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Scripting a diy city

Artist Prayas Abhinav shares his ideas of innovative expression for the city. Malvika Tegta lends a ear

Malvika Tegta



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Amidst the incessant blaring of horns and vehicle noise, a rhythmic humming fills the air of MG Road on an unsuspecting February evening this year. A few shoppers turn back, amused to hear groups behind them casually humming a pre-decided tune, while others "expectedly" seem nonchalant.

What the city witnessed briefly was Gun Gun Gumpu, a festival of public humming.

This was an attempt by Prayas Abhinav, an artist with the Centre for Experimental Media Arts in Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, to break the monotony of a prominent city point and "alter its sound-scape and people's daily experiences".

Reclaiming what's yours

At a time when public spaces are increasingly being converted to private, this is just one of the ways in which he proposes a "transparent takeover of public spaces; a tactical way of exerting control in private domains where there is little."

"As people living in cities designed by planners and architects, what say do we have in altering our own city's landscape? Spaces are increasingly becoming private, impressing upon those who use them, rules and the need to transact," says Abhinav. "And we are not even sure if we are worried about that." This thought triggered Cityspinning.org, a series of art interventions that explore a creative language of protest, and through which artists, activists and residents can script and "narrate" their own cities. "Shouting slogans and holding placards has hardly led to much," he adds.

In technology terms, the concept is a reflection of Web 2.0, where the Internet user went from being a passive recipient of information to the generator and driver of content. His projects then seek the real-world equivalent of its virtual counterpart — a democratic, iterative city, "a city continually responsive to the collective needs, demands, requests and preferences of its users."

Ideas for expression

Abhinav's ideas have been tried and tested in Delhi and will be implemented in Bangalore next year. One such project is called Canopy that was recently showcased at an art festival in Delhi. As the name suggests, it is a 12-foot tall canopy structure in bamboo (see pic) with hanging pots that will yield 5 kg of vegetables. The structure was gifted to tea shop owners in Chandni Chowk, Delhi, on the condition that street children will have full access to it. "It's going to be a structural intervention where the street kids can have space, where otherwise they have none. It will address the issue of how street children can use infrastructure on the street to sustain themselves. They can play on it, grow vegetables, sleep on it or use it as a performance space," he says. A canopy will be erected in Poorna School in Yelahanka by December end, he says. He will try and put up canopies in other schools too under a "contract that the school will erect one outside its campus."

In June 2008, Abhinav walked the main streets of Delhi wearing a jacket with an LED screen stuck to its back. The board displayed messages like Main Ujala Hoon (I am the light), Naya rasta (New way), Yeh meri jagah hai (This is my place) and Khelo (Play). Bangalore will soon see this experiment. The variation, though, is that

citizens will send the messages to his mobile phone, which will then be displayed on the LED screen.

The artist's latest project is the Bamboo Bus that will be seen on city roads by February. It's a bus with a bamboo base and transparent walls that will be parked in different neighbourhoods of the city at different points of time. An artist will "be jailed in it for a few days" and will produce art that responds to that area. For instance, if the bus is parked near a slum, the resident artist will create art — say a photo project or a documentary — on life in a slum. The bus will be wi-fi enabled, and fitted with GPS devices and cameras. Planned to accommodate 10 to 15 people, "it can even be used as a theatre club if anyone wishes so". He will soon invite proposals from other artists for possible use of the bus.

"From what I make of it, the government is not interested in getting people to talk to each other in order to solve problems. It wants people to depend on it because it hasn't facilitated public interfaces for people to interact with each other," he says. Cityspinning.org will serve as that interface by pointing at design lapses in the city and then inviting proposals from the people to meet them. If you have ideas that can revitalise and re-imagine your city, log on to <http://cityspinning.org>

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