

Designing for Children 2019

- Play and Learn

Designing an experience: Storytelling through multi-perspective lens

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Abstract: In an age where stories have dominated the world. The paper looks at the danger caused by a single story and how it manifests into the understanding of a place/people/ object associated with it.

It looks into the creation of a culture that promotes pluralism by using a monument and the multiple narratives around it as a tool to create a critical understanding amongst the children around the single story. The experience helped the children understand the past by not only listening to the stories but by experiencing them through an interactive curation to build a comprehensive and an objective understanding of the past. The concept was further explored by conducting a workshop and a walk around Dara Shikoh Library, Delhi.

The essence was to create critical engagement over agreement.

Key words: *Social design, experience design, historiography, inclusiveness*

Introduction

With the boom in technology and the access to information through multiple platforms the reception of information has become passive there by ruling out the possibility of an objective and a critical intervention.

The single story that circulates around becomes the popular story and often is received as the 'truth'. It limits the understanding and imagination and furthers in the manifestation of stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination.

In a world where communication has become smoother and faster with no tap on its authenticity, there exists a dangerous space where false identities are formed on the basis of misinformation or lack of information. For instance the cases of circulation of fake news have cost many lives (Didyala, A. 2018). The cases where the government is propagating certain ideology by changing the history in the books (Vijaykumar, N. 2017) and manipulating the historical narratives in the political rallies (Puniyani, R). History is being used as a tool to implicate a certain kind of understanding amongst the masses to mobilise them on the basis of identity. One such instance where the understanding is formed due to misinformation is when Archaeological Survey of India

(ASI) had put a signage on a mosque Quwwat al Islam meaning 'the strength of Islam' however the name did not exist before 19th century (Liddle, S. 2017).

The cases represent a scenario where single information is passed on to the public and the public in each case gets persuaded into believing the same. The structure so designed is such that it negates the possibility of independent thought and judgement. It becomes essential to intervene at an early age to foster the critical sensibilities amongst the children. Such is done by understanding the relationship of the children with the monuments and its history. The focus area has been selected as monuments because the story encapsulates the experience of the monument and creates an understanding of the place and of the people associated with it.

Children in their formative years are introduced to the history of monuments by either history books or by visiting to the monuments.

History as an academic pursuit is given a fixed identity. As Penelope Lively says, '*the nature of historiography has been such that they have to be 'accepted' - identified but not queried*'. (Southgate, B. 2015)

The chapters on monuments mainly talk about the functionality of the built structure, the series of the conquests made by the kings, the series of events in a chronological order.

The text states events as facts without leaving a space to inquire further, thus it lacks in fostering of imagination and building the curiosity which curbs the child to critically analyse for oneself. It is very unlikely to see a women's perspective or story in the books which therefore invisibilizes perspectives from the past. The way history is written and taught, it is made to be understood objectively on the grounds similar to science such understanding of history is problematic. In the book 'What is History', EH Carr says that historical facts are facts once the historian decides to write it. This selective approach of selecting facts cannot be considered objective and independent of the interpretation of the historian. The process of selection also brings to the question of what does it mean to see? The historian while looking at the records from the archives tends to select some and leave behind some information. Such selection is based on the subjective understanding of 'important' by the historian, which brings us to another question of what defines invisibilization of certain things at certain age? Such invisibilization again is taking place by unseeing certain piece of information disregarding it as less important than others. The element of selection, invisibilisation and who is writing for whom builds an understanding that there is no singular past that we are looking at- *there is more to what we know*.

The relationship of the children with the monuments and its history: The only time when one witnesses children going to a monument is when they have visit a new city with her/his parents, or a school trip is organised, or it seems to function as a playground. Monuments are a road trip to past. The story functions in binding the experience and understanding of the past. However such experience is not welcomed by children because the monument shares a dull space in their mind. The history of the monument is introduced by a guide; each monument has a popular single story, and is conveyed by the guide to the children. The guide brings in the element performativity to make the story engaging and eventful but there also exists a space where the bias of the guide intervenes. One such instance was at Qutub Minar, Delhi where the guide pointed at Khilji's tomb and called it '*Dusht ka maqbara*'. Even in the monuments that are 'popular' and invite huge number of public, the narrative that dominates speak of the kings and rarely about the women or the workers perspectives. This results in limiting the understanding of the past to one singular perspective. Another aspect that misinforms is the understanding about the past is the cultural lens that we wear to look back into the past. With the understanding derived from the present if one looks back, it creates a gap and such gaps leads to misjudgement of the people in past. One such example is when we hear of demolishing of the temples or mosques by the rulers, we immediately form an understanding on the grounds of religion. But in the past to build temples was to show the power and dominance of the ruler, and so on invading another city and demolishing of places of worship was considered an act of power independent of the religious politics.

One needs to understand that the events that take place do not have intrinsic meaning in themselves. The event independent of a story is meaningless. Narratives are considered as a constructive act where meaning is given to an event by adding a layer of narration to it and such narration should be received as a story and not the 'reality'. Such inquiry into the association of children with the monuments and its past helped in defining the design brief

Brief: How might we create a culture that promotes pluralism by creating a critical engagement over agreement with the multiple narratives of a monument by using experience design?

To introduce the concept of critical thinking and looking at things through multiple perspectives, a workshop was conducted with a group of 10 students from an NGO called ROPIO (Reach out and pass it on organization) near Ramesh Nagar, Delhi.

Introduction to the children: The children were between the age group of 11 - 14 years. The children in this NGO are from underserved communities and are students of the government schools. A monument for some is an interesting place, playful place or a haunted place- some are yet to figure out what it is for them. The monument that they are closely associated with is the India Gate, Delhi since they take a weekly trip with their friends. One monument that draws their attention is Taj Mahal because of the stories they have heard and read in the books. The historical figures from the Mughal Dynasty popular amongst them were Akbar, Jodha, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb.



Figure1. Picture from the workshop, Children from ROPIO foundation, Delhi

Design of the workshop: The design of the workshop was to subvert the status quo of the single narrative and bring another perspective into inquiry by the way of creation of dialogue.

Objective: To introduce the idea of multiple perspectives through the creation of a discourse around the single story of a person and of the place as a way to introduce the idea of multiple narratives around a monument and of the people associated with it.

Activity 1: Creation of different narratives around a person. The activity called for the participation from the kids. They were made to sit in a circle to make the exercise participatory. The activity was based on the guidelines of passing the parcel. It looked at creation of narratives by the children about their fellow friend. Creation because they were given the liberty to create a narrative which could be true or false. The assumption was that the first kid would say the popular thing about the kid selected however once we proceed ahead with the game there would come stories which would differ and compel the children to think through different angles.



Figure2. Demonstrating the process of the activity



Figure 3(a) and 3(b). Children involved in Activity 1

The conclusion drawn from the activity :

- Looking at the same person through different perspectives.
- Communicating the idea of a possibility that each story written might or might not be true.
- The person on whom the narratives have been said has no control.

Activity 2: Looking at the identity of the place as a stage of inquiry, by tracing its history. Thus, expanding the meaning of the place and its association.

Design process and Strategy:

The pictures were presented as flash cards one after the other in retrospect. Each time they were presented, the kids were asked to define what they see.

Moving back in time Tracing the history of the temple by going back in time giving a fresh perspective



Figure 4. The flash cards used in Activity 2



Figure 5. Children engaging with the picture and writing the feedback form

Conclusion drawn from the activity:

- Shift in association: Understanding what they thought to be a place of worship was once a place for garbage disposal and a person's innovative strategy got the area cleared by building a temple out of rock.
- An unexpected outcome: an element of surprise shaping their understanding

After the two activities, the kids were introduced to the idea of monuments through multiple lenses.

Based on the learning's, the experience was then designed around a monument called Dara Shikoh Library, Delhi

Dare Shikoh library:

The infamous library is situated in old Delhi, Kashmere Gate. The building has been around for about 400 years. Famously known as Dara Shikoh's library, it is part of the campus shared by Ambedkar University, Delhi and Indira Gandhi Delhi Technical University for Women (IGDTUW). The building unique in its architecture speaks significantly about the different times it has seen, since its beginning the building has had a royal stature beginning from the prince inhabiting the palace to the Britishers residency to its symbolisation as a building catering to knowledge. Despite of being a significant structure in the past it fails to hold the same recognition in the present. However, on further research about the building it was explored that the building was not a library but Dara Shikoh's Delhi Residence and library was just a part of it. The identity of the building gets mistrued by a plaque found in a school in 1904 (Safvi R, nd).

An experience was then designed around the 'library' basing on the ambiguity around its identity and its architecture.



Front side



Back side



Left side

Figure 6. The exterior of Dara Shikoh library from three different sides

Designing an experience around Dara Shikoh 'library' using multiple narratives

Objective: The objective is to critically engage the children with history by the way of building an interaction with monuments by highlighting the nature of historiography, invisibilisation, and communicating the idea that there is no single story by looking at the building through multiple perspectives.

Strategy: The nature of the walk is such that it prompts the audience to think by presenting multiple perspectives. The inherent nature of the walk is to create a dilemma but building linearity through the notion of time.

Design process:

Designing the space and route:

The space was designed in compliance with the architecture of the building. The building that is prominent on mughal architecture was picked as the 16th century, Dara Shikoh's Residence, The left side as the Residency of David Ochterlony, 18th century and the front side as the different things it once was post 18th century connecting it back to the present.

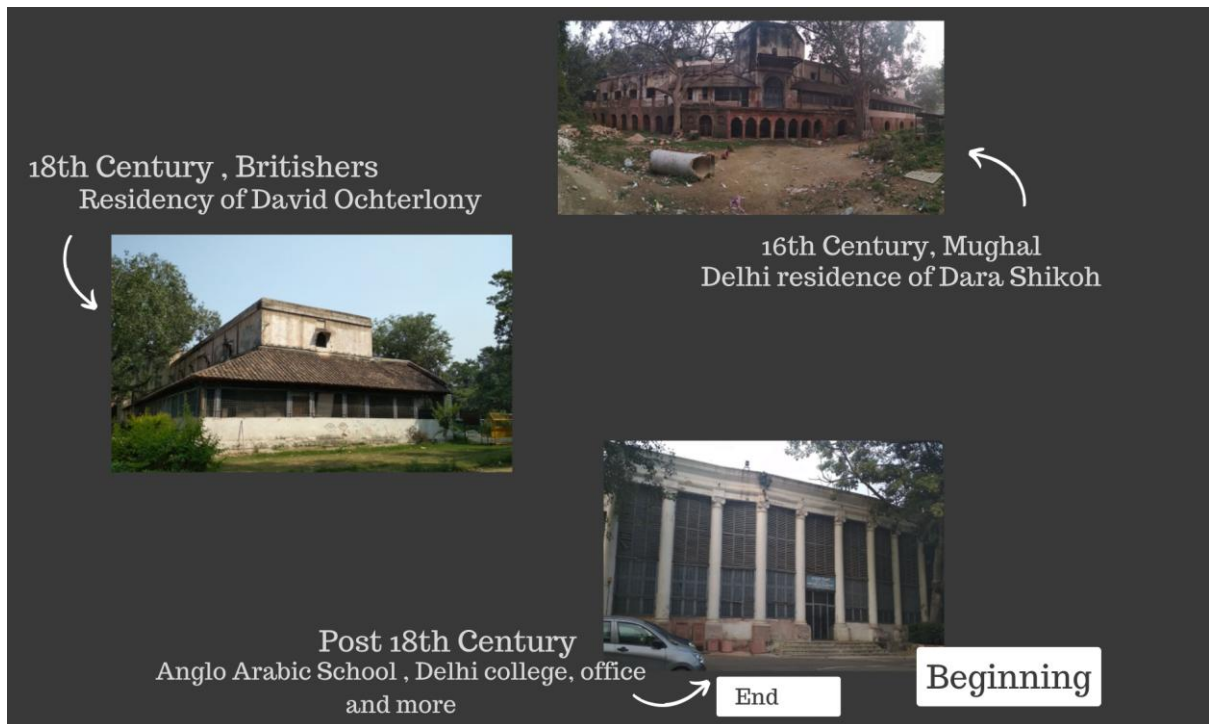


Figure 7(a). Representing the mapping of the building considered for storytelling

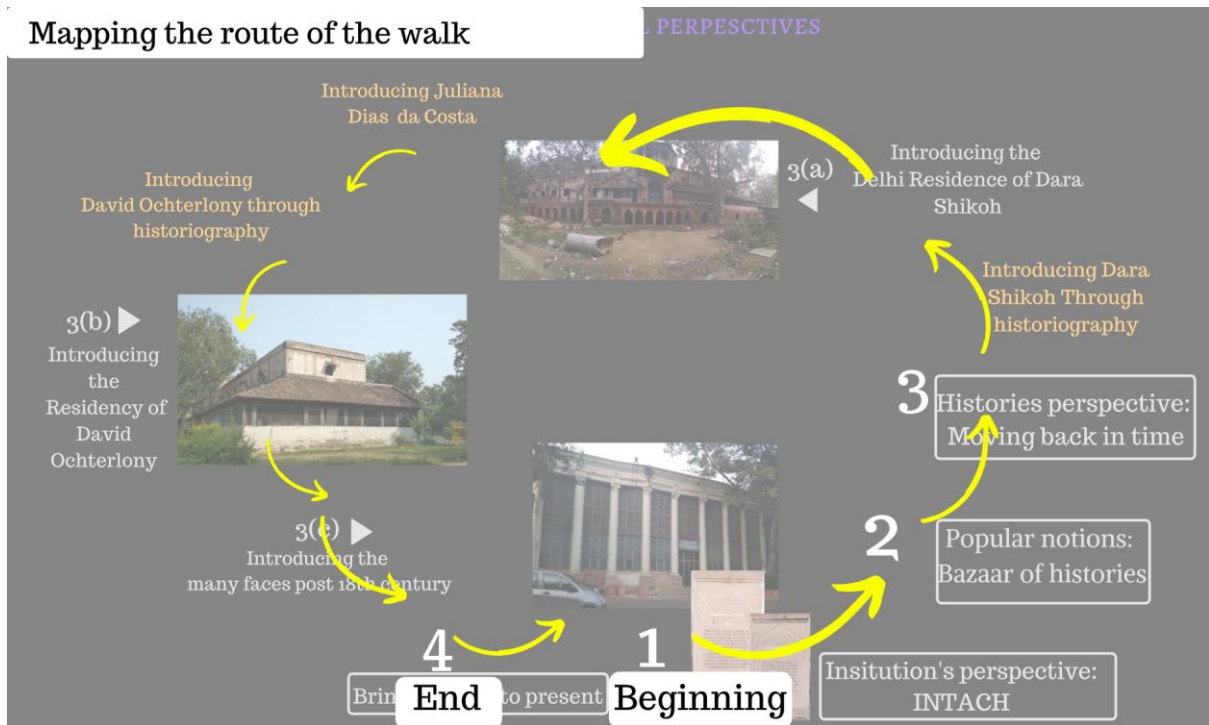


Figure 7(b). Representing the route for the walk

The design of the route was intentionally kept circular so that it takes the audience through different lenses and brings them back to the present thus completing the circle and coming back to starting position

Designing the content

Storyline: The storyline was constructed as such that it gamified the experience by giving the role of investigation to the audience. This made the process participatory.

The storyline was divided into four parts comprising of:

- 1) Organization’s perspective- through plaques.
- 2) The popular opinion of the people of Ambedkar University and IGDTUW
- 3) History’s perspective- Through the writings of historians.
- 4) The present perspective- transformation taking place in the monument.

The storyline looked into the historiography that surrounds the popular figures and addressed gaps in history relating to invisibilisation; it talked about the functionality of the building at different points in time.

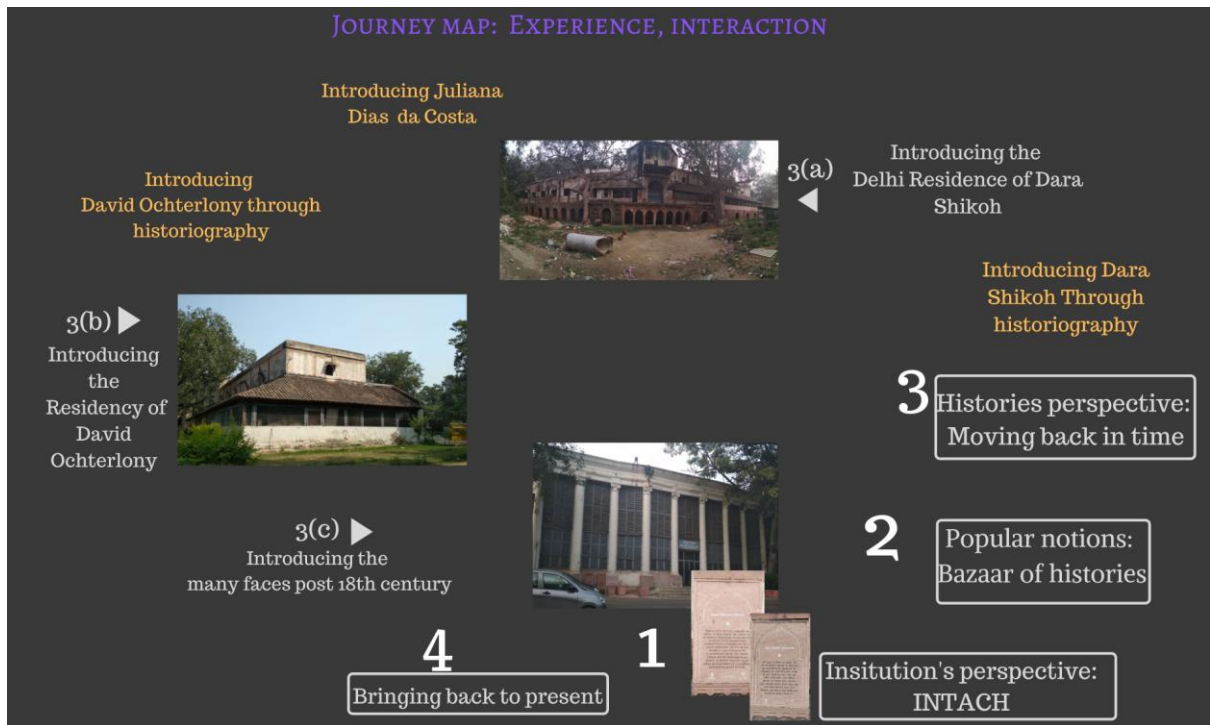


Figure 8(a). Representing the content introduces at different points in the walk

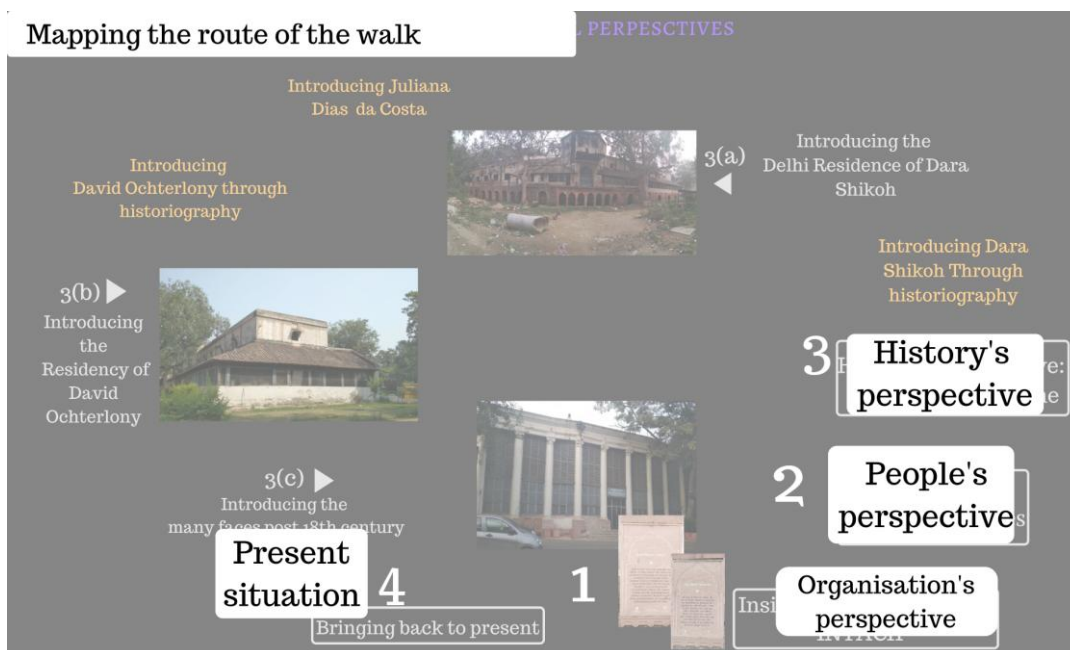
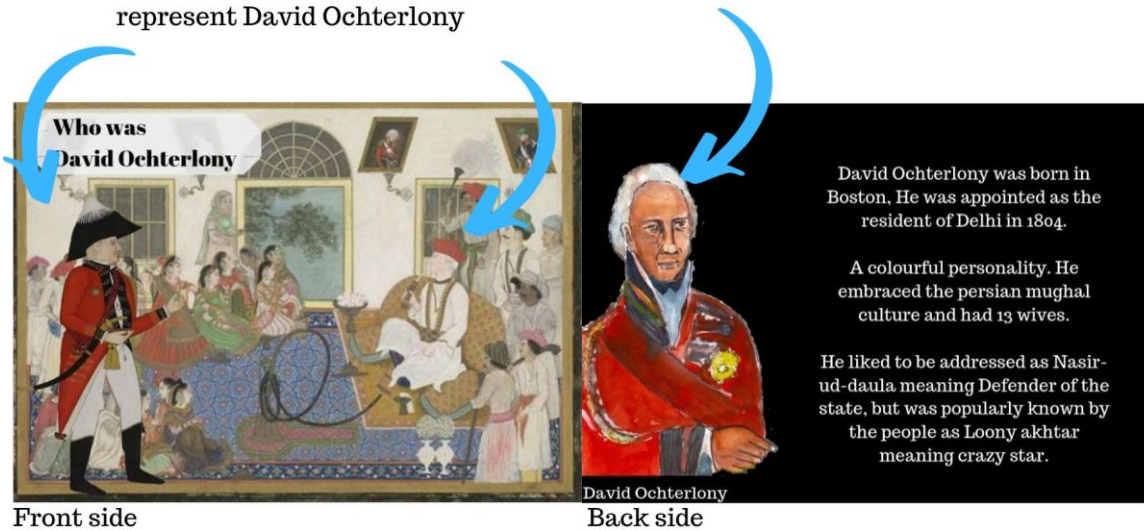


Figure 8(b). Representing different perspectives covered during the course of the walk

Historiography:

The arrows pointing at different figures represent David Ochterlony



Handout about David Ochterlony

Figure9 (a). Representing the design of the hand out

Hand out about Dara Shikoh



Figure 9(b). A hand out given to the children introducing various narratives about Dara Shikoh

Booklet: The booklet was designed in compliance with the storytelling, questioning the identity of the building by presenting various perspectives. The book had props which at each section had to be pulled out.



Figure 10. Picture representing different sections of the booklet

Props: The props functioned in conveying the idea of perspective. Each prop had to be placed at certain point in conjunction to the building conveying the idea of seeing the same thing through different lenses.



Figure 11. Picture grid representing the props

Execution:

Children invited: The children who were invited for the walk were from the organisation called Kilkari Rainbow home for girls, Kashmere Gate. Kilkari is an orphanage which provides shelter to women and girls. The children who came for the walk were between the ages of 11-14 years. The students are studying in government schools. This was their first interaction with the Dara Shikoh library.



Figure 12. Pictures from the walk conducted with children from Kilkari girls' orphanage, Delhi

Analysis:

The children were not familiar with the building and its history. The interaction fostered an inquiry into the building and into the different figures. Half way through the walk questions like 'How do you know? Where is it written? How do we inquire?' were being asked. This showed the building of curiosity, depiction of critical sensibilities and creation of dialogue. The interactive nature that is the experience of the walk helped in simplifying its inherent confusing nature. By the end on being asked how they view the building, some said that they need to inquire more before giving an answer and the others marked either all the options or none of the above which is different from the popular narrative of it being a library. This shows an understanding being formulated on not the 'popular' grounds but as a sign of independent thought and judgment. As a take away while some students took the experience using the props with them, there were some who took back questions with

them like Dara Shikoh or Dara Shukoh.

Conclusion:

The premise on the basis of which the walk was designed was critical engagement over agreement. The design's primary aim was to engage the children critically in a discourse around the single popular narrative that exists by the way of an interactive curation. Such experience compelled the children to look beyond the popular notions of the building and an attempt to investigate for themselves what the monument is for them. The experience brings in historiography commenting on the nature of history written through peoples' perspective and as an attempt to shun the idea of it being the ultimate truth. The curation introduced different people at different times and their association with the building. Therefore, conveying the idea is to celebrate not only the people in power but the struggles of the excluded and the discriminated thus building the grounds of empathy and strengthening the association.

Thus, Storytelling through a multi perspective lens at an early age is an attempt to functions as a catalyst in a world being mobilised on the basis of misinformed stories targeting vulnerable groups.

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