

# Controlled Chaos

An exploration of Delhi, India, brings retail inspiration By Eric Boulden

**W**hen a client asked our team to explore Delhi, India, as we were developing a new concept brand/Indian restaurant and retail space, of course we said yes! Immersing ourselves in a part of India for eight days during our discovery process would help us develop an authentic experience for a North American audience.

Controlled chaos best describes our experience of the country from the moment we stepped off the plane. No photo or movie can do justice to the experience of actually being on the ground, breathing the air, and walking amongst the local citizens. Although our traveling companions of Indian descent guided us and Westernized our stay, the culture shock was significant and meaningful.

The pace of life in India seems to move at two speeds. The first is an almost standstill waiting for life to happen. We saw many groups just sitting at stalls or roadside restaurants at all times of day. This is in sharp contrast to the incredible surge of speed required just to navigate the streets. In a country of over 1 billion people, space is at a premium.

This is never more evident than when you are driving. If there is space, it will be filled with a vehicle immediately. The lines on the road are guidelines rather than rules. And within this seemingly chaotic ritual of maneuvering to your destination lies a control and respect for those around you.

These same principles apply to retail space. If there is an open area, it is often filled with product, service, or food. Many street-side vendors have staked their claim on a mere square yard of real estate, and manage to live and thrive in front of traditional storefront spaces. Almost every square inch in the old city of Delhi seemed to be filled with retail: street vendors



*In a country of over 1 billion people, space is quickly claimed in India, whether it's in traffic or retail.*





*The defining beauty in Indian architecture are double domes and recessed archways, as in the Taj Mahal, which is further enhanced by the textural detail and use of cut stone screens. Delhi features market areas for a specific type of retail, which appear to form a giant superstore with streets as aisles. As you venture out of the city, middle- and high-end retailers occupy leased spaces in shopping centers, much like the location of this Gucci store.*

approaching cars, small street-side stands selling fruit, and small storefront vendors with living quarters above. As you travel out of the city, middle- and high-end retailers occupy massive storefronts or leased spaces in shopping and entertainment centers.

Like many cities in Asia, Delhi, and many of the small towns we visited have market areas within each known for a distinct type of retail. From food to clothing to car

parts to wood furniture to textiles and designer tiles, these distinct market areas are geared to a destination-centric consumer. Shoppers come with a purpose, not as part of a casual browsing and impulsive shopping excursion. With each area defined by what is being sold, the market areas seem to form one giant superstore with the streets as the aisles.

Although categorized retailing and product bundling is not new, it felt like this was

their birthplace. In North America, retailers have non-compete agreements written into their leases to avoid competition. In India, it seems that you will not survive unless your store is situated in the midst of your competitors.

**Architectural clarity**

The controlled chaos of daily life exists in contrast to the consistency and clarity of architectural traditions in India. Having

evolved over many centuries, Indian architecture has been influenced by great empires rising and falling. The influence of the British Empire is obvious, but for a Westerner, some of the most interesting structures and details derive from Mughal and Indo-Islamic architecture.

The most obvious example of this is the Taj Mahal. The symmetry of its architecture, employing double domes and recessed archways with an almost melodic and rhythmic pattern, is further enhanced by the textural detail and use of cut stone screens that draw you in for a closer look. This fine example of architecture did not disappoint in its grandeur.

The day that stood out most in our minds and opened our hearts to the culture of India was our last day, the Day of Holi. Holi is a spring festival, also known as the festival of colors and the festival of love. It is an ancient

Hindu religious festival, which has become popular with non-Hindus in many parts of South Asia. People gather to sing and dance, but most importantly, they “play.”

The morning is a free-for-all carnival of colors, where everyone chases and colors each other with dry powder and colored water. Some carry water guns and colored water-filled balloons. Anyone and everyone is fair game, whether friend or stranger, rich or poor, man or woman, child or elder. The frolic and fight with colors occurs in the open streets, in the open parks, and outside temples and buildings.

Our host was kind enough to set up an event of Holi at a farmhouse in his old village. We doused one another with color before jumping into a pool to the sounds of Dholki, an Indian drum. Despite the fear of trying to go through customs with the remnants of colors from the previous day,



India's Day of Holi is a spring festival of colors and love. People gather at the religious festival to sing, dance, and color each other with dry powder.

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Indian street vendors inhabit categorized market areas—from food to textiles—targeted to a destination-centric consumer. Like a mall with stores, streets serve as aisles of retail.



it was an incredible experience and has made for lasting memories.

**Our takeaways**

Many of our client’s customers have lived in or experienced this community, surrounded by the street retail culture, a multitude of architectural influences, and a defined social hierarchy. Our goal is not to replicate what we saw, but to portray it authentically as we design a contemporary brand. The brand experience will respect and celebrate India’s culture while

inviting a North American audience to experience it.

In some instances, our preconceived design ideas were validated. At other moments, our trip raised more questions and clarified our design thinking. Making this trip with our client gave us a chance to see and discuss potential brand touch-points as we move them through our own individual set of filters. This is a critical part of our discovery process. The material, architectural detail, and communication choices we make may not completely reflect

the controlled chaos that we experienced, but the tone and attitudes will no doubt form the personality of the brand.

Namaste. 🌈



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