



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Sculpture and text by Riyas Komu



Out in the Open

The conflicting reality of urban spaces is quietly inherent in art that finds its spot in the quaint, amorphous, ever-changing and laid-back public spaces around the world

SIDDHARTHA DAS



Temporary Installation in the courtyard of the Ministry of Defence, Mexico City.

In the changing urbanscapes of conformity, mindlessly developed spaces and structures, every once in a while, we find these idyllic spaces tucked neatly away. Public spaces that are amorphous, quaint, ever-changing and laid-back, appropriated by people. Public spaces are like trees, they just get better with age.

As cheeky teenagers back in school, my friends and I would look up meanings of words in a dictionary to start an essay. So, from Oxford Dictionaries I have grown to do the same mindless referencing but now with Wikipedia, though its conformity to facts is more suspect. 'Public art is art in any media that has been planned and executed with the intention of being staged in the physical public domain, usually outside and accessible to all.'

Temporary or permanent, murals or sculptures or memorials, integrated into architecture or landscapes, digital new media or performances and festivals, this is how we have now come to understand public art. I have had some limited experience of public art projects. Be it fascist, communist or capitalist, I love the way art in public spaces creates interactions. You could love it, hate it, be amused by it, or, most often now in our selfie-world, look at it via the phone on a stick. And, invariably, many contentious issues come up: what is art, who is it meant for, what purpose does it serve, who gets commissioned for it, and how does the public either appropriate or vandalise it. So, though mute, it invariably evokes a response.

Two public installations that illustrate this notion of purpose and engagement, though with contrasting approaches, are the *Head of Invention* by the Scottish sculptor, Eduardo Paolozzi, and the other, the *Flight of Steel* by Indian artist, Jatin Das. One on the Thames' river-front, the other in Bhilai, a steel township. Paolozzi's bronze *Head of Invention* has parts of the quotation of Leonardo da Vinci set at its base that read: 'Though human genius in its various inventions with various instruments may answer the same end, it will never find an invention more beautiful or more simple or direct than nature, because in her inventions nothing is lacking and nothing is superfluous.' Das' work titled *Flight of Steel* by poet Dom Moraes was created on a key round-about of the Bhilai township, celebrating the steel city's contribution to the country. The poetic photograph of it by Raghu Rai captures the play between the bird-like forms and their counter forms. The sculpture sadly has now been removed. So, do we appropriate art or vandalise it?

With this question in mind, I want to criss-cross the world and think of all the incredible places and people I have encountered and what the idea of expanse, public spaces and art means to them. The contrasting places come to mind all at once, like little pixels of images on a funky video wall. Photos like music take me back in time, to times of love, sadness and wonderment was I really that lucky or such a schmuck to not value that experience? So here goes my list.

As a student in Milan a while ago (I have been told by a friend who knows more about the world than I do, that after 40 we have to be vague about time), I discovered the stereotype of the historic Western public art; the perfect Adonis-like figures of Neptune or David perched on top of a pedestal, shaming us with their sculpted features.

If I think of public spaces and art I always think of Mexico City. It is a crazy city, monstrous in size, replete with violence, drugs, heritage, diversity and most of all that seductive Latin zest for life. I know of friends who would move there in a heartbeat. Mexico City, home to the spirits of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, Luis Barragan and Trotsky, the drug lords and the Aztecs... Spaces that would be out of bounds are home to public art projects in the city, be it a busy promenade or a courtyard in the Ministry of Defense! Thematically relevant, I guess, I was in Mexico to work with a team of international consultants to design a plaza for the city of Monterrey, which is a sad cousin of Mexico City with little of that zest for life. My life is checkered with failures and things that didn't happen and the plaza would have a pride of place in that list. But my love for the country is undying. So back to Mexico! I am kicking myself that I don't have any sharable photos of the amazing Mexican muralism by the likes of Diego Rivera. While most of us know of Frida Kahlo, and her tragic life and the beautiful Indigo blue house, Diego Rivera is the stuff of legends.



• The upper deck of the Nemo Science Museum, designed by Renzo Piano, Amsterdam



• Installation by Daniel Buren in the courtyard off Place Colette, Paris.

Like many who visit Paris, I too fell in love with it, and the roughness of the city is completely missed on me, as I live in the mother of it all Delhi. Paris has transformed many of its institutional courtyards into quaint public art projects. Be it the courtyard of Place Colette with its collection of squat black-and-white cylinders by artist Daniel Buren, or the courtyard of the Palais Royal with the shiny steel spheres by Paul Bury Fountain, much before the likes of Anish Kapoor made us see steel spheres differently.



Years ago, when I worked at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, like many others in the staff, we would come out into the inner courtyard, fashioned like an Italian piazza, for our lunch. Today, the courtyard is home to many installations, and families have completely made the courtyard garden and the water body their own.



Water has this amazing jewelled quality that one can never tire of. A place to sit with your loved ones by the water-front is always exciting. The Nemo Science Museum in the centre of Amsterdam leverages this combination. Designed by one of the most sought-after architects today, known for his museum commissions, Renzo Piano has made, at the top of the Museum, a viewing deck affording great vistas of the city. The museum often installs fun interactive installations on the deck and not surprisingly, on any sunny day, the deck is completely covered with people.



Head of Invention by the Scottish sculptor, Eduardo Paolozzi, Shad Thames, London

Fountain installation by Paul Bury in the courtyard of the Palais Royal, Paris

Hercules and Cacus by Bartolommeo Bandinelli, 16th cent. Florence, Italy.



Bizarre and exciting waterfront-public spaces are located in Scandinavia, the frozen sea-fronts. I remember walking around in Helsinki dressed like Michelin Man with a jacket that said Arctic Expedition on it, hoping that my umpteen layers would keep me warm, while families walked and skied around joyously on the frozen sea; ice covered water and grass with the same alacrity.

- **Elytra Filament Pavilion** by Achim Menges and engineers from Stuttgart, Victoria & Albert Museum, London

- **Flights of Steel** by Jatin Das, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, photograph by Raghu Rai.

- **Kaal**, a temporary installation by Siddhartha Das, Southbank Centre, London.

- *The promenade by the frozen sea, Helsinki*



Rabindranath Tagore often spoke of the importance of the arts in developing empathy and sensitivity, and the necessity for an intimate relationship with one's cultural and natural environment. Today, in this conflict-ridden world, we need this more than ever.

