

PARADOX IMPRINTS

The many faces of Banaras



SAMIRA RATHOD

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".

If one thinks of any single element associated with a city's identity, Banaras (or Varanasi) with its myriad imagery would be found wanting.

Perched on the edge of the Ganges, this linear development encroaches the river banks like a pulsating, giant caterpillar that guards the city, watchful yet forbids any penetration within, as it mounts high, like a fortified dam above the banks.

At first glance, the city appears to be the remnant of a bombed site. Incomplete in every sense, unplastered, ravaged, broken, bandaged, dry and grey, the city recoils in perpetual mayhem. Ironically, peace and silence are unknown phenomena in this holy city. This is the new city. With its new aspirations that alone become the virtual line of divide between the river front development of the old city, and its new brethren. The aluco bonded malls and larger than life billboard monsters mask the sky, like gods, mockingly looking down on the pious city of Banaras, as it struggles for survival.

A surreal world exists on the other side of the old city. A hard, uncompromising but a rich layer of embellished lace-like architecture that is hidden behind the veil of an omnipresent religious frenzy. Temples and rituals fill every pore of this urban fabric. The whole city, peppered with white skinned tourists in hats and dark glasses and the infamous tongas, plod towards the Ganges, every day, all throughout the day. A cacophony of smells and sounds, weigh down the air, against the backdrop of silent hollow carcasses of tattered burnt buildings, ghosts of a lost glory, suffused in the debris that surrounds it as one walks in the fog of dust that fills the air. The city of light is vivid and grey both at once, incoherent yet palpably sensual.

In this intoxicated sense of shock and bewilderment, one approaches the ghats. A stony, yet porous maze of scrawny wangling lanes and scrambling steps that lead to the river below. This myopic web is delightfully punctuated with a plethora of surprises, in unexpected courtyards, blessed niches and alcoves, embellished doors and windows and

slivers that offer glimpses of the holy river. Cows stroll aimlessly, and children with gleeful eyes smile at all passing folks. Up above, the sky is sliced into narrow rills, that spill light in sudden spurts onto the fanatic chasms of life within. Barely wide enough to walk, these streets are lined with thresholds, where people bear their entire selves.

From small spaces carved out from the underbellies of buildings that flank the streets, to the havelis and palaces, homes, shops, and temples, are strewn and strung together with no apparent rationale of space or planning.

Chaos is the determining order. Faith is the unwritten doctrine that breeds Banaras. So being 'clean' is a concept; a metaphysical idea. But poetry is a way of life; a common phenomenon. The dialect is musical; the language is lyrical. Death is a natural event, and the prayer ritual is celebrated with pomp every evening. An unparalleled paradox, this holy city. An entire urban fabric woven from smaller vignettes of experiences. Its people here perform the act of life with an exuberant zeal, and a nonchalant complacency. One could witness a hysterical dramatisation of mundane daily activities, all out on the streets. Proudly exemplifying an energy that is overwhelming. There cannot be a truer representation of India, in its secularity and pluralism—loquacious, humble, vulnerable, and innocent all at once—both, in its architecture, and its people.

Sandal wood smeared foreheads and paan smitten lips, wives and widows, flower girls and lepers, barbers and pundits, incense and cocaine, bald heads and beards, beads and dung, the burning of the dead and the aarti, sewage and carcasses and diyas that float in the same water, all make a haunting image of a city of contrasts. An incoherent coexistence. Could this be heaven or hell?



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