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studio abhyas newsletter

july 2008

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About Us

Studio Abhyas is a non-profit organization that concerns itself with yoga, dance, urban design and care for stray animals. All our activities are geared to locate the “center of initiative” within the human body: body as means of self-awareness, expression, as well as connectivity in space and with the environment.

Forthcoming Events

Fundamentals of Yoga

Workshop by Navtej Johar

Anand Gram, Aaya Nagar, Delhi.

September 20 & 21, 2008

Yoga in the Himalayas

Retreat at Sonapani

June 21 - 28, 2009

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Editorial: Humane Context

A pedestrian steps into a puddle of rain-water outside a major Gurgaon mall and gets instantly electrocuted; a PhD student ruthlessly batters and dismembers a dog inside his hostel room at the JNU, and the police and the concerned authorities do not take any action. I refuse to believe that we — the authorities, the police and the citizens included — are a callous or a cruel people, but we do need support and solidarity to do the “right” thing. For instance it is within a policeman’s powers to arrest without warrant anyone inflicting cruelty upon an animal. But most police personnel may not even be aware of this law, or else may not be convinced that their acting on this law, i.e. intervening to protect a mere animal, will be supported by their peers and the police force. Ordinarily, people need their actions to be supported and endorsed, and for this they need to be surrounded by a supporting context.

We, as citizens have the power to create a context that is humane, reasonable and sane. For this we will not only have to make sane choices but also have to make ourselves visible for making these choices. If we feel, we need to demonstrate! We need to step forward and pet that dog in the street and take care of it when it needs help; likewise we need to be visibly concerned about that storm-drain, and the lamppost and the tree outside our house. We need to begin seeing, registering and then acting accordingly. We have to psychologically forego of that invisible retinue of “under-classes” who will pick after us and take care of all that needs attention. If I see it, then I do it! And I need to be seen and recognized for making that gesture of being proactively connected to my environment. Today, the message that needs to circulate is that “it is OK to be connected and concerned.” Each one of us needs to carry that message, and need to make those signs that make ourselves into visible signifiers of change that will create a sane and humane context.

Navtej Johar

Mind the Gap

Tool Apathy & Lack of Definition on our Roads

By Navtej Johar *

As a student of graphic design in the USA, the first thumb rule that I was taught in the very first class of the semester was “do not use a bad or an inappropriate tool,” as the quality of the tool would greatly determine the execution and thus the outcome of the intended design. An example was cited about a cutter-blade; something as small as a blade could spoil an entire design project if the cut was not executed just so; a blunt cutter-blade could cause inaccuracies in dimension, and inaccurate dimensions could grossly jeopardize the design and its affectivity. It is not incidental that masons and carpenters in India have held their tools sacred and have even allocated Lord Vishwakarma as their guardian deity.

The Power of Seeing project documents factors that lead to chaos in our cities. We realize that there are multiple factors that contribute to this chaos and our attempt is to isolate them and list them individually. In this issue we are going to focus on tools used in our city making.

When we examine a broken pavement, our mind does not automatically go to the tools that were used to make it. But if we just examine the cut edges of the tiles used to pave it, we can detect the quality of tools. For the pavement to be strong, each tile should securely fit into its respective slot and effectively interlock into the grid of the rest of the tiles, plus it should have a smooth and sealed edge. And to ensure this, the tiles must be cut with an appropriate tool so that it can be cut to exact size. This is one simple ground rule of design and construction, and is neither foreign nor too sophisticated a notion for us to understand or implement.

When getting our own bathroom floors tiled, we make sure that the tiles are cut to exact size and shape with an electric-cutter so that they perfectly fit the dimensions of our bathroom. And we do this because we understand that both for the bathroom to look good as well as function effectively, we need to pay attention to line, incline and definition.

I don't think I'll be accused of generalizing if I say that Indian cities are plagued with lack of definition. We find rampant lack of definition in both construction as well as the placement of

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street elements that comprise our urban spaces. Definition is important to maintain clear demarcations, and clear demarcations send out clear messages that guide the behaviour of users. For example if the pavement, parking and the carriage way of the road are clearly defined, then the accuracy of these demarcations automatically dictates its rules and accordingly logical behaviour. Design and demarcations have a direct impact on the psychology of behavior; and it may further even satisfy our human need for order. Clear definitions are also imperative to ensure correct and long lasting construction. In the case of tiled pavement, the edges of each tile will determine the quality of the pavement. If the edges are not evenly cut, they will result in an ill-defined edge of the pavement making the sealing of the edge more difficult and secondly they will not tightly interlock into the grid of tiles. In



Trowel, a plastering tool, poised to break a tile into two.



Uneven edge of paving tile broken with inappropriate tool



Close up of an unevenly cut tile that is not secured and hence can come off easily.



A gap left between edge of pavement and tiled area as tiles could not be cut to size.

both these cases, they would be more susceptible to come loose and in time result in the unraveling of the pavement.

We followed the history of one pavement from repair to disrepair. The pavement was being retiled and this required cutting some tiles into smaller pieces to fit the frame of the pavement. The tiles were well designed and looked sturdy; however, the workers were not equipped with any cutting tools. They used their ingenuity and used a plastering trowel to break the tiles to approximate size. Even though they were being careful, the edges of many tiles were far from even, making the interlocking between tiles impossible. Within months, the whole pavement came apart, completely unraveled! It is of course due to various other reasons as well that this pavement broke, but one of them was use of inaccurate tools.

In other cases, when cutting a tile to exact size is not possible, the margins are left un-tiled and sometimes even unplastered. Again leaving the pavement exposed to the elements and more susceptible to quicker wear

and tear!

If we look around our urban environs, we can see that the materials used in our city are actually decent and relatively better designed. Then why are we not accordingly upgrading our tools? Do we not have the expertise? Or is it that we lack political will to make our cities more organized and friendly? Is it apathy? Are we culturally negligent to detail? Or more importantly, is it something that runs deep in our Indian psyches

and makes us loath to equip the poor man working on the road with more sophisticated tools and the expertise that goes along with them?

Because tools are empowering!

** To sensitise people towards their urban environment, Navtej Johar, Managing Trustee, Studio Abhyas has been writing a regular column on 'Power of Seeing' in First City, Delhi's city magazine, starting February 2008. This article appeared in the July 2008 edition of First City.*



A well demarcated space at Bhikaji Kama Place that dictates order on the street.

Events

Protests Against Killing of Dog in JNU

Citizens for Animals (CFA) staged a candle light march near Jantar Mantar on July 21, 2008 to protest against brutal killing of dog in Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. In their ongoing battle against cruelty towards stray animals, activists from CFA lodged a protest against JNU for not taking severe action against a student who killed a dog in his room on July 7. Although the student has been evicted out of the hostel and fined Rs. 2000, the students of the varsity and animal rights activists were not satisfied with the punishment meted out. They were demanding that JNU should bar the student from submitting his thesis and launch an animal protection movement on the campus. "Despite complaining many times, neither JNU has taken any action, nor have the police filled an FIR... In the past also there had been complaints about dogs going missing in the area. It is time the authorities took steps to stop this cruel practice," said CFA member, Rukmini Sekhar.

The activists have put up their petition online to register their protest worldwide. "After it is signed by a reasonable number of people, if necessary, we will file this petition in court," said Rishi Dev, another member. "The health of a nation can be judged by the way it treats its animals. The requirement is to sensitise people about the rights of animals as much as that of humans," said Swami Agnivesh.

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Yoga in the Himalayas

In keeping with its annual yoga tradition, Studio Abhyas organized a yoga retreat at the Himalayan Village, Sonapani recently. Week-long retreat starting June 23, 2008, was conducted by yoga exponent Navtej Johar. It was attended by 18 participants from India and abroad.

The retreat included nearly eight hours of yoga practice daily on an average. The days would begin at the break of dawn with an energizing three hour sessions of *asana* practice. Lectures on the Yoga Sutras, talks on the finer points of yoga and *pranayam* would follow next, after breakfast.

The days would draw to an end with some more *asana* practice



and sessions of Vedic chanting and meditation. Removed from the din of the city streets, set in the middle of a pine forest, the retreat was however not just about yoga, making new friends or gaining greater clarity about daily yoga practice.

It was also about solitary walks in the neighboring pine forest; soaking in the beauty of rain soaked lush green jungle around; watching the fog enveloping us in its embrace, making us forget about the hot climes back home.

And most of all, the yoga retreat was about being in communion with nature. Our nature!

*** Next Yoga Retreat in Himalayas - June 21-28, 2009.**

Dance Workshop - Gati Forum: Navtej Johar conducted a choreography workshop on April 5 & 6, 2008 that explored ways of adapting and pushing technique beyond conventional boundaries. It was organized by Gati, a space for dance practice and research, at the Max Mueller Bhavan/Goethe-Institute, New Delhi.



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