

Revitalizing Urban Spaces: A Contemporary Perspective on Art in the City

During my student years, I had the privilege of interning with the Bureau of the State Architect of the Netherlands—a pivotal role overseeing the construction and enhancement of state buildings.

Central to their vision was the innovative 1% regulation, which earmarked 1% of construction costs for the embellishment of these structures. From striking paintings to intricate installations gracing floors, walls, and ceilings, this regulation breathed life into the very fabric of these public spaces.

An assembly of 4-5 eminent artists, handpicked for their artistic prowess, was entrusted with the task of curating and implementing these creative endeavours. Their stewardship spanned a couple of years, ensuring a continuous infusion of artistic brilliance into public edifices. It was through this meticulous curation that the cityscape transformed, leaving an indelible mark on its identity.

My role, as a student at the time, was to create two comprehensive databases—one dedicated to artists aspiring to find a permanent spot within the bureau's collection and another chronicling the realization of these visionary projects. This was no mere exercise; some of these undertakings, seemingly ethereal in nature, translated into tangible wonders that enriched the urban milieu. Remarkably, these artistic marvels constituted a mere fraction—1%, to be precise—of the total construction expenses.

Fast forward to today, back in my hometown, and a disheartening reality unfolds. Our city's artistic soul seems to have been overlooked, overshadowed by mundane surroundings that lack vibrancy and inspiration. Hospitals, police stations, and public spaces stand devoid of art's transformative touch, failing to uplift the spirits of those within and around them.

In a bygone era, a dedicated group sought to breathe life into our cityscape—aesthetic committees were formed, and art installations adorned intersections. Fond memories linger of metal jars and pots adorning Paldi crossroads, becoming a cherished beacon for many. Fountains, adorned with sculptures reminiscent of tales from yore, once graced our pathways, evoking nostalgia and wonder. Though bold in their use of primary colours, these artistic expressions retained a sense of authenticity.

Yet, time marches on, and a new endeavour emerges, buoyed by fleeting publicity and the promise of cultural enrichment. Yet, our thirst for true artistic transformation remains unquenched.

Take a leisurely drive around the city, and the absence of public art becomes all too apparent. In a city steeped in creative potential, the scarcity of artistic vibrancy on its streets stands as a perplexing paradox. Institutions of artistic brilliance dot the landscape, yet the canvas of our city remains largely untouched.

Who holds the reins of aesthetic direction? What is the mechanism behind selection? Are stakeholders like the Traffic Police consulted in shaping the urban narrative? These pressing questions gain renewed significance in an era that champions transparency and community engagement.

Surprisingly, a sense of complacency has settled over the artistic community—both established and emerging—silencing voices that should be rallying for change. As institutions like AMC and AUDA garner accolades for administrative prowess, we must ponder: Are our efforts to beautify the city

reserved solely for designated occasions? Why not a consistent endeavour? Shouldn't we aspire for well-maintained streets, efficient waste management, and the pride of a citizenry that respects its environment year-round?

It's a stark revelation that our city's transformation is seemingly sparked by external forces, not internal pride. Why must our love for our city be most visible on foreign shores, while our local landscape yearns for the creative revival that we are inherently capable of?

In this era of possibilities, the call to action echoes louder than ever. Let us rally together, artists and enthusiasts alike, to infuse our city with art's transformative power. Let's craft a narrative that celebrates creativity, fosters pride, and elevates our urban environment to new heights. It's time to usher in an artistic renaissance—one that radiates from within and breathes life into every corner of our beloved city.

Together, let's be the architects of change, for our city deserves nothing less.

Gauri Wagenaar