

the ground below

The Power of Seeing is a project that looks closely at the obvious and the not so obvious reasons that contribute to the chaos on our streets. A street comprises a number of elements, and all these elements need to be properly defined and allocated a definite space in order to ensure order on the street, demarcations

POWER OF SEEING

Navtej Johar

being crucial to urban design. Thus, a) these spaces need to be first defined on the drafting table, and b) then they need to be executed on the ground in a way that they stay contained within their parameters. If street elements begin to spill out of their marked territory, they begin to blur boundaries between and contribute to chaos.

Let us identify the two most basic spaces on the road, one being the carriage way, or that part of the road on which vehicles run, and the other being the footpath on which pedestrians walk or wait. Both these spaces share two common features, one being the quality of the surface and the other being their demarcations. The first determines the flow of traffic upon it, and the second aims at segregating the two types of users, the wheeled as opposed to the legged. And it is important to maintain this distinction in order to ensure the free flow of traffic and safe human movement. .

However, in Indian cities, it is commonplace to find pedestrians walking alongside the moving vehicles on the carriage way. This mixture of two distinctly different kinds of bodies moving through the same space, and at varying speeds, is extremely hazardous as well obstructs the free flow of traffic. But, this is our reality. In fact, pedestrians and vehicles moving side by side has become part of our urban-ethos or even culture. This is a direct result of haphazard planning, designing, demarcation and construction of these two spaces.

In this article, we take a closer look at the actual construction of one of these spaces, the pedestrian walkway - the ground beneath.

There are many reasons why pedestrian pathways are not suitable for walking. Reasons that



Pedestrians forced to walk on the road due to cluttered and uneven footpath



Classic example of tiles caving in on a footpath due to uncompressed ground beneath

either force or prompt the pedestrians - by simply not being walk-friendly - to walk on the road: one primary factor being the uncompressed ground beneath the pedestrian footpaths.

The quality of the surface upon which we walk determines the flow of our movement. Most of us tend to take walking for granted, and may tend to ignore the condition of the surface, but we have all taken care to tend the surface whenever the user has been a toddler, an elderly, disabled or injured person.

In order to achieve an even pedestrian surface, the first thing to look into is the leveling of the ground beneath, the very earth we stand upon. Of course, this is very obvious and does not bear mention, leave alone reiteration. None of us will let a contractor get away without leveling the earth, before he lays the flooring of our house; but we not only let the local authorities get away without doing it, most of us don't even notice it. Is it because we don't care, or we are simply overwhelmed by the surrounding chaos or we don't expect anything better from the local authorities?

All over our city, very expensive tiles are being laid out without effectively preparing the ground below. This preparation requires evenly compressing the earth upon which the tiles are laid. The earth is not compressed and is left still soft or soggy when the tiles are laid atop it. As a result, virtually within days, it begins to dry or collapse under the tiles, the tiles cave in. The cemented seams joining the tiles crack, the tiles come apart and begin to come loose, and within no time the pavement is undone. The very tiles that are meant to offer smooth passage for pedestrians now break, litter the space, and become garbage dumps. Thus becoming obstacles in the way of the pedestrian!

The Power of Seeing Project is a guided exercise in identifying elements in detail that contribute to chaos in our urban spaces. It involves not only the government and the municipal corporations but a proactive involvement of the citizens who need to look, see register and thereby begin to identify with their environment. We invite community participation, if you can detect similar examples in your neighbourhood, please send us a photo with a brief map of the location so that we may add to the bank of our urban case histories.



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 side view of the uncompressed loose rubble which cannot evenly support the footpath tile



Tiles dislodged as a result of sinking in of uncompressed ground beneath, invite garbage collection



Loosened stray tiles that litter the road, creating obstruction to traffic flow