

RAJIV SETHI'S DIARY

Romancing the West

The well-known designer offers some vignettes on the highs and lows of the arts and culture scene in Washington, New York and Paris where he was a recent visitor

Washington, The International Trade & Culture Centre:

The Americans have always been so concerned with celebrating their own geniuses that they have never bothered to understand anyone else. Consequently, American business never endeavoured to reach out - its promoters were probably too scared about the situation outside. Cholera and revolution, perhaps. Who knows?!

But now they are waking up to the knowledge of their insulated ignorance. They realise the need for a meeting point where American businessmen can learn about other countries, and businessmen from other countries can also learn about each other. And this has given birth to the idea of setting up an International Trade and Culture Centre in the heart of Washington, the federal triangle, minutes away from the White House.

There are certain by-laws in Washington which get accentuated because of the city's hot seat which

everyone is scared of circumventing and the federal triangle is full of these neo-fascist buildings. So everybody has to follow suit and create something which harmonises with these fairly hideous structures. Hence the vision for this project has not been able to leap and express itself in the physical space in the manner in which it should, whereby materials could come in from all over the world - stone from Morocco, lacquer from Japan, inlay from India - to make it a truly international celebration.

Instead, it has turned out to be a very tame rendition of a huge concrete mall which has large atriums and soulless shopping plazas, which I don't think will lend themselves to a world showplace. These constraints may, however, vanish once the project gets going. It was important for them to start conceiving of how the space would be received by the people from this hemisphere, and that is why they consulted me.

I emphasised not how my hemisphere would view such a facility, but how in a global context, we could address ourselves to the fu-

New York, Breakfast television:

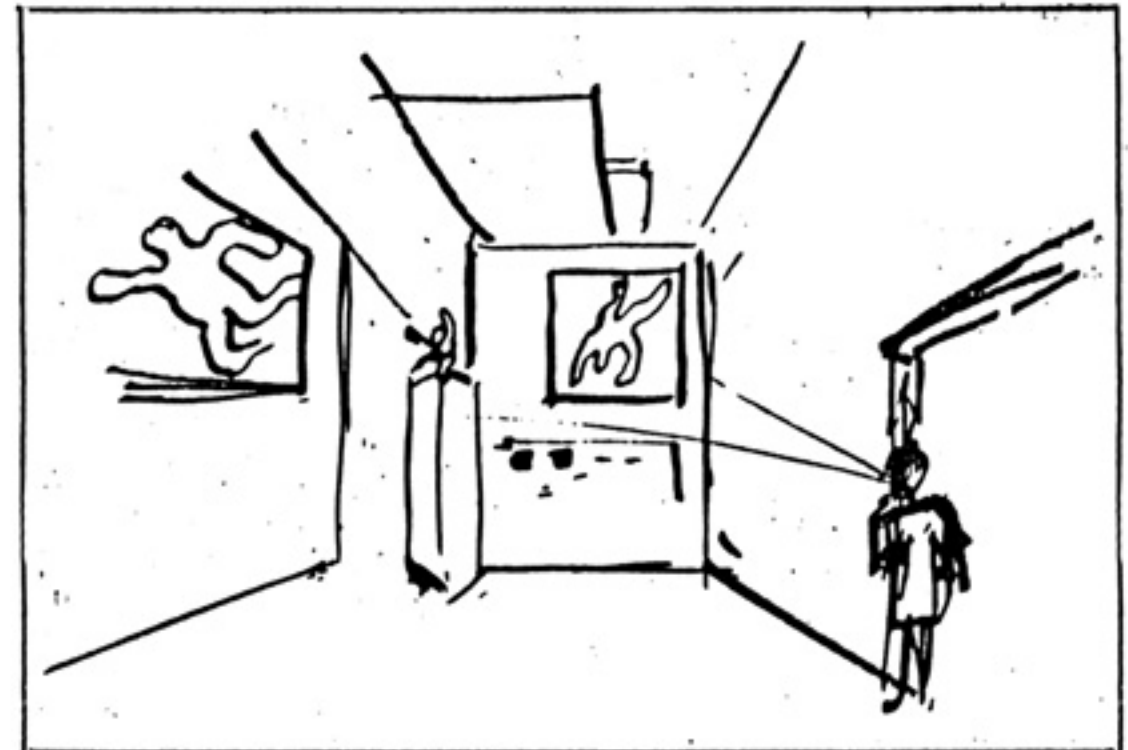
I got 'hooked onto' the court cases they show each morning on American television. Simple cases - like somebody driving into somebody's fence, or someone stealing a lawn mower from someone's garden - are taken up with the judge deciding them and the viewers listening in. It suddenly struck me that in this way, a number of small disputes must be getting sorted out through the electronic media. It is an educative experience, and then I began to wonder whether or not it was a good idea to make our pan-

chayats come alive again for one hour every day in this manner.

