

# mind the gap: tool apathy and the lack of definition on our roads

**A**s 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

## POWER OF SEEING

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just so; a blunt cutter-blade could cause inaccuracies in dimension, and inaccurate dimensions could grossly jeopardise the design and its efficacy. 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 realise 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. While 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 functionality, we need to pay attention to line, incline and definition.

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



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



*Uneven edge of paving tile broken with inappropriate tool*

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; secondly, they will not tightly interlock into the grid of tiles. In both these cases, they would be more susceptible to come loose and in time, result in the unravelling 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 unravelled! 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, 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



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

we not have the expertise? Or is it that we lack political will to make our cities more organised 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!



*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](http://www.abhyastrust.org).*



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



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