves as 'a human infrastructure of skilled craftsmen and architects who design and build the work directly', with an emphasis on close observations of their immediate environment. 'We need to understand why things are a certain way', they suggest, referring to the ingenuity arising from work with limited resources. *In-Between Architecture* was described by the practice as a 'distilled architectural study of a dwelling' which contained, in its restricted confines, spaces for community, refuge, contemplation and worship. Surprise and delight, light and community, and above all, a sense of dignity were thoughtfully presented in a careful and sympathetic installation which offered a humbling reminder to architects of the beauty that can be carved out of the meanest of situations.

The ethical implications of constructing architecture were also present in Rural Studio's *Woodshed [3, 4]*, a forceful installation that tested the potential of an underused resource. West Alabama based Rural Studio, an Auburn University programme for undergraduate and graduate architectural studios, is renowned for providing affordable housing and community facilities designed and constructed by students. Focusing on donated, recycled and overlooked resources, projects in Alabama have tested carpet tiles, cardboard bales and car windscreens as viable construction materials. *Woodshed* explored the practicality and potential of constructing with timber thinnings – the small growth timber removed so that larger trees can flourish – here obtained from managed forests in Wales. Working in collaboration with Hampshire-based company Green Oak

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5 *Beetle's House*, Terunobu Fujimori, Tokyo, Japan



6 *Inside / Outside Tree*, Sou Fujimoto Architects, Tokyo, Japan

Carpentry and the University of Bath, Rural Studio developed a repetitive system of frames constructed with various species of thinnings – the 'rubbish' from a forest, as Director Andrew Freear described it – compressed together by threaded rod to create a monolithic 'tube'. Of all seven installations, *Woodshed* was perhaps the most emphatic celebration of construction and materiality. The emphasis upon a simple, repetitive form constructed with one material focused attention on each joint and finish, and the results were both innovative and elegant. Each frame was jointed with an experimental system of highly-compressed birch plywood strips, while the structure was charred externally as a protection against weathering and insect infestation. The reduction of components to one material, and the adaptive use of affordable, abundant, renewable and underutilised timber thinnings was indicative of a belief in affordable, ethical and accessible means of construction. It may be 'low tech', as Rural Studio described it, but the uncompromising focus upon redefining the value of an under-used resource, coupled with an inherent playfulness in elevating the ordinary – exemplified in the finishing touch of a 'vine' of lightbulbs which nod to Sigurd Lewerentz's flower kiosk in Malmö – raised low tech to something altogether more substantial. 'Architecture shouldn't just be the plaything of the rich,' Freear wrote in the accompanying documentary of the construction. Exhibited in the formality of the Porter Gallery, encased in dimmed lighting, the ordinariness of low-cost and low-tech timber thinnings were re-presented here as a precious commodity.

The elevation of the ordinary was exemplified in Stavanger practice Helen & Hard's exterior installation *Ratatosk* in the John Madejski Garden *[2]*. Five ash trees, felled from forests near Stavanger, were split in half lengthways and placed to face each other in an oval formation connected by a canopy of willow strips. Helen & Hard, founded in 1996 by Siv Helene Stangeland and Reinhard Kropf, describe their thinking as a rejection of sharp distinctions between the living and the non-living, the natural and the artificial. 'All our projects', they state, are developed as an assemblage of 'contextual circumstances and intrinsic material properties'.

Ratatosk celebrated the pairing of the natural and man-made. The weathered, moss-covered bark exterior surface, displaying the inherent irregularity of the ash trunk, was contrasted with the precisely finished interior surface and crafted joints which connected the ash structure to the willow canopy. Every architectural project, Helen & Hard suggest, opens up an opportunity for experimentation, and here the digital, the hand-crafted and natural forms sat comfortably together. To assist detailed design, each tree was digitally scanned, and rapid propotype maquettes formed as study models. The split interiors of the trees were then carved with a CNC router, creating a highly controlled interior surface. The smooth beauty of finished ash was revealed here by a process of splitting, routing and burnishing; this, in turn, highlighted the inherent beauty of the undisturbed weathered exterior. The contrast of the rough, weathered bark and the smooth interior surface invited touching, rubbing and wearing, and a hands-on response was specifically welcomed. Helen & Hard described the project as a climbing structure, referencing memories of childhood play within forests in a semi-mythical world exemplified by the Old Norse title of *Ratatosk*, referring to a squirrel living in a giant ash tree at the centre of the cosmos. The balance of the natural and the man-made, the handcrafted and the digital, the finely-finished and the weathered, entreated visitors

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7 *Ark*, Rintala Eggersson Architects, Bodø and Oslo, Norway

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into a tactile, sensuous and mythical structure.

