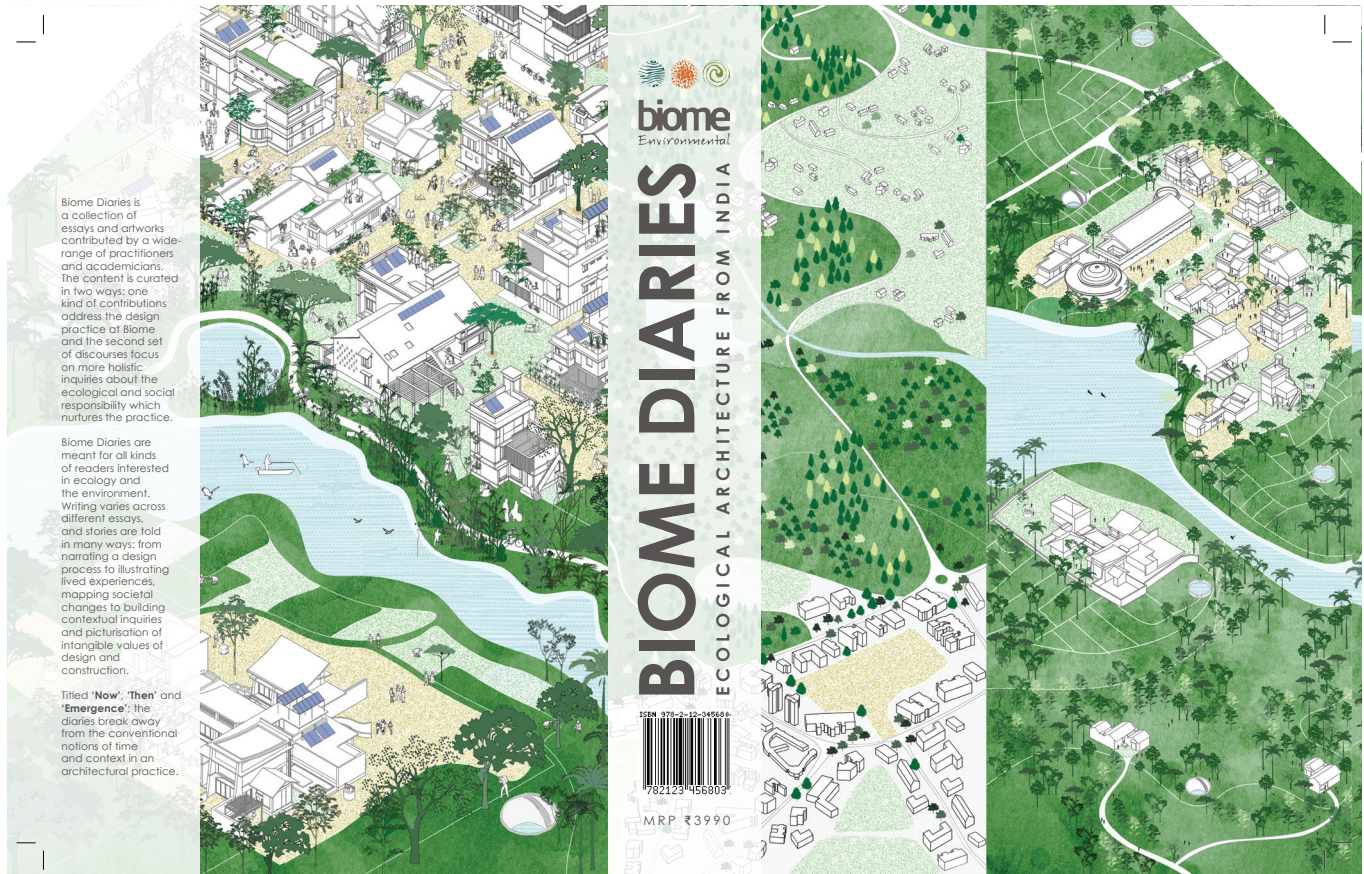


Book in Question

Biome Diaries: Ecological Architecture from India

2021, Biome Environmental Solutions Pvt. Ltd.

Ishita Shah



Biome Diaries is a collection of essays and artworks contributed by a wide range of practitioners and academicians. The content is curated in two ways; one kind of contributions address the design practice at Biome and the second set of discourses focus on more holistic inquiries about the ecological and social responsibility which nurtures the practice.

Biome Diaries are meant for all kinds of readers interested in ecology and the environment. Writing varies across different essays, and stories are told in many ways: from narrating a design process to illustrating lived experiences, mapping societal changes to building contextual inquiries and picturing of intangible values of design and construction.

Titled 'Now', 'Then' and 'Emergence', the diaries break away from the conventional notions of time and context in an architectural practice.

What were the initial thoughts, prompts and triggers for Biome Diaries?

We had started building the archives at Biome to (re)document and organise their portfolio from over three decades, and began collecting stories from the wide range of members at Biome in the form of oral histories or unstructured interviews. Initially, we were convinced that the publication should have a common thread that ties the narrative - perhaps a message that Biome has for its readers. We deliberated some critical concepts like stewardship over craftsmanship in architecture and institution building for ecological consciousness. Either way, we found that the process of arriving at a thesis statement was limiting and not encompassing the wide range of experiences that were emerging from our conversations with clients, contractors, architects, designers, artisans and other collaborators. Subsequently, we arrived at the possibility of writing and curating a diverse body of essays, which would reflect a set of values and engage

with the different processes at Biome. Right from the beginning, it was also very important to all of us that the publication is easily accessible, be it the language, size, or its tactility. Adding to that, we also wanted there to be enough room for readers to make their own interpretations, make notes and sequence the essays to their own liking. Thus, the project took the form and function of something akin to a personal diary, and was titled *Biome Diaries*.

What parts of Bangalore or its identity are reflected in Biome Diaries?

Bangalore is at the heart of curating and writing *Biome Diaries*. It all began with Chitra Vishwanath's essay in *THEN* on nurturing and receiving from her relationships to strengthen her practice, which was combined with Vishwanath Srikantiah's continued explorations at the Biome Trust towards developing SMART systems in response to changing ecological conditions in *NOW*. Bangalore also brings along the poetics of scale,

materiality and aesthetics to *Biome Diaries*, both through the processes which are rooted at Biome and by turning the spotlight on clients, contractors and other collaborators. Today, Biome has built over 700 buildings and a majority of them are all in and around Bangalore.

Alluding to this achievement, architect Soumitro Ghosh writes, '...these may seem few and far between in a city of 12.3 million. However, it has made a difference through its relentless persistence and unadulterated view of the world. This practice could only be possible in a place where a significant mass of its population found that it filled in a gap for all their anxieties.' Just like these personal stories, the raw materials of Biome's solutions were also found in this city - the soil, the rainfall and the technology. The identity of Bangalore being intertwined with Biome and *Biome Diaries* is also reflected through the visuals created by the different artists - photographs, illustrations, maps and collages used here.

How do you see the work documented here (re)shaping aspects of Bangalore and what might they be? Where do you locate *Biome Diaries* in architectural discourses in the city and about the city?

I feel I must clarify at this point that *Biome Diaries* is not an uncritical praise for the city's 'elevated' and undisciplined development, but that it is rather a eulogy to the Bangalore of the past. Biome's journey may have started with finding an opportunity to experiment with alternative practices in response to the urban sprawl, and designing almost self-sustaining spaces for families or communities living on the fringes of the city. However, in its most recent endeavours, many of their solutions have been driven towards unburdening the city and its

infrastructure. In both cases, the concern remains that the city requires and has been consuming more and more resources than it can afford in the longer run.

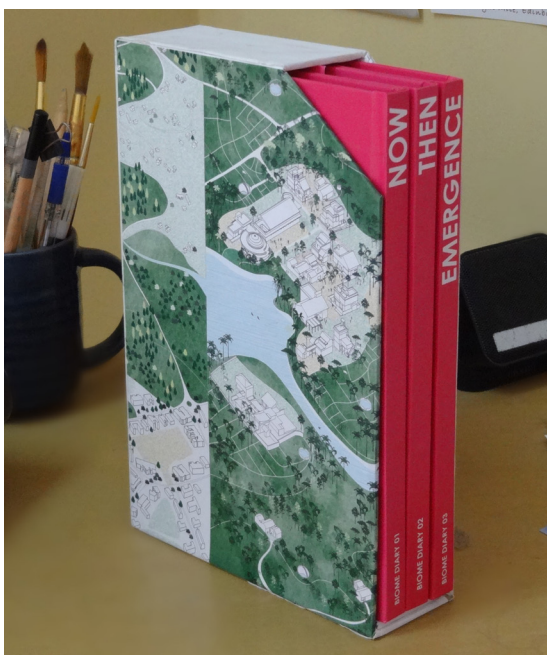
Biome Diaries attempts to situate itself at the intersection of architectural discourses in a triangulated space marked by those passionate about its ever-transforming historicity, the ones struggling to conserve its environmental diversity, and also those who are working towards innovative planning and designing. In fact, there are quite a few publications about Bangalore, composed from the stories of its people or communities but none of them (that I know of) are inviting those from the built environment agency to slow down and reflect. Perhaps, *Biome Diaries* is a form of emancipation for architectural discourses that don't align with any pre-set genres of art or a critical theory, but engages in criticality through collaborations and inclusivity of voices.

Could you elaborate on the role of people (Biome, contractors, construction workers, clients, public); place (the office, sites, city) and time (precedents, zeitgeist, futures) in *Biome Diaries* and their place in the post-pandemic city today?

Contractors, masons, and former architects participated in the interviews to map the journey of Biome while architects-turned artists interpreted and illustrated the different texts into intriguing visuals. If the recent pandemic has introduced us to newer uncertainties of survival and wellbeing, these dynamic ways of rekindling our relationship with our 'biomes' gives us hope. Imagine that we will be reading into these unknown encounters, evaluate them against our socio-cultural realities, design responsively and create responsibly. Many of these discussions have also hinted at the inevitable negotiations between the micro-initiatives and mega-solutions. We can then transgress the need to be excellent or unique and agree to be more symbiotic.

Describe your process of interpreting 'practice' as 'archive'. How did you restructure 'practice' thematically for the publication?

A practice is built over many years with different people interpreting and processing their relationships with place, politics and performance in their own ways. In reading of these processes and performances, there are many vistas to the changing times and relationships. In building a practice, we are building an archive or many different archives. When it comes to publishing a commentary on the practice, its own archive(s) can become the context for investigation - like in the case of *Biome Diaries*. The archive-in-formation was opened up to most of the authors for reading, interpretation and critique without



any preconceived outcome of their contributions. Even if there were underlying preferences, they were not rigidly tied to the 'success' of the publication.

The thematic lenses for engaging with the practice of Biome are a result of this constantly evolving curatorial process, and not a methodological tool of developing the publication. The answer was not found in the chronological transformation of the practice, but in the changing attitudes and associations of its people. Thus, the wide spectrum of essays engages the reader with personal quests, professional benchmarks and socio-political responsibilities of an architectural practice, striving for ecological consciousness.

What is your vision for archives and archiving in Bangalore? Are there specific projects or disciplines that require urgent attention in the context of archives and archiving in Bangalore?

My experiences with the wide range of museums in Bangalore have been significant in this journey. Across different learning expeditions, my students and I have learnt that several museums have very extensive archives, and most of these collections are not limited to the city's history. If these archives are made more accessible, they would act as great learning tools for educational programs across age groups. I am interested in documenting and archiving the wide range of citizen initiatives that have shaped and grown in the city. Apart from news coverage, it would be critical to recognise the personal experiences of citizens who have led or participated in these initiatives, record the story of the State or other bureaucratic members and look into the archives of photographers, musicians and other artists who contribute in their own creative ways to citizen-led initiatives. Another important project for documentation is situated in the suburban neighbourhoods of Bangalore surrounding the different Public Sector Units (PSUs) and campuses.

Did you encounter any hitherto unknown facets of Bangalore during the making of Biome Diaries that you would like to share with us?

I discovered new neighbourhoods and their famous local food spots while visiting clients or projects for the purpose of curating *Biome Diaries*. In this expedition, I also learnt about the stark differences in topography across the city, and thus, the effect of it on urban infrastructure and lifestyles of people. I had read about the origin stories of the water tanks (now called lakes), but it was educational to understand from Vishwanath S. that even today, rainwater harvesting can address the city's water sustainability. Similarly, I learnt from Chitra Vishwanath

and through the architecture of Biome that the 'beautiful skies' of Bangalore do not necessarily offer the best light for all kinds of daily activities.

How did your own experience of the city shape/influence the way you approached Biome Diaries? How do you see yourself in the city?

I do not really live in the 'city', since Vidyaranyapura is not as much Bangalore as MG Road or Koramangala. I have learnt that Bangalore city as we see it today is formed by constant municipalisation of the villages on its periphery, and that periphery is continuously shifting. Living at the intersection of Vidyaranyapura and Thindlu village, and flanked by the satellite town of Yelahanka on one side and Sahakaranagar on the other, I am offered a layered experience of life in the metropolitan. There is a stark difference in the facilities, private and public, from where I live and to staying in Indiranagar or Whitefield. Even the social behaviour of vendors, artisans, or shoppers towards a non-Kannada speaking person is quite different from one part of the city to the other.

Note: All pictures in this article are contributed by Ishita Shah

Ishita Shah is a designer and historian. Her curatorial practice under the aegis of 'Curating for Culture' is focused on areas of cultural preservation, creative interpretation, and community engagement. She is a recipient of fellowships at Graham Foundation, Futura Tropica, and Khoj International Artist Association. Email: info@curatingforculture.com



Ulsoor Lake (Source: Madhuri Rao)