



ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Striking the Right Note



Passersby become part of the Chess game in the park. Geneva, Switzerland

The energy enshrined within a space – be it in its volume, proportion, light or sound – is something that breaks through the barriers of place, people and identity, asking us as we travel the world to ‘listen’

SIDDHARTHA DAS

I write this piece, completely sleep deprived, as I try to produce a festival with my team members in Bhubaneswar. At 4.30 a.m., the morning before the festival, I am preoccupied with some existential thoughts: Who are we doing this for and why? Who is our audience and will they care about what we are doing?

Having lived alone for possibly way too long, and working in a cocooned existence, the world seems to have changed a bit too fast for me. I am in denial about malls, selfies and how rapidly Americanised and polarised we have become. And yet, working in the realm of design, spaces and culture, I have to contend with the issues of place, people and identity on a regular basis.

With this rapidly changing world, it makes one think if an object, a piece or a place can exist without an audience. Is the *raison d'être* to engage, or merely to have a reaction and create a spectacle? Etymologically, the word ‘audience’ comes from the Latin

word *audientia*, the action of hearing, and the verb *audire*, which is to listen. I see myself as a part of the audience, one that ‘listens’. But, I think, today we confuse audiences with consumers.

All of us are seduced by different things, and sometimes by contrasting things – by colour or monochromes, ever-changing imageries or stillness, glamour and fame or anonymity. To engage and entice. Seduction, like everything else, is different for different people and wildly contrasting. What do we like? There is an audience for art, for religion, for sights and sounds, for dating and sex, for mud-slinging and trolling... There seems to be an audience for everything, all at once. There is no space for stillness, for thorough engagement. And, Delhi, the city I live in, seems to be at the bottom of that smog-filled abyss.

Ghalib wrote soulfully and longingly about the same city decaying. Luckily for us, he wrote more emotively about love, not

too differently from Pablo Neruda, though separated by centuries and continents. Though creating with completely different media – Neruda with words, Tadao Ando with serene spaces or Kumar Gandharva with music – all of them seem to make you fall in love with the idea of timeless beauty, with words, spaces and notes. I work on the design of cultural complexes and museums and am preoccupied with how I can make this love for words, spaces and notes tangible to an audience.

As a practitioner, I had thought that making buildings was supreme among all the art forms, the *sthapatis* who would create a sculpture or a temple or a township. After two decades of working and intermittently studying and teaching, I realise that for me it is music. That is the innate nature of music as an art form to be able to create a space, that feels limitless, and challenges all notions of finiteness.





● The audience is intrigued by the exhibit. Tate Modern, London, UK

● An engrossed audience takes in Van Gogh painting. Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

● Ayasofya. Istanbul, Turkey

● The painted domed ceiling. Duomo, Florence, Italy

Lao Tse, the 6th century Chinese poet-philosopher captured this notion of infiniteness in a way that only the most incredible poets can:

*Thirty spokes join together in the hub.
It is because of what is not there that the cart is useful.
Clay is formed into a vessel.
It is because of its emptiness that the vessel is useful.
Cut doors and windows to make a room.
It is because of its emptiness that the room is useful.
Therefore, what is present is used for profit.
But it is in absence that there is usefulness.*



One has to merely visit Mahabalipuram or Ellora to know what Lao Tse meant. The tangible always seems finite and the intangible so incredibly infinite. Sacred architecture often seems to straddle these two worlds of formless infiniteness (if I can call it that), the spiritual being, enshrined and contained by a building. Even as an agnostic, I am always excited to visit historic places of worship. A church, a mosque or a temple or any other sacred building seems to somehow enhance your belief. And there are others that completely and sublimely elevate the spirit and almost make you a believer, be it the Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, the Duomo in Florence or the *Ayasofya* in Istanbul. The art in the buildings is tangible and yet seem surreal. It is a combination of the play of light and form, space and volume, the smell and sight, that somehow makes one a believer.

In the Brihadeeswarar Temple, for instance, it is the unimaginable volume and detailed stone sculptures mounted on one another, and as a visitor, a worshipper or a tourist, one goes from the profusion of sculptures in the temple to the large empty courtyard which contrasts befittingly.

About a decade ago while at the Duomo in Florence, the experience seemed similar. The volume and

the incredible painted ceilings, and especially the dome, were jaw dropping even centuries after. In *Ayasofya* in Istanbul, it is the play of light and form, not just the natural light but even the way the large rings of light seem to precariously hang from the high ceiling. In all of these spaces the audience, a mix of believers and tourists, seem to somehow come together. It makes you wonder why the manifestations of belief and religion can divide us so severely.

As I sit in the darkness of night with these thoughts, I rediscover my prized book, J. Krishnamurti's *Krishnamurti on Education*, sitting quietly on a pile of books. As a 20-year-old I went back to school to teach briefly and promptly got a copy of it, and while leafing through it, I discover the passages that I, as a hesitant young teacher, had underlined.

'Since you are young, fresh, innocent, can you look at all the beauty of the earth, have the quality of affection? Can you retain that? ... as you grow up, you will conform, because that is the easiest way to live... you will grow up to a different human being, one who cares, who has affection, who loves people.'

That is the audience I want to be a part of, and to create things for.

●
Krishna Mandapa,
Mahabalipuram, Tamil
Nadu

●
Brihadeeswarar Temple,
Tanjore, Tamil Nadu