

WHEN THE CITY FOUND FUN OUTDOORS

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On a December weekend, six panels were arranged to form a canvas on pedestrian plaza in T Nagar. Artists were given an hour to paint their interpretation of the heritage of Chennai. As they busied themselves with brushes and spray cans, the old and the young gathered around. Street children who sell colouring books got an opportunity to wield the brush and the once busy commercial space transformed into an unhurried street with people sipping coffee and sharing memories.

That's the very purpose of creating a space like this, said Aswathy Dilip, senior programme manager, Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, which worked on creating the Plaza with the Chennai corporation. "Public spaces have been at the heart of Indian culture. Streets were where people spent time together. Cars and two-wheelers changed the nature of the street," said Aswathy. "We wanted to create safe equitable spaces for people to walk, which would also serve as platforms where they could play, sit and experience performances without paying for it."

That's been the theme the city has been waking up to in the past decade. With parks, beaches, and now the plaza hosting events and performances, all the

city is now a stage. Beaches have been the perfect backdrop for art installations. Carnatic music found its parks well over a decade. In Nageswara Rao park, mikeless kutcheris have been organised on the first Sunday of every month since February 2006. In 2015, T M Krishna took kutcheris from the sabhas into a fishing village, launching the Urur Olcott Margazhi Vizha.

And the city has quickly cottoned on to the idea. The aim of the live art project by Madras Inherited was to explain the history of T Nagar and use the Plaza as a space to engage with the public. "It generated a lot of curiosity and we could talk to people about the more than 100-year-old history of T Nagar," said Shalini Ravikumar, head of operations, Ma-

dras Inherited.

J Daniel, a 21-year-old beat boxer who has performed at Anna Nagar Tower Park and Nageswara Rao park, said it helps introduce people to new art forms. "Not everyone is familiar with beat boxing. At parks, the response was mixed with some people appreciating, while others didn't understand it, but it definitely grabs the attention of people," he said.

But the coming year may not be so kind to city parks that host a plethora of activity ranging from yoga to roller skating, to name a few. As the second phase of metro rail begins, Panagal park is among the few that will face the axe. Though authorities have assured that the park will be restored, residents are sceptical. On the bright side, metro rail has begun work on the 1,54,950sqm Central Square near Central railway station. The space, created after removing encroachments, will be turned into a recreation zone with dedicated pathways.

The corporation is in the process of setting up 67 new parks and 23 of them will be ready in April 2020. Velachery, Anna Nagar, Adyar, Mylapore, Tondiarpet, and Nungambakkam have all been identified for redesign and a revamp. "All neighbourhoods will have a street, which can serve as social and public space with utilities," said Aswathy.

(With inputs by V Ayyappan, Srikanth D)



ON THE ROAD: A performer in Pondy Bazar when the pedestrian plaza was inaugurated, and a street show in progress