

ISSUE 31

# A DESIGNER'S CITY: CONVERSATIONS ON CREATIVE BOMBAY

— BY PAYAL KHANDELWAL —





Between the chaos of life and the tranquillity of the sea, Bombay has many facets indeed. The famous or infamous indomitable spirit of the city, the humans behind what is now an international case study - the *dabbawallas*, the impeccable yet rickety Mumbai local trains, the largest slums in Asia, Dharavi, the largest red light district in Asia, Kamathipura, the historical architecture of the town, the charmed life and bohemia of Bandra, the vast spaces of crowding suburbs, the snarling traffic, the ubiquitous black and yellows, the filth, the vibrant nightlife, the burgeoning street art, the heady concoction of different types of people, and so much more. Bombay is indeed one of the world's truly unique cities, both for its offerings and its quirks.

We speak to three different graphic designers and connoisseurs of visual culture in the city to get their versions of Bombay - how they perceive the city, how much it influences and pervades their work, their specific favorite places in the city and more. Sameer Kulavoor is the founder of [Bombay Duck Designs](#), who was born and brought up in Bombay. Mira Malhotra runs her own studio - [Studio Kohl](#) - in suburban Malad. She moved to Bombay from Saudi Arabia when she was eleven years old. Kay Khoo, co-founder, [Kyoorius](#) and chief innovations officer at [Creativeland Asia](#) first came to Bombay from Malaysia in 2005 and then moved here with his family in 2012.



*Kay Khoo loves to try different cuisines and restaurants, therefore we decide to meet over a delicious dinner at a vivacious little hole in the wall in Bandra called the Wild Side Café.*

*Born and brought up in Malaysia, Kay's first brush with India was through Kyoorius. After managing affairs from Malaysia and occasionally travelling to India for work, he finally made the big move of shifting here with his family for good.*

*He is both intrigued and fascinated by the city. While he is beginning to live and feel like a local, he still uses his foreign eyes to spot unique or bizarre aspects of the city that a local's eyes might miss. The mutual coexistence of widely contrasting types of people is something he finds most interesting. Here he speaks about the city's charms, idiosyncrasies and its influence on his work.*

### **What was your initial impression of Bombay?**

I first came to Bombay in 2005 and my initial impression was that it was quite disorganized. It still is, and it often fascinates me how people here live their lives amongst so much chaos.

There is an interesting mix of people in Bombay. There are people who are westernized in the way they look, talk and think and on the other hand, there are people who are still far away from that world. They are not necessarily uneducated but they still live in the throes of tradition, in an old world. It is amazing to see these different people who have to Bombay from everywhere.

### **What is it about the city that irritates you the most?**

What frustrates me is that it is disorganized. Everything here takes so much time. There is no system in place, for anything from life to daily services. The logistics for everything are too complicated.

### **What is your favourite area in Bombay?**

It would have to be Bandra, one place where you actually get to see two completely different sides of Bombay. You will see a different world in various high-end places like say Salt Water Café, Sassy Spoon, etc, a world of people not just from India but from different parts of the world, with their unique looks and accents. And then once you step out into the cozy lanes of Bandra, you get to see that the old traditions are still alive and breathing. If you move towards the Khar area, it gets even more local.

### **What do you think about Town?**

In Town, some of my favorite places to go to are Crawford Market and Chor Bazaar. I really like that entire area. The stores there are filled with extremely interesting junk which I would not get to see anywhere else. Every shop at every corner houses something unique.

But overall, Town is quite pure, old and traditional, and therefore a very “normal” place. There is nothing there that’s too interesting for me.

### **Is there any particular place in Bombay you like to visit when you are feeling low or want to feel inspired?**

Not really, as sometimes getting in and out of places in Bombay consumes more energy and is a huge hassle. Having said that, I do like going to Malabar Gardens. I also really like Dhobhi Ghaat. I have taken a lot of visitors over there too. The idea of doing collective laundry in an open-air laundromat is simply fascinating. However, these people and the charm of this place are gradually disappearing now. On the other hand, it is a positive thing in way as it is probably time for them to adapt to the fast evolving life and get organized.

### **Do you feel a sense of belonging to the city now or do you see this as a transitional space?**

I moved here in 2012. I sometimes do feel like an outsider with foreign skin but now I am able to predict things to a very large extent. I am getting accustomed to the ways of Bombay, so in that context, I feel like a local. In any given situation, I have an idea of what

would happen and how things would pan out. I don't necessarily accept all of it but I am beginning to get used to it.

I feel quite happy here. The city grows on me each day.

**A lot of people complain that Bombay lacks culture. Do you agree with that?**

That's not really fair to say. It depends on what kind of culture you want to see in the city.

I think the biggest pain is when designers complain there's no culture, they are actually expecting "western" culture. A Shakespearean play. A slam-poem. An exhibition. And so on. But seriously - that's how they are defining culture. And that's unfair.

