

RETHINKING THE PERIPHERAL

IN THE PAST, THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN URBAN ART SCENE WOULD FOLLOW A RELATIVELY PREDICTABLE ARC, FROM CHEAP TO CHIC. NOT IN GURGAON.



There is a popular saying within the National Capital Region's artist community: You start out in Ghaziabad, then, if all goes well, you move to Delhi, and then, if you do really well, you move to Gurgaon.

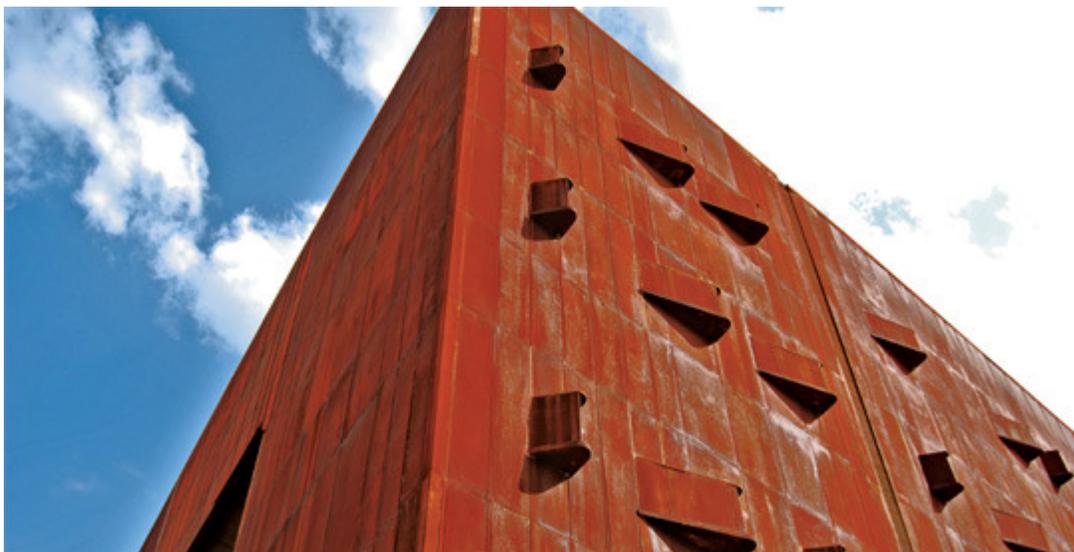
For centuries and in cities the world over, it has made sense for artists of every kind to locate themselves at urban peripheries. With increasingly compressed, high-priced city workspaces, it's certainly about cheaper rents—just look what happened to downtown New York in the 1960s, or East Berlin after communism. But since India's economic liberalisation in the early 1990s, as Gurgaon has exploded from a humble Haryana village into a major centre of

commerce, real estate value has increased by several hundred percent, pricing out all but a handful of India's most established artists such as Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Jagannath Panda, and Arunkumar HG.

On the face of it, Gurgaon's art scene does appear to be the exclusive domain of the rich, and while this helps explain the axiom above, it also defies the usual tenets of urban movement: impoverished artists are supposed to move into so-called dead zones and raise the land and cultural value, drawing in business and development over time. But Gurgaon has grown too fast for that.

For two of Delhi's most successful art galleries, opening franchises in Gurgaon has given them more access to the corporate, international clientele that's made the satellite city's success. Art Alive Gallery, focused on "smart investment in art", set up an outlet in a commercial office building, and Gallery Nature Morte opened a branch in one of the 'jewel boxes' in the retail arcade of the five-star Oberoi hotel.

Aside from the not-for-profit Devi Art Foundation in Sector 44, built here in 2008 and considered one of the country's best contemporary art spaces, most artists in and around Delhi have found little reason to engage with Gurgaon. But there are people who disagree that Gurgaon's moneyed reputation robs it of its potential as an artistic centre.



Jeebesh Bagchi, of the artist trio, the Raqs Media Collective, says, “Gurgaon should not be passed off as yet another ‘glitter’ landscape. There are larger questions of urban and postindustrial life that one can ask. Gurgaon can alert us to a different relationship with urban space and culture.”

Since August 2012, Raqs has been curating *Sarai Reader 09*, a nine-month-long project at the Devi Art Foundation that has seen more than 100 artists realise new, interdisciplinary projects. While not all of the artworks are direct responses to Gurgaon, those that are— Dr Parvez Imam’s collaborative video project made with the local participation, the Finnish Tapio Mäkelä’s sound artwork which requires participants to navigate their way through the city upon hearing instructions—indicate that there is material in Gurgaon from which genuine, productive artistic discourse can be generated, without conforming to corporate ideas of art.

Mapping Gurgaon’s fast-changing socio-architectural landscape is Prasad Shetty, who, along with Rupali Gupte and Prasad Khanolkar, two fellow urban sociologists from Mumbai’s Collective Research Initiatives Trust, has been busy compiling *The Gurgaon Glossaries*. The ongoing book project looks at new terminology that emerges as the city’s identity begins to form, and also outlines a series of walking routes through Gurgaon’s newer neighbourhoods, older villages, industrial areas and highways. Shetty says that their research into the city’s “shortcircuited development” surprised them: “All of our meta-narratives were being challenged, and newer micro-narratives were breaking and being reconfigured.” As they began to see Gurgaon as more than just a city in chaos with huge environmental and developmental problems, they slowly came to understand its nuances and the subtexts provided by its myriad variety of inhabitants, migrants and settlers alike, and the personal histories that they bring with them. Shetty is also one of the mentors of *City as Studio 03*, a three-week residency initiated by Raqs, to be held at the Devi Art Foundation later this year. Artists, architects, writers, filmmakers, photographers and performance artists have been chosen to engage with the idea of ‘the city’ through informal conversations and practice oriented presentations.

But an artistic response to Gurgaon need not come only from innovative curatorial programming. For the art-and-design duo of Jiten Thukral and Sumit Tagra (also known as T&T, whose pop-culture installations reside in London's Victoria and Albert Museum and in the home of Elton John) relocating to Gurgaon in 2005 changed their entire praxis—and at that time, they were able to rent an entire building in Sector 23 for what they had paid for a tiny *barsati* in Maharani Bagh in South Delhi. Not possible anymore, but they've managed to find success and stay on, and Gurgaon's commercial explosion has informed and inspired the work that has made their name.

“Our works transformed from 2005 onwards,” says Thukral, who moved to Gurgaon with Tagra in search of studio space where they could produce large-scale works, in isolation from Delhi's crowded art scene. Back then, “there were no museums, parks or culture, but we counted 26 malls at one time, so we had to respond to that.”

T&T's works have since become known for their witty commentary on the city's urban and cultural development. “One of our projects,” says Thukral, “was a store filled with fake products and another was a massive dinosaur sculpture we made for a shopping mall.” *Everyday Bosedk* (Nature Morte, 2007) was an installation of everyday grocery items in a simulated supermarket, commenting on the commodification of art. The dinosaur sculpture, constructed of 'Bosedk'-branded bottles, titled *Now in your Neighbourhood*(2008), was also a critique on consumerism and went on to be exhibited in New York, São Paulo and London. In a bid to take their cultural practice one step further, T&T have recently designed a multi-purpose arts facility, a model of which was on display at the India Art Fair 2013. The pair hopes the building will be completed over the next couple of years with the help of both private and public sponsorship, and will help bring art to an audience apart from the usual enthusiasts, collectors, curators and critics. Beyond that, Jeebesh Bagchi of Raqs also sees Gurgaon as having potential for the development of a variety of cultural industries: “In a few years, Gurgaon

will have its own festivals that will come up—international film festivals, literary festivals—and that will have an effect on the landscape.”



But this still belies the fact that Gurgaon is too expensive for most artists to come, live, and be part of any on-the-ground creative movement. Cheaper by far are Delhi’s urban villages such as Shahpur Jat and Lado Sarai, where over a dozen art galleries run along the old Mehrauli-Badarpur Road. In these residential villages, artists and gallerists can open their own spaces because even though they’ve been absorbed by the capital’s conurbation, they are technically independent of Delhi’s municipal zoning bylaws. Jose Abadi, owner of the quirky gallery Abadi Art Space in Lado Sarai, exhibits emerging, unconventional artists. “Before Lado Sarai it was difficult to place the art scene,” he says, speaking philosophically as much as geographically. “Now, it makes sense to be here.” Eastwards, across the Yamuna River in Delhi’s other satellite city, the Greater NOIDA Authority has marked out land for artists’ studios in its Kaladham Knowledge Park. Art historian/ critic-turned-artist Anita Dube, painter and installation artist Ranbir Kaleka, and sound installation-artist Rashmi Kaleka will be among the first to move to Kaladham.

So, while the Uttar Pradesh government has been proactive in planning and reserving space for artists—and, indeed, inviting artists to live and work there—Gurgaon hasn't been able to capitalise on its potential because of little community integration and public involvement. Not that Gurgaon's foot-dragging is uncommon. As Anita Dube puts it, "With the rare exceptions of Cybermohalla [part of the Sarai- CSDS] and Khirki Village projects [part of Khoj International Artists' Association], that has not really happened in Delhi either."

In a Gurgaon that Prasad Shetty describes as still "in the process of shifting and settling", projects such as *Sarai Reader 09* and *City as Studio 03* have, at the very least, demonstrated the city's potential to showcase, even absorb, the arts. As demonstrated by projects at Devi and elsewhere, Gurgaon is slowly opening up as a place for artists to gather, reflect and create; just not in the ways one would expect.

And so, as the city's art scene continues to develop, Jitin Thukral would encourage us to think of Gurgaon not as a place only for India's most successful artists, but as "a raw place in which you can come and play." And that's more than you can say for the vast majority of India's cities.

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