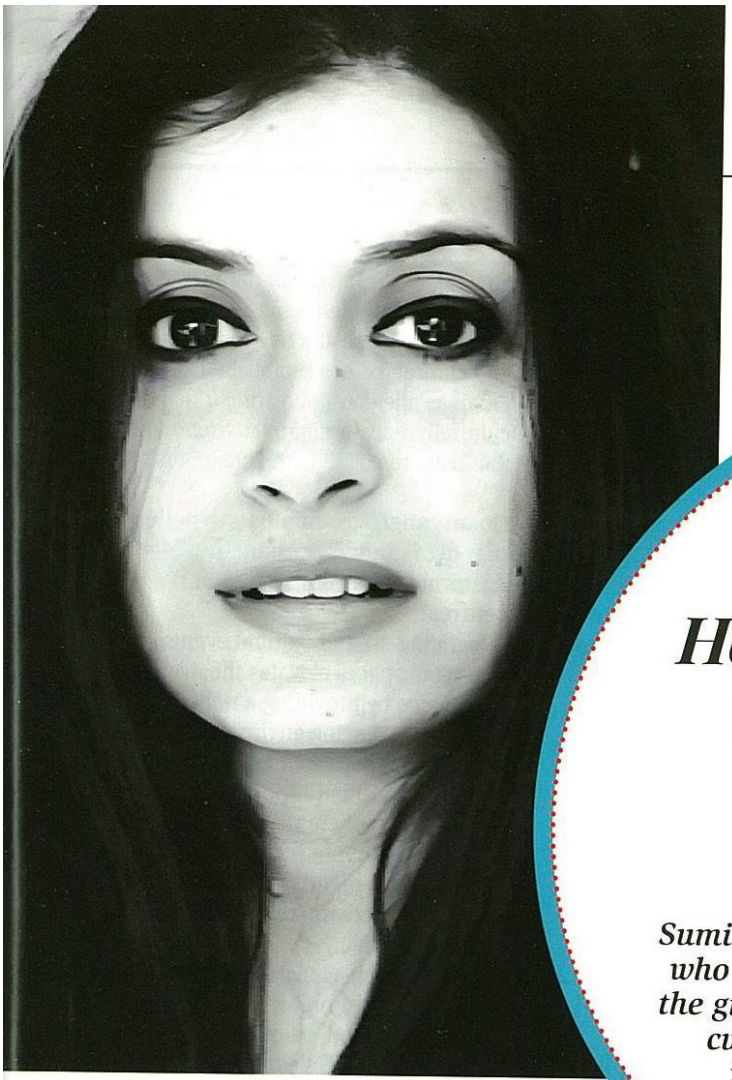


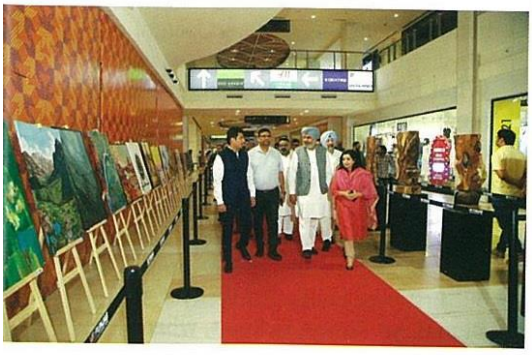
'Fusion of Art and Commerce Helps Virtuous Retail Create Culturally Rich Shopping Environments'

Sumi Gupta, board member of VR South Asia, who spearheads all things art and culture at the group, talks about the unique approach of curating art festivals in retail spaces to foster a deep community connection and drive commerce

By Sandeep Kumar

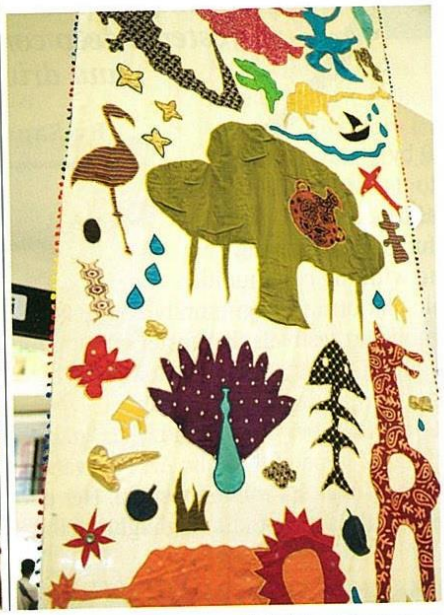
Xander Group-backed Virtuous Retail (VR) South Asia is redefining the essence of retail by embedding art and culture into its design philosophy. VR believes that retail spaces should transcend mere commercial functions, evolving into vibrant cultural landmarks that resonate with the communities they serve. Each VR centre acts as a dynamic platform for community engagement, featuring art, innovative architecture, and public art festivals that foster cultural interaction. By seamlessly integrating art with retail, VR enriches the shopping experience and enhances the cultural landscape, making art more accessible to everyone.

