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Public art in Western Australia fires the imagination alongside urban growth

An innovative policy has made art an integral part of Western Australian cities. As cities in America and Europe also build community spaces with art, in India, we still wait for that creative spark in urban planning.



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Rainbow Sea Container, an installation made with nine customised shipping containers by Marcus Canning, brightens up the port town of Fremantle, in Western Australia. (Photo: Sonal Kalra/HT)

A city that truly has a culture consciousness expresses itself through vibrant public art. From the Sphinx of ancient Egypt and the erotic temple sculptures of Khajuraho, right up to the world's longest piece of graffiti in Dubai, art has been the tangible evidence of evolving culture.

At some point in the early 1800s, in many countries, especially in those weighed down by colonialism, statues of dignitaries became the predominant form of public art. Art

historians see during this period a massive decline in the level of understanding art. In the past few decades, there has been a corrective exercise, as world cities have focussed on making contemporary art universally accessible. One of the best-known examples is Cloud Gate, fondly nicknamed ‘the Bean’, installed at Chicago’s Millennium Park. This massive piece of art, carved during 2004-2006 from a humongous blob of stainless steel by the renowned Indian-origin artist, Anish Kapoor, is a much-loved icon of the city, giving a sense of identity to the residents.

Surprise element

While the United States and Europe have had, for long, an established culture of thriving public art, it is astonishing how a region such as Western Australia, known mostly for the dry Outback, has made public art — and that, too, created by indigenous artists — an integral part of its urban development policy. With the country’s 60,000-year-old Aboriginal tradition, the art itself was never difficult to come by. The challenge was to make it seamlessly blend in with the economic and real estate growth of Western Australian cities, such as bustling Perth or the port town of Fremantle.



Indigenous Australian artist Troy Bennell explains his street art in the city of Bunbury. (Photo: Sonal Kalra/HT)

What Western Australia has done is, in a nutshell, a genuinely innovative plan: any new real estate development worth more than AUD\$2 million has to set aside 1% of its budget for public art; and that art has to be created by an indigenous artist; and the artwork has to be installed in the vicinity of the new real estate. The delightful outcome highlights the spirit of this region's multi-cultural population.

Paradigm shift

“Western Australia lives and breathes art, if I may put it briefly,” says Alec Coles, CEO of the state-run Western Australian Museum. “What changed the paradigm completely”, he says, was the enforcement of the “percentage for art scheme” by the government. “The scheme has been a game-changer,” explains Adrian Fini, Business Leader and Chair for the Art Gallery of Western Australia. It means employment and encouragement for local artists and ensures highly enjoyable spaces for the public, adds Fini. He is behind the incredible makeover of Perth’s dilapidated 19th century Government Treasury Office into a building that houses the ultra-luxe Como hotel, with spectacular art fully accessible to public.

Even the much smaller town of Fremantle has made a name for itself on the art map of Oz. The entrance to the port city proudly displays Rainbow Sea Container, a brilliant installation by Marcus Canning made with nine customised shipping containers, an ode to the town’s maritime association. At the Fremantle city centre, you can see neon-bright yellow stripes on several buildings, including the Town Hall — it’s only at the end of the street, when looking back, that you realise you’ve walked through an art work. The Arcs



Yellow foil pasted on the buildings along this street in Fremantle create a sense of intrigue.
(Photo: Sonal Kalra/HT)

d'Éllices is a masterpiece in optical illusion art by the Swiss artist Felice Varini. Looking back, you see “a mind-blowing artwork against the 3D landscape, showing a high tide, for the inaugural Hide Tide Fremantle art biennale”, says Brad Pettitt, the city’s mayor.

Where is ours?

Back home, if India has a public art scene, we’re yet to figure



The riddle is solved when one reaches the end of the street and looks back. The Arcs d'Éllices is an example of optical illusion art by the Swiss artist Felice Varini. (Photo: Sonal Kalra/HT)

out what that is. There are stray masterpieces, such as the giant pair of Yaksha-Yakshi, sculpted by Ram Kinkar Baij, guarding the doors of the Reserve Bank of India in New Delhi. And then, there's public art that's little better than a heap of concrete.

“In India, I don't think that we have a defined public art policy. Displays of public art have never been part of the Indian cultural landscape,” says National Award-winning



There are no grim, dusty covers for electricity meters in West Australia. They are canvases for public art. (Photo: Sonal Kalra/HT)

Indian architect and designer Sunita Kohli. “But, in the past few decades, several good attempts were made to commission public art works, as seen in the 1931 Dandi March sculpture, by Devi Prasad Roy Chowdhury, in New Delhi. Another veteran sculptor, Ram Sutar, has made several large sculptures of famous men and women. However, many of these are in the classical mould, as was popular in Western countries over the past few centuries.”

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Among the mould-breakers, Kohli mentions Latika Katt and her “magnificent’

19-foot bronze statue of Pandit Nehru releasing doves, symbolising peace. This is placed at the entrance of Jawahar Bhawan in New Delhi. Kohli adds that many veteran Indian sculptors have been greatly influenced by European and Russian art statuary, showing “idealised heroic figures”, and therefore, “public art was, and still remains, in this part of the world, a means of propaganda and of showcasing might”.

What India needs to emulate, she believes, is a public art programme that would beautify a city and also enhance the well-being of its ordinary citizens. “It’s uplifting!” says Kohli. Are we listening?

Disclaimer: The author represented India in an international delegation to Western Australia by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade