

JOYS OF DISCOMFORT

Impractical ideas in architecture can also be engineered to create delightful experiences



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Principal architect at Samira Rathod Design Associates, Mumbai, Samira celebrates design and considers every project an opportunity to critically test parameters. About herself, she says, "I am an architect and enjoy being one".

The air-conditioning unit in our bedroom is hung on the wall at a height of nine feet. Last month, our teething Labrador puppy chewed up the remote control for the machine. The controls are now remote, nine feet above floor, on the unit itself. To operate the device, my husband climbs up nine rungs of the painter's ladder (that I bought specially for this operation) to turn it on for the night. The ladder got painted red, and has found a special place in the room. Discomforting as this was, the exercise has now become an involuntary ritual.

My 10 year old daughter thinks this is fun, and has made a game out of playing the A/C repairman. An artist friend thought that the ladder was a newly acquired art installation.... And I wondered, what if this was actually designed like so... would not the entire impracticality have its own virtue?

People around us (in this city) spend their entire lives by preconceived norms of 'practicality', which when read backward would spell as a life of convenience, a pursuit devoid of difficulties. In other words, an existence on an armchair, from where everything one ever needed or desired was within the arm's reach, and if the chair had a swivel, even better (this is probably the best explanation for obesity in the rich). So if one abandoned this pursuit of the swivel, and chose instead to follow his heart, (which did not necessarily subscribe to economic abundance), he would probably be ridiculed as a strange, self-destructing, 'oddball' and be considered as silly as someone dancing in the rain in his new tuxedo!

Over the centuries, design too is beaten and packaged into conventional entrapments of ratings; so good design is popularly defined as: 'saaru, sastu, tikau aur majboot'. When translated, it means

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reasonably glamorous, inexpensive, durable and strong. In the realm of architecture too, design is measured by its ability to perform the function it has been performed for (rightly so), have a trendy global aesthetic (fashionably so), be cost-efficient (budgeted) and structurally safe (a necessity) and most of all, be free from all maintenance requirements (a dream?).

So good buildings, though they function well, fail to make the adrenaline flow.... Other than the sense of the visual, most buildings are unable to satiate any other sense of smell, sound, taste, or even the inexplicable sixth sense, that we know as the 'vibe'.

Let us, for a while, get off this ever ongoing, monotonous circling of the merry-go-round, and try the transient thrill of the roller coaster. Perhaps, then, the first of the 'odd ball' phenomenon in design would be to break away from the shackles of conventional ratings, and step into the arena of the so called 'impracticalities'.



(TOP) THE BLUR BUILDING IN SWITZERLAND HAS A MYSTIFYING CLOUD MADE FROM WATER JETS THAT HIDE THE ACTUAL BUILDING (LEFT) THE FAB TREE HAB-A CONCEPT HOUSE THAT IS A LIVING SYSTEM AND IS ENTIRELY EDIBLE WHEN INHABITED

(TOP) THE BALLOON-SHAPED AWNING OF THE SUMMER PAVILION AT THE SERPENTINE GALLERY IN HYDE PARK, LONDON IS RE-BUILT EVERY YEAR (RIGHT) THE PROSPECTA '92 TOYAMA OBSERVATORY TOWER IN JAPAN HAS A RAINSHOWER AROUND THE BUILDING

THE INDOMITABLE ROMANTIC....

A romantic would never measure his life by the number of years that he has lived, but by the moments that he has loved...

How often are spaces designed and volumes calibrated to create the desired sound and decibel, so that every spoken word maybe musical? How often is a flooring material explored, to create a tingling sensation on the bare feet? Why can't windows allow clouds to waft in? What if doors would tap dance as they open and staircases would swing like bobbing boats on the sea?

Why can't I walk on wet floors? Or have grass growing on my table (minus the ants)? Could I not really order rain? All around my house?

Logically, all of these are the oddballs—the impractical ideas. But they could be engineered to create an experience of sheer delight. Often, I have wondered, what would buildings look like if architects were blind?

STANDARDISATION ILLS

Standardisation was created to increase speed and ease of construction, through mechanical duplication. Repetition, though, is hugely limiting to craft and creativity.

Imagine the texture of a wall built in different sizes and shapes of bricks. Imagine then the magic

of light and shadows that these would create and their patterns that would dance to the rhythm of the sun.

MONEY MUTTERINGS?

Then of course there is the big worry of the budgets: economic viability.

Perhaps the real value of a unit of money, if broken down, would be an equivalent unit of labour. So what price would one pay for the

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labour of love? How would one evaluate the real price of the Taj Mahal? Can one budget a project with passion?

A note from a client to his architect, read as follows... "Thank you so much for blatantly lying to us about the construction cost of this house at our first meeting, for even though this has cost us three times over, we would not have been the proud owner of this beautiful piece of architecture that we dearly enjoy."

IMMORTALITY DESIRED?

As designers, we are constantly flogged by a common demand that we unwillingly succumb to—the one of the 'maintenance free' product.

Must we generate dust-free products, or dust-free environments?

"Maintenance free" is a pair of words that merely make a myth. Are women and the metro men maintenance free? Immortal?

The nation would need to be built on the shoulders of the safe, tried and tested, merry-go-round architects. These are invaluable people.

But cities would lack the vivacity of energy sparks that come from the madness of mavericks. Without their zany experimentation, there could never be innovation. Like the old proverb goes, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Our maverick would say, "Nothing adventure, nothing changed!!"

Would you rather have a safe life married to the Bollywood Sulochana? Or risk an affair with Bipasha Basu?