



# Understanding Space And Realising Self

Samit Das

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**Samit Das** studied fine arts from Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan and Book Arts at Camberwell College of arts London. A practicing artist, he is inspired by the philosophical spirit of Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Das' research-based writings and archives look into 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian art and its relevance in context of contemporary art. He has conceptualised and curated research-based exhibitions that deal with Tagore's concepts of space, featured in his book *An Architecture of Santiniketan: Tagore's Concept of Space* (Niyogi Books: November 2012). He has exhibited in India and abroad several times. His works have been featured in magazines like *Art Asia Pacific*, *Wallpaper* and *Domus*. He lives and works in New Delhi.

Photo credit: Mithu Sen

For any creative person, the idea of space, in the guise of a studio is something deeply personal, imaginative and innovative. To approach the essence of this term, we could see the concept of physical artistic space starting out with cave paintings, and evolving, over the course of a very long journey, into the abstract idea of Web space, thus incorporating the concept of a studio as both mobile or rooted. Even the very word 'space' creates a pause, a connection with the organic rather than the constructed human world, and without this rupture, the term cannot be located anywhere. Space is an interaction between these two elements and in this sense I am extending the idea of space to something that is related not only to typical artistic practices, but includes the idea of it being a centre for the enhancement of human capacity and thought processes.

The idea of a studio could be community oriented or

something deeply personal; it could range from the idea of vast infrastructural spaces to a network of laptops or tablets connected to the Web. Web based space is intangible and involves a virtual rather than a physical identity that is rooted to a fixed space like a screen or a digital system. In this regard, I am interested in thinking about space as an intangible element that speaks to creative people and leads them to create tangible statements imbued with a strong physical presence.

The concept of art or artists emerged long after the paintings made by cavemen; these notions were invented when human civilisation began to live in built-up space. People have travelled a long way from the thatched roof hut of *Tapovan* to the digital world. Despite all the 'real' and 'virtual' movement, the most important site for any creative person remains spaces within the mind. It could then move on to spiritual space, and physically churned out space.

I would like to consider what space means holistically; one starts from a mindscape to translate an idea into physical space, which could take any form. I would want to consider the idea of space as it emerges while meditating under a tree. If we remember Rabindranath Tagore, we all know how important this idea was for him, as it was his visit to Santiniketan with his Father (when it was a small meditation centre) that planted the seeds for the school in Santiniketan<sup>1</sup> – which also shaped into a community studio for the most influential artistic minds of the time.

From photographic evidence,

we can see that the tree was the earliest concept of architecture in Santiniketan; people worked under the shade of a tree. But even as the space evolved, the integration between nature and man-made space remained fundamental. The whole concept of an artist working in a studio with northern light is in fact a colonial concept and arrived quite late in India. In ancient times, an ideal space for a creative person was a much vaster area, which provided room to think.

Whether a space is tangible or not, it serves to focus the gravitational force of the mind, allowing thought processes to begin a new journey. There are many sites in India which creative persons might consider wonderful for this function: caves, cave temples, stupas, viharas (Buddhist monasteries), Himalayan caves and temples. All these evocative spaces existed long before the idea of the studio arrived. Today, the development of hardware and software technology, which give us the option of working online or using clouds and Web domains, has brought about a fundamental shift in the notion of space. The notion of interactive space evolved over time and today people can work with a variety of platforms. Earlier, spaces were constructed by those who creatively engaged with them, but today such interactions seem to be based on demands and instructions. The inventors of digital space may not involve further in the creative processes within the spaces they churned out. Now space seems to be enduring and unlimited, but earlier the

Left side image: A lotus-shaped seat at Rabindranath Tagore's daughter-in-law Prati-madevi's studio, Santiniketan. Photo credit: Samit Das 1995.



Students of Kala Bhavan, Havel Hall, Santiniketan Photo credit: Alain Danielou and Raymond Baurnier. Image courtesy: AD Centre, Jean Cloarec Collection and Dr. Samuel Berthet



Mahatma Gandhi uses his lap as a writing desk. Photo credit: Late Suchanda Sarkar Collection

process of defining any space required us to investigate questions of identity and presence – identity was a far more static notion in the past.

The ghats at Varanasi are an example of a rich space of production; they inspired and continue to inspire endless creative expression from the ancient past to today, in the form of literature, art, performance, filmmaking and so much more. We could hence see this as one of the most dynamic spaces in India, which speaks to innumerable creative people. People who create spaces rarely imagine these will remain as enduring sites of inspiration for so many years. Swami Vivekananda realised the concept of India while seated on a rock at the seashore, which was later named Vivekananda rock. That particular site helped Swami Vivekananda to arrive at a realization, but nowadays this particular site may no longer be imbued with any particularly innovative energy. Alternatively, if we take the case of Santiniketan, however, Rabindranath Tagore had designed a space for himself, as well as for teachers and students. Here, the experience of space is extremely tangible and Tagore wrote a great deal on it. In this context we will quote the following letter:

“I have changed my room again. Within Udayana only. I should let you know here that the house is called Udayana. There are two small rooms in the northern part [of this house]. I love rooms of this kind, because, let me tell you. If the room itself is large, then the outside is distanced. It is a spacious room that actually imprisons a human being

because the mind makes itself comfortable in that sizeable space, pushing the external world still further away. There is nothing in this small room that is beyond my wants of living. There is a bed, a table, a stool — I have not tried to get a mouthful of sky in the room by tying the sky to a piece of furniture. I want the sky in its own place — in its wholesome, pure form. The moment I let it go it comes and stands right beside me. It is just a few steps away from the wooden cot on which I sit: it leans cosily against the window. Its task is to let the mind go on vacation. If it itself doesn't get sufficient leave, then it cannot give the mind a holiday. This time I have been able to achieve the right accord between my room and the sky — I am happy”<sup>2</sup>