There is a lot more that the city offers. You have to learn to find its unique aspects. So it might not be the culture you want to see but it's completely a matter of perspective.

**Do you go to any specific places where you could mingle with other creative professionals?**

I don't think that there are such specific places. And I wonder if such places would even work. In my case, for example, the work hours are so crazy that I just want to disappear after my day is over. There is not much time to really hang out. Creatives need a valid and strong reason to go out there and mingle among their peers. To create that compelling reason could be a challenging task but gradually setups like Creative Mornings, Sketchup, The Hive, etc. are trying to achieve this which is great.

**How has Bombay influenced you as a designer?**

It has not directly influenced my work. It, however, has made me realise that I don't necessarily have to look at things from a design process point of view but in terms of how we can do things with our hands. Now I have a very hands-on approach to everything I do. It has inspired to keep creating new things no matter what and somewhere I have imbibed the whole *jugaad* (work-around) spirit. I experiment a lot more now, while constantly rejecting the polish of design. I like to go with the flaws. I don't stick to a fixed colour palette. So basically, it has taught me to intentionally embrace mess.

I really believe that as a designer/creator, you should be able to pick up inspiration from the environment around you. There is something wrong if you are not doing that. You have to make it a part of your work and a part of you in some way. It has to become a part of your soul for you to grow as a creative person.

*Located in suburban Malad, Mira Malhotra's semi-furnished new studio still smells of fresh paint. She travels to the studios everyday from farther north, Borivili, where she lives with her husband. For her, suburbs mean more space and peace, and she is very conscious of the conduciveness of both for her work.*

*Until she turned eleven, Bombay was only a place to visit relatives during vacation for Mira. After that she got to explore different parts of it while studying in different educational institutions. For Mira, the city represents an Indian-ness which is integral to her work. She loves the madness in the method and*

*has found various exciting things in local bazaars across the city that sometimes find place in her work. Here is our conversation with her on the city of Mumbai.*

### **What are some of your earliest memories of the city?**

I moved here when I was eleven, but before that, I was visiting every year to see my grandparents. We used to go to Marveh beach for fun and stay over at Dadar and that's the first thing about Bombay that I was introduced to. My grandparents had a very beautiful old house in Dadar, opposite Salvation Church, with a very odd circular layout.

When we finally moved here, it was a different experience. I first noticed the bad part about the city was the filth all around us. Having moved from a clean place like Saudi Arabia, it was a very sharp contrast. But we were living in Borivili which was very green and wide open.

I finally opened up to the city when I went to Xavier's College thanks to learning and being allowed to commute by train. That building makes you feel insignificant and important at the same time. The architecture, the huge clock, the corridors – everything is magnificent. That time was probably the most inspirational time of my life. I also met my husband in Xavier's library.

### **What do you think about Town?**

Colaba Causeway in Town is interesting. All the shops have this old world feel to them. There is an interesting contrast between Town and suburbs like Borivili and Malad. Borivili and Malad (north) are very peaceful and natural in a way. While one side celebrates the glories of civilization, the other celebrates nature. A lot of fine art artists have now set up their studios in these parts as they are very quiet and yet not entirely cut off from the outside world. And on the other hand, in Town (south), you get to witness history. And it all averages towards Bandra.

### **Do you have any specific interesting places in mind for Town?**



The whole Kala Ghoda area is beautiful. Then some of my other favorite places are NGMA (National Gallery of Modern Art), Jehangir Art Gallery, Khyani Café (which I would frequent a lot when I was in Xavier's). A trip to Jehangir every week was in fact mandatory for us while we were in Sophia college. Town has changed a lot though over the years. There are so many new places now.

### **What do you think about Bandra?**

I always went to Bandra to shop before I got into college. I think it is more my style than Town. Town is old cool and Bandra is new cool. While all the newest and hippest things are in Bandra, there is also this “villagey” life in some pockets which is very niche and charming.

I also love Bandra for the kind of music I like. There are a lot of venues for hip, indie punk. The now defunct Live From The Console at Mehboob Studios was a great music concept.

### **What are some of the other places for good music in Bombay?**

Kino's used to be a good place for punk music. Sitara Studio in Town is quite cool too. It has a very warehouse vibe. Three Wise Monkeys is also a venue where good gigs are planned.

### **What are some of your favourite food and drink places?**

For food, it's usually Candies in Bandra. I love their cheesecakes. Then there is Andora's at Perry Road, Janata to drink, Jai Hind and Highway Gomantak for Konkan food. There is also Brunch & Munch in Malad, near my studio.

