

Nitin Killawala & **URBAN SHELF-LIFE**

Associates

A townhouse of stacked shelf-like floor plates in suburban Mumbai energises a prosaic neighbourhood. It also sets the case for a simple, emerging prototype that responds to the typical suburban situation of narrow mid-rise buildings standing tightly upon plots formerly occupied by private dwellings

Text Suprio Bhattacharjee
Photos Dinesh Mehta



This spread: the house is imagined as a set of drawers pushed in and out of a box; this seemingly simple strategy immediately and noticeably achieves a set of overlapping semi-outdoor verandah-like spaces that recede and advance towards the street frontage to varying depths, and with varying relationships to their immediately adjacent floor levels above or below

A little less than two decades ago, as a student of architecture, I had chanced upon this striking farmhouse in a magazine. It was located a few hours from the city of Bombay, and my mental picture of the project until today from the photographs I'd seen then is of a bold geometric presence within the landscape, a building mass partially obscured by bermed earth, the presence of bursts of primary colours, a mix of stone and steel, an intimate yet cavernous interior ventilated through natural means, aided by a wind tower that struck a totemic man-made presence within the (then) habitation-devoid landscape. Here, the architect-as-client Nitin Killawala had envisaged a

work that, for the context of its time, was a marked departure from the building-as-object-in-the-landscape. I am now walking up to the same architect's recently completed city house in a western suburb of the city of Bombay, where he awaits me on a pleasant February afternoon. Here in Juhu, sweeping changes in the built environment over the past two decades have turned a former low-scaled neighbourhood into a now-typical urban situation of narrow mid-rise buildings standing tightly upon plots formerly occupied with private dwellings, with hardly any visual aspect other than the access road in the front or the neighbouring window a few feet away, or the intermittent





This page: the building makes for an enticing case for perhaps an emerging typology in the city where stacked townhouses (born out of joint families wishing to live together on inherited land) will become a way of absorbing the increased building areas permitted



This page above: the building during construction phase – fabricated steel columns and beams were brought into the site in sections and raised quickly. Left and below: the greys on the building facade give way to fresh and lively interior surfaces (as seen in the last spread)



blaze of sunlight (if one is lucky) as it finds its way through the gaps left over after building. One may glance upon the old tree that has escaped being trampled upon by construction, or if one is fortunate enough to be faced with a plot that is as yet to undergo redevelopment, one can savour the vista and the unhindered breeze for as long as it lasts until the hammer falls over there. The first thing Nitin Killawala tells me as he receives me on the street outside his home is to imagine the house as a set of drawers pushed in and out of a box. What this seemingly simple strategy immediately and noticeably achieves is a set of overlapping semi-outdoor verandah-like spaces that recede and advance towards the street frontage to varying depths, and with varying relationships to their immediately adjacent floor levels above or below. A little balcony (that I later discover is fairly sumptuous yet intimate) dangling out precariously on the

fourth level with vivid red handrails forms an unmistakable visual anchor from the street – high up amongst the branches of the large trees, rooting an ensemble of 'drawer faces' that seemingly sit in gay abandon upon the shelf-like floor-plates. The 'drawer faces' are a mix of opaque and transparent, or veiled (as in the first floor level). This is also the west facade of the house, so the deep recesses and opaque fronts also become a means to engage with the harsh afternoon sun. This striking building facade is already a marker on the street – the obvious porous nature and inclusive stance (to the street and the large trees) makes one do a double take while strolling within an otherwise prosaic neighbourhood. Passersby are surely going to gape in either amazement or envy. Nitin takes me on a tour of the building – a simple arrangement of shared spaces on the first floor upon which are stacked two townhouses that can be independently accessed

– a large house for him and his wife spread across a duplex on the second and third floors, and a larger house for his brother's family spread across a triplex from the fourth to the sixth. The shared multi-purpose spaces on the first floor serve both townhouses – a guestroom is included, with a lobby space leading to a large multi-functional hall with generous pivoted metal windows shaded with timber slats that ensure privacy as well as a shimmering dappled light on the inside. The duplex offers a sectional play of note, as well as a loose and freeing spatial disposition – much like the 'Raumplan' of the 1920's – with an internal stair, a bridge with a slatted floor much like those seen in older houses, a nook with no windows and light filtering in from gaps between the few opaque wall elements. The triplex is more conventional in that sense – with stronger light as one ascends the building and clears the tree canopy.

