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## Spacing Out

Text by Parmesh Shahani

Published: Volume 20, Issue 5, May, 2012

### New spaces are emerging in our cities – whether around art, design or philanthropy. Parmesh Shahani reports on a new trend in the making

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I recently attended a by-invitation-only Design workshop organised by the Dutch organisation THINK in Mumbai. THINK is an educational foundation located in Amsterdam that has the lofty mission of accelerating the development of future generations of creative leaders. I have seen so many of these organisations pass through in the past year, and my experience at THINK was no different than say, at a workshop by corporate design thinking ventures like IDEO or Frog Design. We did creativity huddles, stuck post-it notes on walls in little groups, swapped ideas about how we would change the world, and then, broke for some synchronised belly-dancing. (Yes, just your typical day-in-the-life-of...)

Actually, what I liked way more than the workshop was the space it was held in. The space – called the Dutch Design Workspace – is an open plan studio located in Parel, Mumbai's erstwhile mill area. One can rent desks in this space, or even the whole space itself, for any kind of design related activity. While the main aim is to create a home for Dutch designers and design companies wanting to establish themselves in India, it also serves as a point of contact for Indian designers and

organisations that want to connect with design, fashion and architecture from The Netherlands. In space-crunched Mumbai, places like the Dutch Design Workspace are manna from heaven and I see more and more of these coming up now. Bombay Connect (formerly called Bombay Hub) for example, is a collaborative work-space in hipster-full Bandra, that provides everything a start-up social entrepreneur might need – Wi-Fi, tea, desks, a network of useful people, and in addition has a lively calendar of events and workshops that its entrepreneurs as well as the general public can attend. So that's one kind of new space then that's popping up all over – the collaborative workspace.

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Saloni Doshi at her art residency Space 118 in Mumbai

Another interesting trend that I am seeing increasing is of art residencies. They are taking place at unique locations all over India like Jaaga (Bangalore), or Zorba the Buddha (in Delhi, previously the Global Arts Village), or at Anupa Mehta's charming haveli in Ahmedabad (Arts Reverie), or in Mumbai, at Saloni Doshi's fabulous Space 118, in Wadi Bunder. (Could Wadi Bunder be Mumbai's future SoHo? Bodhi space, then Le mill and Space 118...what's next?). What I like about Saloni's space is its size, and the range of artists she brings together each year, from countries like Taiwan and New Zealand, and across India, to mingle with each other, and the city of Mumbai. The art that emerges is often quite magical.

Take one of Space 118's current artists in residence, for example. Mufaddal Husein is a food experience designer/artist. (Check out his blog on <http://moodbyfood.wordpress.com/>) Mufaddal is exploring how he can use food as a medium for more interactive experiences. If you remember I had spoken about Dutch food designer Marije Vogelzang some months back. Mufaddal has been directly inspired by Marije and is writing his thesis on food design and experiences at IIT Guwahati. I am quite psyched that food design is now slowly percolating in from the fringes in the Indian design scene, and even more thrilled that there are places like Space 118 where it can be mixed up with other art forms to create new kinds of possibilities.



Food and art is one kind of cross-pollination. Art and fashion is another and I was happy to curate a conversation with Chemould's Shireen Gandhi on the occasion of the Mumbai exhibition of artist Vivan Sundaram's latest body of work, Making Strange: Gagawaka. Vivan spent three years in making the sculptural garments exhibited in the show, by utilising everyday and discarded items, like underwear, sanitary napkins, and rubber tubes. Based on the concept of the ready-made or found object, he created these garments as playful, erotic, exaggerated provocations, to question the time of excess and alienation that we live in.



This experiment was probably one of the first in India when someone from the world of art took a step into a deep engagement with fashion, and so, Shireen and I decided to probe this intersection further by curating a discussion around exactly these two themes – art and fashion. From the art world, we had Gitanjali Dang, a curator and critic, someone who knows Vivan's work well and had modelled his sculptural garments in his Delhi show. From the fashion world, we invited Little Shilpa, who in her work, addresses a lot of what Vivan's show was about. Recycling, the question of value, memory... And finally, we put into the mix, Anirban Mukherjee, India's finest fashion and trends researcher. Through his work over the past few years with Future Brands, he has developed a unique interpretation of the changes among urban, rural, metropolitan and small town India with regards to fashion and identity.

