





Bharti Labwani



# In The

# Studio



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Bharti Lalwani is an art critic and a perfumer. She is the founder of Litrahb Perfumery and curator of Bagh-e Hind



### Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, in the 1980s and '90s and had a happy childhood. I have memories of a trip to Japan, at about six or seven, to visit family. I remember encountering such different landscapes, and unique tastes and smells. Till now Japanese flavours, especially sweets, are my favourite. I am also especially drawn to Japanese crafts, ceramics and textiles.

In 2020, I researched Japanese brooms and learned how to knot, tie, and cut brooms from palm leaves. In early 2021, I started learning kendo.

Things became very difficult as a young adult, and my escape from reality was watching *Dr. Who*, *Thunderbirds* and the 1960s *Star Trek*. Nigeria was going through a period of political uncertainty.

After returning from London with a degree in art I worked with an Indian conglomerate from 2002 to 2008. Then I left for Singapore to do my MA at Sotheby's Institute of Art.

I found my place and voice in the world only in 2011 while writing about biennales and exhibitions in Southeast Asia. I was 30 and I began to understand that with my unconventional background and education, a "proper career" was not possible. I had to take risks and be creative in order to make my way. This is an **admirable Nigerian characteristic**.



A detail of Maharaja Sangram Singh celebrating the Spring Festival with his nobles in the Gulab Bari, ca. 1715-20. Udaipur; opaque watercolour and gold on paper. Courtesy, Smithsonian

### What is a day in the studio like?

Spontaneous! I can spend weeks in the solitude of my apartment/studio. I message my friends to let them know I am alive, plus there's always some gossip to delight in. I like to read critiques on culture and class online. Sometimes I listen to audio discussions while I make soap, formulate perfume, or look at the lush banana trees



in 17th century paintings or draw a series of them. I visit the glass workshop and if uncle is enthusiastic, he listens to my ideas for new perfume flacons. Apart from that, I maintain a writing practice through my newsletters.

### What does 'Litrahb' mean? How did Litrahb Perfumery come about?

It's my name spelled backwards. By 2017, I was exhausted being in the art world. There were no opportunities for critics. **There is no recognition of our existence in this ecosystem, so no platform or patron exists to nurture independent thinkers.** When I applied for grants or residencies, I was rejected for being under-qualified, too qualified, too old (at only 36), or for not having contributed to South Asian contemporary arts since I had not lived in the subcontinent.

So 2017 onwards, I explored flavours and delved into how perfumers and chefs were using the same ingredients to elevate their aromatic experiences. I never planned to create a "business" or to monetise fragrance. **But I instinctively knew that as a "critic-perfumer", I could tackle the issues of art, history, politics — in a pleasurable way and still make a living.** After years of writing about other artists' practices, I finally had something of my own.

### Tell us about Bagh-e Hind. How do you distinguish between the two artistic and curatorial practices?

Litrahb Perfumery (LP) provides an income. Bagh-e Hind is where I spend some of it. I keep LP very simple. The perfumes are not too abstract and their descriptions use simple language. LP is not scaled up like mass-made goods.

Bagh is a virtual garden that I built with Nicolas Roth, a garden-scholar from Cambridge, Massachusetts. Here I undertake academic research, and curate it in a way that is multi-sensorial and enjoyable for the public. While my perfumery practice is individual, **Bagh is a collaborative space where I construct an olfactory map of 17th and 18th century India.**

Through five genres of paintings produced by Mughal and Rajput courts, Nicolas and I illustrate the commonalities between them. According to him, the Mughal and Rajput courts do not have differing olfactory (or horticultural) palettes at all. There are narcissi and roses all over Rajput art, and the Mughals wrote about kewra a lot (in *Baburnama*, *Ain-i-Akbari*, etc.) and also depicted it in paintings, along with banana plants, and many other Indian mainstays. They had one garden ideal, and one idealised material culture, even though different courts and points in time produced different painting styles. By centring the plants, flowers, and poetry, we present a sensorial experience of the art history of Early Modern South Asia.

### What motivates you to build this project and its entailing artistic practice?

I conceived Bagh-e Hind mainly to satisfy my own curiosity. Since my education on Indian history as a young adult only concerned the Independence movement, Bagh-e Hind was a way to access a part of South Asian history that interested me.

Nicolas built the foundation with his expertise in history and horticulture, and I added a perfumed skyscraper on top. Remove the foundation, and the tower evaporates!

When we began to put this project together in 2021, olfactory and horticultural aspects were rarely ever explored beyond their connection to politics, food, medicine and the esoteric arts.

I learned about NYU professor Dr. Dipti Khera's scholarship on the sensorial reading of Rajput court paintings. But it is only after our exhibition became public that the landscape around us changed! Now, I am pleased to see many academics vested



Images: (Top) Indo-Portuguese Relic Box soap translation; (right) Gulab-bari soap translation

# Studio

In conversation with our Features Editor,  
**VASUDHAA NARAYANAN**



Artwork by Rithvika Reddy.  
Rithvika is a visual and type designer from Hyderabad. Through her work, she focuses on UI/UX, type and publication design.



Manuscript: 'Khamsah-yi Navai (The Quartet of Navai) 1492c-1615; calligraphy by Sultan Ali Mashhad; later illustrated with six Mughal paintings. Pairs of lovers around an octagonal water feature at the centre; opaque watercolour, metallic paints and gold leaf. Courtesy: Royal Collection Trust, UK

in the sensorial dimensions of incense, perfume and gardens; and that museums have begun to insert scent and Hindustani music into the experience of their exhibitions. We did some groundbreaking work.

**Where do you start with your research? How do you decide whether an object is made into a soap, perfume or incense sticks?**

The practice of spontaneous making has actually opened up possibilities. The research is all there, in Bagh-e Hind itself. I pore over paintings of water features, *jalis*, or the architectural garden sites that Nicolas brings to my attention, and think about how these could be experienced as soaps, chocolates, perfumes, incense or glass flacon designs.

**Are there some ideas that don't make it?**

The ideas that don't make it are more technical, they require space, context and funding. If asked to 'dream big', I envision Bagh-e Hind as a travelling public garden installation across South Asia. I also envision an expensive, immersive, Van Gogh 360 style experience, where the details of the Mughal and Rajput garden paintings in our project can be expanded, and enjoyed.

**Tell us about the 'Stepwell' soap.**

This soap was a concept I had been exploring since 2019. Made in two parts, opaque soap is poured into the mould first; when it sets it makes a perfect vessel to contain the "water" part of the transparent soap poured in the second stage.

The soap itself was marvellous, and the reveal of each stepwell detail as one used the soap further was quite clever. It was an interesting idea that was scrapped as it could not be scaled up. **There is a reason I make under 10 editions of a soap at a time as the process is labour-intensive.**

**Your research into each painting is deeply extensive, yet very public. How important is it for you not to be a gatekeeper of knowledge?**

What is my incentive to be a gatekeeper? If my parents had the money, opportunity and encouragement from their families, they would have become artists and poets. But, due to the circumstances post Partition, it took four generations for someone like me to indulge in the rarified field of contemporary art. **I have spent my entire professional life being asked: Who do you think you are? And my standard response is: I'm extraordinary and I make my own way.**

I have open-sourced my processes and ingredients as much as possible. Self-taught perfumers can look at all the ingredients in the perfume translations of the paintings in Bagh-e Hind, and recreate the synesthesia for themselves. This is one way of making art history accessible, especially since learning perfumery has been an **informal space mainly occupied by women without credentials.**

**You recently questioned the Smithsonian curators about their exhibition, 'A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur'. The Smithsonian claimed you violated copyrights by making soaps based on their art on display. But isn't all art inspired by other art or art history? Take us through what happened.**

As an independent art critic, I asked a taxpayer-funded American museum obvious questions about their role and responsibility towards the subcontinent since they possessed so much of its art. They didn't like it.

I will preface this with strategies of our own public project. Nicolas and I systematically brought out approximately 30 Mughal and Rajput paintings from museum collections (including some from the Smithsonian) and presented them with their multi-layered context online. By designing this ourselves, we shaped its narrative without fear of being censored, and somehow included many more layers than possible for any real-world museum.

When we launched in September 2021, none of these paintings was on display. We brought out obscure South Asian objects like silver perfume and *paan* boxes, *gulaal* spray pumps, musical instruments and carpets, so that the public could connect those to the details in each painting. We created galleries of plants and a synesthesia online, so viewers can stroll through the flowers depicted in those paintings and connect them to photographs of existing garden sites. We pollinated these galleries by inserting playful Urdu verses from that era. Our novel methodology and mode of presentation no doubt broadens and spurs research in directions not thought possible before.



For museums this is great publicity as we were directing digital traffic to their sites. Having virtually borrowed from the Smithsonian and learning from the scholarship of its guest curator, Dr. Khera, I was looking forward to seeing what an institution-exhibition like 'A Splendid Land' could do.

'A Splendid Land' was ten years in the making and built chiefly on Dr. Khera's intellectual labour. It must have been a huge moment for her. However, a month into the show, in November 2022, I noticed that there was negligible press around this exhibition and Dr. Khera was not mentioned on the Smithsonian website, nor was there much information about the exhibition itself beyond the donors' names.

Image: Nighttime Raagmala soap translation

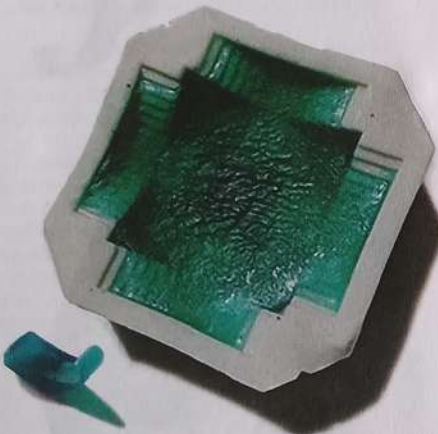


A detail from "Pleasures On A Moonlit Autumn Night", folio from the Sitaravilas, ca. 1740, Udaipur; artist: Shahji; opaque watercolour, gold and silver on paper. Courtesy: Smithsonian

The press release-style regurgitations in *The New Indian Express* and *Vogue India* publicised only the American museum curator. So I thought to take the opportunity to interview both curators comprehensively.

**There are many scholars, academics and experts who could write reviews of this show, but that is not the case...**

Generally speaking, beyond getting published in obscure journals, academics have no incentive to bring their scholarship into the public sphere. They depend on a precarious network for career advancement, so no one publishes any critique. My editor at *Hyperallergic* (NYC) greenlit the long-form Q&A and the museum agreed to be interviewed by me.



While I awaited responses to my questions, I perused the museum's images of paintings that they cleared for press and publicity. **I was really inspired by the daintily painted gold-lined monsoon clouds, carefully drawn plant and flower details, views of the Prussian blue night sky through palace archways and so on.**

I also thought it tragic that an exhibition of such scope with paintings from Udaipur's City Palace Museum was open to an audience not in India, but in America. Even their panel discussions were not accessible online. I thought about what I could offer the public besides my interview. How about a soap that embodied these paintings? A sense of equity, of reparations through a 'soapy gesture' for audiences in India felt fair and harmless. I could also draw in an uninitiated public safely into this complex dialogue on art and politics.

**So, I spontaneously created a series of soaps that riffed on the exhibition title, 'A Splendid Cloud: Soap Translations of Paintings from Royal Udaipur'.**

#### At what point did all hell break loose?

I really admire Dr. Khera. She is an exceptional and generous scholar. I have come to appreciate these artworks mainly due to her eloquent discussion in her book, *'The Place of Many Moods: Udaipur's Painted Lands and India's Eighteenth Century'*. But I suspect this whole thing got out of hand because of how sensitive the Smithsonian is to institutional critique in general.

On the day of the deadline, instead of receiving the curators' responses to my questions, I received a terse claim from the museum's PR department that, by making (and selling) art based on paintings in their collection, I had violated their copyrights. It further mentioned how "provocative" my questions were and swiftly shut the door to dialogue. That is how the museum let slip that they were searching for a reason to refuse the interview.

**Every visitor to their public exhibition was taking photographs of those paintings and posting them on social media. But I, an Indian in India, making art inspired by 300-year-old Indian paintings on public display, had crossed the line.** To be clear, this is not about ethics. We are talking about a legal grey zone of copyrights, an artificial boundary the museum has created to protect itself.

Museums want it both ways — they want the publicity, but also control over which public engages with this knowledge. Who has the legal right to endlessly profit off of our art history? Only them and their lame gift shops. The hysterical, accusatory tone in their email made it sound as if I were slapping on images of these paintings over mass-produced soaps and profiting off of some impoverished curators.

#### Why do you think there is a hoarding of this knowledge?

The type of public access I continue to provide, through my writing and art, disrupts the hierarchy within the art world where knowledge and expertise is cultivated so that only a select few can participate and uphold this closed-ranks system. **If the public realises that the museum needs them and not the other way around, such elite spheres would be forced to become more people-centric** — and this was the nature of my questions to the museum:

*Since the curators repeatedly emphasised the sensorial experience of "A Splendid Land", how did they curate this show to allow differently-abled people to access this art history beyond adding peacock and elephant sounds?*

*How did the museum curator and the independent scholar distribute the intellectual labour between themselves? How did they steer the audience away from orientalism that the exhibition title itself perpetuates?*

*How does the Smithsonian curator navigate beyond her billionaire donors to be more inclusive of the public in the Global South, all the while being singularly in charge of the largest collection of South and Southeast Asian art in the Global North?*

*Why wasn't there any virtual programming created so that audiences from South Asia could tune in?*

*How did the Smithsonian see its role and responsibility, being an institution existing in proximity to political institutions dedicated to imposing American supremacy around the world?*



The public will not be receiving the curators' answers — because...I made some soapy art.

**In your newsletter, you do explicitly say that these people are 'taxpayer funded salaried public servants'. Why does this matter?**

We should be paying attention to how our public institutions (health care, transportation, education, culture) have so thoroughly been hollowed out by private corporations. Should we go to the "world-class" culture centre opened in Mumbai recently by the Ambanis? Isha Ambani sits on the board of the Smithsonian, by the way. Her mother is on the board of the Met in New York City. At the same time, as the main donors of right-wing Hindu fundamentalist politicians, they hold a corporate and political monopoly across India. So these people dictate which internet service to use, which store to buy our vegetables from and now what our "Indian" art history should look like.

It's easy to connect the dots between the Smithsonian behaving like a private corporation that only responds to its billionaire stakeholders



Rajput painting: "Kamod Ragini", ca. 1770-75; Kota; opaque watercolour and gold on paper. Courtesy: Smithsonian

such as the Ambanis and their NMACC opening in India on the same weekend as the torching of the *Madrasa Azizia* in Bihar Sharif. A 113-year-old library where ~4,500 books were burnt by Hindu right-wing thugs, while India's cultural elites took to social media to explain to us why India "needs" the benevolence of billionaires through such cultural centres.

**Why is this type of an exhibition 'inequitable' and what is the way forward?**

This interview, if published, would be the only piece to date that would have furnished a broad Indian and international audience with a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual merit of such exhibitions. How will the general public know that Dr. Khera's magisterial scholarship pushes back against colonial narratives that for too long painted these Rajput kingdoms in a dismissive light? Not everyone is going to buy the expensive exhibition catalogue. Alternatively, I considered interviewing just Dr. Khera but by March 2023 the museum brought an abrupt halt to communications.

The way forward for me is through my Bagh-e Hind, a garden where I outwit these virtue hoarders.

**What have been some of your favourite collaborations so far?**



My longest (virtual) collaboration has been with Nicolas Roth. I know of flowers through their extracts and synthetics, while he knows them through the varieties he grows, and their historical significance in early modern South Asian gardening texts. Our individual practices and formal training, when combined, fit like obvious puzzle pieces. There is no other historian (I have done my due diligence to find out) who can look at these ancient depictions of flowers and plants and identify the exact variety of jasmine, rose, grapes, the season, time of day, type of soil, and further have the ability to describe their specific smells for me to translate into artworks.

**What are your hopes for Bagh-e Hind in the next iteration?**

At times, I have thought about giving up on Bagh-e Hind. **There is no precedent for such a project, no guidelines, support, protection; so much pilfering of our intellectual labour.**

But Bagh-e Hind serves a purpose. The catalogue section is an exciting space where I have commissioned a few brilliant friends like critic Parsa Sajjid, academics Vinit Vyas, Lily Kelting, Deborah Schlien, and fermentation expert Payal Shah, among an ever-growing list, to write original essays around sensorial research that pushes the boundaries of scent and flavour.

I am currently exploring how a delightful smell and a pop-up book can expand on our ideas differently from ways that already exist in the online exhibition.

**Who inspires you? Is there a specific essay/quote/poem that you often come back to?**

I enjoy returning to the writings of Eqbal Ahmad. He always won people over even in arguments by using a language of inclusion, peppered with humour. And sometimes an unexpected sharpness with a lick of anger at those who were in positions of power. He was born in Bihar, maybe a decade before Partition. Imagine being the only brown boy studying in Princeton in the late 1950s, then ending up in Algeria on the side of the anti-colonial revolution; and then being arrested in 1971 and put on trial for conspiring to kidnap Henry Kissinger as a way to put an end to the secret American bombings of Cambodia and Vietnam! I love his inventive, creative wit and moral clarity.

My copy of *Eqbal Ahmad: Confronting Empire* is a well-worn, second-hand copy, signed by his interviewer, David Barsamian.

**How did you find your way to creating objects of care?**

I think being a critic is an act of care. Looking closely at the world, asking questions, and writing for the public good comes from a place of care and sensitivity. Sensitive people see the world very differently and often with an unwavering sense of right and wrong. So it was only a matter of time before the peculiarities of my artistic and intellectual abilities merged to create sensorial experiences.



'Maharana Jagat Singh at a religious ceremony in the City Palace', ca. 1835, Udaipur, artist: Jai Ram; opaque watercolour and gold on paper. Courtesy: San Diego Museum of Art

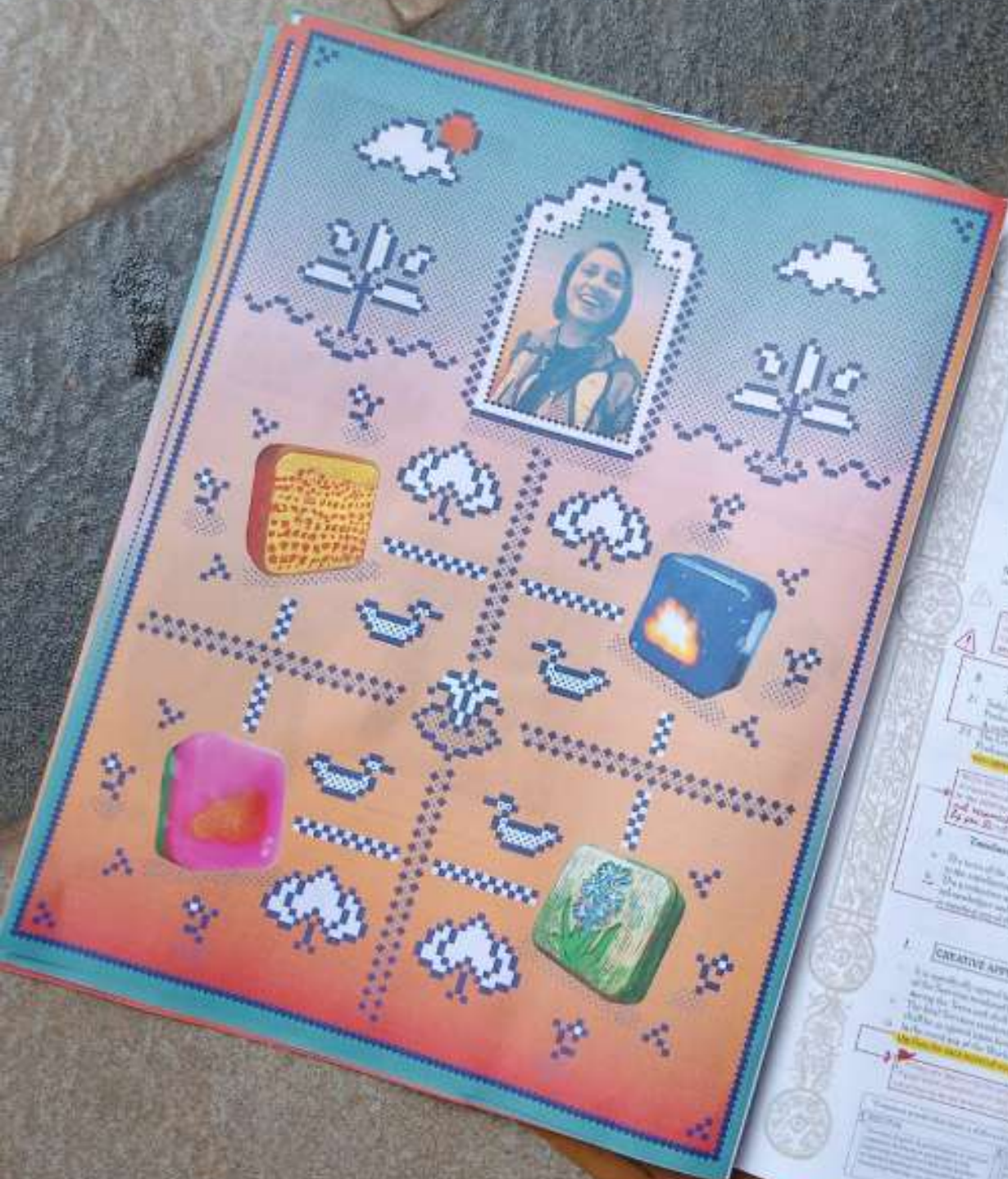


Detail of 'Sunrise in Udaipur', 1722-23, Udaipur; opaque watercolour and gold on paper. The City Palace Museum, Udaipur. Courtesy: Smithsonian

**What are you looking forward to this year?**

I'm looking forward to doing less. Our history is replete with paintings of frolics in pool parties, garden soirees, naps under tents. I am learning how to while away my time doing nothing. ☺





# Asking D

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- QUESTION 1**
- ANSWER**
- The Charter of 1931 was the first time that the CIA had ever supported the arts and culture.
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## HOW TO USE THIS

1. Read the question carefully and identify the key words. 2. Think about the context of the question. 3. Consider the options and eliminate any that are clearly wrong. 4. Choose the best answer.

### SCOPE

The scope of the agreement shall be limited to the design and construction of buildings. It shall not include the design and construction of infrastructure, transport, or other works. The scope of the agreement shall be limited to the design and construction of buildings. It shall not include the design and construction of infrastructure, transport, or other works.

### TERMS

The terms of the agreement shall be those set out in the Schedule. The terms of the agreement shall be those set out in the Schedule. The terms of the agreement shall be those set out in the Schedule.

### CREATIVE APPROVAL

It is a condition of the agreement that the design and construction of buildings shall be subject to the creative approval of the CIA. The design and construction of buildings shall be subject to the creative approval of the CIA. The design and construction of buildings shall be subject to the creative approval of the CIA.

DEFINITIONS	PROVISIONS	NOTES
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