Blinds become a necessity, the west facade verandahs become deeper, and an internal spiral stair illuminated by a shaft of light from a roof-level skylight serves as a visual and spatial anchor. The greys on the building facade give way to fresh and lively interior surfaces – more polished wood in the triplex and more painted surfaces in the duplex. Colours within this spatial ensemble make this a house that is obviously fun to live in and experience on an everyday basis – with these little window nooks that pop out from the north and south faces of the building (and become the only real burst of colour on the building facade) becoming spaces that kids will enjoy being tucked up in. Furniture integrates into these nooks and elsewhere with the building plan. The bathroom volumes form quirky foils within some spaces – especially within the duplex – elsewhere they become solid, almost free-standing anchors that orient each space. The building makes an enticing case



Left: little window nooks that pop out from the north and south faces of the building become the only real burst of colour on the building facade. Below: the stark and proud poise of the steel frame on the outside



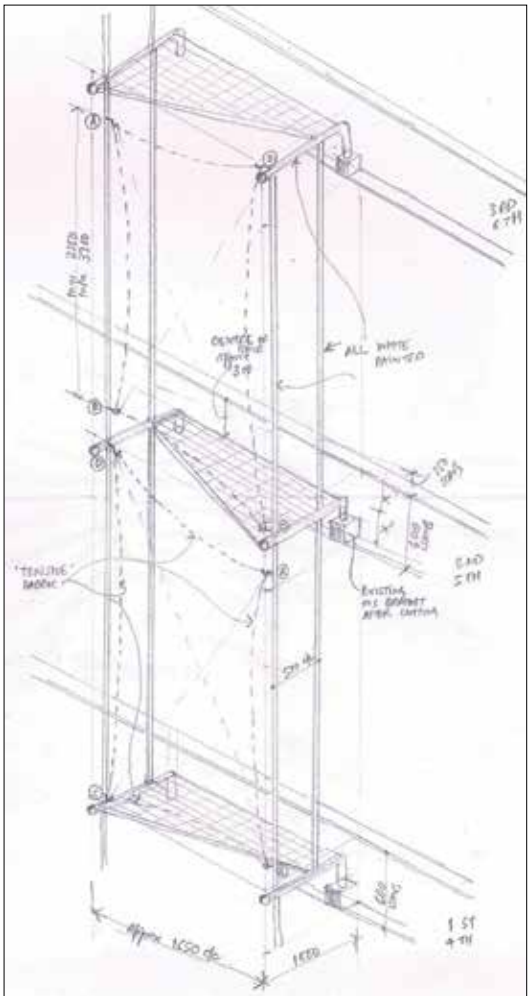
Left: semi-outdoor verandah-like spaces recede and advance towards the street frontage to varying depths. Right below: fabricated steel columns and beams, photographed during the building's construction. Far below: the rawness that one would expect of a steel building has been smoothed over substantially in the interior space



