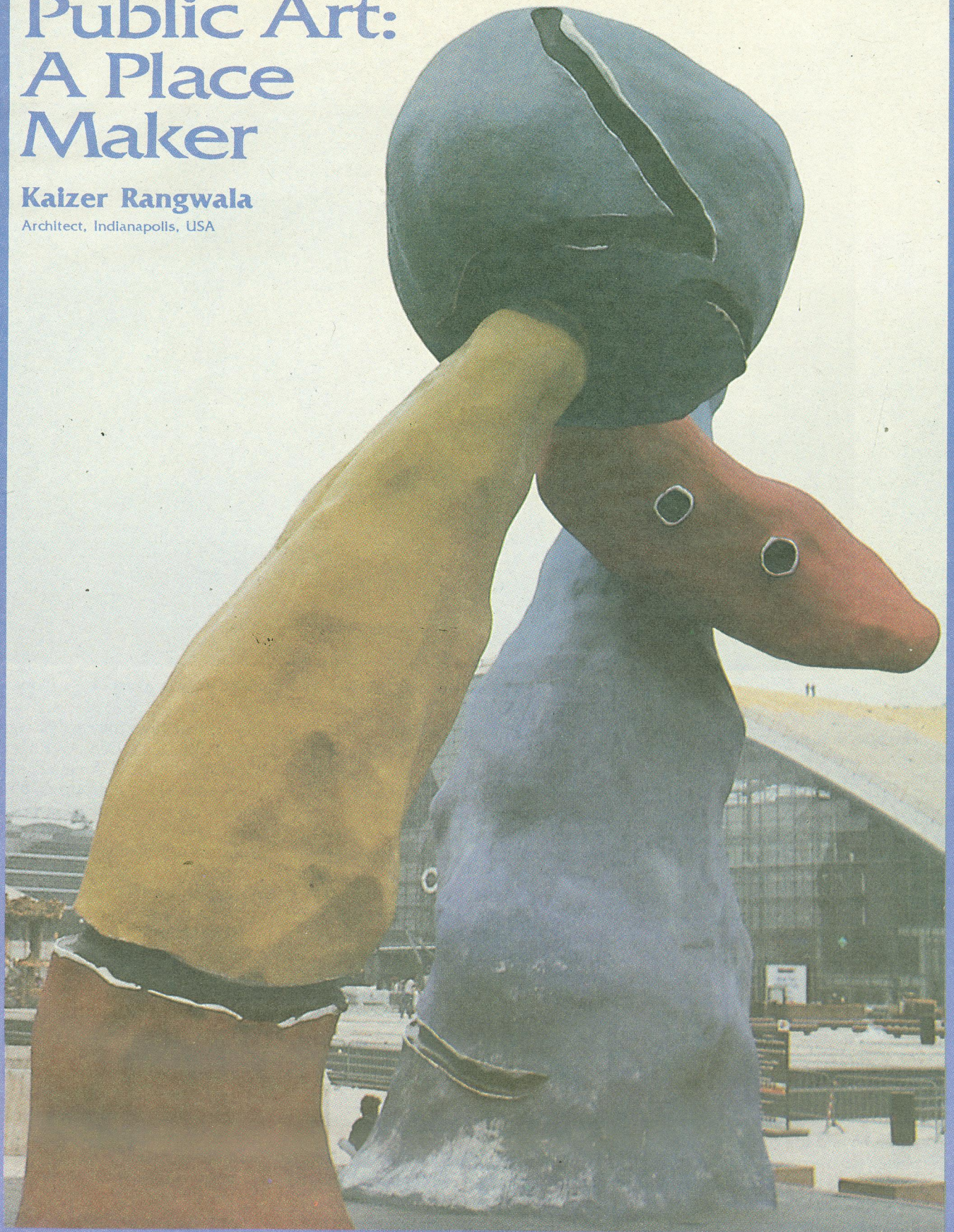


Public Art: A Place Maker

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La Defense, Paris: Cultural dimension was provided by sculptures and the Agam Pool's 70 fountains.

The question has baffled artists, art critics and the public. It is just what the words imply: 'art' that is placed in public spaces. A narrow and constricted definition of 'public art' would be art that is installed by public agencies in public spaces and at a public expense. Although, the three are seldom concurrently public.

The term 'public art' is an oxymoron. Art is an individualistic and autonomous expression, and its appreciation, likewise, is very private. In almost all cultures, Art may embrace a collective model, blending the differences among individuals to represent a common goal. The celebrated treasures of antiquity do not exalt the artist's individual vision, but speak of shared values of the entire community; and are commonly found in places where people gather to commemorate those values and convictions.

