By AMITA KANEKAR

Where ‘Hostile Architecture’ feels right at home

My advancing age hit me hard this weekend, when after buying provisions at Panjim market, I reached the bus-stop in time for the last bus, but there was no sign of it, only the massive traffic jam that has become the norm in this Smartening City. I turned, planning to park myself and my bags on a bench, and found, instead, a pipe. Three of them, actually. Three pipes, sleek and shining, each rising from the ground, running horizontally for a few feet, and returning into the ground; separated from each other by a couple of feet. The old benches had disappeared.

Two men perched on the pipes, because perching is all that was possible. One was young and comfortable, thanks to youthful joints, ligaments, and balancing power; the other old and visibly distressed, holding on to the pipe with one hand, a knee with the other, and leaning forward to avoid slipping off backwards. A middle-aged lady stood forlornly nearby, as if she had tried sitting and given up. I did not even try. I stood and watched the jammed traffic, and the toy-like little bridge beyond – being built, at the cost of Rs 5 crores, for tourists to take selfies – and imagined the crowd at this critical bus-stop through the day, when both customers and vendors would be loaded with full bags and baskets, and with only pipes to sit on.

This is not, of course, the first example of disappearing seating in Goa. Check out the new public parks, and even some of the old ones, both the new seating there – increasingly uncomfortable – as well as their walls. Now, walls around public gardens are not really justifiable, but they can be a great place to sit and relax. The old Portuguese-era gardens of Panjim had low walls which seemed designed to be just edges rather than barriers, since they could be easily stepped over, besides being used as seats. But not anymore. Public garden walls gardens nowadays are higher and designed such that sitting on them is difficult if not impossible. If they don’t have spikes or glass bits or railings on top, there are at least sloping surfaces which allow you to, again, only perch.

What explains these obviously bad designs? Why is it becoming increasing difficult to sit comfortably in public? Not a mystery at all; everyone knows the answer, from ‘city fathers’ to even those struggling to perch. Comfortable public seats get ‘misused’, they explain, and hence cannot be allowed. How misused? By sleeping on them. But is taking a nap on a public bench really such an intolerable misuse of public facilities that it has to be stopped, even if it means removing the bench? No, the problem is with WHO takes the nap. The problem is that it is the very poor and homeless who are likely to be looking for public places to rest or nap, or spend the night; and it is their use of these facilities that is considered intolerable.

‘Hostile architecture’ is the term used for public architecture that is deliberately designed to

create discomfort, especially for homeless people, and thus deter them from using spaces. It is also known as defensive or deterrent architecture, and has become almost ubiquitous across the world. Benches are one of the most common examples, with all kinds of deliberately cruel designs that make even sitting uncomfortable. But there are also the pavement water sprinklers, the strategically-placed planters and boulders, and especially the monstrous spikes – common in many of the top cities of the world today, where walls, ledges, pavements, and spaces under flyovers are carpeted with anything from pointed knobs and cement bollards, to small metal spears, which prevent homeless people from sheltering or even sitting there. Many of the richest cities in the world, from New York to Stockholm, once known for the friendliness of their public spaces and also for their large welfare states, now boast many of such ugly designs, clearly a response to the growing homelessness created by the neo-liberal economy. But they have in turn resulted in a public backlash, with angry locals, strong criticism in the media, and popular campaigns by citizens against such designs, which has resulted, in some cases, in city authorities removing them.

To quote The Guardian,

“When you’re designed against, you know it,” says Ocean Howell, who teaches architectural history at the University of Oregon, speaking about anti-skateboarding designs. “Other people might not see it, but you will. The message is clear: you are not a member of the public, at least not of the public that is welcome here.” The same is true of all defensive architecture. The psychological effect is devastating.

India is not likely to see such protests, nor even such a great psychological impact. Because we hardly have any concept of really public spaces anyway, and never had. There were no public spaces, open to all, till the Europeans arrived. The nationalists like to blame European rule for all India’s problems, but it was under their rule that the growing cities were provided the first designed public open spaces, and also the consciousness that these are important for public health. But the Indian governments that have followed have been uncomfortable with such things. Because caste society doesn’t believe in equal access to anything. Hierarchy is the norm here, and public spaces don’t go well with hierarchy. Thus, even pavements (which are used by all, but more by the poor) are seen as a waste here. And Bombay, India’s richest city, which ranks very low in per capita public open space among the world’s cities, and whose streets are full of people sleeping rough in the dead of the night, figures in lists of the world’s most hostile architecture.

The public that is considered worthy of having public facilities here is just the so-called ‘middle class’, which cannot afford the private recreation spaces of the super-elites, but is not much less elite itself, belonging as it does to the top 10-15% of the population in wealth

and privilege. That’s why bus stops will have pipes as seating, but not airports – the ‘public’ in the two kinds of public transport is different. That’s also why public open spaces in Indian cities are so few, with none at all in villages – they are aimed at just this 10-15%. And it is this urban educated ‘middle class’ which demands that public spaces charge for entry, and unashamedly asserts that only this will keep unwanted/dirty/rowdy people out.

Thus, the new hostile designs would not cause surprise among those they are targeting, nor, definitely, anger among the educated. The latter never question why some people need to take shelter in the open; we just accept the situation as normal and natural, that the poor deserve no better, and that public facilities are ours alone. When the society is itself hostile to the weakest, hostile architecture seems – not monstrous – but the perfect solution.

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