New York, Park Avenue:

I saw a wonderful play called Tamara (the story you follow from room to room) at the Park Avenue Armory - a beginning-of-this-century European revival building, and terribly shee-shee. The play is about the rise of fascism in Italy. The audience comes together in the lobby of the house of a nobleman, Gabriele d'Annunzio, an exotic turn-of-the-century Italian poet and patriot, now decadent. The house

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has about 10-12 rooms and you can follow any one of the characters - the butler, valet, chauffeur, Annunzio's ex-mistress, or Annunzio himself, among others - around the house throughout, or switch from one to the other whenever you want to. As you enter a room with one of the players, there is an intimate rapport with him, but you can't intrude. It's like a living movie with you as the ultimate voyeur.

I switched characters, because I wanted to understand the mechanics of it all. The role would carry on, even if the character was left with no audience. In the end of course, all the points came together and the characters. In contrast, the architecture and orchestra for

Sketches by RAJIV SETHI

theatre is so unadventurous here. Besides, these productions suggest incredible teamwork, something we are not good at.

At the end of the play, you are served a period dinner. Which is a good thing, because by then you are quite hungry, especially if you have been chasing the lord of the house when he goes down to the cellar and starts cooking an egg, right in front of you...

Paris, The Picasso Museum & The Louvre Pyramid:

These days one can't see museums the way one could in the earlier days. You can see them only around Bulgarian and Russian backsides, through the flash of Japanese cameras or over American shoulders and crew cuts. This is part of the physics of a museum. But I got the opportunity to see them after they closed.

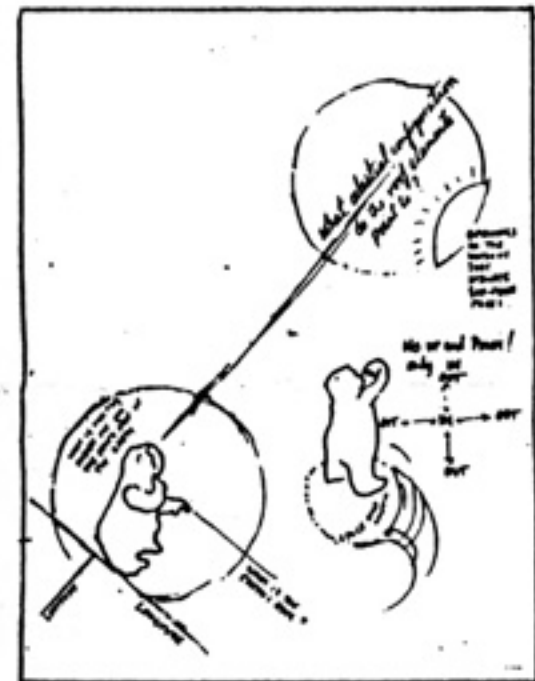
The Picasso museum in Paris is an old mansion which has been remodelled as a cubist structure. Architecturally, it gives you the feel of what the paintings are. It invokes

within you the cubist principle - for instance, standing in front of one of the doors, I could see the lovely symphony Picasso's acrobats made, leaping from painting to sculpture to painting.

The pyramid at the Louvre is a symphony in opaque and transparency, dense and sparse, reflection and illusion. This is the harmony, but the rhythmic part of it is provided by the day and the night because it changes its relationships. The play of illusion is specially amazing when at night, you see not just the pyramid (reality) but the sky through the pyramid reflected in those marvellous waterbodies around it - the pools.

The foundations of the Louvre when excavated, revealed structures of the ancient city of Paris. And then side by side, you have this most advanced pyramid which reflects like an obelisk, rising aspirations. The ancient of Paris and the most contemporary come together so well.

In retrospect, it saddens me to think of the Purana Quila, where we have had to wrap up excavations dating back to 2,300 years ago in polythene because there are no funds available with the government to do anything about it. If it does not have the resources, then why can't it receive donations from the corporate sector and then let the tourism industry pay for the maintenance of this museum within a museum?...



the building gives you an indication of what we are a part of; whether the roof is inclined to the form of an axis of the earth, or whether the beam points to a galaxy, or whether the ground I stand on indicates what is on the other end. It gives me a very cosmic feeling of what I am into.

Look at the Jantar Mantar. I don't believe those people who say that these are purely astronomical instruments. If you look at it in detail, certain things that are not related to the instruments have been made in an architectural sense, like the formation of the steps, of the arches. They were architectural statements too.

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