We called the panel Fashion Cycle as a play on both fashion – how it cycles – season after season in the pursuit of newness, and recycling – which is all about deriving value from oldness. I particularly enjoyed

seeing images of Shilpa's work juxtaposed against the mannequins wearing Vivan's art. Shilpa's work reflects the larger theme of making strange, as well as recognising the familiar, whether in found objects, or in the other things she works with to create high fashion garments and accessories for clients like Lady Gaga. Very Indian, sometimes kitsch, but also very global. I also enjoyed seeing Anirban's images of the fashion desires that he was witnessing on the ground, while doing research in small town India. The untucked shirt, the concept of local formal versus MNC formal, and many more, were all ideas he shared with us.

Seeing Vivan's and Shilpa's work next to each other made me wonder about the difference between art and design. Weren't Shilpa's pieces worthy of being called art? And weren't Vivan's sculptures actually design, considering that he executed them with a team from NIFT, after careful planning? Is it just where things are sold that makes a difference? If something is displayed in a shop and sold at a particular price, is it considered a designed product, and if something is displayed in a gallery, then is it art? Or is it the training received by the creator that makes the difference?

I also wondered about how in the West, we have seen a lot of collaborations between fashion and art – right from a Poiret collaborating with printmakers in the early 1900s, to Dali and Chanel, through cubism, art deco, pop art, and so on, and recent collaborations between Louis Vuitton and Murakami or Richard Prince, for instance, or between fashion and music – like the Lady Gaga-Mugler collaboration, or between fashion and architecture – like Zaha Hadid designing mobile Chanel exhibitions. But why don't we see similar collaborations or intersections in India? Do we need institutional spaces like Cartier Foundation for example, which specifically nurture these kinds of collaborations, or do these need to be organic? Perhaps the existence of a Space 118 (and others like it) with a free-flowing agenda, and artists like Muffadal, is an early sign of some exciting cross-pollination we might see in future?



Art Reverie Ahmedabad, with staffer Devi Singh creating a flower rangoli



Muffadal Husein in his food studio at Space 118

The IPF this year was as creative as always. What? You've heard about the IPL but not of the IPF? (Hint: I wrote about it in a Viewfinder last year. Shows just how much attention you've been paying, my loyal reader! Make amends by checking out our Verve archives on [www.verveonline.com](http://www.verveonline.com)!) IPF may not have the sexiness quotient of the IPL, but the ideas that emerge from it are exciting enough to smash many of our country's pressing needs out of the stadium. IPF stands for the Indian Philanthropy Forum, if you didn't already know.

Before going further I want to distinguish between charity and philanthropy. Many people use the term interchangeably but there is a big difference. I'm going to quote Pierre Omidyar (founder of eBay, and now one of the world's leading philanthropists through his Omidyar Network) in this regard, because he says it so well: "When I use the word 'charity', I think of what's needed to alleviate immediate suffering. It's just pure generosity driven by compassion, and it's important but never ending work – there will always be more suffering. Charity is inherently not self-sustaining, but there are problems in the world, such as natural disasters, that require charity. Philanthropy is much more. It comes from the Latin for 'love of humanity'. Philanthropy is a desire to improve the state of humanity and the world. It requires thinking about the root causes of issues so that we can prevent tomorrow's suffering." (Harvard Business Review, September 2011 issue.)

IPF is simply a collection of some of the best minds in the country, and some of the best poverty-action tools, all under one roof. My first highlight at this year's event was a panel humorously called toilet training, but the statistics they presented were far from funny. Only 200 cities in India have sewers, revealed Sheela Patel of SPARC, while listing several other dire figures about the state of sanitation in our country. By now, a commonly used statistic is that India has many more mobiles than toilets. How do we solve this problem? All the panelists were in agreement that we need to understand local contexts, social and caste issues while working on issue of toilets and sanitation. They are all interlinked. Also making a positive change in sanitation can have ripple effects, for instance, in girl child education, since many parents don't send their girls to school because the school doesn't have toilet facilities.

