

Checking into Hotel Contagion

An exhibition in Bengaluru takes you to the room where a previous deadly pandemic originated

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By BINDU GOPAL RAO

China has an unsavoury reputation in virology. Imagine going back in time in 2003 to land in Room 911 of Hong Kong's Metropole Hotel without a PPE suit. It is where the SARS outbreak of 2003 began. In February that year, a doctor from Guangdong, China, with breathing problems checked in and unintentionally infected 16 other people on the same floor of the hotel. They carried SARS across the world. Art is a reminder of history, both contemporary and of the future. Amid the raging pandemic that also originated in China, Matt Adams of Blast Theory—an artists' group that makes interactive works—has fictionalised the SARS epidemic in the form of a 1:50 aluminium scale model of the hotel floor of the Metropole. Titled 'A Cluster Of 17 Cases', it is on show at Contagion, a 45-day exhibition at Science Gallery, Bengaluru, held in collaboration with Robert Koch Institute, the Indian National and DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance.

'A Cluster Of 17 Cases' was created for Wellcome as part of their Contagious Cities programme. The original artwork is a physical model of the accursed floor of the hotel, which has been digitally recreated by Adams—part of which was shot using mini cameras inside the original model. Any curious visitor can walk into the Metropole Hotel and explore the events that caused a global epidemic. Jahnavi Phalkey, founding director, Science Gallery Bengaluru, says that the exhibition will run virtually until December 31. The eerie experience of



wandering along the corridors of the hotel takes the visitor back in time.

Since it is a virtual immersive experience, you can safely explore details of the transmission of diseases, understand the investigative nature of epidemiological research, allowing visitors to participate in the tragic

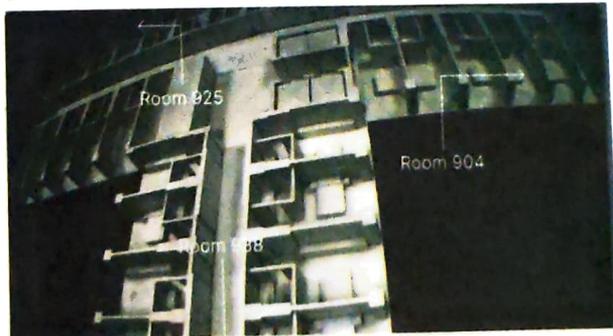
Blast Theory founders Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj; (below) screen grabs from A Cluster Of 17 Cases

experience of being a part of an outbreak. This opens doors for further reflection on their choices in uncertain circumstances. "We interviewed many WHO staff to understand their work. We spent a lot of time in the organisa-

tion's library and archives. Our research gave us fascinating insights into the skills and practices of experts combating infectious diseases. We wanted to explore their psychology to understand how they dealt with mortality," explains Adams.

Interestingly, no staff at the hotel were infected. To understand why, the researchers did several tests. "The exhibition recreates the process by which the epidemiologists studied the room by room movement of the guests on the doomed floor. Though they did not get definitive answers, the most likely explanation is that Patient Zero vomited in the hallway and other guests inhaled the aerosol. The show reveals how even the most banal actions, like touching a handrail or sneezing, could have unforeseen consequences," adds Adam.

Contagion can be viewed for free and is available in both English and Kannada at nowtransmitting.com



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