

Book Review by **Suhasini Ayer**

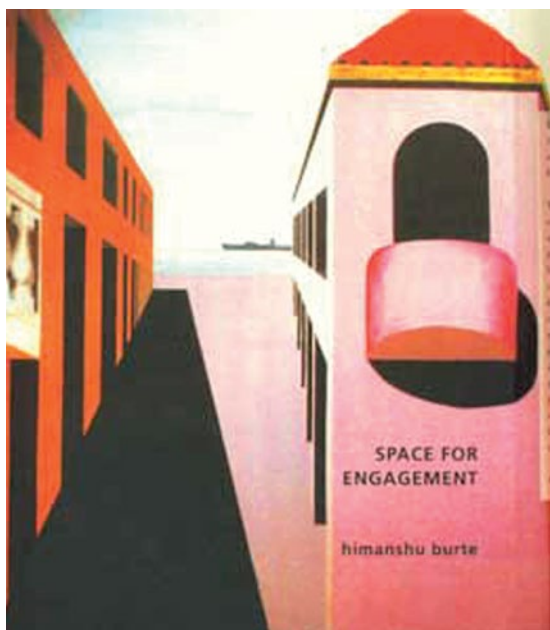
# SPACE FOR ENGAGEMENT

## The Indian Artplace and a Habitational Approach to Architecture

Author | **Himanshu Burte**

Seagull Books, 2008 | ISBN 9788170462781

203 x 240mm, 340 pp, 135 halftones, Hardbound



Design of Contemporary cultural institutions as “public space” inviting engagement and its impact on urban sociology.

Spaces of Engagement is divided into three sections and takes the reader through well delineated process of critical evaluation of how we perceive our artplaces. The first section defines the terms of engagement and analyses the artplaces within the context of a democratic political background, as places inviting social engagement by being inclusive even within a purely transactional economy. Meticulous analysis and explanations of

protocols and contexts also prepares the ground to explore the ways an artplace usage is perceived by user.

This section also sets the tone for the format of how the book will unfold with examples of situations and places. Each chapter in section one is devoted to defining the various aspects of critical evaluation of quality of habitation that design allows. The second section then defines over five chapters the factors that influence and shape how a space is occupied, penetrated, made legible, sociable and finally how it lends itself to be possessed by the user.

In the second section the author dissects the design biases of the built environment, on encounters favoring the non-democratic or even elitist nature of space functions. And as how iconic architecture while being promotional and yet somehow remains elitist, the economic imperatives as dictated by the market adding to the alienation of the public from the very places that are supposed to be of public nature. Three types of action central to habitational expression; pause, transition, cognition, social contract, possession are outlined and then compared with examples to illustrate the values.

The issue of purchased experience with the contemporary cultural spaces such as malls or multiplexes as well as spontaneous events like “Kala Ghoda” in Mumbai that provide for incidental artplaces is not really explored as it is not central to the theme of the book. But it could have been interesting as a background for a comparative experiential understanding as the frequency of encounters for most Indian urban dwellers is with the first kind rather than with the types of projects selected for the case studies. But then maybe my comment becomes a case in point that our artplaces fail miserably in being inclusive, thereby driving the “common person” finds his or her place in the purchased cultural spaces. In the elusive world of public artplaces; engagement could be fleeting as a “momentary attraction” to “enter into contact” to “build a relationship” and “commit to a long term reciprocal interaction”. Here, frigidity as an expression of space design – “no touch only see beauty” to promote a no-encounter with no invitation to personalize the space by the user seems to be contradiction in terms. But as repeatedly demonstrated by the author the intimidation of the viewer or user is one of the main tone of design in our public artplaces with ambiguous entries, oversized foyers, none or overpriced eating places, no lingering alcoves and even to the extent of avoidance of seats, benches and shade.

In the three case studies; Bharat Bhavan – Bhopal, the National Crafts Museum – New Delhi and the Prithvi Theatre factors such as occupiability, penetrability, legibility, sociability, possess-ability into which the case studies dwell in minute details is exemplary. But the buzz generated by the background information in the first section with the four chapters sometimes drowns out the muted sounds of the succinct analytical insights. In some of the sections the descriptive analysis tends to get repetitive and thereby lose some of its legibility; with the tendency to gloss over if

one want to read through. But then such books are not meant to be read from end to end in one sitting; rather it falls in the category of books that you come back to now and then, to refer, to browse and ponder.

The text and images are well put together to be explicit for each point outlined; only sometimes the images seem to be in defensive mode in the page layout. The photographic quality in the book does not rise up to the bar set by the written content; rather it timidly accompanies it, which is a pity as more vivid images could have enhanced the message. The drawings by Anil Achar besides illustrating the text are a delight in themselves due to the whimsical nature of expression they bring to the table.

On the whole, the courage of the author and the publishers has to be felicitated for undertaking such an exercise when most design books is often limited to paying visual homage to the self absorbed club of architects and designers, who in their insecure social context respond to the single agenda of “visual gestures” as the means of communicating within their own community. This book could become a valuable document in understanding, teaching and communicating the values dictating space design and its impact as the methodology used in the analysis of artplaces and by extension to other places of habitation.

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