Art, when viewed in a private

gallery or museum, is a personal expression of the artist, a statement of the inner psyche, a joke, or an aesthetic combination of colour, texture and shapes. In the public realm, it goes beyond fulfilling the above mentioned criteria. Art in the public realm is accessible to the mind and eye, is integral to its site, responds to the place-making concept and speaks to a multi-dimensional society.

The purpose here, is not to answer the questions about the meaning of public art. Instead, it is to dwell on the contribution of art in the making of places that the public can take pride in, to discuss the process involved, and to determine how to raise money for it.

A Precedent For Public Art

"When is it time to provide art? Is it when the socio-economic problems such as poverty, illiteracy, homelessness, and corruption are

solved- that time may never come," notes Raj Saxena, Dean of Roger William's School of Architecture, while addressing a group of public officials on the significance of art in public spaces. The socio-economic problems will likely continue to plague both the developing and developed countries. Our physical realm does not have to follow.

India is home to one of the richest art and architectural heritage in the world. The quest to express through art, whether historical, religious or quotidian (commonplace), can be seen in our temples and palaces, where the art and architecture are intuitively integrated into a total living environment. Art fulfilled a spiritual need- a function as important as the utilitarian need of the built environment.

Age-old traditions of enriching the public realm such as the colourful wall paintings found in Gujarat



Fontana de Trevi, Rome. Tossing a coin over the shoulder into it is supposed to guarantee entry to the Eternal City.

and Madhya Pradesh, the women decorating the chowks with rangolis, or the pattern decoration of the door are a few examples. Contemporary art is not limited to the domain of temples and palaces, but is found in every phase of our environment. Yet, in our new development, public art is seldom seen. Perhaps because the built environment is not conducive or does not encourage such activities. For example, in an apartment building, the only public or semi-public realm is the common green (if it has not already been converted into a parking lot). The challenge then, is to provide for spaces where in a diverse range of artistic endeavors may blossom.

The Role of Public Art

To stimulate play, creativity and imagination:

Elements of design that invite a child to play, also initiates the adult

to cognitive activity. Interactive fountains, sculptures that can be manipulated, or those that are meant to be climbed, crawled or sat upon, elicit a playful response from both the children and the adults, and stimulate everyone's imagination.

To promote contact and communication among all members of the community:

Public art is also a tool for communicating. The audience is no longer confined to the role of a passive onlooker, but as a participant, is actively involved in the ambience created by art. Sculptures and fountains attract people of all factions. They are first drawn by the fountain's pleasing physical sensations, textures, sounds and smells, and if they are easily accessible, they become a great gathering point. To stimulate contact and communication, the fountain design should accommodate its viewers by incorporating

steps, ledges and benches. Like the Fontana Di Trevi, Rome. Here, at the bottom of the street, backed by the facade of the Palazzo Poli, looms the most stunning fountains of Rome; originally designed to receive the waters of the Aqua Virgo, the aqueduct built by Agrippa in 19BC to supply water for his baths. The bliss of returning to the Eternal City is guaranteed to all foreigners, who with their backs turned, throw a coin over their shoulder into the fountain.

Another example is the Flora Fountain, Mumbai. The strategic placement of this beautiful fountain at the intersection of two major streets, at an axis whereby it was once visible from the Town Hall, recalls the important principles of urban design of visual connection and termination. Today, its splendour is somewhat marred by the schism between the chaotic traffic



The green-tile-capped Chinatown Gateway, San Francisco, makes distinctive the entrance into its Chinese realm.

and the pedestrians trying to find their way around it.

To stimulate curiosity and interest in the community's heritage:

Public art can represent, and celebrate, the memory of historically significant events, people, values, traditions and customs. It should have the ability to communicate on several levels- with the use of metaphors, myths, legends and levels of meanings, some of which may not be immediately apparent. Like the Chinatown Gateway, San Francisco. This green-tile-capped gate with its triple portals makes a distinctive and recognizable entrance into the realm of this largest Chinese community in USA.

To promote a sense of membership and harmonious co-existence among the various factions of the community:

Public art has an important civic responsibility to enhance the quality

of urban life. It should not portray malevolently, any minority group, nor represent any individual type negatively. Art that is deliberately derisive, antagonistic or antisocial is unsuitable for public places and must be rejected. The task of an urban artist is to transpose the life of the community, in all its dimensions, into a significant and beneficent whole.

