

join the dots: a lesson in commitment

As part of the Power of Seeing Project, we are continuing to list elements that contribute to chaos in our streets and give the city a look of being in perpetual disrepair. A closer cross-examination of these various elements is beginning to reveal two things - a) that the dysfunction manifest in our cities may stem from oversight of some very basic axioms pertaining to alignment, level, line and point, and b) the chaos is a reflection of our cultural and social attitudes.

Point and line are two basic elements of design. When a designer or an architect envisions an

act of drawing more considered with a commitment to the consequence of that line.

The rate at which our city builds and tears is nothing short of being criminal. Very expensive material is used to execute lofty ideas and designs that fall to waste within few months due to shoddy workmanship. In fact, shoddiness has become a method; I call it method, because it is achieved through methodical oversight of basic axioms. One basic axiom that is defied is that of anchorage of the point. To anchor a point, it must be definite, fixed and be weighed down. For the point, a corner, or an edge to remain fixed, it needs to be well integrated and reinforced in accordance to the space, context and the conditions that surround it, or else it will become weak or vague, and may soon become a blur, a fuzzy smudge, or quite literally a heap of rubble as we commonly see in our streets. I share with you a recent pictorial history of a 'made-to-break' pavement, where the edge was not firmly hemmed, because it could not effectively negotiate the discrepancies of ill defined space, level and alignment that surround it. It was destined to break apart, which it did within two months of being constructed.

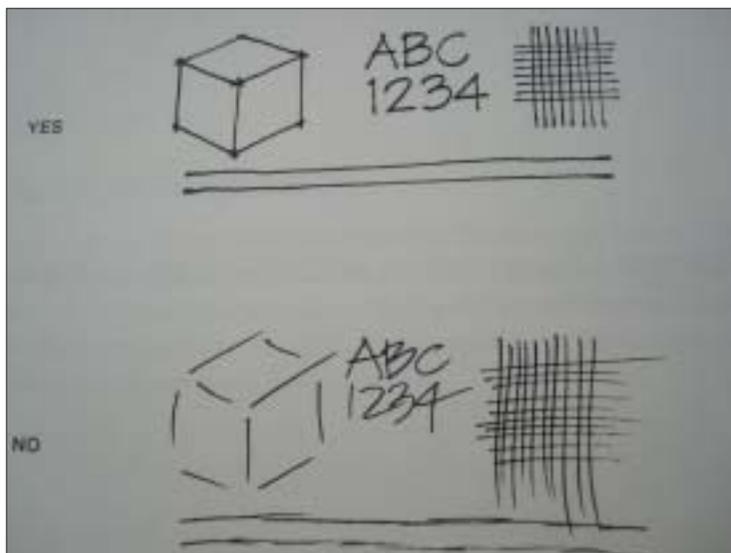
As part of our Project, we are documenting histories of elements in the streets over regular intervals, we do this not only to prove an obvious point, but to document the histories of 'unfixedness' that repeat and replicate themselves all over the city. A single photo would make a statement, but a string of photos tells a story, which then begins to reveal a string of weak links and illogical or forced connections.

One of the things that we are seeing being repeated over and over again through our exercise of sustained observation, is a basic lack of 'anchorage'. This can be exemplified not only through the roads and pavements, like the current example, that are falling apart within days after they are made, but even through construction or repair jobs that begin haphazardly and are left unfinished and un-cleared, that is without definite beginning or end. Such shoddiness or vagueness is so widely spread and that we do not even notice it anymore. By repeatedly turning a blind eye to things that are blatantly illogical and defy acceptance or comprehension, we may be compromising ourselves at a very basic level and dulling our innate 'cohering' faculties, which contribute to mental and psychological well being. The brain runs on an operational principle that is primarily

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object or a building, he or she first commits the idea or rather an array of fleeting ideas on to paper, filling the negative space of blank paper with the shapes of envisioned positive shape(s). And to create shape, s/he draws lines that connect more than two or more points. The type of line most specific to architecture and design is drawn with an emphasis at the beginning and at the end, that is, it is anchored to the page through the points at either ends. This anchorage is more than just a learning tip particular to the vocation, it is also deeply psychological, as it gives the line both conviction and punch, and reinforces the relationship between the line and its drawer, making the



Lesson 1 in how to draw a line, from "101 Things I learned in Architecture school," by Matthew Frederick

holistic and analogous and is invested with self-organising tendencies. This is that exciting faculty of the brain that supplies us with the possibility of making connections; it is in fact a compulsion of the brain to connect parts together, to create or inspire connections where they are possible, and to detect the absence of connections where they are obvious. This tendency of connecting parts is described as grouping, or gestalt. For example, if there are two points on a blank sheet of paper, the eye will immediately try and make a connection and 'see' a line, or if there are three points, it would be unavoidable not to interpret them as a triangle. Gestalt is the fundamental tool the designer uses to build a coherent composition. Gestalt is also the fundamental tool that a common person like you and me uses to realise the suspension of common sense, or the absence of axioms in our everyday environment. Our mental health, our imagination, our sensibilities, in fact our culture, depends on this faculty that is compelled to cohere connections.

When we look at a pavement that is breaking because the curb has no clear definitions and there are too many random, rogue elements to negotiate with, it is easy to be accusative and point fingers and hold governments responsible for the chaos in our streets and our cities. But the malady is too wide spread and deeper and older than the governments; it is part of who we are. Thus it would be more challenging and far more exciting to squarely implicate ourselves in this chaos and find creative solutions. And this may begin with our rediscovery of the basics, or rather it begins with basic education! More than professional schooling, we today need to take a very hard look at our elementary education. A phase of life when the child first experiences and strikes his or her primary relationships with the 'point' and the 'line', and develops the concept of negative and positive space. Each individual, each society and, may I add, each city needs to create forums, rituals and situations that may generate this primary affinity with the basics. Because it is important to look around, see, notice, configure, imagine and feel connected to the environment, even if it means finding a sustainable and effective way of adhering the curb to the road. On a very basic level, it requires a *commitment* to join the dots, that is effectively anchoring the points and joining them to make solid lines and surfaces. There is absolutely nothing mundane about this exercise! After all, there is deep psychology and philosophy that resides in the 'line' and the 'point', or if you want to further rarify it, in the *rekha* and the *bindu*.



The Power of Seeing is a Studio Abhyas project initiated by dancer and yoga exponent Navtej Johar. It questions the absence of the human body as a central point of reference in urban design, making our cities inconvenient, unsafe and hazardous. Log onto www.abhyastrust.org.



Pavement being constructed in Green Park, in August, 2008



Edge of pavement that has to negotiate the ill-defined road, plinth of the house, a rainwater drain, and the curve, 'completed' on August 27, 2008



The condition of the same edge of pavement on October 27, 2008