

a beacon or a stick in the mud?



A pole bang on the carriageway at a turning into Aurobindo Marg



A cluster of poles completely blocking a sidewalk



A supporting pole eating into very dear parking space



Random placement of poles contributing to mismanagement of space

Chaos on our streets is often due to the disruption of movement caused by a haphazard configuration of multiple maladjusted street elements. For example, it might be caused because of an unlevelled surface that serves more like a speed-bump at a curve rather than a smooth gradient that facilitates quick turning, scattered blocks and tiles that are obstacles in the way, a peeling off pavement, a shoddily placed drain cover and an out of

POWER OF SEEING

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Power of Seeing is a common man's view at the state of perpetual disrepair and disarray that surrounds us, and aims at isolating one element at a time that contributes to chaos in our cities.

The most common vertical element that we encounter on our streets is poles, mainly electricity and telephone poles. Both of these provide our very basic amenities and we all are hugely dependent upon them, yet their placement is uneven and even makeshift in some cases. Poles serve both a purpose as well as punctuate our streets; and it is important to remember that one of the primary aims of streets is to remain channels of efficient movement; however, in reality, our streets are not the most effective channels of free movement. Let us see how poles contribute to the obstruction of movement.

One disconcerting thing about poles is that they are often not evenly installed, i.e. they may not be placed at even intervals and in some cases may not even be in a straight line. An uneven placement of poles will ensure the impossibility of an evenly demarcated public space, which is one root cause of chaos in our cities. Trees and poles are two major fixtures that should have been planted and installed with much deliberation, planning and thought, keeping in mind the possibility of expansion and change, mainly because they are difficult to move and impossible to uproot. Today, their random placement has become cause for much confusion and even conflict.

With Delhi growing and its needs swelling, the margins are shifting, the roads widening and the pavements shrinking, pushing the poles that were once on the pavement now onto the roads. These poles now either obstruct movement of traffic, or hinder parking.

I cite an instance here where a pole stands bang on the carriageway of the road that turns into Aurobindo Marg. With an explosion in the number of cars in the city, especially the giant SUVs, poles

place pole. All these are so commonplace that we don't even pause to register them as an oddity. The



Two poles: misaligned, leaning and too close to each other



A pole and a tree enmeshed into the new demarcation

that stand at the apex of a turn in residential areas are now cause for traffic jams on narrow inner-lanes because they are situated right on the critical 'curve' that is required to make a smooth turn.

Given that today space is dear, and getting dearer with each passing day,

street elements need to use space most economically. But it is not uncommon to see two poles placed close to each other where one would just as well serve the purpose, or a pole that needs yet another pole for support, or a cluster of poles crowding over space that can otherwise be used for parking or movement, or randomly placed poles that contribute to the impossibility of creating an even demarcation of spaces. In some areas, new electricity poles have long been installed as part of the beautification drive, except that the old poles are still standing alongside them. But it is important to note that these new poles are a) well secured into the ground, and b) are intelligently designed like an obelisk that tapers at the top so that they will stand vertical without support and not lean over.

Interestingly enough, Delhi lanes and streets today offer a mix of the old and the new, the random and the organised, systems of installing poles and organising wires. In one block in Green Park, there are poles randomly placed with a jumbled network of wires, and on the other hand, there are poles that have been very well braced and flushed right against the boundary walls of homes so as to allow for maximum free space for parking and with the wiring organised and not tangled. These are wonderful realistic solutions as opposed to makeshift *jugads* that need to be acknowledged and registered.

The placement of poles has to be done very intelligently and from a very resolved and a firm perspective, and then their installation executed with exactitude, because poles form the very grid within which structures will be built and empty spaces will be demarcated to facilitate movement. We cannot forget that the counterpoint to our bodies being contained within a built structure is the freedom for the body to move in empty space. We cannot privilege structure over space, private over public, containment over freedom. And it is important to acknowledge that we Indians don't seem to fathom that co-relation too well and it reflects in both our lives and our governance.

The Power of Seeing project is an exercise in looking at each element in isolation and understand its nature, how it fits, misfits, changes, responds to our needs, and ways in which it falls prey to our characteristic tendency to tweak things around to serve personal agendas. It is paramount to gain a realistic overview from a resolved and a firm perspective so as to envision an efficient and humane demarcation of public spaces that privileges freedom of movement.



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.



A well-secured new pole on the pavement with the old pole pushed off on to the road



A pole well-braced and neatly flushed against the boundary wall of a house helps create more parking space



Tangles versus tidy wiring