The Process

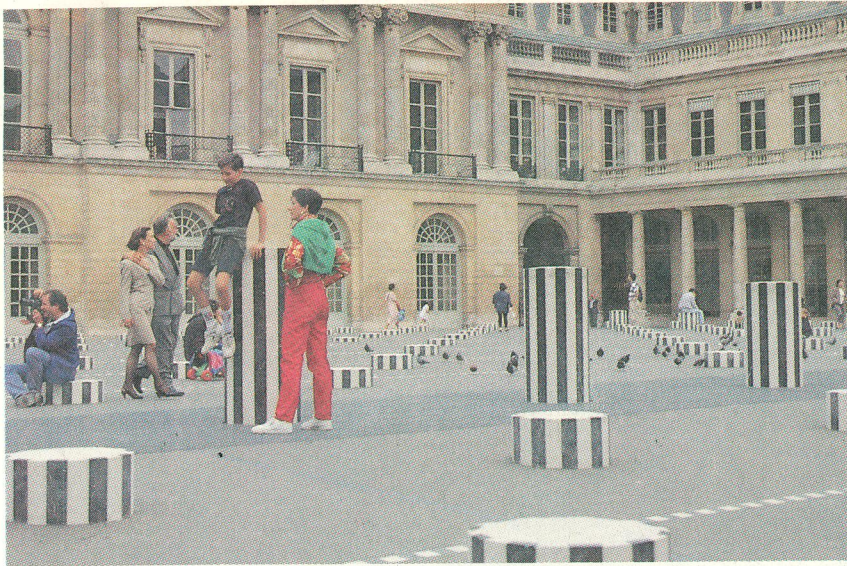
Visual art tends to be static once it is up. It provides very little opportunity for community-building. Even a world-renowned artist's work cannot replace the sense of 'proprietary', the sense of ownership, the public would feel towards art if they are involved in the process of creation. For a public art project to have a positive community response and support from community leaders, it

must grow out of an effective community participation.

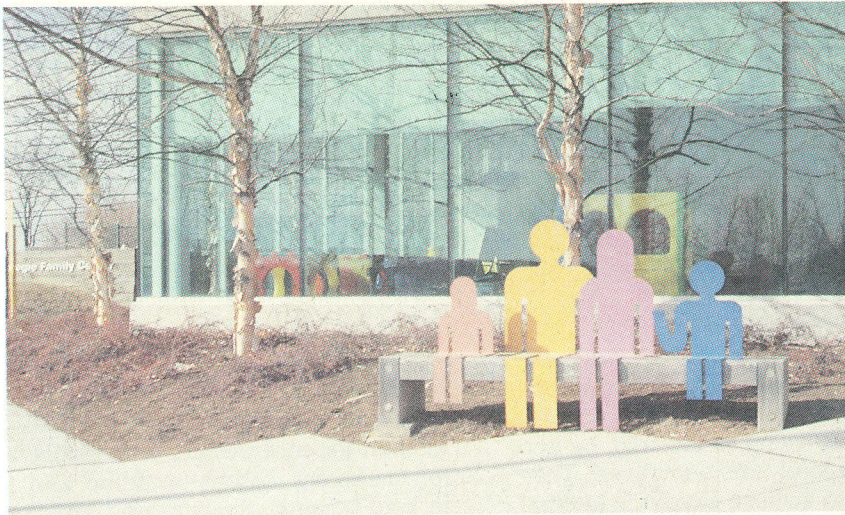
Any organisation (municipal corporation, local art council, civic beautification group, or an art museum/gallery) interested in public art should ideally involve a multi-disciplinary team comprising:

The designer of the public space: to evaluate the constraints or dynamics of the site, its significance in the larger urban context, the possibility of contiguities and linkages within the city and to assemble and translate metaphors, story lines, themes or symbols into design elements that could anchor and enrich the experience of place.

The behaviourist: to analyse how people use the space now, how the placement of the public art would affect the future use of the site, or whether a design could be planned for incrementally assembling parts over a number of years- leaving



Above: Daniel Buren's stone columns in the Palais Royal, Paris.
Below: A bench outside a kindergarten, New Jersey.



some things incomplete, so that the future generation can also make an imprint on it.

The local historian or people with long memories: these are people who can tell you about the historic events that took place nearby, how the city evolved over time, the ethnic traditions in the surrounding area, or about any legends, characters or myths that could be commemorated in the art.