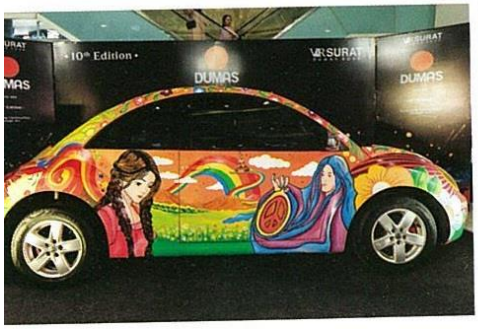
Over the past nine years, Sumi Gupta, a board member of VR South Asia, has played a pivotal role in this transformation by curating 22 impactful Public Art Festivals, supported by the Yuj Arts Foundation, drawing in over 9.4 million visitors. Her efforts have significantly shaped the retail real estate landscape in India, highlighting the importance of art in public spaces.



In September, she launched three new month-long festivals in Surat, Chandigarh, and Nagpur, which will be followed by two more in Chennai and Amritsar in January. Her festivals, including the Dumas Art Project in Surat, the Madras Art Guild in Chennai, and the Whitefield Art Collective in Bengaluru, offer emerging artists unparalleled opportunities through initiatives like the Student Artist Programme and foster inclusivity by showcasing young talent alongside renowned artists. In addition to her festival work, Gupta is involved in fostering artistic collaborations between India and the UK, recognizing the growing global interest in Indian art and culture.

In an interaction with Shopping Centre News, Sumi Gupta who spearheads all things art and culture at the group, talks about the unique approach of curating art festivals in retail spaces to foster a deep community connection and drive commerce. Edited excerpts…





Can you elaborate on the philosophy behind this unique blend, and how it shapes your retail strategies?

At Virtuous Retail, we view retail spaces as more than mere shopping venues; they are cultural hubs that promote community engagement and provide immersive experiences. Each VR centre is meticulously designed with architectural features and artistic elements that celebrate the cultural heritage of the communities they serve, transforming them into vibrant cultural spaces. This not only enhances the aesthetic appeal of our centres but also infuses them with cultural significance, connecting deeply with our diverse visitors.

By incorporating art into our retail strategy, we aim to inspire, educate, and engage, turning standard shopping experiences into enriching cultural journeys. This distinctive fusion of art and commerce has established Virtuous Retail as a leader in creating innovative, culturally rich shopping environments that truly resonate with consumers.

Do any metrics support the belief that art is indeed enhancing customer experience at your centres?

Integrating art and cultural events into retail spaces elevates the overall experience by providing a richer and more engaging environment for customers. These elements add cultural depth and aesthetic appeal, creating a unique atmosphere that goes beyond traditional shopping. The result is a shopping experience that is dynamic and significantly more rewarding for visitors.

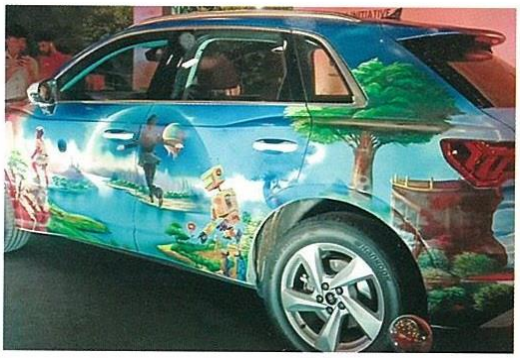
Metrics such as increased footfall during festivals, higher customer engagement, and extended dwell times in our centres are clear indicators of the success of these initiatives. We have noticed growing interest from our tenant and brand partners, who recognize the festivals as a platform to connect with their target audience.