A similar sense of ritual and child-like delight was found within the tiny confines of Terunobu Fujimori's *Beetle's House [5]*, an intimate, charred-black tea-house teetering precariously on heavy chestnut legs amid the architectural artefacts of the new top-lit galleries of the V&A's Medieval and Renaissance Room. Sited between a sixteenth-century oak staircase from Brittany and a sixteenth-century timber facade, *Beetle's House* was approached via a small white stool and white runner provided for the removal of shoes before ascent into the tiny blackened timber structure above via a wood ladder, designed in collaboration with Royal College of Art architecture students. Once inside, a plastered white interior clad with strips of charred timber was sparsely furnished with an inset fireplace and tea-kettle, a ceramic tea set designed by RCA ceramic students, and a model of a bicycle. Exterior timber shutters and a trapdoor set into the floor enhanced a ritualistic sense of removal from the exterior world, and invited complete immersion into the dreamlike state of Fujimori's world. Fujimori, a professor and historian of modern Japanese architecture who completed his first project at the age of forty-four, suggested in his accompanying documentary film that his buildings are intended to 'by-pass any architectural style that has developed since the Bronze Age'. Previous projects such as the six-metre high Takasugi-an tea house (2004), were simultaneously familiar and fantastical, resembling a child's sketch in form, yet remaining carefully controlled in the precise selection and editing of materials and details. Fujimori had previously described a tea-house as the 'ultimate personal architecture' and, despite its location in a busy, public museum, *Beetle's House* achieved a surprising sense of familiarity, intimacy and immersion. You felt genuinely welcome to linger and take tea. It's a pity that the stove wasn't lit.

Exposure and immersion were precariously balanced in Sou Fujimoto's *Inside/Outside Tree [6]*, which occupied the second floor stairwell landing at the entrance to the Architecture Room. Delicately balanced against the weighty stone stairwell, a complex layered cube assemblage of polygonal acrylic sheets stitched together with white cable ties had been digitally designed to internally describe the void of a tree structure. Tokyo-based architect Fujimoto described the installation as a combination of simplicity and complexity, stating, 'nature is really complex and artificial things are based on simplicity so I like to create something very complex in an artificial way'. Toyko, as Fujimoto suggested in his documentary film, is an ambiguous mixture of nature and architecture, of inside and outside; the conditions of exterior space are often similar to the conditions of interior space, and vice versa. 'We cannot say', he concluded, 'what is outside and inside, what is artificial and what is nature'. The blurring and overlapping of boundaries were central to this installation, in which the void of the tree created by the arrangement of transparent sheets was never quite obvious. Rather, the void tree structure was glimpsed and abstracted among complex layers of reflections and a three-dimensional maze of cable ties. Stepping into the void of the tree trapped within *Inside/Outside Tree*, the viewer was at once immersed and restricted within the seemingly fragile assembly, unable to move freely despite the apparent openness of the structure. Exposed to external viewers, the internal viewer became part of the exhibition, at once participant and viewer in a further blurring of boundaries.



8 *Spiral Booths*, Vazio S/A, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

The viewer's personal experience took central place in Norway-based Rintala Eggertsson's *Ark [7]*, a free-standing three-storey timber book-tower squeezing through the void of the stairwell which runs between the V&A's bookstore and the National Art library. The construction of *Ark* was a relatively straightforward assemblage of timber framing, and the simplicity of construction was a deliberate decision. 'It's about putting one stick on top of the other like every small child does in the beginning of their life,' Rintala Eggertsson

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said of the project's construction by the architectural team, who are familiar with timber construction and include a trained carpenter. This structure was less a celebration of complex systems or experimental materials than it was a celebration of the inherent simplicity and clarity of timber construction, and a warm invitation to linger and curl up with a book. Rintala Eggertsson, formed in 2007, are based in both Oslo and Bodø, a town located above the Arctic Circle which receives no sunlight for two months of the year. 'We conceive our ideas from our existence', partner Dagur Eggertsson noted in their accompanying commentary: this tower offered fur-lined benches and reading nooks nestled among the warmth and colour of approximately 6,000 books wrapping the structure, creating an intimate world of wood, books and fur which is redolent of a dark northern winter afternoon spent indoors, reading, immersed in another world.

While *Ark* invited the inhabitant to linger in a warm, cosy and intimate world, Brazilian based Vazio S/A's *Spiral Booths [8]*, an altogether more urban structure paired with Rural Studio's *Woodshed* in the Porter Gallery, turned the inhabitant into a performer. *Spiral Booths,* a vertical metal structure clad with opaque MDF, translucent steel mesh and transparent acrylic panels, wrapped a narrow winding staircase around six red curtain-lined performance booths, some only large enough to accommodate one or two performers. *Spiral Booths* was an outcome of Vazio S/A's concept for a performance space developed to occupy the urban void beneath a Brazilian 'palafitte' – a building on a steep slope, supported by tall concrete pillars. The potential offered by left-over, unplanned urban spaces was outlined as a key interest of the practice, who suggested that 'informality, urban voids, and the market itself can work as triggers of new projects and opportunities'. They described *Spiral Booths* as a vertical theatre with a fragmented stage: the 'stage' was vertically dispersed by the narrow, winding staircase, specifically dimensioned to force visitors to squeeze past each other. 'I had in mind to use architecture as a way to invent spontaneous performance amongst the visitors,' Vazio S/A's Carlos M. Teixeira summarised. Located in the corner of the Porter Gallery, the open floor of the gallery became a potential setting for an audience, with the installation as stage set. Alternatively, the installation could house visitors as audience, overlooking other visitors as performers in the gallery below. As staircase became performance space, performance space became staircase landing: stages became places of refuge, while circulation spaces exposed inhabitants to external viewers in an often disorienting and manipulative inversion of refuge and exposure. The V&A commissioned six London theatre, music and dance companies to develop new works for *Spiral Booths*, presented over six weekends as open workshops intermingling visitors and performers in and around the structure, reinforcing the central idea of engagement which permeated the project.