The artists and craftspeople: to

inform if there is an arts and craft tradition in the built environment of the surrounding area that could be continued or embellished, using the human resources (skilled and unskilled) in the area to create public art.

And, a community leader/politicians: with a strong sense of proprietorship, who is inclined to defend the project and safeguard the objectives of the public art through the endless hoops of bureaucracy, so that the project can be realised.

Ideally, the above mentioned talent and participation should be the foundation of any team. Depending on the scope of the project, other people with diverse backgrounds can be added to the team. The objective of a multi-disciplinary team is not only to get the best of all possible worlds, but is also to generate proprietary sense. The more the people are involved in the process of creating art, the greater are its chances of success.

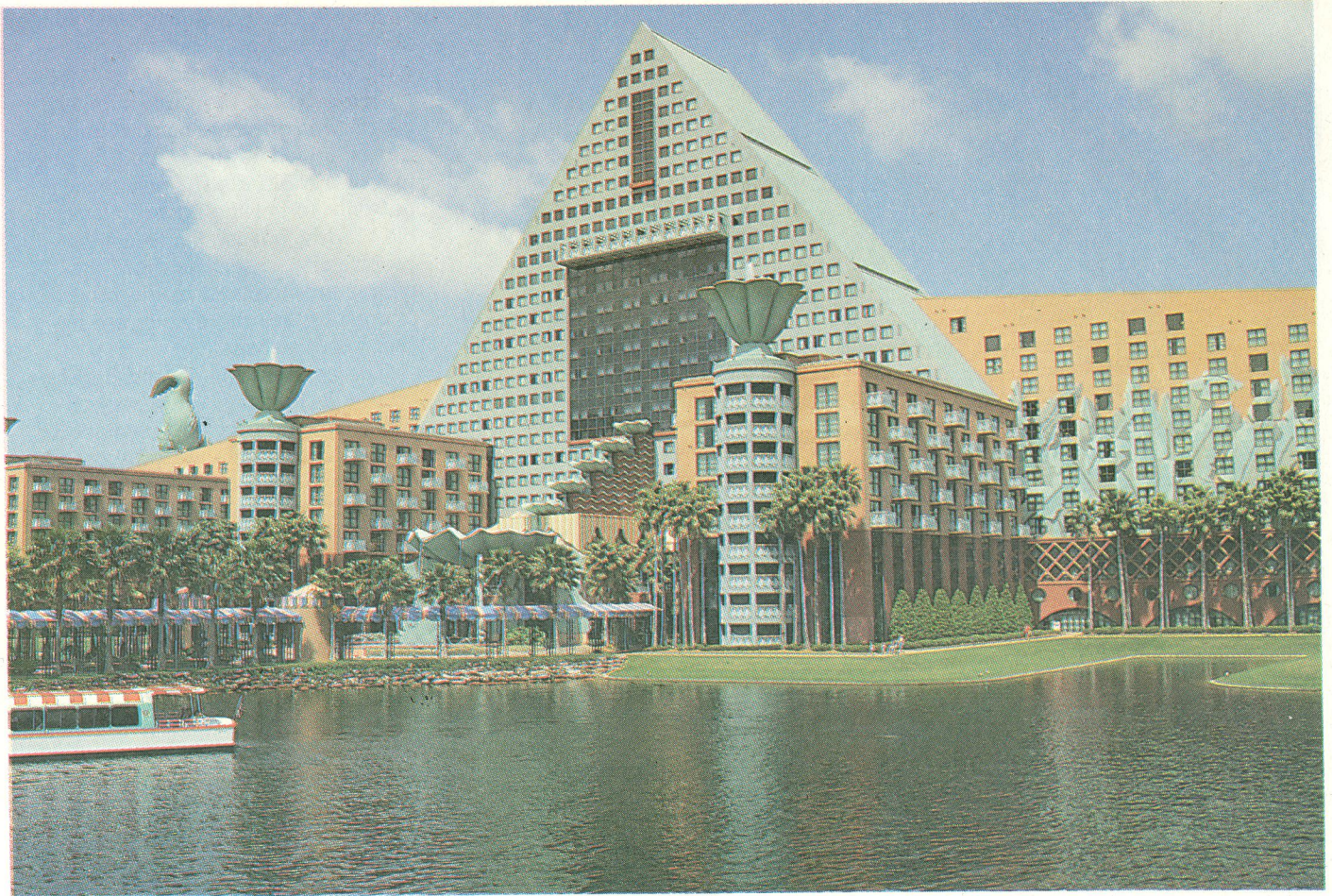
The organisation should decide on the vocabulary of the project. Will this project be representational (in which elements are composed to resemble a person, structure, object, scene or other artefact) or abstract (not intended to resemble a life form or object). The communication between the artist and the audience could be aesthetic, didactic, functional or symbolic. Finally, because public art should be about creating a sense of place, selection of site and the relationship of the artwork to the landscape is important. Based on these criteria, a brief statement of goals must be prepared for further feedback and public comments, to inform the artists, and form the basis on which to evaluate the proposals.