### **What is your go-to place when you need to feel motivated?**

When I am feeling low, Town is usually very inspiring for me. You know there is this book *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron where she talks about two things to keep creative. One is called Morning Pages, which basically involves getting up in the morning and writing down whatever's on your mind to empty your thoughts. The other is to do solitary visits to at least one gallery per week to open up your mind. So in Town, I usually go to both

Jehangir and NGMA. Jehangir often has the same stuff though, while NGMA has more challenging artists.

**What's your most favorite aspect of Bombay?**

Nobody is of a particular culture here. There are all kinds of people with mixed backgrounds and it is truly a melting pot. You don't have to fit in any kind of mould to be in Bombay. Having seen a lot of other cities, I feel that in Bombay, there is something for everybody.

And the least favourite part?

That has to be the commute. I hate travelling and the local train commute can get very annoying.

**What do you do when you are feeling a bit isolated and want to be around other creative professionals?**

I think there is a great creative community in Bandra and whenever I am feeling isolated, that's where I usually head to. The Hive in Bandra has really come of age and has matured a lot as a creative hub. You will get meet people you know and you will be introduced to five or six new creative people during each visit. People go there just to hang around and they also offer workspaces for freelancers. So whenever I go there, I get a sense of community with the other designers.

**How has the city influenced you as a designer?**

When I was starting out, I noticed that most of our art and design was about or influenced by the western culture. There was nothing authentic and it was almost like we were ashamed of who we were. And anything remotely Indian would just fall into the 'kitsch' category. There was no sense of the way we look at things and that view is no less valid than any other view. If you see our rural art, you will see that it's all flat. They don't draw in perspective and that's because traditionally we have been drawing what we know rather than what we see. But we reject that philosophy of drawing.

So for me finding an original voice was and is very important. And Bombay is so rich in visuals to inspire that originality because it is urban life mixed with traditional values. The street culture, food stalls, practices in Indian households, Indian motifs. There is so much to document. Kulture Shop, for example, is doing a lot of that. We need to notice the unique things in India that you can't find anywhere else in the world.

I feel that Town has been overused and suburbs like Malad are more fascinating for me. Here you can find some Goan style houses, local fish markets, odd novelty items, the local bazaars, etc. Then Dadar Flower Market is very interesting, with so many nuances. There is Natrajmarket outside Malad Station, jewellery market at Underai road, off SV Road, the local traditional Borivili market at the station at an elevated platform.

For me, what's exciting is the whole cramped-ness, our method of doing things, of doing business, the product diversification.

**Do you feel a sense of belonging to Bombay or do you see it as a more transition space?**

Since Bombay is a melting pot, you don't really belong but you belong everywhere. Your identity is always in a state of flux. And thanks to globalization and modernization, things are constantly changing. So Mumbai feels more like a state of transition. You don't get the feeling of being settled down here.

*Sameer Kulavoor meets us in one of the most interesting and quaint parts of the city, Mazgaon, where he has set up his studio. After crossing a maze of lanes, and getting lost for a bit, we find his studio quietly tucked away at the end of a small lane. Surrounded with history and culture from all sides (including a 100-year old church) and buried in an enigmatic silence, his choice of this unusual location isn't actually that surprising.*

*Born and brought up in Bombay, Sameer was deeply influenced by his college time when he got to explore Town (the southernmost part of the city) most thoroughly. He carried those subtle impressions of the city in his consciousness and over the years, they have had an interesting influence on his various personal projects like the Xerox project, The Ghoda Cycle project, the Blued book, etc. We talk to him about this and about his views on the other parts of the city.*

### **What are some of your earliest memories of Bombay?**

I grew up in Borivili, Bombay. As a child, Borivili was a huge farm land. My building was one of the few proper buildings there. In about ten years or so, things changed quite drastically. There used to be agriculture earlier. Now it's a metropolitan. Things are getting smaller and more connected. And I got to see that whole transformation. As a kid, my parents also used to take us kids to nani's (maternal grandmother) place close to Girgaum chowpatty from where we used to frequently visit the seaface, Malabar Hill, Churchgate,

etc. I got to see both sides of Mumbai. There was also globalization coming in at that point, brands were coming in to the country. It was an interesting phase to witness.

**What promoted you to choose an unlikely location like Mazgaon as your studio?**

Well, I was looking for a studio apartment and my broker got me to this place and it seemed like a quaint, peaceful place - perfect for a studio. It's quite cut off from the outside world. Moreover, the place is surrounded by a lot of history. For example, there is a little church close by which was built in 1875. It's not common to find such old structures in Bombay as Bombay is a fairly new city. And this is one of the few places in Bombay which still has a very old world charm to it and I was lucky to find it.

**What is your favourite area of the city?**

It would have to be Town as it played a very important role in my life during schooling and college days, the whole JJ School of Art & Architecture area at VT and Sydenham College area at Churchgate. Jehangir Art Gallery would have to be another one and of course the seaface. My dad used to take me there quite often while I was growing up. So that whole triangular area has been an integral part of my life.

