Ruins of modernity

Author(s) Hell, Julia; Schönle, Andreas

Imprint Duke University Press, 2008

Extent xv, 511 p

ISBN 9780822344568, 9780822344742, 9780822390749

Permalink https://books.scholarsportal.info/en/read?id=/ebooks/ebooks0/duke/2012-10-25/1/9780822390749

Pages 261 to 266

RAHUL MEHROTRA

14

SIMULTANEOUS MODERNITY

Negotiations and Resistances in Urban India

Urban India has been one of the most interesting sites for the modern project—a place where the notion of modernity was simultaneously embraced and resisted, creating a highly fractured and fragmented landscape. In fact in India, societal modernity and aesthetic modernity often took different trajectories in how they were introduced and absorbed, sometimes collapsing together, but most often operating independently. Societal modernity, or the process of modernization, was unleashed in colonial India and has developed a well-documented body of scholarship. Aesthetic modernity emerged later through the process of industrialization, with shifts in material production. Its most obvious presence was realized only when architecture and the arts embraced the new sensibility and aesthetics of modernism. It is this aspect of its codification in architecture that is a crucial area for discussion as architects and urban designers grapple with and make sense of the emerging built landscape of India.

Following its introduction to India in Mumbai (then called Bombay) in the 1920s, art deco was the harbinger of aesthetic modernism. Through the medium of film and a wealth of public sites that dazzlingly combined consumerism and entertainment, Western cultural modernity—or aesthetic modernism—influenced all of urban India.[1] Leaders of India like Nehru, who clearly embraced modernism as the appropriate vehicle to represent the country's future agendas, encouraged the spread of modernism. The elite patrons of architecture and town planning found it attractive, as it was devoid of references to the past and brimming with optimism about the future. In fact, Nehru's orientation made India the most vibrant

site of the modern project, where the East-West relationship was constantly redefined and where the modernizing experience was a key to forming the identity, or at least the architectural identity, of the nation. The culmination of this process was the invitation extended to Le Corbusier to design Chandigarh, the new capital of the Indian states of Punjab and Harayana. His designs became the symbol of the modern independent India of Nehru's imagination.[2]

But India's independence, while closing the debate on architecture and identity, did not produce the society that the nation had yearned for. Instead all efforts were directed to dealing with the splintered society the nation inherited, a society fractured by caste, class, and economic disparities; rural-urban divides; and a multitude of religious affiliations. "Independence unleashed waves of violence that seemed to be the wrath of supernatural powers. Indeed, in a metaphorical sense, the violence embodied the Indian philosophical tenets of creative and destructive forces—the cycle of chaos leading to order only to return to turmoil. Although modernity claims to decry chaos, its determination to oppose tradition breeds confusion"[3]—a phenomenon that continuously resurfaced and played itself out in far more potent manifestations as the nation evolved.

In the coming decades, the greatest challenge for modernity as the ideological project of independent India, and urban India in particular, will be resistance by subaltern cultures and their negotiations with the state. In the Indian city space many modernist urban systems spread to several other cities and formed startling combinations. We see two major axes of modernity: The first is the axis of the divide between East and West, which has produced distinct variants of modernity; we now recognize that this relationship is much more complex and subtle than the endless repeated world of simple, determinable substitutions. The second axis is that of the asymmetry between hegemonic and subaltern cultures, which continues to produce more ruins and cause an incredible mutation of the original intent of both aesthetic and cultural modernity. This is a fascinating area, and one that is becoming increasingly evident in the emerging urban landscape in India.

Urban India has become the new site for this negotiation between hegemonic and subaltern cultures where a recycled modernity has emerged. This modernity is fluid and mocking. It belongs to those estranged from the elite domains of the formal modernity of the state. It is a pirate modernity, slipping past the legality of the city to create a survival strategy without any particular self-conscious attempt at constructing a counterculture.[4] This is in contrast with the many historical legacies of modernity in India, where instruments such as the state plan (borrowed from Soviet planning paradigms) controlled, determined, and orchestrated the built landscape. With the dramatic retreat of the

state in the 1980s and 1990s, the new space of the everyday is where struggles are articulated—a space that has been largely absent from the cultural discourses on globalization in the urban and architectural contexts, which have tended to focus on elite domains of production in the city.

Today, Indian cities clearly contain two components in the same space. The first is a static city, built of more permanent material such as concrete, steel, and brick; comprehensible as a two-dimensional entity on city maps; and monumental in its presence. The second is a kinetic city, which is incomprehensible as a two-dimensional entity, but perceivable as a city in motion—a three-dimensional construct of incremental development on the ground. Built of recycled waste, plastic sheets, scrap metal, canvas, waste wood—juxtaposed with items like dish antennas, webs of electric wire, and cable—this city represents a kaleidoscope of the past, present, and future compressed into an organic fabric of alleys, dead ends, and labyrinths; it is a mysterious streetscape that, like a living organism, constantly modifies and reinvents itself. The kinetic city is not defined by its architecture but by its spaces, which hold social values and support lives—and it is this pattern of occupation that determines the form of the city and how it is perceived.

In Mumbai, for example, it is commonly believed that about 70 percent of the population works in the informal economy. This number has risen as the fragmentation of urban labor curtails workers' bargaining capacity. Approximately 60 percent of the population of Mumbai lives on approximately 10 percent of the land, in the city's interstitial spaces: beside roads, in drainage pipes or ditches, on the edges of railway lines, on sidewalks under plastic sheets, or in houses with walls made of empty storage drums. This is the kinetic city, which like a twitching organism locates itself through the city in perpetual motion—a fluid and dynamic city that leaves no ruins.

The kinetic city, like a bazaar in its form, can be seen as a symbol and metaphor for the physical state of the emerging urban Indian condition. In fact it is from the kinetic city that Indian cities derive their image today. The processions, festivals, hawkers, street vendors, and street dwellers all create an ever-shifting streetscape—a city in constant motion, whose physical fabric is kinetic. In contrast, the static city, which depends on architecture for its representation, is no longer the single image by which the city is read. Thus architecture is perhaps no longer the spectacle of the city or its dominant image.

In fact in the kinetic city, the very expression of the city is temporal in nature: it is in constant flux. Festivals—including Diwali, Dussera, Durga Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, Muharram, and Navrathri—are emerging as the spectacles of the kinetic city, and their presence on the everyday landscape pervades and dominates the popular visual culture of Indian cities. In Mumbai, for example, the

popularity and growth of Ganesh's festival have been phenomenonal. During the festival (which occurs sometime in August or September because it is based on the lunar calendar), numerous neighborhoods transform themselves temporarily with lights and decoration. For ten days, entire spaces are created with an array of paraphernalia to house the idol of Ganesh. During this festival period, family, neighborhood, and city events mark the celebrations, and on the last day the idol is taken to be immersed in the sea, in processions that literally mobilize the entire city. The processions weave through assigned routes in the city, and through their scale, they showcase the intensity of their following in a competitive spirit with other processions emerging in other neighborhoods of the city—a truly spectacular format! The processions wind their way to the nearest waterfront to immerse the idol of the God and bid it farewell amid chants inviting Ganesh to resurrect his presence the following year.

The final act of immersing the idol is a wonderful metaphor, where through immersion the idea encoded in the spectacle disappears with the clay from which the idol is made, dissolving in the water. Thus there are no static or permanent mechanisms to encode this spectacle. Here the memory of the city is an "enacted" process—a kinetic moment, as opposed to buildings that contain the public memory as a static or permanent entity.[5] When this double coding of static and kinetic moments takes place in the same space or building, the city and its architecture can no longer be presumed to contain a single meaning. In the kinetic city, meanings are not stable. Like buildings and space, they are consumed, reinterpreted, and recycled, even if only momentarily. The ruinous quality of the city of modernity is recycled to create a new spectacle.

This idea takes on a critical dimension when we contemplate the preservation of the built environment in these contexts. Debates about the conservation of the ruins of modernity often revolve around the idea of cultural significance. This notion as an all-encompassing idea emerged clearly during the conservation debates of the 1980s. To be more precise, this notion of cultural significance first arose in what is referred to as the Burra Charter, adopted in Burra, South Australia, in 1979—one of the many resolutions made by the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (known as ICOMOS) to define and guide conservation practice. The Burra Charter defined cultural significance as a site's aesthetic, historic, scientific, or social value for past, present, and future generations. Implicit in this definition is the belief that significance is static. The definition centers on the object and is devoid of life, with the debate rooted in ideas about antiquities from the Renaissance. What is the validity of such a notion in cases where cultural memory is an enacted process, as in the kinetic city, or where meanings are as fluid as the kinetic city itself? This incongruity is often complicated by the fact that the

creators and custodians of historic environments in the static city hail from different cultures than those which created the environments.

What is our cultural reading of the kinetic city, which now forms a greater part of our urban reality? In this dynamic context, if the production or preservation of architecture or urban form has to be informed by our reading of cultural significance, it will necessarily have to include the notion of constructing significance, in debates about architecture as well as conservation. Here the idea of significance will not be a static notion, but rather one that is continuously reinvented to respond to the shifting cultural landscape. In fact, an understanding that significance evolves would clarify the role of the architect as an advocate of change rather than a preservationist who opposes change, defining the architect as someone who can engage with the kinetic and static cities on their terms. An architecture created in that spirit would reduce the symbolic import of the architectural landscape and deepen architecture's ties to contemporary realities and experiences. Conventional architecture and urban typologies would be transformed through intervention and placed in the service of contemporary life, realities, and emerging aspirations. The static city would embrace the kinetic city and be informed and remade by its logic.

Clearly the static and kinetic cities must establish a much richer relationship both spatially and metaphorically, one where affinity and rejection are simultaneously played out in an equilibrium held together by a seemingly irresolvable tension. They must negotiate with the modernity that simultaneously accepts and resists them, so that modernity becomes a basis for identity construction and the kinetic city understands itself only through the degree to which it embraces this modernity.

The ruins of modernity are a fascinating intersection where the static city, encoded in architecture (the symbols of aesthetic and cultural modernity), becomes modernity's ruins and creates a moment for contemplation. The ruins are positioned between their former newness, as symbols of optimism, and their ultimate implosion as they are engulfed by a landscape that they set out to remake. Alternatively, the static city reengages with the chaotic kinetic city, in which it was inserted as a symbol of reason. With these simultaneous pulses of the urban landscape, the modernist ruin dissolves its utopian project and becomes a monument that symbolizes our historical trajectory by fabricating multiple dialogues with its context. To borrow the words of Gaonkar, "one does not retreat, one moves sideways, one moves forward, all this is creative adaptation."[6]

Here, then, modernity reinforces the idea that contradictions and contentions are its fundamental qualities. Modernity is conceived both as something that is encountered and as something that is strived for—sometimes both simultaneously. Then modernity's ruins are not just ruins, they are allegories of the

paradoxical crossings in which ruptures and discontinuities are inherent. They are about negotiations that create adaptations and resistances simultaneously. This reading celebrates the dynamic and pluralist processes that shape the urban Indian landscape, creating a kaleidoscopic representation of modernity. It is this celebration that is critical to internalizing the ruins of modernity and rebuilding them, even if only temporarily.

Notes

Some sections of this essay were previously published in "Negotiating the Static and Kinetic Cities," in *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries*, edited by Andreas Huyssen (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009).

1. Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities."
2. Mehrotra, "The Architecture of Pluralism."
3. Tagore, "The Legacy of Anti-Tradition," 36.
4. Sundaram, "Recycling Modernity."
5. Mehrotra, "Bazaar City."
6. Gaonkar, "On Alternative Modernities," 22.