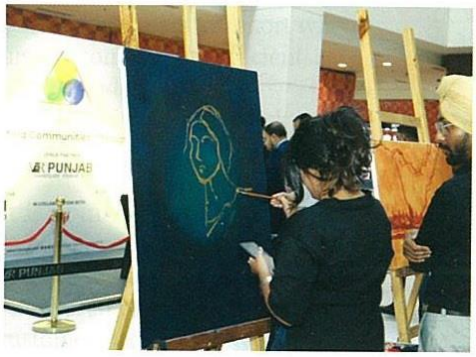
How important is community engagement to your brand?

A core philosophy that shapes VR's foundation is Connecting Communities©. The art festivals offer a platform for young artists and local artisans to showcase their talents, fostering growth and learning in an environment deeply connected to the region's cultural identity. The celebration of art and heritage brings people together, reinforcing community bonds.

What has been your most memorable experience curating these festivals?

Curating 25 public art festivals over the past decade has been an incredibly rewarding journey. One of the most memorable experiences was from our first ever Public Art Festival, the Dumas Art Project in Surat, where





we had the privilege of collaborating with several senior artists, including renowned artist Padma Shri Paresh Maity, who created the monumental Jal Tapi installation for the inaugural event. The life-sized boat installation was created using the actual sailing vessel or "Hodhi" that won the Magdalla boat race in 2012. This is a tribute to the long history of Surat as an ancient port city which is marked by its unique cultural facets.

With each passing year, these art festivals have become more layered introducing additional verticals such as literary events, poetry readings, performing arts, pottery, and textile workshops. Over the years we have collaborated with prestigious institutions like JJ School of Arts, Mumbai, M.S. University Vadodara, Chitrakala Parishath, Bengaluru, Delhi College of Arts, Govt. College of Art, Chandigarh, Srishti Institute of Art Design & Technology, Bengaluru, NIFT, Govt. College of Fine Arts, Kumbakonam, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, and SRM Vadapalani. As the art festivals have evolved, so too have our partnerships with civic bodies, institutions, and cultural organizations, growing in significance and expanding the reach and impact of our events.

This year we have had the privilege of collaborating with esteemed organizations like UNESCO, Rajasthan Tourism, Chandigarh Tourism – Le Corbusier Centre, Arts for the Future Festival powered by the United Nations Civil Society Conference, and Lalit Kala Akademi, amongst others giving the visitors a chance to see various forms of art and culture under one roof.

> **"Each VR centre is meticulously designed with architectural features and artistic elements that celebrate the cultural heritage of the communities they serve, transforming them into vibrant cultural spaces"**

What unique themes or initiatives can we expect from new events?
Each new festival brings its unique flavour, addressing global themes and contemporary trends that reflect the evolving landscape of art and culture. This year's theme 'Transcending Boundaries' for the annual program of six art festivals aims to unify diverse experiences, fostering a shared narrative that celebrates both local culture and global artistic movements.

In terms of new initiatives this year, the Public Art Festivals supported by the Yuj Arts Foundation have collaborated with renowned organisations like UNESCO, Chennai Photo Biennale, Rajasthan Tourism, Le Corbusier Centre - Chandigarh Tourism, and Arts for Future Festival, which is powered by the United Nations Civil Society Conference.

What challenges do you face in integrating large-scale art installations and festivals into retail spaces, and how do you overcome them while maintaining a balance between commerce and culture?
Virtuous Retail centres have incredible infrastructure for hosting Public Art Festivals. However, integrating large-scale art installations and festivals into a retail environment requires meticulous planning. Logistics, space management, and, above all, the safety of our visitors are critical considerations. We collaborate with artists, art institutions and experts who understand the unique dynamics of retail spaces to ensure that installations are strategically placed, and events are scheduled to enhance the overall experience.

Carefully curated workshops and events help create a harmonious balance between art and commerce. Through thoughtful planning, we enrich the shopping experience while maintaining the commercial vitality of our centres.

What are your long-term goals for the festivals and cultural initiatives at your retail properties?
We aim to expand the Public Art Festivals to more cities across India, broadening the scope and impact of these initiatives. Additionally, we are working to extend the festival's reach to a global audience. Our plans include increasing our support for student artists, introducing new and innovative forms of art, and exploring the potential of digital and interactive art to keep our festivals at the cutting edge of cultural expression. SCN