

The artful connection

Virtuous Retail redefines retail, curating fine art at its centres



When much of the retail space often mirror each other in their conformity and commercial focus, Virtuous Retail South Asia (VR) stands out for its communities, which come just not to shop but to engage with the vivid display of art and soak in the traditional local artistic experience. VR has integrated art and culture into the core of its design, and crafted spaces that resonate deeply with communities across the Indian diaspora. At the core of VR's philosophy lies the belief that retail spaces should serve as more than just commercial entities.

"Our properties are a platform for experiencing local culture inspired by the very cultural foundation of communities," says Sumi Gupta, curator, Public Art Festivals & board member, VR South Asia. "Through thoughtful architecture, design and art, the properties reflect the long-standing traditions that communities are proud of associating themselves with. Our centres have been designed to provide large, open spaces for communities to interact and socialise. Rooted in the cultural essence of their respective communities, our centers transcend

the conventional retail landscape, providing a unique platform for experiencing and celebrating local culture".

The transformation of these spaces into cultural landmarks has been nothing short of revolutionary. With open, inviting layouts, VR centres provide a stage for public art festivals, cultural gatherings, and civic partnerships, effectively blurring the lines between commerce and culture. For instance, the Dumas Art Project initiated at VR Surat became a cornerstone event, paving the way for the successful hosting of 22 art festivals across various cities, attracting over 9.4 million visitors.

Over the past decade, public art festivals have enriched the cultural landscapes of numerous Indian cities. These festivals, characterised by strategic collaborations with renowned institutions and celebrated artists, are deeply rooted in the unique ethos of each host city, making art more accessible and engaging for a broader audience. In fact, the quintessential 'live-work-play' lifestyle, provides an ideal backdrop for the public art festivals.

"We have been collaborating with

the public art festivals over a decade and 13 of the 22 festivals were hosted at our centres across Surat, Nagpur, Mohali and Amritsar," informs Gupta. "They received an overwhelming response from the local and artist communities".

The art festivals also promote local art and culture by supporting emerging artists and artisans. Each festival has artisanal bazaars, workshops, art cinema, theatre, panel discussions and exhibitions of fine art, photography and sculptures that transform the VR centres into a hub of artistic activity for the one-month long duration of the art festival.

Celebrating heritage

VR' strategy of curating fine art has also piqued interest in Tier II cities, unveiling as it did the universal appeal of integrating art with retail. "These cities boast of an incredibly rich artist community and a population with a profound appreciation for art", adds Gupta. This has spurred the success of art festivals in cities like Mohali, Surat, Nagpur and Amritsar.

The success of these festivals is measured not just by foot traffic but by the depth of community engagement and the support provided to local artists. "These events have become a melting pot of creativity, fostering an environment where artists, students and the wider community can come together in a shared celebration of art", affirms Gupta.

A key aspect of VR's success lies in its meticulous attention to the architectural and artistic details that reflect the local culture and heritage. "The festivals provide an immense contribution to our core principle of curating unique experiences," explains Gupta. "Our events calendar is based on local culture,



traditions, and celebrations of the city that the VR centres are located in". This philosophy extends to the architecture of each centre, designed as an ode to the local heritage, ensuring that every visit offers a deep dive into the city's cultural ethos.

For instance, VR Chennai draws inspiration from the grandeur of South Indian temples, with *gopurams* marking its entrances and intricate hand-carved granite bas-reliefs depicting the reigns of historic dynasties. The centre boasts of elements like *tamarai sadukam* (a large wading pool reminiscent of temple water tanks) and a majestic Nandi statue, creating an ambiance that resonates with the spiritual and cultural traditions of South India.

Similarly, VR Surat pays tribute to the city's maritime history with a life-sized boat installation by artist Paresh Maity, celebrating Surat's ancient port city legacy. The center captures the essence of Surat's vibrant culture through various installations and hosts the city's second-largest *garba* celebration, underlining the community's penchant for dance and festivity.

VR Bengaluru takes a different historical route, highlighting the area's Anglo-Indian heritage through its design and annual events. The centre here features 'The Whitefield Arms' pub and 'The Waverly hotel', which are themed around English cottage and colonial architecture, paying tribute to Whitefield's past as an Anglo-Indian settlement. VR Bengaluru was also the first commercial property in the country to celebrate Pride Month, showcasing its commitment to inclusivity and community engagement.

This success can also be measured by its impact on local communities and artists as the art festivals have become platforms for budding artists to also showcase their talents. On the other hand, for students these festivals allow to engage in creative exploration. For brands, it fosters connection with their audience on a deeper level. "Our festivals have brought together master artists, students and alumni from reputed art schools and institutes, creating a dynamic environment of learning and inspiration", remarks Gupta.

Students have come from prestigious institutions such as Delhi College of Arts, Lalit Kala Akademi, JJ School



of Art, NIFT, Chitrakala Parishad, MSU Baroda, Shrishti, Surat School of Fine Art, Choramandal Artists Village and INIFD have collaborated with Virtuous Retail. Senior artists, including Bose Krishnamachari, Paresh Maity, the late Yusuf Arakkal, Gita Hudson, Murali Cheeroth, George Martin, and Gigi Scaria have also supported support to these festivals.

The festival is also helping curate young artists and nurture new talent, drawing many students and patrons to these festivals. "Over the years, we have seen a significant increase in the involvement of students in the festivals," observes Gupta. "An increasing number of students actively participate in the workshops and events organised during our art festivals. Additionally, we have noticed growing interest from our tenant and brand partners, who recognise the festivals as a platform to connect with their target audience".

Theme as springboards

In an age where digital experiences are becoming increasingly sought after, VR is also charging ahead in transforming India's creative landscape. "The demand for interactive and immersive experiences presents a wonderful opportunity", says Gupta.

"The growing recognition of art and culture's vital role serves as a catalyst, motivating us to tailor our initiatives

to cater to a broader audience," assesses Gupta. That is helping VR make art more accessible. VR has also been curating art themes based on pressing issues. In the recent past, the theme has been environment. "The theme of the annual festivals is based on issues on which we think awareness and dialogue is necessary and therefore we have had themes focussed on sustainability and climate change. The theme for Public Art Festivals 2023, 'A Fine Balance', was chosen with the aim of examining the delicate relationship between human beings and their environment, with a special focus on climate change and sustainability. We encouraged the students to work of installations using recycled materials, found objects, natural fibres and fabrics, upcycled objects in keeping with the theme," says Gupta.

Further, sustainability and social responsibility are central principles which shows the dedication to ecological stewardship. Through defined policies and initiatives aimed at energy conservation and waste reduction, VR exemplifies how art and retail can contribute positively to environment and sustainability.

Looking to the future, VR is eager to expand its integration of art and retail through innovative partnerships and projects. VR's has an ongoing partnership with UNESCO and is making new collaborations aim to further the reach and impact of its initiatives. "Our partners and retailers are keen to collaborate with us", contends Gupta.

VR has announced 'Transcending Boundaries' as the new theme for Public Art Festival this year. The Whitefield Art Collective in Bengaluru, slated for April 2024, will be the first festival under these theme and will aim to advance the frontiers of creativity and innovation. This theme promises to push the frontiers of creativity and innovation. The impact of these efforts is clear. VR's art festivals influences foot traffic and sales within its centers. "The festivals attract large audiences... thereby positively influencing the sales of our brand outlets", comments Gupta. The enrichment and commercial success highlights VR's pioneering efforts are proving successful, but more importantly getting more people deeply connected to art. ♦

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