As I said above, the concept of space in Santiniketan began its journey from beneath a simple tree; it developed into the thatched roof and then into concrete structures. Tagore did not want to destroy the vast horizon and he never wanted to build houses that were over a single storey high. The house he describes in the letter above was two and a half storeys high, but

he was never truly satisfied with it. His own search constantly drove him to explore new spaces for his creative activity. The recent discovery of his notebook (Mazumder Punthi) reveals his perceptiveness and imagination, and the notebook becomes a studio/ space in which he cultivated his mind from within. The earliest artists' studios built at Santiniketan (Master Moshayer studio or Nandalal Bose's studio) was extremely simple, a one-storey house with a large bay window, so that the artist remained in constant contact with nature. The concept of studios with a northern light did not exist in Santiniketan or in the Government art college in Kolkata. Nandalal Bose was not interested in the idea of creating life studies in a studio, he preferred to spend time in neighbouring villages and to study the villagers as they went about their daily activities, in order to understand the human body.

Tagore also wrote to the famous environmentalist and city planner Patrick Geddes

“Your idea of graphic representation of the growth of human life and mind, the cycle of their activities & varied manifestations has



Rabindranath Tagore's ancestral home, Jorasanko House, Kolkata. Photo credit: Visva Bharati Quarterly.





Rabindranath Tagore at Surul Kuthi Bari.  
Photo credit: Rabindra Bhavan, Santiniketan

strongly captured my mind, I wish we could make room for it in our institution.”<sup>3</sup>

Both his letters clearly reveal his deep concern with space, both for himself as well as for his institution.

The epicentre of the Bengal school movement was a south facing veranda in Kolkata, at Jorasanko, Tagore house [House No-5] where Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Samarendranath used to work, sitting on chairs, placing the paper on their lap. It was far from the concept of a studio enclosed by four walls, and represented the integration of an intellectual and a physical space.<sup>4</sup> On one occasion, Rabindranath asked them to go out physically to look at the outside world but they refused, replying that sitting there, they could see the whole world. They made a huge impact on the art world of their time and their influence is still relevant today. The space had its own character and remained deeply connected to the surrounding nature. They listed the sounds of the civet cat on the Jorasanko rooftop that led Gaganendranath to write the famous story *The Brave Civet Cat*; in fact most of his works were inspired by this space, Jorasanko house, so we could in fact see the

whole house as being their studio space. Unfortunately, these spaces did not continue to evolve and were unsustainable over time, as a result they slowly came to be frozen in time.

In those days the term ‘public art’ did not exist, but at that time Ramkinkar Baij was exploring nature as a site or a studio to execute his sculptures like *Santal Family*, *Mill Call* or *Sujata* and this concept was extended to the creation of frescos or murals on the walls of institutional buildings. In Santiniketan, another extravagant space was created for discussions and brain-storming sessions to enhance the human resource, it was called *Dinantika Cha Chakra* or the ceremonial tea room. It was built in the form of an octagon, not quite two stories high, with openings on all sides; the walls of the seating area were painted.

I cannot conclude this essay on space without mentioning an artist whose work I deeply admire. Gordon Matta Clark [1943-78] is one of the masters in the West, where he interacted profoundly and intimately with space; most of the time his sites of intervention were abandoned houses, or houses that were about to be renovated. He spent his entire life negotiating with builders and demolishers to execute his works. He said, “When a measurement does not work...a more intimate notion of space begins...” Matta Clark’s work dealt to a large extent with the complex relationship between time and space, as well as human experiences. His exploration of intimate spaces is associated with the dissection of buildings. The way in which he cut through

the axes reveals unexpected views that had never been explored before. His work consequently became a multi-layered journey. One of his specialties was walking through a building and seeing the many untold stories that could be unfolded, while the space still remained a very different experience for each person who visited it. This work allows us to imagine that creative processes are not the result of a singular fixed space, rather that of dynamic spaces. I feel that Matta Clark created a new, modern definition of studio spaces.

Personally, I am also interested in looking at the idea of space and thoughts about this idea through my own artwork. It does not matter where the works are produced, but the whole journey starts from my own mind and various resources that I employ, and it then moves on to a surface, which is my idea of a workspace. This is by no means a dictatorial journey, but has to remain flexible and inclusive. Anyone can follow his or her own personal journey through my work, as it is a platform where the work is constantly developing. I am attached to the idea of completeness, but a single exhibition may not be a complete statement, as the space has to run on to the next level and time, and it is probably in this that it will endure. How and where the work is made is irrelevant, and what counts is the dimension and panoramic vistas of the mind, not the size of the physical space.

1 The first school in Santiniketan started by Balendranath Tagore

2 *Pathe o Pather Prante*. 20 November 1928. *Visva-Bharati*. 1980, pp. 52-53 [Architecture of Santiniketan by Samit Das, Niyogi Books]

3 Original Letter/Dtd. 28 Dec-1922/ Coll. Santiniketan/Visvabharati/Rabindra Bhavan)

4 Mohanlal Gangopadhyay, *Southern Veranda*, Visva Bharati



Vivekananda Rocks, Kanyakumari, prior to temple construction. Photo credit: Nivedita O Bharater, *Shilpa Andola* by Shankari Prasad Basu, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata.