

NOTHING TO TEACH

Disrupting Disruption

Nexus Studio NID India 1987

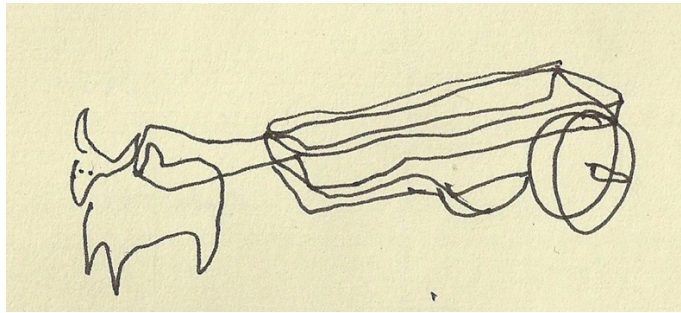


NOTHING TO TEACH (Disrupting Disruption)

Nexus Studio NID India Roger Connah 1987

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Abstract (300)

This essay is prefaced by a definition of 'disruption' and hints at, but cannot elaborate at this point, a more detailed theoretical or historical overview of the concept of disruption. We could have chosen many references to set up a dialogic condition and present an academically-supported narrative even a historical overview of 'disruption'. The essay explains why this was not chosen, even though the project might have been re-framed as an example of 'material' thinking. What field of evidence would this serve? According to Paul Carter, the Australian writer well-known for his complex interweaving of cultural studies: "Material Thinking is a record of creative research, a phrase that ought to be an acknowledgeable tautology. If research implies finding something that was not there before," Carter writes, it ought to be obvious that it involves the imagination."¹ Instead, I set out to explore the journey and the *deep subjectivity* within the teaching of a design studio (Nexus) with the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad (India) in 1987. More significantly, looking back, I assess how this project is recalled, written out and, of course, re-written in some semblance of an academic paper. Held in the Paldi Roundabout, Ahmedabad, this event was the first of its kind where students from the prestigious Indian Design institute set foot outside the boundaries of the school, thereby interacting with the public. The Institution, the city, the students, the residents and passers-by all engaged in this unusual intervention. How the public and institute reacted and responded is documented through students' responses and an image collection from the time. It was this engagement that became part of the open pedagogy of the studio. The essay closes by asking what it then means, to echo Jacques Rancière, to teach whilst having 'nothing to teach'.

Prologue

Disrupt:

1 to throw something into disorder (protestors disrupted the meeting

2 to interrupt the continuity of (a schedule, etc.)

disrupter (noun), disruption (noun), disruptive (adj), disruptively (adv)

disruptiveness (noun).

The New Penguin English Dictionary 2000

Beginning from the notion of *Disrupting disruption*, this knowing concept (the mindful aspect) connected to disruption itself, can be opened as a way to understand the mental tools that could activate positive change through design. Looking back, Nexus can indeed be framed as a creative research project, an example of design and material culture in practice. Disruptive thinking acted out on the streets of Ahmedabad in 1987 becomes a relational activity across time, culture and the city. Any disruption intended however – both in project and pedagogy – was filtered by the flexible, Fluxus-shaped nature of a project that clearly went beyond design. Is it only now defined as disruptive, or has any disruption been normalized over the years within India's national design school now branded throughout the country? The disruption acted out by design students on a traffic roundabout became quite something else. How might we understand and celebrate this? How then did the project become a disruption by and of people across time and space?

Disrupting Disruption?

Overture

Disruption is both a knowing concept and one which relies on stealth. It intervenes and interferes within systems but more so. *Disrupting disruption?* You will notice the question mark. It is there for a reason. It signals a disruption of this very presentation and any dialogue that might emerge. The word 'disruptive' of course fits varying discourses today around diversity, the notion of the 'mindful' and the subsequent challenges on existing educational structure and content. In an age now challenged by calls for re-structuring, especially in our pedagogies and educational strategies, we are challenged to 'think differently.' We accept this term as one which joins the lexicon that is being re-defined; a new lexicon of our micro-histories that is beginning to test many of the tenets embedded in pedagogy and education in the 20th century.

At first then, I must admit, it seemed reasonable to introduce this (disruptive) Design Project, Nexus, in Ahmedabad with selected reference and critical settings from materialism, material culture and material thinking. Nexus could be framed as a creative research project and we could argue for this from varying sources in order to set up an academically supported narrative. I chose not to do this even though it might be framed as 'material' thinking'. This would have allowed me to recall the work of Raymond Williams, the British cultural theorist who writes the following in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (1980) "as a matter of general theory it is useful to recognize that means of communication are themselves means of production." ² Whilst I choose not to continue this way, another framing comes to mind when we think of *celebrating (and disrupting) disruption*. Here we cannot fail to link this to a current return to issues in education around 'unlearning' and *deschooling*. Whether we speak of Ivan Illich with *Deschooling Society* (1970) or later, Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991)³ what field of evidence would this serve? The imagination often shudders within and beyond the academic environment we inhabit.

The Nexus Fragments

There was a time when the words of V S Naipaul were taken beyond anecdote and seemed to suggest a serious thesis on India around 'synthesis and mimicry': "The National Institute of design is the only one of its kind in India," Naipaul wrote in 1977 on a visit to NID, "it is fabulously equipped, competition to enter is fierce, and standards should be high. But it is an imported idea, an imported institution, and it has been imported whole, just like that."⁴ In 1956 the Government of India invited the design team of Charles and Ray Eames to recommend a program of design as an aid to small industries in India. Based on the Eames' document - '[The India Report](#)' - the government set up the National Institute of Design in 1961.⁵ With a strong Modernist spirit steered by the Sarabhai family, NID was set up to promote Indian culture through a pioneering education. The nuances of an Indianness within a borrowed, or shall we say 'culled' Modern form of institute and pedagogy, were sketched. NID became an autonomous national institute for research, service and training in industrial design and visual communication. It has since expanded to two other campuses and was recognised as an Institute of National Importance by the Indian government in 2014.

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In 1987 conducting a design studio at NID, which attempted to have nothing to do with an imported 'colonial' privilege, tried to situate privileged Indian students out on the streets of Ahmedabad for the first time in this institution's life. Was I, as another white man in India, contributing to a form of 'joke knowledge' that Naipaul wrote about in his novel *The Enigma of Arrival* (1984). Was this another import of dubious pedagogical value? How was I to tell? How were the students to tell? Was there, embedded in this off-campus idea, a desire to nudge faculty, residents of the traffic island and passers-by into a disruption of their own thinking, their way of living albeit briefly? Why?

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“Nexus, the most controversial work, was attempted at NID, breaking all laws of design, if they even exist. But, Vivek Narang one of the students wrote in 1987, did it evolve a new concept? Was there a change? Was it accepted? The answer is yes. There is much controversy now that it is over. Nexus suggested that a new approach to design could evolve and change during the design process. This was the change. Yes, it was accepted. Wasn't it?” The balance between tradition and the philosophy of machine aesthetics led to NID being the scene of a ‘revolutionary’ experimentation in design in India. Faculty and students searched for the Indian identity across all aspects of life. The word ‘revolutionary’ now is painful in this context, especially for those who took language so lightly and confused the politics of design with design policy and ideology. The politics of design coincided with the movement in India towards “Appropriate technology”. Much of that time has been researched since and offers us more nuanced views of Naipaul’s words, which would later be considered ‘wounded’ “Mimicry within mimicry, imperfectly understood idea within imperfectly understood idea.”⁶ Since Naipaul grappled with this, we now know more about the value of careful imperfection, we know the distaste at not achieving progress with in an imported idea. Nexus tried to insert the students within this disrupted condition; to the extent of disrupting even the accepted mimicry of the ‘imported’ pedagogue.

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White privilege: I will briefly set the scene. In 1987 I was invited as a visiting professor to conduct a workshop and eventually carry out a project with design students in NID.⁷ I was at the time teaching film, photography, scriptwriting at the Mass Communications Research Centre – MCRC - in Jamia Millia Islamia in south Delhi. I spoke there of ‘denotation’ and ‘connotation’, the onset of ‘semiotics’, Roland Barthes’ *Rhetoric of the image* and the ‘third meaning’. I was interested in the increasingly challenging way students could begin to ‘read’ the images there were consuming and producing. Images that would soon pass out of their control, of any control. Reading culture, reading film, reading society were all new and offered the Indian students an exciting field of evidence. For many it was the beginnings of a critical ‘eye’. Many students who came to study for their MA in film and communication had not held a camera until embarking on this program.

Terms like *Restorative Design*, *Relational Art*, *Fuzzy Thinking*, *Disruptive Teaching* or *Design Ethics* were not around at the time. In the 1970s and 1980s designers were still considered privileged producers of (industrial) objects, some of which communicated better than others, some of which were produced and consumed greater than others. Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) was suddenly a new text in the 1980s as India began to understand its own advertising strategies and the regional emphasis put on crafts, mythology and design. No one and everyone could be fooled. There was more mythology per square metre in India that shocked no-one; it just had to surface and did. Meanwhile books and sources continued to go out of step and then come in step again, as references and frameworks or re-scripted worlds. Take, for example, the work by E F Schumacher *Small is Beautiful* (1975). Subtitled, 'economics as if people mattered' this has taken a long time to reach into the awareness (mindfulness?) of our current condition. In 1987, few were decolonizing a heavily-layered Western idiom and ideology, Modernism's privilege had not been undressed and dismantled. Few at that time were un-learning the empire, though the Trinidadian-British novelist V S Naipaul, in the 1970s and 1980s, hinted at the agony of (white) import and loaned models. Reading was already not a favoured pastime back in the 1980s, except for the cult text. Images were taking over an already post-modern Bollywood. Little of this was yet to be shared but design students did begin to practice a skill of lifting and moving ideas that could later be shaped for an open, disruptive, design thinking. *Design for the Real World* by Viktor Papanek (1985) would have answered many of the enquires and challenges students were facing in the mid 80s both in Indian and abroad. The works we recall of use, the references worth mentioning now were shrouded beneath the trends of understanding visual sign systems, playing neo-linguistic games, and believing we knew what 'structuralist design' meant. Th students were cut and paste before cut and paste arrived.

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There was a feeling of relief in the design students which perhaps answered a dread of the institute. It was announced our project would be situated outside the institute and campus. Simply, a group of twenty 3rd, 4th 5th year Industrial Design and Visual Communication students were to occupy a traffic roundabout in a busy city in India and take it from there. The Director of the Institute had contacted me and proposed a re-design of the bus station located on the Paldi Roundabout. Whether this was when the first disruption occurred I could not be sure. But I felt in the busyness of life at that moment, India mid-80s, there was no program that could be written down, no theory that could be explicated, and no commitment defined in advance. From the outset, this studio was set up as a design practice, but there were no received images.

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There was no program for seeing this studio in advance or imagining its results and outcomes. It became obvious at our first meeting. Nobody wanted to design a bus station. This was the moment the studio became participative and had to program its own challenge. We – including the (white) instructor – were all in the dark. At some stage, in the haste that was my life in India at that time, the project was given the name *Nexus*; meaning a connection or series of connections linking two or more things. It became obvious from my short visit to NID earlier that year, that there was both a nexus and a disruption between the National Institute of Design and the city. There was no animosity in this, no abuse that could be motivated. It was a simple act of privilege and withdrawal; students often came from all over India and spent time at NID in what were so often called, to go by the cliché – ‘hallowed Modernist grounds’. Books would be written about the Eames experiment turned into reality in India. Photographs would capture a meditative design world amidst lawns, sprinklers and student rites of passage. The Institute worked as an early wellness centre before they became fashionable and marketable. NID appeared to be looking like India was supposed to look like – according to ‘official’ cultural politics and the ideologies circling round an imported modernism. Yet outside the campus, passed the informal settlements (never to be referred as slums) affixed to the boundary wall of the Institute, there was a heavily “regional’ character and a world enriched by imperfect practices. Seeing India, feeling India; the everydayness of the Paldi roundabout would win out. We had to invent something! When it became a disruption by and of people, time and space is hard to say.

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The Paldi roundabout, Ahmedabad, less than a half a kilometre away from the NID campus, would be the site for the 2-month design studio. A recent report on traffic movements by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation at 9 of Ahmedabad's busiest junctions (2020) helps us to situate the reality back then in 1987. The study revealed that every minute, between 142-420 vehicles pass such a roundabout in peak hours. Peak hours generally last throughout the day in India. The Vadaj junction was close to 417 and Panjrapool, the least-busiest, at 129 vehicles per minute. We can imagine the Paldi Roundabout somewhere in between.⁸ In the 1980s of course the traffic was less; but replace the image of the cars today with images of autorickshaws, hand carts, cycle rickshaws, bicycles, scooters, oxen drawn carts and pedestrians and the picture would be quite similar to the one today. Paldi was a busy, endless public space which had boundaries only defined by the students; 'spatial practice' might be a useful academic and theoretical invention but the rest of the roundabout was relentless pulsing without words.

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What we plan, not what we suggest! What we suggest we might not plan! There was a constant temporal disruption of space not only through the traffic but the plethora of designed and accidental signage, advertisements and hoarding structures, all interspersing myth with the present-day. Day/night routines were to become welcome disruptors for the students to work into the night and survive the heat. My initial sketches were imprecise, impressionistic and imperfect. They communicated nothing but potential. No form was implied, nothing drawn to suggest completion. The drawings themselves were rapid in line, cut-up, embarrassingly poor but precise in another way. They merely suggested ways of drawing other than how the institute had trained the students; they were meant as pointers to possible other ways of articulating design, mapping this 'space' and shaping a design skill for this roundabout. The drawings became fleeting but strangely permanent; they were part of the flux, the never-ending sequence of the traffic roundabout. In a way the drawings were disruptors too. Students were encouraged to make their own drawings, mapping, diagrams, site measurements. They soon got the hang of disruption!

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The nature of the design studio being collaborative had to take all the decisions concerning cost, material, intervention, appropriateness and imperfection together. Details were hinted at, then became reality. Activities were imagined alongside the daily trading and 24-hour life of the roundabout. A walk-in cinema, a resting-listening space, a theatre space, a snake charmer's space, a temple attacked by narrative graffiti (whatever that was at that time!). No brief for design intervention was rejected or planned in advance! If this was mimicry it was also synthesis. If this was synthetic it was also antithetic. The studio became a never-ending dialogue, a disruptive brief around an infinite conversation. Our notebooks and drawings got soaked, dropped into mud, sweated in the over 40' Celsius temperature on this traffic roundabout in India! There was not much talk of temporal vs permanent space, but all students knew what it meant. If they were to invert notions of the space in a roundabout sense, they would create ephemeral yet strangely permanent canvas and cloth 'ceilings'. The temporal collided with designed space and used as a trigger for interaction. Celebrating the community, the village and the Design Institute.

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Students were to step outside the Institute, as far as we knew, for the first time since its inception in 1961. There was very little money for any work. We had a decision to make. To produce anything with so little money we had to decide on materials. It became obvious from the workshops around the roundabout there were only two things we could afford – cloth and bamboo. The rest was endless collaboration, open thinking, design and adventure. And yes, probably disruption. We were faced with a very hot month in summer sitting and occupying the roundabout. It was so hot that we shifted our collaborative classes to the afternoon, planned the ideas back in the relative calm of the NID campus and then organised a period of working, of sleeping on charpoy and speaking in various languages to the inhabitants of that space, the Paldi roundabout. Our working time on site was usually from 3 or 4 in the afternoon until after midnight. Their village became our village. Locals began to hang around. The students participated in conversations that required them to invent a new language.

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“Ordinary people outside NID got to know a little of what NID does: “design”, a young student called Bernoulli wrote. “You could hear the word ‘design’ coming out of the mouths of many people. And they would relate the word ‘design’ with the objects around them. These objects were very concrete, their uses were very obvious, seen and understood by everybody. The practicable results made the structures applicable wherever shade and sign were needed. Shop-owners, traders and craftsmen used them conveniently.” After 4 weeks of study, initial discussions, visits to the roundabout, sleeping there, eating there, hanging out there, the students discussed, wrote scripts, drew out ideas, made models and prototypes; was this design as a spatial or material practice? Was it macro to micro and back again? What difference did this language make to their design thinking? Materiality and structures began to be considered in ways unlike their usual classes or workshops back on the campus. They listened to the narratives being told them by the villagers. They answered with their own. They drew strange drawings, mapped out unknown activities and began to imagine design and mythology returning to the site. Some constructed maps, all analysed the site in their own way. ideas went from theatre, events, an opera, a rock show but at all times students were to collaborate with and celebrate those villagers, traders and travellers occupying or dwelling on the site.

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Heyy..In the sands of Sabarmati, float this Paldi town

Heyy.. And on the branch of the bitter Neem tree lives this bitter crow

Heyy...As he awakened one morning

Narrative: Yes, as he awakened on morning, all at once found himself with square eyes

and wings of the hues of a rainbow. His ears heard things like never before and his

imagination flew off on a target. *caw – caw - caw caw caw*

We arise every morn with a *caw caw* on our beaks

and you awakened day after day with a ‘cha-cha’ on your lips... *cha cha cha*

The Crow Peeped through Square Glasses (student theatre draft)

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To ask students to collaborate with a public located on the traffic roundabout within a kilometre of the campus was of course a disruption. It was a disruption of their own embedded structure of being educated in design in a private campus, separated from any public they may be working for or thinking about. Interactive groups were formed to explore interventions using sound and light, information systems, posters, graphics, advertising and existing billboards. Many had no knowledge about coordinating this in a real-life situation. We were inventing and freewheeling.

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On the dark roads of Kalupur and Dariapur
And Raipur and Saraspur
just see the floods of humans on their way
Get to work after a cuppa "cha"
Now alight from here, get off from there
Do it like this and not like that
Apply for all things, don't grease no palms
Do you job well. Salute those who mater
As thorns nudge you and.....Tchah!

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"These structures brought more awareness towards the space and the environment; they became bright spots in a grey (except for hoarding) untidy, unending environment, Daniel Bernoulli explained. "These people were confronted with a new kind of aesthetics, neither traditionally Indian or an imitation of the West. In the end it turned out people were open. They accepted the project and results- even to the extent that they wanted these structures to stay. The event on the 18th and 19th was more than just entertainment. A different consciousness of the space at Paldi was created." Structures of bamboo could minimally alter space, and by grafting onto a billboard the students did so. Events for the surrounding villages, the Paldi community and children, were also planned and curated. Vendors got new shelters which became new gathering points. There was to be a central gathering point – it was an area to exchange ideas with the local people and villagers.

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“No truth in your dreams and no dream in your truths...So why not colour?
And why not beauty. Hey...in this vast sea of illusion.
Now with an all-new concoction of sweet-n-salty, hot-n-sour,
smooth and phoney tastes in a unique cheap, holy as well as filmi bhelpuri.
Use humanity; brand litter bins.”
(“The Golden Dream of a Bitter Crow.”)

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Design methodology? There was a tree overhanging, a project waiting to happen. It became a tent designed and hung from the overhang. Nicknamed the Silkworm It became our listening point, a café and seminar centre. Designed to create shade and using cotton reels, wire and bamboo, it could slide back, collapse in for the night. Anyone was welcome; we held studio discussions, seminars, poetry readings and open debates. The police would gather there and drink tea and discuss ‘design’ – or we assumed that was the discussion! The villagers came, the Police hung out and the students began sharing a bond with both people and space. Inside it was Hyde Park corner. Local juice wallahs and others set up their own stalls outside. Disruptive thinking? Trees, billboards, railings, traffic islands were used to create new flexible shelters, new spaces out of the sun for shoe wallahs, juice wallahs and the incoming craftsmen from Gujurat with their children doing the sewing. Other constructions/appendages – vendors on the railings - were designed, often on site, utilising existing structures and spaces at the roundabout. Vendors would be encouraged to fold up their structure, take it home on their bicycle and bring it and fix it the next day. *A Flexible Event space* was imagined and identified by the students to create an environment for impromptu events, theatre, snake charmers, dancers. The students took on the task of organising and coordinating such events with the villagers. The following is a script for the student play performed one afternoon:

“I am the NID god

The Deity of Design, Born 1961.

These past 25 years I've lived far down this lane but for the
first time I am amongst you,
not to give or to take but to share with you
all what I have learnt within
the high walls of my temple.
And what do I take back with me?
A part of you and a part of me.
So look at me and desire
"Your Commons"

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The strength of Hanuman, bachelor and celibate, became a heroic initiative is an assertive form. Most will know of devotion to his personal god Rama. Literature spins it many ways even as far as becoming the patron god of martial arts, acrobatics and wrestling. Today we see much more of Hanuman's iconography and temples have been increasingly used to re-stage this narrative. A focal point facing the roundabout was the temple. It was painted in a somewhat drab light turquoise, and it was faded. One student led a narrative project team using paint and what they called 'big graphics'. They wanted to turn the temple walls into a mythical narrative around Hanuman. I gave them only one condition: they had to negotiate everything about the project with the pandit. The painting of the walls, the narrative of the stories and the structure of the work was discussed. The students had their own ideas and began to sketch out in charcoal the characters that would then be painted. There was established an immense trust between the pandit, the temple stewards and the students. The temple project eventually became so successful that the, the pandit offered to buy even more paint and even asked the students to help 'teach' the locals and villagers to paint in narrative form. Painting between the students was planned and carried out at night. Eventually other villagers came to work on the project. Meditation and diligent scholarship, perhaps the students too were tapping into a human excellence, their inner mythology and self-control. Students were encouraged to work differently, leading one group but helping another group to work with the locals. They wanted to celebrate the space too. April 18th was Hanuman Jayanti and, with other students coming in from the Visual Communication also participating, the local Hanuman Char Rasti temple was finished.

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The mythological narratives were planned, discussed with the pandit and temple goers. Drawings and sketches were shown to them before the big work started. All sorts of volunteers offered to paint. The 'big graphics' also occupied a meta-wall on the outside and reflected what was going on in the roundabout itself; the students even captured the three 'babas' who regularly sat on a bench outside the temple facing the roundabout. Their story was also told. These 'babas' became local celebrities. Another discussion area was created. Three wise 'babas' sat on the outside wall of the temple and chatted with the students and other villagers. "Limitations? Where are mine?" Pillu reflected on nexus and May Day 1987, "While I can see some mere mortals crumbing, stone by stone, as the enormity of our task grows, some change like putty to absorb the chaos and still not give in. It's all in the mind. The exhaustion, the tension, the will to continue to create as students, then rejoice. Yes, rejoice! I guess this is an offshoot of the godly advice offered by Shri Krishna to Arjun on the battlefield: "Think not of the fruits, but only of the effort. Rejoice, we did it..." Seduction and resistance became favoured themes as students also explored the mechanics of advertising and the means of communication. One student called this *Rump Ahead*. This was our combined semiotic exercise. In our seminars and classes, we had been sharing ideas about semiotics, the theory of signs and the current interest in the 'signifier' and 'signified'. Rump Ahead! The student's works were exquisite and meticulous, cutting and designing crisp polystyrene panels. Two students took this as a way to insinuate sign into the space; playing both at a witty level but also at a literal level.

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The notion of the road accident was always a constant theme on the roundabout. There was to the students a surrealism on the traffic roundabout that needed no further schooling. To cross the busy roundabout on foot was always taking a chance. Everyone somehow knew how to do it, but every moment an accident would be waiting to happen. Students imagined accidents going unnoticed, ignored as the daily rush continued. The idea of an elevated zebra crossing as a ski jump indicated impossibility and continuity. The notion of a zebra crossing simply would be redundant; crossing occurred at every point on the roundabout; the space was open more like Shibuya in Tokyo. A group of three students wanted to celebrate the Paldi bus depot and the daily visitors. A canopy was imagined as a signal of this daily moment. The Gujarati men came to pose and chat with those who could speak 'Gujarati'. Finally, to celebrate the end of an intense 8-week period the students organised, on April 28-29th, a weekend of planned and unplanned celebrations. It was to be a shared festival organised by the students with the villagers. It included wrestling bouts, theatre, mime, song and film.

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“The barriers are no longer so important but the fact that it all happened and people came, cared and talked about it counts.” The student Pillu wrote: “The offer of ‘Malay’ the rickshaw driver to dig those holes. All those jokes in bad humour cracked and dropped into the hot unforgiving tar of the roads around the roundabout. The morning cup of tea and the excited happy open sleepers. For me I won’t forget. If you are thinking of other witty critical comments forget it. Thinking of the courses and learning – there was a lot of that. All the time.” Fliers and information systems were set up around the roundabout, with short poetic/neo-mythology texts (The Dice of Design) which acted as invitations. These were presented on transparent film and hung everywhere. Some survived, others were stolen, some were damaged by accident. Three students imagined designing and setting up a screen on top of the curved concrete roof of the bus dept. It was a challenge itself of course to erect with bamboo a frame big enough. A frame on which a projection could be made. After various trials and errors, a screen was created. I have no idea how they succeeded in this, so busy were the final two days. But the whole group had decided on a finale to the project.

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As Krishnan said: “The conception of ideas followed a stricter rationale at first given more time, but fragmented later even into some arbitrary themes. A few became paradoxical in the service of ‘design’ but probably a vast public space in practice cannot be woven into any complete harmony without great expertise. Is such harmony even required? Does a wrestling bout or a middle-grade marriage band permeate well in a designed environment, one suggesting higher sophistication (free forms, material planes, structures, colours) contrasting to the reality of the existing environment?” The one image not present here but inside everyone who witnessed it, is the final unforgettable event of the Nexus Project on Paldi roundabout. It occurred on a night at the end of April 1987 and began at Midnight. Around my first year in India I had been not only teaching film in Delhi but I had begun writing a book called *Misreading India*. It was a collection of the interpretations and misinterpretations I felt existed in many of the commentaries on Indian film at the time. I had also begun writing the occasional film review for *The Times of India* and had written on the film *Mirch Masala* by the director from Ahmedabad, Ketan Meta. The students suggested we end with a film for the whole Paldi community. They thought of the film *Holi*, by the same director, a well-known production of the festival of colour.

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To achieve this, I set the students the same condition as we had throughout the studio. The students were to conduct all negotiations with the authorities and the police to

manage a way of doing this. We went to the local police station. Perhaps it was because I was also treated as a *burra Sahib* - we have to accept that – but the police willingly spoke to us. Over cups of chai in the police station, they chatted with the students. They said they had been intrigued by what was happening at Paldi. They didn't understand anything, they said. But their enthusiasm was infectious. "Of course, you can show the film at midnight." The police sergeant said. "In fact, we'll close off all the roads to make this happen. But on one condition." Which is? I asked. "We can all come along too."

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It was a deal. We contacted Mr Mehta and went to meet him. He had read the review of his film in *The Times of India*. He had a copy of the film *Holi* and offered it to us for the evening. I have no idea how we achieved it, but the film was projected at midnight. The somewhat flimsy screen the students had erected, using bamboo and cloth somehow stayed up long enough. But that closing night at midnight, Paldi roundabout was rammed packed with a near 2000 people sitting all around watching *Holi*. People had come in from all the surrounding villages nearby. It had spread by word of mouth. 2000 was a conservative estimate. The police lined their cars blocking the roads into the roundabout. They leant on their cars, walked around, smoked, chatted and watched. I watched it with Ketan Mehta as we walked between the people sitting all around. I felt emptied, in a Zen Buddhist sense. I was mindful of something more acute. Any self, any identity, had flown. It was quite simply the most rewarding moment of my time in India; the achievement of non-entity hood. Krishnan would write it out in a report. He summed it up for the students. We couldn't put it in any better way. "It is likely that the foundations of change are based on the mix of truth and myth-to-come, an obvious transition from today to tomorrow. In terms of a practical end in mind (ideologies of institute assessment) no individual from a group can be entirely selfless. Twenty hands together on digging the road, erecting structures, might seem a finely orchestrated and curated piece of teamwork, but the accommodation of another's idea is always as necessary. The result is a small, powerful segment of the team within the privilege of experimenting with time conducting the remaining 'labour'. Vanity is centralised. And even pitfalls. So what is involvement in such a situation?"

So disrupting disruption question mark? Yes, we might say that the Nexus studio under the auspices of NID (1987) utilized material, disrupted an institution and celebrated objects, events and actors on the Paldi traffic roundabout in Ahmedabad. We can also, as academics, *epistemize* these discussions, if that is even a word. Even if it isn't, we know what we mean by it. It stands in for the tacit nature of design language and pedagogical intent. We can deliberate on material culture, mindful architecture and design. We can rethink modes of material design practice and the 'other'. But unless we find new ways of seeing this as material thinking beyond the academy and institute, I have to wonder what exactly was the disruption taking place?

ॐ

To sum up in fragile manner. Without over-thinking it, without over-teaching it, I had helped students discover things that I discovered with them. There were few prompts. There were short fragments of texts and drawings but there was no written page, no language of the teacher that necessitated me to explain further. I would agree with Jacques Rancière in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: "there is nothing beyond texts except the will to express, that is, to translate." So at Paldi we moved along in a manner of riddles, emancipatory moves you might say; figuring it all out for ourselves on a traffic roundabout.

ॐ

Show us what makes you design what you design. There was ultimately in Nexus no other method: "I must teach you that I have nothing to teach you" as Ranciere writes. What then is disruptive thinking and was Nexus an intervention, an interference or a disruption? Or did it disrupt disruption? Disruptive thinking was considered by *The Economist* some years back as "the most influential business idea of recent years". But what does it actually mean? At its core, disruptive thinking is about thinking differently. Specifically, it is thinking that challenges the traditional way of doing things in an organisation (or even an entire market or sector). The reason this is disruptive is that it typically brings about innovations which completely changes the way that a company or industry behaves. But how can we use it - s teachers and designers - to drive a real change in the way we teach and an understanding of our own narratives. Even our own selected bias?

ॐ

The results of disruptive thinking can often be something quite radical that actually transform an experience for a customer or someone else involved in engaging differently

with the sector. In essence, it is more about changing things from the way they've always been and taking them somewhere completely different in order to return to what they have always been. This is the spiral implied in disruptive thinking. Nexus was not only a material practice it was a social and unknown intellectual adventure for the students. Today it might be called a *mash up*. It was also an inescapable collaboration with those the students might have considered 'the other'. In this context, the 'other' were all the people who lived on, slept nearby, or worked on the Paldi roundabout and bus depot. Nearly 2000 of them walked to see the film *Holi* on that final evening. I would like to say that the students learnt by themselves, learnt by collaborating and also disagreeing with each other and *the other*. There was nothing in my expectations that they had to respond to. The project was always possible, always shiftable. There was nothing to be explained, nothing to be directed, nothing singular, and no design method sovereign above any other. Is this the pedagogical clue - no insistence, no imposition, no privilege? Was this something emancipatory then? And emancipatory to whom? What did the students learn then? By leaving out any idea of a masterly science and a borrowed method of design thinking, Nexus could only allow the students to grapple with issues that they themselves had to imagine. No imposition, no domination was implied. Did this return us to the underlying spirit presented by Eames in 1958 which led to the founding of NID and the beginning of design education in India, an unconventional education influenced by the Bauhaus "learning by doing"? Problem-solving with the designer a bridge between tradition and modernity? Or was this designer a social agent, expanding sharing and celebrating the appropriate alternatives available at the time? It's important to stress that "disruptive" doesn't necessarily mean dangerous or disastrous. Perhaps by the very nature of Nexus acting outside the National institute we would be challenging design norms and teaching norms. Easier on hindsight to consider this a disruptive program. For surely, intentional or not, anything taught and situated beyond the campus would inevitably plunge the students into a practice that had no past. In a way whether this was part of their design education or not, the students had to think material, culture, society and practice from a blindness.

Remember we are talking of 1987 when the notion of disruptive thinking had not entered academic vocabulary or design thinking. In this way the project was not

celebrating disruption as much as celebrating the 'other' – the people, the vendors, the passers-by, the stall owners, the street kitchens, the police, the temple visitors, the bus station travellers from out of station in Gujarat. Of course, by taking such a studio outside the campus - a unknown teaching condition - it could not help disrupts the norms of design thinking. Whatever Nexus was I felt there was also nothing in my own knowledge and learning that made it masterly or in need of explication. There was only a shared commitment to what was not defined at that time as design-in-practice. Perhaps it is even simpler. I had a will (and mandate) to carry out what might have been called 'teaching', but nothing in my own position, even intelligence, had to be obeyed. The students merely could absorb my will with their own intelligence. Here I coincide and paraphrase Rancière's understanding of the *Ignorant Schoolteacher*, where generally the pedagogical act is taken as a minimal agreement and breaks with the transmission of the teacher's knowledge to the students. "But Jacotut had transmitted nothing." Rancière writes, "he had not used any method. The method was purely the student's".

ॐ

The Nexus project must have been emerging without me really knowing, especially after a series of presentations and a workshop held earlier in the year 1987 at the National Institute of Design. NID itself was of course another type of a nexus; it was a focal point, a privileged and well-recognised site of (Indian) design. The title of the workshop had been *Seduction and Resistance* and was a study into the topical academic issues around at the time, *visual communication* and *meaning*. The presentations went from fields like 'The Retreat of the Word', 'The Rhetoric of the Image', 'From Innocence to Irony', to 'Mapping Indian Television, Film and Advertising'. It culminated in an open discussion about the tyranny of the image and how we could at that time participate in meaning outside the academy and the accepted patterns of design thinking common to the Institute. Perhaps the project was born there. I don't know who it was decided that I would return in March to NID for 8 weeks.

ॐ

Today we are joined whether we like it or not in a re-jigging or re-structuring of many of the things we assume will be taught today. We are facing a moment – it may extend – of unlearning, of thinking how we might remove the excesses of knowledge which are often unfairly and unchallengingly imposed by our syllabi and teaching methods. We are in a way entering the same territory that behavioural economists speak about – the structure of bias. The question might be put another way; not whether there is any innocence in our bias but whether innocence is even plausible.

☞

Nothing to teach? It is true though that such work exploring the nature of design commitment itself could be seen as a celebration, it could also be seen as ‘playfully accentuating the qualities of predictability and disruption’; but none of this was in our minds as we collaborated in this material practice. I’d like to extend all this ever so slightly. What, we can ask, was the pedagogy at work here? Was there a pedagogical act implied in this chance teaching and events? Is this it? We speak again of Jacques Rancière’s discussion of Joseph Jacotot and the way he approached his students: “he had only given them the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered.” That was it. I probably gave them an order or rather approval to leave the institute and pass through openings and clearings that I had not discovered.

1. People:

The disruption caused by you as a white man in India, by design students who understood the activities of the roundabout but most importantly by the residents who were nudged to disrupt their ways of living.

2. Time:

The temporal disruption of space through the myths brought and interspersed with the present-day advertisements, different use of the city in the day vs at night, old routines and new introductions of activities like movie-watching, plus also a temporal dissection of this project after 35 years.

3. Space:

Temporal vs permanent space, inversion of the horizontal street axis to the vertical axis through the temporal canvas roofs. Space not as private/public or religious/secular but space to trigger interaction and celebration.

“The flurry of activity is over and there is a brief spell of sadness. The aftermath of the Nexus project has taken over, impeding attempts to ponder the happenings of the past 8 weeks. Yet ponder I must. Yes, I have learnt a hell of a lot in just 2 months, besides space, design, structure, bamboo etc. largely due to the variety of work and materials I have handled, aside from being a chauffeur, an interpreter, mediator, handyman, diplomat and the grunt work of erecting and dismantling. I’ve had my moment of great disappointment. The disappointment was the shelving of the textile tower project on the roundabout. This was due to selfishness and disagreements. Manipulation by the glory hunters is a lesson I learnt too. I am not bitter about it. The disappointment lies in the fact there was so little time left to achieve it; not enough sharing of the careful planning. Another disappointment came in the form of an altercation which ensued during the dismantling of the craft structure. It was unnecessary as relations with locals had been soured. It could easily have been avoided. Explanation remedied the situation. All in all, the project has done a lot more good to the locals and to the students than any other project we have done at NID. I am satisfied I put in my best effort and it was also the first time I have worked so hard on any student project, where I was able to utilise all my capabilities to the max. It was something I will never forget in a hurry.” (Manjunath R.)

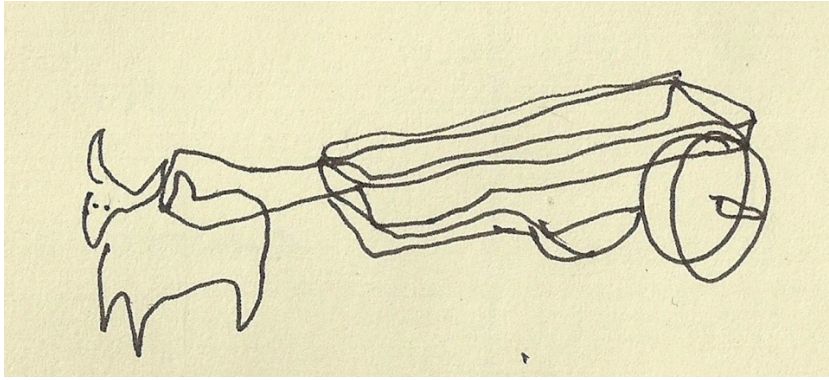
Nexus Project, *The Poetic extracts.*

NID March-April 1987



NEXUS

The Dice of Design



200 yards from here Bahadur and his family
sit and live under a tree.
The tree is in the shadow
of a very large container.
Le Corbusier's Museum in Ahmedabad.
It is one of Corbusier's not-quite-famous buildings.
The cart and oxen Bahadur makes
from the idle mud is for home consumption.
A toy from crumple-able mud, as clumsy
and as beautiful as the word 'crumple-able'.
It costs 2 Rupees. Perhaps
they should get 5, or 10.
Later, an emporium, an institute
or an entrepreneur would charge 25 Rupees.
Who lives in the difference?



The mountain temple arrives on top
of a Maruti. A Maruti Deluxe 800. Like caviar
on top of smoked salmon
held aloft by the bearer. Hanuman
swings down, comes to our rescue
Myths need us as much as we need them.
Bears dance, buses burn but
the temple survives.
No caprice here. Burning the soles of our feet,
the sun too
reaches down, upstaging all.
There are a lot of temples
where the walls could dance.



3

This is a watermelon. A cycle rickshaw hood.
The canopy for a child struggling to avoid
direct sunlight. An ashtray in forbidden
regimes, unfortunate dynasties.

Folded away the sun leaves
so little unscorched. Lonely we
wait an eclipse of the
watermelon. So that we can call it
design or poetry.

Or *La Folie*.



4

Arcadia is a word that should
roll off the tongue. Where the country
meets the city and the city, if lucky,
still meets the country, while the
billboards meet the theatre.

Dressed up with nowhere
and everywhere to go, a bus station.

Nearby, a stone's throw, a beach,
the urban beach or the atomic café
where one can kick sand in the
face of dust and decay. And then
smile before it settles too quickly
into further decay.

Up, up and away!



5

Beware. Rump ahead!

Or close behind.

There are few ski jumps in India, yet the road is full of those soaring swerves. Black and white swerves of hockey players and terrorists, the kinetic art of the strangler, the politician and the administrator. Blindly cross at your own risk and tether yourself if you dare to the daily stasis.



6

A silkworm can crawl. If you
look at it close enough it will.

But it is scorn that it loathes. Like the word
folly it has little shared sense anymore.

It has escaped, it has been emancipated
and now must find new reassurances.

But it will. Because a silkworm
can crawl. All the way.



7

So what happens now? Survival or caprice?

The Lota exercise! Lota theory.

The pot, the tea pot, the bus depot. Gold spot

Lota before marriage, Lota after marriage,

Potsdam is a place in East Germany

Pozzo is a character in a play by Samuel Beckett.

Pozzo has a servant called Lucky.

Pozzo goes blind. Lucky,

Or life after pot?



8

Nexus is the dice of design

“Pledge but also wager symbolic
order and gamble”. Lines borrowed
from other projects, other minds.

The throw, they say, and should
we not believe them, for it has been printed,
not only programmes a strategy of events
it anticipates the design to come
living one’s space, running risks
giving us chances.


9 NEXUS is the goat and the zebra crossing.



NOTHING TO TEACH

3 NEXUS Miscellaneous Documents

Roger Connah (1987)



राष्ट्रीय डिज़ाइन संस्थान
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF DESIGN

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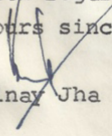
Mr. Roger Connah
E 47 Lajpat Nagar III
New Delhi 110 024

दिनांक Date 29 October 1986

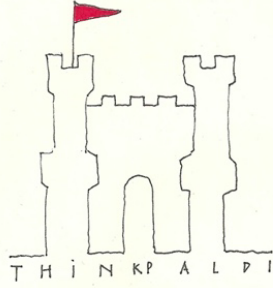
My dear Roger:

This is in response to your letter dated 7 October 1986 regarding the lecture and workshop to be conducted by you here at NID early in 1987. My faculty colleagues have gone through your proposal and their reactions are very positive. Till about the second week of January we are tied up with the visit of a number of consultants under the UNDP project. However, after 12 January 1987 we could have a week' programme on Semiotics and its position in Design, Culture and Industry. This would be in the form of general lectures and workshops. All the students of 4th and 5th year from both Visual Communication and Industrial Design disciplines would participate. While this programme is going on and on the feedback we get, we could decide whether this particular input needs to be repeated for other groups of students and faculty.

The 8-week period from 8 March to 2 May has been earmarked in the academic calendar for an inter-disciplinary design event, as part of our Silver Jubilee celebrations. A possible theme for this event could be the design for a Railway Station or a State Transport Bus station. It would be a total design project including signage, interior of waiting rooms/restaurant, bus shelters, kiosks etc. Would you like to lead the project? If you find this would take too much time in view of your other commitments you could work as a member of the project team. Please let me know. You should plan to be here at NID by Sunday 11 January 1987. Please let me have your travel plans so that arrangements for your stay can be made.

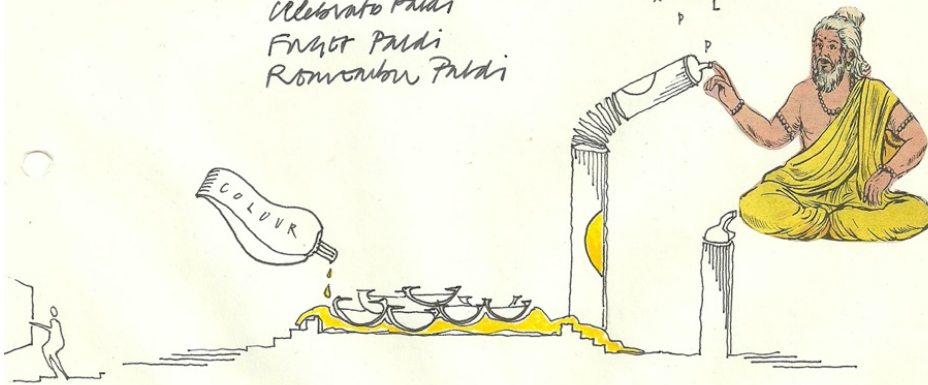
With regards
Yours sincerely

Vinay Jha

vj:N



Think Paldi
 Eat Paldi
 Sleep Paldi
 Dream Paldi
 Run Paldi
 Stop Paldi
 Worry Paldi
 Celebrate Paldi
 Forget Paldi
 Remember Paldi

K L A N P
 P I S L A P L P P
 I I A T L A D
 P A P L
 P




ROGER CONNAH
 E 47 LAJPAT NAGAR III NEW DELHI 110024 INDIA TEL 611601
 U.S. 1987.

A A P N U

सुवि
माल

In the coming days we are celebrating Paldi Crossroads. Events designed for this purpose will appear at various times of the day and week. These events involve surprise structures, installations, performances and craft alterations.

The Nexus group from  invites participation from anyone interested in Paldi as a living space. Everything is designed to explore the communication value of new or existing textures. Hanuman will be celebrated on 14th April the Hanuman Jayanti Day, in paint, in light, in space, in sound. These events will culminate with a living exhibition on

28 29 April

at

Paldi

Any suggestions are welcome at our silk worm site office near Udipi Cafe.

P A L D I
N A T I O N A L I N S T I T U T E O F D E S I G N



આવના ગણતરીના દિવસોમાં અમે પાલડી ચાર રસ્તા ઉપર ખાસ પ્રસંગ ઉજવવાના છીએ. આ ઉદ્દેશ માટે ડીઝાઇન કરેલા પ્રસંગો જુદા જુદા દિવસના સમયે અઠવાડિયા સુધી દર્શાવાશે. આ પ્રસંગોમાં આશ્ચર્ય પમાડે તેવા સ્ટુકચરસ, તેના નિર્માણ, તેની ઉપયોગિતા અને કલાની કારીગરીનો સમાવેશ થાય છે.

“નેક્સ” ગ્રુપ તરફથી જે કોઈ યજ્ઞિને પાલડીને જીવંત સ્થળ બનાવવામાં રસ હોય તેને આમંત્રિત કરવામાં આવે છે. આ બધી જ ડીઝાઇન નવી તેમજ ચાલુ પદ્ધતિથી માહિતી મેળવવાનું સંશોધન છે. ૧૪મી એપ્રિલ, હનુમાન જ્યોતિને દિવસે હનુમાનને રંગથી, રોશનીથી, અવકાશમાં અનગ ધ્વનિથી ઉજવવામાં આવશે. આ પ્રસંગોની સર્વોચ્ચ કક્ષા

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એપ્રિલ

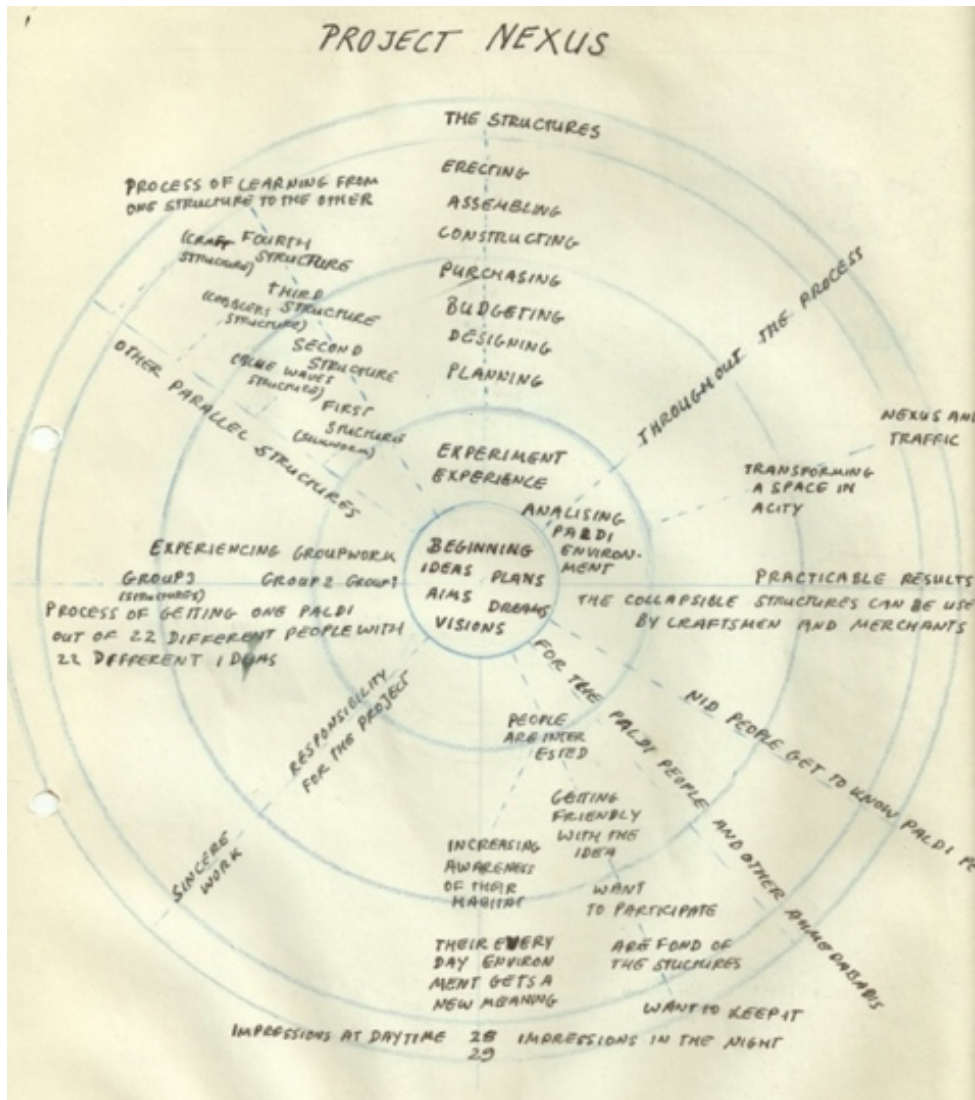
પાલડી ચાર રસ્તા

ઉપર જીવંત પ્રદર્શનથી થશે.

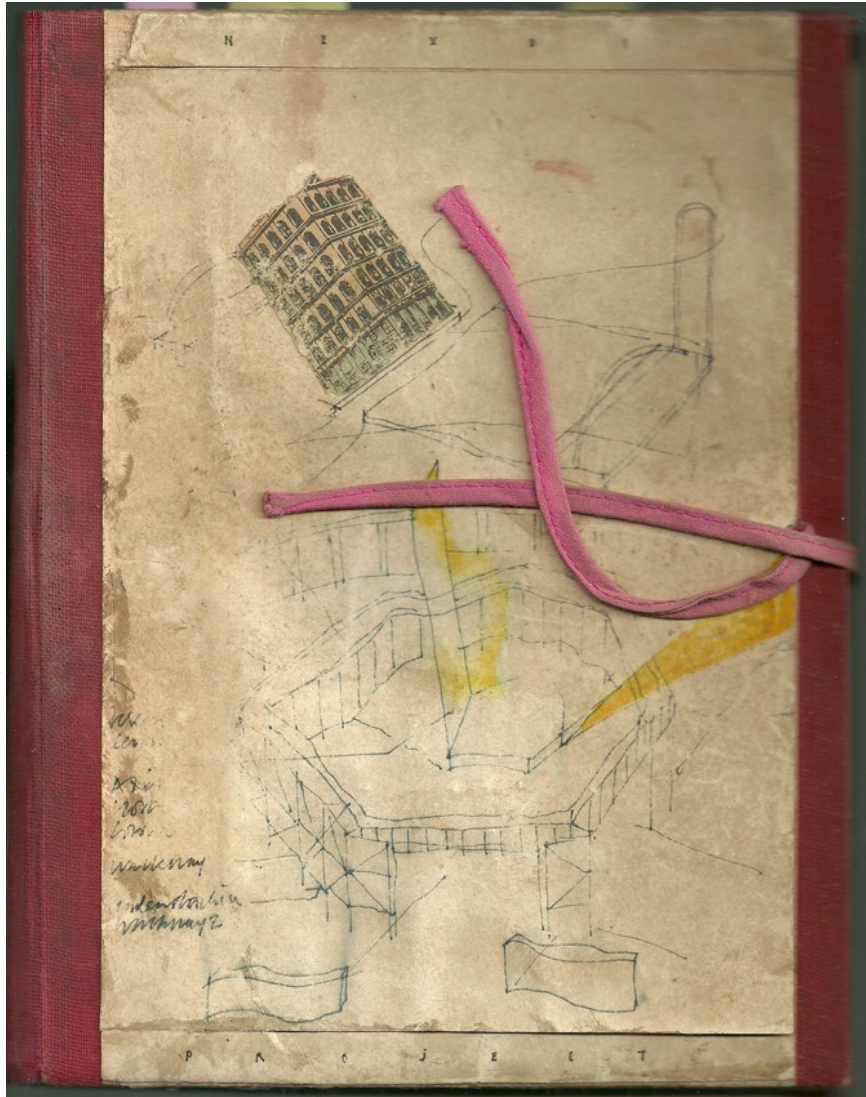
કોઈ પણ પ્રકારના સૂચનો ‘ઉડીપી કોફે’ નજીક અમારી સાઈટ- ઓફિસ ઉપર સ્વીકારવામાં આવશે.

આપણું
WALS

PROJECT NEXUS



Design Mapping - Daniel Bernoulli



Roger Connah The Notebook 1987



DIFFERENT SHADES OF HANUMAN: As part of an environment workshop, a team of students of the National Institute of Design has given a modern interpretation of Lord Hanuman in this drawing at Paldi Char Rasta in Ahmedabad.

NID workshop on use of living space

IN THE CITY TODAY

By A Staff Reporter

AHMEDABAD, April 14. For the first time the National Institute of Design has organised a unique design and environment workshop at Paldi bus terminus to explore the communication value of new or existing textures and also to create an awareness in the common man about the living space and environment in the area.

Addressing a press conference here today, Mr. Roger Connah, a Finland-based architect and director of the workshop, said that the workshop would focus on the use of design and semiotics as analytical tools to enhance the literacy of the street among the common man by studying the environment.

Mr. Connah said that a study of the Paldi bus terminus was undertaken by a team of NID students known as Nexus group. Ideas were suggested by this group for re-creating and re-organising environment and service to the public in that area. The entire workshop is based on the theme — "Aspiti Paldi".

The most creative part of the workshop is the meaningful painting drawn by the NID students on the walls of an ancient Panchmukhi Hanuman temple in the Paldi area to explain the mythological greatness of Lord Hanuman to the common man through paintings. This had been also done to coincide with Hanuman Navratri today.

MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND: A huge painting drawn

inside the temple shows the Pandavas and an 'Aghori Saint'. Mythological writing on the wall along with the painting tells us that this "Aghori Saint" who used to become a beast at night had shown the underground way to the Pandavas thousands of years ago.

Yet another painting outside the temple shows the present and the mythological significance of Lord Hanuman in our culture and civilisation as a perfect example of self-control and celibacy.

Also the NID students have shown the simple way to construct cheap shelters for the vendors, larvae, watermen by setting up two cloth and a bamboo structures in the Paldi area.

Punjab National Bank: Swami Vishwadevanandji to inaugurate the 108th branch of the bank, Khokhra, Maninagar east, 9 a.m.

Anandam: A meeting to pay tribute to late Mrs. Udayaprabha Mehta, M. J. Library Hall, Ellisbridge, 6.30 p.m.

Harold Laski Institute of Political Science: Prof. P. G. Mavalankar to speak on "V. P. Singh forced out the deepening crisis", Socrates Hall, Maharashtra society, 6.45 p.m.

Rotary Club of Ahmedabad (West): Closed fellowship meeting, Ambet garden restaurant, Jodhpur char rasta, 7.15 p.m.

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¹ Paul Carter *Material Thinking* Melbourne (2004)

² Raymond Williams *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso (1980);

³ Ivan Illich *Deschooling Society* Harper & Row (1972), Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford (1991)

⁴ V S Naipaul, *India A Wounded Civilisation*, Penguin 1977 p.123

⁵ http://echo.iat.sfu.ca/library/eames_58_india_report.pdf

⁶ for the shape of the political discussion around design and architecture

including the 'appropriate technology' movement see *India: Modern Architectures*

in History. P Scriver A Srivastava, Reaktion Press (2015) Read this across Naipaul's chapter

Synthesis and Mimicry (op cit.) pp 117-134; also, for the notion of 'joke knowledge' see

V S Naipaul *The Enigma of Arrival*, Penguin (1984)

⁷ see Miscellaneous Documents: Letter Vinay Jha (NID)/Roger Connah – note the mid-1980s shape of teaching offered,

the workshop on 'semiotics' and the journey taken from a prescribed in-campus visual

communication/industrial design studio to the openness and 'randomness' of Nexus situated in Paldi.

⁸ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/427-vehicles/min-vadaj-is-busiest-traffic-junction-in-w-abad/articleshow/78920672.cms>