**What are some of the interesting places you have found in Town?**

There are a host of galleries out there which I like visiting - Chemould Gallery, Gallery Maskara, Volte (now defunct), Galerie Mirchandani + Steinruecke. Then Bhau Daji Lad Museum in Byculla is also quite remarkable and so is The Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalay. Shops like Filter, Art & Design Bookstore, Bombay Electric, Bungalow 8 for design shopping. New eateries like Kala Ghoda Café, The Pantry and Woodside Inn are great and so are the old ones like Hotel New Deluxe (great south Indian Malabari food), Swagath refreshments (Fort) and Bharat Excellence.

The most interesting parts, however, are these narrow lanes in the Fort area where you are bound to discover various holes in the walls. I like the way people have built structures over structures. It's a fascinating collage. There was a point when Akbarallys was the only brand in that area, but now there is such a strong mixture of things, a mixture of old and

new and it all peacefully co-exists. Town is also the most touristy area in Bombay, the Mumbai Darshan area. There are so many of these structures like the Asiatic Library that are very 'Bombay'. Then there is the High Court with a completely different appeal.

### **What about Bandra?**

Bandra is undoubtedly cool. It has a very different vibe to it. And its proximity to the sea also makes it interesting and plays a huge role in making Bandra what it is.

My weekends are occasionally in Bandra. A number of creative shops (KultureShop amongst others) and eateries are based there. The street art there adds a lot of colour to the landscape. The old houses of Pali village are fascinating. There are good old venues like Mehboob Studio. It's an amazing structure. I remembering seeing the Aneesh Kapoor show/exhibit which made excellent use of the space in the studio.

### **People often think that your work is extremely inspired by the city of Bombay. How do you feel about that?**

I am not sure that there really is so much influence of Bombay on my work. My work is not only about Bombay. To be honest, I don't know what it is to be 'Bombay'. I am surrounded by various things and I just observe those things and they probably make way into my work, consciously or subconsciously.

Like I said earlier, the time I spent at JJ when we regularly used to go to the Xerox stores and those impressions and memories eventually led to the Xerox project about seven or eight years later. I didn't realize it then but subconsciously, all those memories are still there.

Also, I have a tendency to pick up on little things and they could be from anywhere. The idea of the Blued book for example is inspired by India per se, but the immediate inspiration could have been Dharavi in Bombay. The Ghoda Cycle project is also more India, not necessarily just Bombay. Overall, my work is about the relationship between design and urban culture. How it works together is what fascinates me.

With the high density of people, the city takes on a very different look. People are constantly making small changes around you; you just need to pay attention. God is in the details, they say. I was in Tokyo some time back and it was interesting to notice their attention to detail and how it shows in the way urban spaces are planned/designed or even in the way their bullet trains (Shingansen) works.

### **Does it irk you that Mumbai is so unclean?**

Yes obviously we could have a better garbage disposal system, cleaner and more hygienic surroundings. I wish that can be achieved without damaging the way the city works. One may say that a place like Chor Bazaar is dirty, but it works and you wouldn't want to change that. I feel the same for Dharavi - it is unhygienic and dirty and could be much cleaner - but it is a great ecosystem in itself.

Bombay needs careful cleaning and restoration - like an old oil painting which needs to be cleaned and restored without damaging the textures, pigments and the fabric.

We could definitely do with better infrastructure and traffic conditions. The rent and living expenses are a huge menace. It is not a creative friendly city and you are often limited by space and money.

But visually, Bombay is unique and I wouldn't want to change much in that respect.

### **A lot of people complain about Bombay not being a very cultural city, especially when compared to Delhi. Do you agree?**

Even geographically Bombay is a relatively new city compared to Delhi. Bombay is where new creative/cultural industries have grown and thrived, eg. Bollywood, Jazz bandstand music culture, modern art (Bombay progressive art group) or even the indie music scene.

Delhi has seen so much history, wars and different dynasties – art, architecture and culture have always thrived there. I also feel that lately in the last five or so years, Delhi has improved a lot due to improved infrastructure (post Commonwealth games) that attracts people. The rent is lower than in Bombay and that is welcoming for creative

people. As a result, art and creative industries and cultural events have grown and continue to thrive.

**Is there a place you like to go to when you want to get over the blues or want to feel inspired?**

The sea. That's the greatest part about Bombay. The land ends somewhere, and you get to gaze at the sea.

**Is there anything in the city that you feel deeply nostalgic about?**

The city is evolving at a very rapid pace. The farms, the open space have all completely disappeared and there are way too many people. I miss the old waadis (community living spaces) in areas like Girgaon. They have so much charm and they are very fluid. You can see people's belongings, their lives all around the houses and there is a deep sense of community. That's gradually going away.

I think after about ten years, you will wonder who is a Bombay local as it is going to get very difficult for the real locals to keep a grip on the city.

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