Jack Sim of the World Toilet Organisation talked about muted demand for toilets. If we make them aspirational and market them well, toilets will be as well regarded as cellphones. "The big change in India can come from engaging pop-culture and Bollywood," he added. "We need to make toilets sexy and aspirational." He has just built 9000 toilets in Bhubaneswar, and is on a mission to build many more. He expressed the need of philanthropists to explain the importance of toilets to the poor emotionally and not logically. So telling someone that it is good for their mother not to walk for 2 hours far



Audience at the Fashion Cycle Discussion at Gallery Chemould

away in the night is better than appealing to their sense of health and germs. Or, telling a father that his son will get a better job if they have a toilet.

Rati Forbes made an important point when she said that philanthropists need to look at people they help sustainably, and not only at 'projects' and expected outcomes. "As philanthropists we look at impact and outputs but not sustainability; we often do not involve communities," and this is why many projects fail. Twenty per cent of the Forbes Marshall Foundation money goes to the 'not so sexy' theme of sanitation said Rati, and I was very moved by her simplicity and clarity of vision. When communities are involved in the design of the toilet programme, a lot of positive change happens, amplified Sheela Patel. They take ownership of the project and want to use the toilets then. Sheela Patel shared that Shah Rukh Khan might be championing sanitation ads soon.



The panel on crafts was a lens into philanthropic support of a different nature. "The challenge of philanthropy is how we are going to support commercial activities that then support artisans and craftspeople," said Adarsh Kumar, Founder of Livelihoods Equity Connect, which creates models that enable farmers and rural artisans to access commercial markets. "Philanthropy has traditionally sought to support poor producers in the value chain. It's now time to support distribution and retail," he added, because just working with producers has meant ending up with products that are not saleable and even if they are

saleable, they cannot be distributed. Another thought from this panel was about how philanthropy can add value by developing audiences, and changing the consumer perceptions of India's traditions.

I was pleased to see the latest Bain India Philanthropy Report 2012 that Arpan Sheth released at the forum. The first report that came out in 2009 was quite critical of Indians and how we give. This third report signalled strong signs of change. India's affluent donated 3.1 per cent of their income last year compared with 2.3 per cent in 2010. And more than half of the respondents surveyed promised to increase their giving in 2012. Significantly, younger high net-worth individuals (under the age of 30) are the new key players in philanthropic decision-making, according to the report. In the US, philanthropy has long been the domain of older people. But, of the 398 Indian high net-worth families surveyed, 69 per cent reported that the younger generation was spearheading philanthropic decision-making, and 76 per cent have assumed "active roles" in charity initiatives. As Deval Sanghavi of Dasra said, this is something to be optimistic about. Only 15 years back, tech entrepreneurs were the novice givers in the US, and it is these that have created all the recent innovations in philanthropy – not old established names like Rockefeller or Carnegie. Perhaps these new young philanthropists will also drive change in our country?



Finally, it was a pleasure to listen to Mathew Bishop, the US editor of The Economist who wrote his book on philanthro-capitalism after meeting Nandan Nilekani. Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods to bring to man, was the original philanthropist, Mathew said, as he outlined five golden ages of philanthropy. The fifth one, in which we are now living according to Bishop, was kick-started by Ted Turner who gave a billion dollars away in 1997. His public scolding of Bill Gates and Warren Buffet catalysed the recent trend of the wealthy becoming actively involved in giving and of impact investing. Bishop calls this new age Billanthropy – and his quest to understand why people like Gates and Buffet were giving away most of their wealth, as well as his meeting with Nandan Nilekani, spurred him to write his book. At the forum, Mathew spoke about collaboration. We used to live in a world in which roles were clear: business, government or NGO. However In today's world these roles are breaking

down. Business looking at society. The government looking to NGOs for help. Today's metaphor is the posse, said Mathew. You round up those you need to solve a particular problem.

VERVE EDITOR-AT-LARGE PARMESH SHAHANI HEADS THE GODREJ-INDIA CULTURE LAB. HE IS A TED FELLOW, THE AUTHOR OF THE NON-FICTION BOOK GAY BOMBAY (2008) AND OFTEN SPEAKS ABOUT INDIAN CULTURAL SHIFTS AT CONFERENCES ALL OVER THE WORLD.

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