

amenities outlawed!

Space is not endless! We city-dwellers know this truth all too well. But no matter how limited the space, there are some basic needs and amenities that we cannot forego and must find or invent spaces to accommodate them within our immediate environment. Both our needs and how we choose to fulfill them are the defining features of our cultural uniqueness. The *sabziwala*

POWER OF SEEING

Navtej Johar

la, the *phalwala*, the *dhobi*, the *mochi*, the *paan wala*, the *phool wala*, are all integral to our daily lives and define how we choose to live our lives. In fact, they not only fulfill our daily needs, but also offer opportunity for human contact and social interaction on a daily basis. My mother, when comparing the desolate-ness of American life, where no one may come knocking on your door for weeks on end, once very insightfully, commented on how the constant comings and goings of various maids and vendors in Indian households was first and foremost “entertaining”, because it allowed for human contact and interaction, offering opportunity to converse, negotiate, complain, haggle, *et cetera*.



Display of window blinds on busy main road pavement

Foreign visitors who come to India are often charmed by the *dhobi*, who sits under the tree and home-delivers crisply ironed laundry every evening, the *sabziwala* who hollers in the street each morning, or the *mochi*, who would right away fix their broken shoe strap. Apart from delivering services to ensure a smooth running of our daily lives, each one of these people lend immense colour, character and opportunity for connection, all very essential ingredients for mental health, sanity and vitality. But, from an urban design perspective, they could be seen as a nuisance, because they invade or encroach upon public spaces and lend to disorder.

The crux of the problem lies not in their



The cycle repair man with a visitor

'random' or 'encroaching' presence, but in our refusal to allocate them valid, demarcated spaces. I say 'we', because those who sit on the drafting tables designing our urban environment fall into the category of the 'haves', and share our (middle and upper classes') collective apathetic attitude towards the 'them', that is, working masses. We continue to design new localities and improving old ones, but without any consideration for these people, creating no specially designated areas for them. Are we just doggedly callous and inconsiderate to the needs of these vendors? Or are we undermining our own needs, which these people fulfill? Or is it that we are we just hell-bent upon keeping their existence tenuous?

Perforce these vendors have to assert their presence and pitch their improvised premises on the side of the road or on the pavement. And it is not that they are disorganised, dirty or disorderly; they are all ingenious craftsmen and women in their own right, very meticulous and endowed with ample aesthetic sense. And yet, they cause - amongst many other things - disruption and chaos on our streets. This is because those who envision our cities seem to rather wish them away and not realistically acknowledge the ground reality as it prevails. Not allowing them any space, is in a twisted way outlawing the amenities that we cannot live without. Perhaps we are subliminally willing to support such an absurdity but not allow these people valid space or power.

Of course, it must also be mentioned that in many cases their tenuous existence is linked to the surreptitious *hafta* nexus, where they may have to make a weekly under-the-table payment to retain their ground. These are people who offer valid services, services we rely on everyday, we know these people on a personal basis, even care for them, and yet on the maps of our city they are mostly invisible. And therefore their existence will remain tentative and they will potentially always be in someone's way!

The Power of Seeing Project is an exercise in detecting elements that contribute to chaos on our streets. Everywhere we see, irrespective of whether it is a rich neighborhood or a *basti*, our pavements and roads are randomly taken over by an array of 'wallas'. But they are not the problem, nor is it their nature or 'mentality' to creep out of the woodwork and make their service-shacks wherever they can. The problem lies with us - our attitudes, in not acknowledging the fact that we need them, that they constitute an integral part of our lives. To develop a clear sense of 'self', it is imperative to realistically and honestly recognise our needs, and fully acknowledge and honour those who fulfill them. But honouring the poor is not part of our culture, even if they fulfill our needs! Seemingly, chaos on our streets - amongst other things - may not be so much about bad or ineffective designing but also due to our unresolved 'class' issues. Are we loath to allocate space, validity and affirmation to a lot of people who are below us, and who we'd rather remain invisible?

In order to bring a semblance of order into our cities, one of the things that our municipal governance would have to do is to become realistic in their envisioning of cities as opposed to remaining whimsical and *mem-sabibish* - wanting yet disdainful of the under-classes, who must disappear after they have delivered their services. We need to ask ourselves what stops us from granting the *mochi*, the *dhobi* and the *sabzi wala* an equal opportunity and an equal footing as any one of us. What is it that does not allow us to recognise them as full-fledged people who have needs and wants like each one of us? Perhaps looking at their improvised spaces closely will reveal the integrity and completeness of their worlds, which are otherwise rendered invisible in the din of our privileged existence.



An approved phone booth bang in the middle of a pavement



Colourful vegetable installation on pavement



Portable daal-chawal kitchen on the roadside



The dhobi's world



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.