



Art in Public Spaces

Q&A with Vishakha Desai and Rajeev Sethi

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NGMA Auditorium, Mumbai

1. VND: How did the vision and idea of the Mumbai International Airport Terminal 2 project come about? How did you convince the architects that this was the way to go?

RS: It really was a creative ecology – the knitting together of art, architecture has always been of interest. The concept of public space that contextualize art practices and provoke public sentiment; inspire everyday life varied by ubiquitous presence; improve tangible design; provide livelihoods and opportunities for work; increase access to art. If everything goes into galleries the art shrinks.

The airport would not have happened if it had not been for Sanjay Reddy's vision – he very clearly had this in mind. He did not want this to feel like a Hong Kong or Shanghai, but instead feel like India.

2. VND: One of the key features of T2 is that you have placed art in a public place that is 24/7 – one comes upon it; versus making a decision to go somewhere to see art. You began to talk about Indian cultural concepts. One might argue that it is not the conceptual piece right now, but the art itself that has manifested in T2. Would you agree, or is there a conceptual element on how it was shaped?

RS: There had to be a clear conceptual guideline because there are so many regulations in an airport. I had to work on a computer and spell out what we had to do. I belong to a generation that was deeply dependent on improvisations – I was told everything had to be spelled out which was inhibiting. There was a lot of discussion, dialogue, debate, tension with architects, and then slowly the words started to make sense when I started to present drawings. The architects were very generous in sharing the space. It is a program that doesn't really end – there will be changes and growth throughout T2.

3. VND: One of the issues in Terminal 2 is visibility: the wall is in a transit area, and because of the placement and the way the balcony structure works, unless you get people to go there it is hard to see. There is tension between the function of what you do in that location, and when you actually are quiet enough to look at art, i.e. waiting in a lounge. How do you deal with this experience of art in transition? Is this the intention?

RS: I think this country is a veritable museum and you can find art in every place – under a staircase, in a person or talisman; it's about movement. The sort of bumping into what is considered art is part of our culture, not a special feeling when going to a museum. But I do agree that you could miss the art in the terminal if you are hurried and may not even notice it.

We need to do more in terms of lighting and images. I hope to have a hundred students who are in art education to man the exhibits, to be stakeholders.

4. VND: Let's move away from T2 to the bigger question – as you mentioned, in India we've had art in public places: our buildings, temples, mosques, public facilities for centuries. In the performative tradition – folk dance, sophisticated installations – an amazing richness exists, but yet where we are today, this notion of aesthetics of public spaces seems to have disappeared. How do we strengthen it? How do we think about the aesthetic experience of public spaces – why do you think we have completely stopped that, versus cities like New York or Berlin or somewhere else?

RS: I've been thinking about a few issues that really need to be addressed. One of which is the issue of scaling: I'm not saying that bigger is better. But there is a territorial imperative for space, like Anish does where he takes sound or light to a territory beyond which we know. There is a global and national imperative, as well as regional and neighborhood concern. Each has importance and I don't put them in a hierarchy.

The second part is not prioritizing of objectives – there needs to be a context, a political agenda; environmental, spiritual, and cultural agendas. And there is what we call spontaneous expression that has great creative edge.

What I think we need to do is to work with urban planners and architects to identify spaces or create spaces that are there which can be positioned into an icon for peoples' imagination. It's important to put in place a criteria and mechanism for choosing artists, themes and materials. We should build a structure to come out of this conversation.

5. VND: Indeed, first we need to identify spaces where interventions can occur, either spontaneously or in some other way, but also a criteria and mechanism for choosing – who decides? We can learn from other experiences in other locations, for example Christo and the Central Park installation. It required 3 things: one is an enlightened patron, the way Sanjay has been for the airport. Second is professionalization of some system whereby you know what is going to be produced is what the artist intended. The third thing is a complete collaboration of systems – it is a public space with certain limitations – security and people have to move around. How do you create that and yet create a movement?

RS: It is about public participation and citizens involved. A forum like this is first of its kind where we are saying "let's move this creative expression to a larger domain." Let's look at the base of the pyramid – it's about creating equitable cities. And a large critical mass of people who want to improve their environment with something that moves them.

6. VND: When it comes to visual aesthetics, somehow things have a harder time of becoming a part of that movement and democratization of that process. How might we actually go through that barrier?

RS: Normally when we talk about public art or tangible objects, the thought is that it is there forever for posterity – but that's not always the case. Maintenance is more than just keeping it polished – it's an outreach, a program you have to evolve criteria for. There has to be a space for participation. A lot of this depends on sponsorship – sponsors want signage/credit.

There are 3 issues that are very current: one is on CSR the corporate social responsibility. The 2.5% that has become mandatory from profits and art was not made part of this. I was working with the concerned department and authorities and they have assured me that “creative and cultural industries” will be included going forward, which it wasn’t.

VND: This is an important point – when the Companies Act was first debated and discussed, art and culture was not seen as a priority – that is the issue. WHY it needs to be on all of us to say, “Why is that?” There was no discussion or outcry, nobody criticized it.

RS: One thing is far more critical, Nehru all through the 1960’s was trying to figure out how to bring this into the mainstream. So in the 60’s his efforts bore fruits – in 1971 there was a regulation that says 2% of all the income in the building/construction domain has to go to arts & crafts. The most booming trade in the past years has been the building construction industry – if that 2% had gone we would not need a Ministry of Culture. We need to ask the architects and builders, are they even putting up a fraction of the mandate? Art has become an elite priority.

VND: This is the issue – how do we think about arts for all?

7. VND: Once you get into the public arena and the politics of aesthetics, especially in India, culture can be completely hijacked for political reasons. In terms of the public domain in your own world, how have you dealt with it and what are the issues that we must confront as we delve into the importance of arts & culture in its knowledge and privilege in the country?

RS: You have to be one step ahead. We have to bear in mind that change is essential – what do you do with an art work once its relevance wears off? What do you do with all the statues of the British kings and queens that were taken away from the public space? I think “reach-ness” is pedagogy – people have to understand the art of public domain. It isn’t taught or featured in our pedagogy yet. Many architects and designers confront it, but where do we find support to map the readily available resources: poets, artists, contractors and designers.

One of the toughest parts of crafting T2 was finding these people. It was all illusion until you could find these people to improvise and do things that are very difficult to do in other countries too. These are the real heroes and heroines who really worked to manage such a project. There were many.

VND: Are you going to put all of these resources into the public domain?

RS: Yes, we will put it all online. We really need a proper directory of mapping of resources, which helps people choose. We need to consider these factors. It’s an enormous undertaking which requires systems to be into place to become accessible.