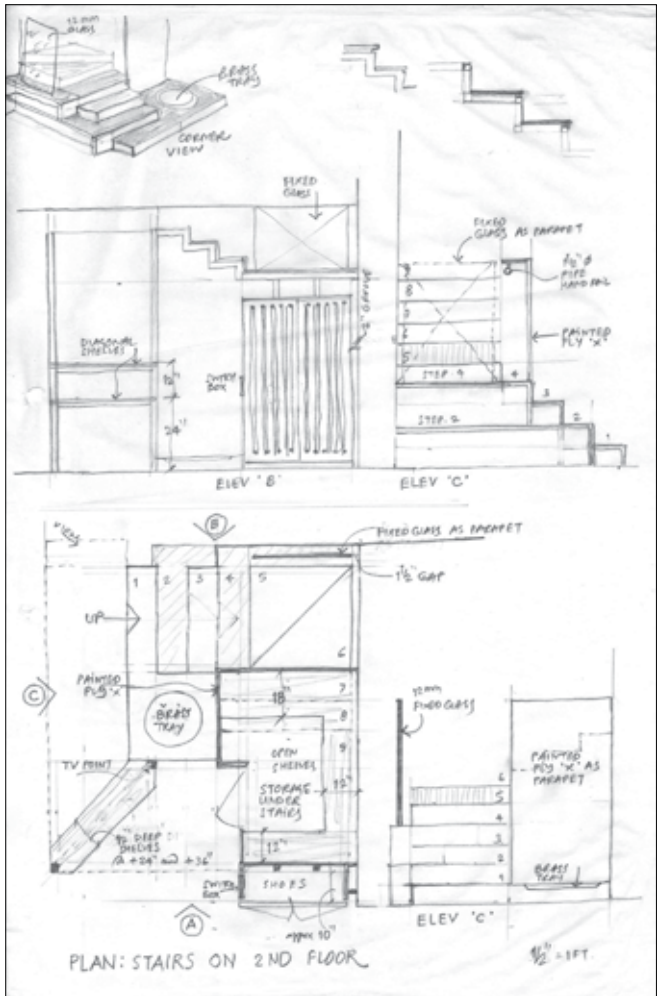


SECTION AA

WEST ELEVATION

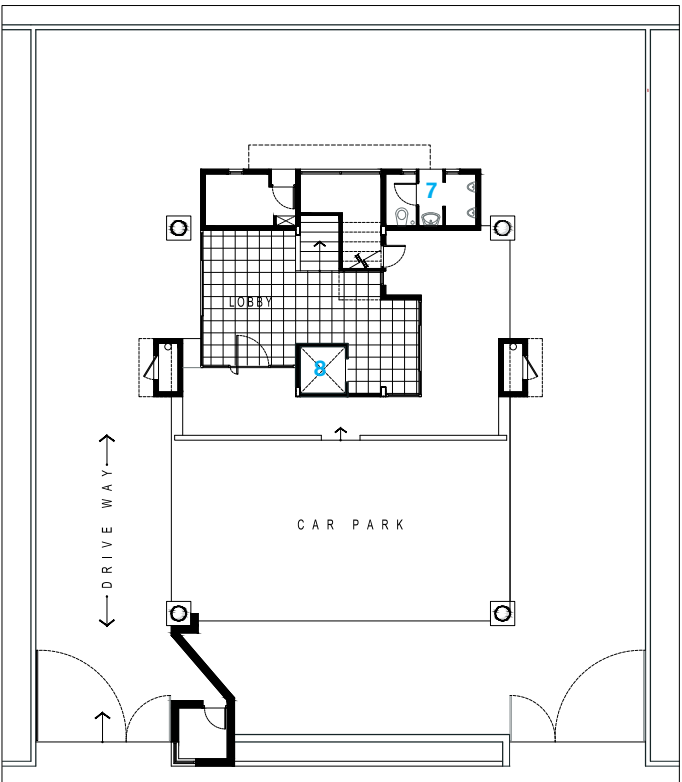


DESIGN DEVELOPMENT SKETCHES

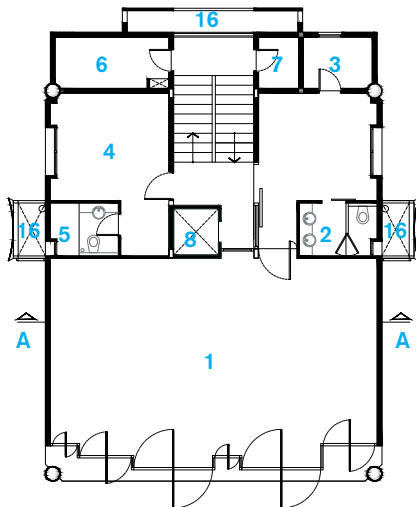


- 1 Multi Activity Hall
- 2 Powder
- 3 Pantry
- 4 Bed Room
- 5 Toilet
- 6 Utility
- 7 Servant Toilet
- 8 Lift
- 9 Living + Dining
- 10 Kitchen
- 11 Family Lounge
- 12 Terrace
- 13 Bed Room
- 14 Deck
- 15 Play Area
- 16 Service Balcony

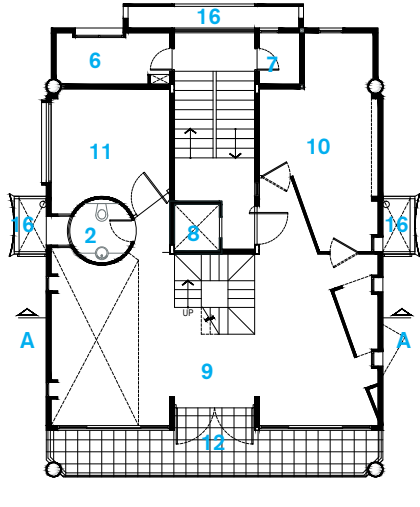
Project
Smriti-57
Location
Juhu Scheme, Mumbai
Client
Killawala Family
Architect
Nitin Killawala & Associates
Design team
Nimit Killawala, Ketan Mistry
Site Area
450 m²
Project Area
900 m²
Civil Contractors
Shree Balaji Construction
Structural Engineers
Shanghvi & Associates Consultants Pvt. Ltd.
Site Supervision
Sailesh Panchal
Initiation of Project
June 2013
Completion of project
September 2015



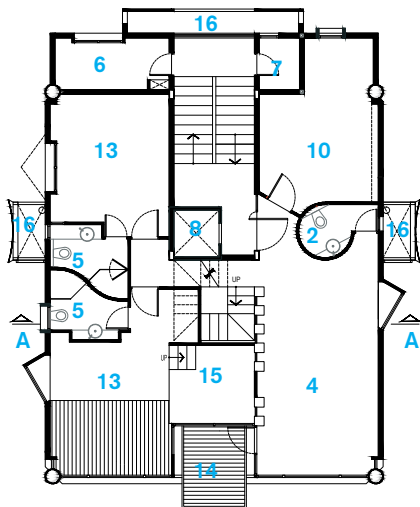
SITE PLAN



LEVEL 1



LEVEL 2



LEVEL 4



for perhaps an emerging typology in the city where stacked townhouses (born out of joint families wishing to live together on inherited land) will become a way of absorbing the increased building areas permitted. As a diagram, the building offers a clear reading: four large columns on the corners of a rectangular plan (10m x 17m) enable large shelf-like open plan floor plates – with the service zones and a continuous internal staircase pushed to the rear of the plot (the east face) and vertical service lines occupying portions of the south and north faces (sheathed in a fabric screen that is perhaps a less successful part of the entire scheme). This clear diagram also leads to the choice of material – fabricated (or built-up) steel columns and beams that easily span these distances. The choice of material for the primary structural system was also based on the speed of construction desired; the entire family was away for only 16 months. While their older house was being razed, the new one had already begun off-site – the fabricated steel columns and beams were essentially brought into the site in sections and raised quickly. Walls are built of lightweight aerated concrete blocks on floor plates constructed of steel decking and concrete – the underside of which is seen exposed in places where there is no false ceiling. Steel is used throughout the house besides its presence in the primary structure – in the stairs, the handrails and the furniture. If there is a grouse it is that within the interior, the rawness that one would expect of a steel building has been smoothed over and hidden away substantially as opposed to the

stark and proud poise of the steel frame on the outside (something that I had mentioned in an earlier article on another steel house as well - Malik Architecture's house in Alibaug). This detracts from the conceptual resonance of the building's making within its interior environment – and perhaps points to a larger aesthetic roadblock that the expression of steel within living spaces encounters in a building culture that is yet to wholeheartedly accept this material as more than merely an expression of the 'industrial'. As an exemplar of an emerging typology, as an exercise in redevelopment, and as an expression of a certain urban condition, this building is a refreshing change within the dull everyday architectural scene of the city. One hopes that this house will spawn many other prototypes within other settings. If nothing, it offers an enthusiastic glimpse of what can be done even with the most technical and utilitarian of briefs within a city not known for its architectural prowess. @

This spread: vivid colours within the spatial ensemble make this a house that is obviously fun to live in and experience on an everyday basis, with more polished wood in the triplex and more painted surfaces in the duplex