The visitor's experience of the *1:1 – Architects Build Small Spaces* exhibition was central to the success of the exhibition: all seven exhibits invited the visitor into small, dense and intense worlds, variously offering comfort, shelter, memories, exposure, provocation and disorientation. In addition to the primary focus of the exhibition – the constructed structures themselves – the V&A also provided valuable short films alongside each structure, containing interviews with the architects and documentaries of the process. Continuing online, weblogs and personal video diaries by the architects and the lead curator for architecture, Abraham Thomas, introduced initial designs, and followed the sourcing, prototyping and the construction of each project, giving in-depth insights into the inspirations and processes behind the installed works (www.vam.ac.uk/smallspaces). Finally, models and drawings of the original nineteen submissions, including the seven final selections, were displayed in the Architecture gallery, and it was fascinating to compare the original sketches and models in relation to the final constructed pieces. Fujimori's whimsical hand-drawings imagined *Beetle's House* hanging from the ceiling of the Cast Courts Room – 'if not suspended, legs are needed', he warned the curators. Rural Studio's faithfulness to one material, meanwhile, was resolutely communicated in a wood model, on a wood base, contained in a finely crafted wood delivery case.

What was compelling throughout *1:1 – Architects Build Small Spaces* was the conviction and resolution of the small worlds created. Beautifully and thoughtfully constructed, these Small Spaces conveyed the power that architecture can hold: be it to draw out the pleasure of childhood memory of playing in a forest, to convey the unexpected delight and dignity found within a Mumbai slum, to argue for the ethical role architecture can play, or to simply provide an intimate space for a moment of relaxation. These spaces demonstrated, with pleasure, the intensity of experiences which architecture can offer in the flesh.

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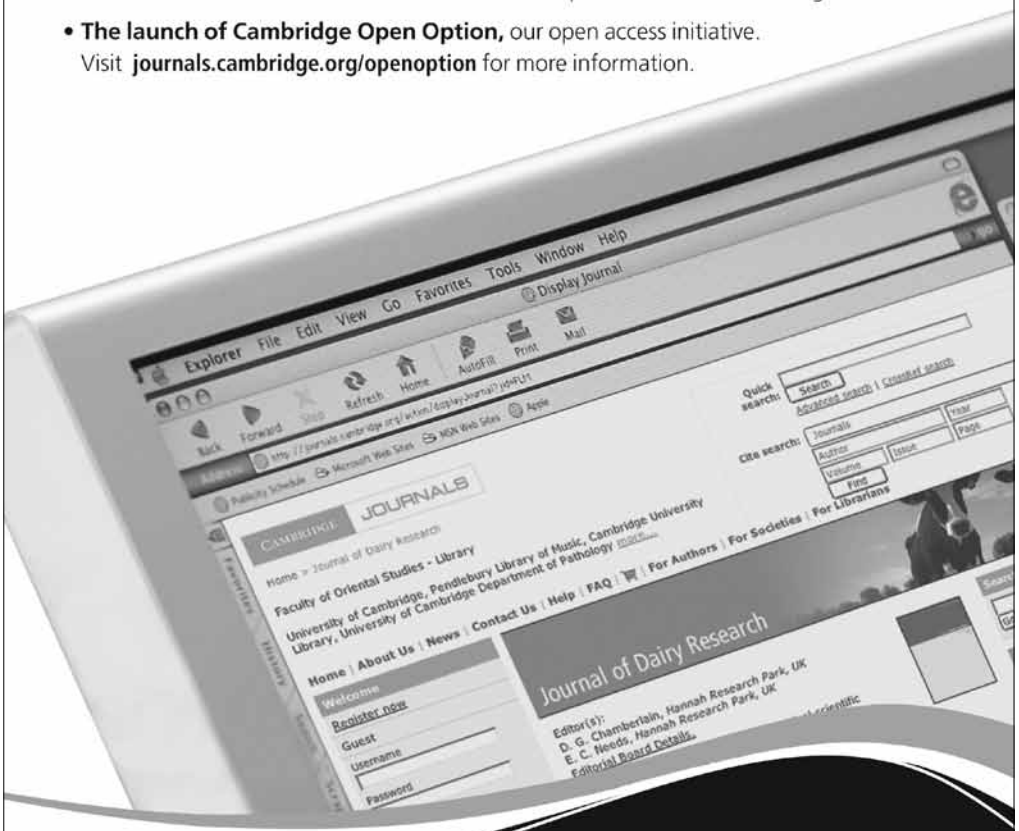
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