Identifying an artist for the project is probably the most important decision in the public art process. The selected artist must best represent the goals of the project, seek quality in the artwork, and respond to the characteristics of the site.

Where does the money to fund public art come from?

Public sector funding: This could involve the municipal, state, or central government municipalities, who could tap unorthodox sources of city funds to support public art—such as a percentage of the lottery and gambling profits, community development funds, hotel, tax and bond issues.

A popular funding model in some progressive American cities, such as Seattle and Phoenix, has



Michael Graves' Disney Hotel, Walt Disney World- entertainment architecture.

been the mandatory "percent for art" requirements for public projects. The city regulation requires a certain percentage of the cost of construction or renovation of any public project to be set aside for public art.

Besides the public buildings and park improvements, the ordinances in Seattle and Phoenix require all infrastructure improvement projects such as highway construction, and city utilities also to participate in the "percent for art" programme. For example, the municipal street furniture, traffic signs, bus shelters, and mail boxes are uniformly dreary. Attempts by city officials to clean up, and provide street furniture elements have often resulted in the 'unsightly' being replaced by the

'boring'. These are lost opportunities, which the "percent for art" programme is trying to tap into, by getting the local artists involved. The goal is to achieve city-wide integration of the arts into the public realm.

Private sector funding: The private sector comprises the not-for-profit agencies and the for-profit corporations.

The not-for-profit agencies are the museums, art galleries, historic/conservation groups, chambers of commerce, and other visual art organisations. While these may be agencies with constricted budgets to begin with, they can serve as a catalyst and mobilise combinations of corporate contributions, individual donations, public grants, and other

resources.

The for-profit private corporations fund art for enhancement of the space for marketing reasons (to attract and to hold tenants), for increased visibility and positive reinforcement of the corporate image, and probably as an investment (if the artist is renowned, the art may appreciate over time.)

Its Implementation...

Contemporary public art has become excrescence left on the sidewalk, tacked onto buildings as an afterthought, rather than an integral part of the surrounding architecture. The solution is simple. Get the designer of the space and the artist working together from conception till the



Entrance to the Abbesses metro station- Art Nouveau by Hector Guimard.

completion of the project.

Implementation of any public project in a system where public officials are largely unaccountable to the public-at-large is a challenge in itself. In an environment where the distrust of the public official is high, it is imperative that the requirements

for public art be an integral part of the by-laws. If it is a written mandatory requirement, then the factions violating the trust (requirement) would have a lot of explaining to do, to the public and the media.

Developers are often resistant to providing public art. They do not

perceive it as contributing to their primary self-interest, which is the economic viability of the project-funds for public art are not necessary or revenue-producing. A frequently used zoning method that never fails to get the developer's attention is incentive or bonus zoning, whereby the community secures certain amenities (enhancement of the public realm) by granting extra income-generating benefits to the developer. For example, a developer may be permitted to add extra floors to the structure in exchange for public facilities (which may include funds for art) on the property.

The by-laws must be rational, certain, fair, and clear about the requirements. They must aim to encourage and not restrict the developers from investing in quality architecture and challenging architects to design unique public spaces, rather than neutral backdrops for art.

Conclusion

A public art programme gives the artists a new source of income and a venue to become involved in the city's functions. It can rekindle the historical precedents of collaborations between artists, architects, planners, and other city officials in a meaningful way. Public art can provide a means for dialogue through involvement in the process.

The private developer can be encouraged (or mandated) by a public authority (through laws) to include public artwork in their projects. It can help integrate the pieces of our fragmented modern cities.

Traditional public art, as an integral part of the landscape, has given our cities a healthy, vibrant sense of place, which enhances the prestige and identity for both its residents and the visitors. Why then can the contemporary approach toward design of our public realm not favour public art? The opportunities and the benefits are endless.

Photographs courtesy Kaizer Rangwala □