

BOOK REVIEW

Many Voices, not a Monograph

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Biome Diaries: Now, Then & Emergence (2021)

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Curator:

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The foreword to Biome Diaries is a conversation between Rahul Mehrotra, the founder principal of RMA Architects and the designer and historian, Ishita Shah, who brings the diaries together as its curator. The conversation reflects on Biome's practice through questions on time, history, context, the client, patronage, conceptualisation, construction practices, aesthetics and more. Here is an extract from that conversation:

"I can read Biome's work and I conclude that aesthetically it is highly inconsistent. The consistency might be in the fact that it feels organic and its theme of material selections is consistent. But it is actually the accumulation of different fragments that come together and that are created through the collaboration and feedback loops from clients they engage with, which then coalesce into something that is cohesive. There is integrity in those buildings because they are cohesive. But they are about multiplicity. They are signalling to me, the simultaneous validity of different kind of moves - which is unexpected and sometimes unsettling for an eye that looks for consistency."

While this is an assessment that Rahul Mehrotra makes about Biome's body of work, it also connects us to the form, content and design of this compilation - an 'accumulation of different fragments' that come together in the form of a set of diaries. They have entries or fragments by three sets of people: clients and friends of the practice, peers from the architectural fraternity, and Biome insiders. The entries take different forms - stories, poems, letters, caricatures, and the more expected essays, drawings and photographs. As a result, we get a mix of multiple forms and voices responding to Biome's practice, and lending a unique texture to the diaries. This stands in contrast to the controlled consistency of voice that one hears in most architectural publications that review the work of a practice.

There are three diaries, each devoted to a stage in the evolution of the practice. There is a fragmentation of time that is created by breaking its chronological sequence. The first, called **Now**, is located in the present and examines the practice in the broad context of contemporary India. The second, called **Then**, is a recap of the first decade of the practice and its gradual evolution from Chitra Vishwanath Architects to Biome Environmental Solutions. The third, called **Emergence**, is a projection for the future through the values and identity of the practice. When these fragments come together as a whole, they lay out a delightful spread for us.

There are two conversations and between them they connect the past, present and future. Besides the one mentioned above, there is a conversation called, '**Way Forward at Biome**', featuring Sharath Nayak and Anurag Tamhankar, both directors in the practice, along with Ishita Shah. It gives us a sense of the questions that confront Biome today, the

collaborations and the organisational design for the future, and the directions that will shape its role in 'mainstreaming ecological architecture'.

Spread across the diaries are essays by fellow travellers from the architecture fraternity and team members of Biome. Some of these essays act as broad overviews of the practice. Soumitro Ghosh writes about how Bangalore of the 1990s and the middle class dream of making a home offered a canvas to the practice in its early days. He also writes about the influence of organisations like Alternative Science and Technology for Rural Areas (ASTRA) at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in forming the foundational ideas of the practice. Martin Laferriere draws a line between the work and manifestos of Laurie Baker; the work of Biome; and the relationship between the workers, the client and the architect in creating spaces with a crafted, sustainable tectonic. In an anecdotal essay called, **'The Ones Who Build'**, Vidushi Gupta, a member of Biome's team highlights a set of self-driven initiatives by contractors and workers that added value to the work, and in the process stresses the importance of collaboration and co-creation. Other contributors of such essays include Gautam Bhatia and Rabindra Vasavada. Parallel to these overviews are essays that are specific, explore and analyse thematic ideas and architectural elements. Falguni Desai writes about recurring expressions in Biome's work around the idea of a room - the basement room, the loft room, the inter-connected gallery room. Priya Joseph takes us back to a time when well foundations were a widespread practice in South India and then reveals the adoption of those techniques by Biome in an updated manner. She uses this premise to ask questions about the necessity for constantly 'making new' and then argues in favour of borrowing from the past to create an 'enlightened new'. She then proceeds to present the well as a metaphor for the practice of Biome. Ishita Shah analyses the institutional work spread of the practice and looks at continuities in the response to context, curriculum and community.

There are a set of illustrated compilations by the Biome team members that take us into the details of their work. They focus on subjects like foundations, site and ecology, toilets, waste management, and groundwater. In a similar vein, there is an essay called, **'The Electro in Biome'** by Kartikeya Acharya that addresses the 'electro' - the electronic and electrical components of our everyday lives. It is nice to see how an essential feature of the modern home, but one that gets relegated as a service element finds space in the diary. It is accompanied with drawings and an info-graphic of some of the key milestones in the design of the 'electro' at Biome.

There is more. Clients and friends write about their personal experiences in specific projects. Vivek Muthuramalingam, a visual story-teller shares three photo-essays, two of which are specific to a project and one that

documents his experiences photographing the architecture of Biome. Khushru Irani of the architecture practice localground writes about his experience visiting two homes designed by Biome and contrasts it with his experience of designing homes. A common presence in all the diaries is a segment called **Design Thinking**, a set of graphical essays by Siddharth Achaya that document processes and certain themes that are at the core of the practice.

The diaries end with an appendix of project drawings that supplement the diary entries. Forty seven projects are documented in this section. In the first two diaries, *Now and Then*, the entries are dominated by private houses. In the third diary, *Emergence*, projects that are public in nature and larger in scale find more presence. This shift in the nature of projects gives us a glimpse of the future course of the practice, a course that will be critical to the development of architectural alternatives to the dominant mainstream.

Mary Woods in the afterword provides a neat summary of the intentions and the design of the diaries, and the work of Biome. It talks about the guiding principles of Biome's practice - context, sustainability and community and the process of documenting and expressing it as a publication. A historical overview of publications by architects and builders establishes the context for the diaries; it then distinguishes it from the traditional architectural monograph; and then establishes continuities with the monographs of Minnette de Silva and Brinda Somaya, published in 1998 and 2018, respectively. To conclude, I would like to go back to the extract from the foreword. The diaries signal the simultaneous validity of different kind of expressions, and voices. For those expecting consistency, and a certain kind of formalism, the diaries can be unsettling. But, this is the kind of displacement and honesty that needs more space in the profession. ■



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