

kisi ka ooncha kisi ka kam

The Power of Seeing is a project that lists and documents factors that contribute to chaos in our cities and result in hampering free flow of movement. Urban spaces can be said to be broadly divided between 'solid' and 'void,' i.e. spaces that are built and spaces that are left open; or spaces that contain static structures and spaces that facilitate movement. But there is also a third in-between space where the inside meets the outside, where the solid meets the void; where the house, shop or office meets the street. And a significant amount of disorder that we

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Navtej Johar

encounter on a daily basis stems from the quality of conjoining between these two spaces. One very basic factor that is crucial to the smooth conjoining of two spaces is level, i.e. the levels of both spaces must either match, or have a mutually agreeable correspondence so that the seam between them is smooth and sealed. But unfortunately, one basic axiom that has been continually overlooked or flouted in our city building, is the absence of a standard height of plinth or the base level of both private and public properties. It is an oversight at a level that is so basic that no one even considers to pay attention to it, and yet it is such a monumental flaw with so many ramifications that a city may never fully recover from the multiple maladjustments that it may have to make due to it.

You just have to step out of your own house, or go to the nearest cluster of shops to note what I am saying. All homes and shops seem to have the

freedom to choose their own plinth levels; even as they abide by many other stringent building laws which make completion-certificates virtual impossibilities. But this one law seems to have been overlooked and continues to be so; perhaps it is too basic to consider! But its omission wreaks havoc as it makes it impossible to enforce one uniform method to treat that space between the solid and the void, or the house/shop and the street. Different plinth levels mean that the incline of the driveway or the step/s leading into the street are each at a different angle, therefore there cannot be one straight running line that separates a row of homes from the street and no one uniform method to knit them together. In fact, most often it is not even possible to match two adjoining driveways together because of the discrepancy in their incline. The more the number of levels and variance in gradation, the more jagged the dividing line and the more complicated if not impossible the job of tying them all together into one cohesive, functional whole. What tears our streets asunder is the lack of binding between different elements and different levels. The prerequisite of binding two levels or two elements together is that they be flushed against each other at the seam (and of course, that it may be done so with good quality sealants applied with appropriate tools by relatively skilled labour), so that they may adhere to each other. But when the levels don't match, adherence becomes difficult. And the results are for us to see: unfinished pavements, peeling off tiles, broken steps, broken edges, jagged lines and relentlessly uneven surfaces; not to mention that because of non-uniform divisions, the in-between spaces become even more ill-defined and invite encroachment.



Just too many levels



Higher plinth means more steps encroaching over pedestrian pathway

At a very basic level, we all need to be *samanya*, i.e. equal, neutral or alike in order to function as a society as a whole. Like 'zero' holds arithmetic together, and *sama* (or the zero count) ties in music and dance, and *samasthiti* or the neutral state yokes yoga, likewise, a common base-level must work as a primary reference point for architecture and urban planning; a reference point that is stable and remains constant and consistent. Therefore, it boggles the mind how an urban designer or a planner can even begin to design a street or plan a market without first firming up the plinth level of structures built upon or around it, as a lot would depend upon the line that separates the solid from the void.

To my layman's uninformed mind, it seems like a monumental oversight that will continue to have endless ramifications. Inconsistency in plinth heights, as negligible as it may sound, seems like one of the root causes that results in our city's perpetual state of disrepair. And it seems that it will remain so for a long time, because no matter how creative or ingenious the method, it will not be practically possible for authorities to customise the paving of streets and pavements to suit the different plinth levels of each home or structure in the city.

The question that begs asking is why our authorities have, and continue to allow, cities to be built, and we are talking of ostensibly planned cities, without demanding an equal plinth level for all structures. From evidence available to us on the ground, there seems to be no law that demands an equal plinth level or else it has not been implemented for a very long time. Whatever the reason, it directly contributes to the ill-definition of public spaces, leading to chaos, a methodical production of debris, as no two lines flush against each other and the disruption of movement.

Why do we plan streets and cities without enforcing one common plinth level? This question may sound moot to some; negligible to most, but to me, it is monumental to the point of being philosophical. Perhaps it holds the secret to who we are as Indians. Do we allow free plinth height because we truly believe in heterogeneity? Or do we just hate being equal? Or don't we really understand the dynamics of movement? Or do we not concern ourselves with reality? Or are we just ineffective at enforcing laws? Or don't we truly care about anything that is not our personal property? Or do we not have a cohesive vision that is inclusive and all encompassing? Or don't we have any love for detail? Or are we demoralised and indifferent and cannot exert to actually see how an idea translates into reality? Or don't we believe in doing things nicely? Or do we not have the political will to create order? Or do we inherently resist uniformity? Or else, do we know something that we are not telling? I do suspect that there is a method to the madness, but even to fathom that mystery, we need to seriously start contemplating upon questions such as these.



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.



Adjoining homes built on different plinth levels leading to variance in incline of driveways



High plinth against narrow pavement



Pavement vs Plinth



Untidy negotiation between pavement, plinth and incline