The aesthetics of 'the ground up' city

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THIS article argues that city aesthetics cannot just be thought of as an artistic creation of 'the beautiful city' (for the beautiful people), but rather imagined as significant political aspects in the way the term aesthetics is mobilized. The relationship between aesthetics and politics is complex, hardly linear, involves city development processes that operate at several levels and, most important, a multitude of actors. I look at this issue in the context of Bangalore.

Like other Indian and 'Southern' cities, Bangalore too has its fair share of globalized infrastructure: 'gated' housing, office complexes clad in glass and granite, and large infrastructure projects of expressways, metro rails, and an international airport. Since 1998, an IT dominated 'civil society' has been particularly vocal in visioning the city's corporate led future along this path. Such visibility serves as an example for others in India to look towards, as an illustration of corporate led urban governance. But this narrative of 'good governance' oriented urban reforms also homogenizes the rest of the city into a non-planned 'slum', with the exception of some select parts of the central market areas that are now to be sanitized as 'heritage precincts'. In this meta-narrative those who are not part of the IT world, in particular the poorer groups, remain marginalized, unruly, illiterate, and victims of a clientelistic and corrupt politics.

One immediate realm within which the term 'aesthetics' is mobilized is that of the need for 'order' and 'discipline' in confronting the chaos of the city. Here we have the history of Jagmohan's urban renewal schemes during the Emergency in Delhi. As landscapes of copycat institutionalized murders, these have been witnessed in the evictions and clearance drives unleashed in almost all other metros – Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bangalore. But the politics of this aesthetics is complex rather than conspiratorial: over-zealous development authorities believing to have 'the god of planning on their side' playing to an audience of higher level politicians implicated in making cities globally competitive; also, powerful real estate developers and, at times, facilitated by a system of justice that seems insular to issues of poverty and progressive justice.

There is a great deal to be learnt from other contexts – Haussman's Paris, and Moses's New York City.[1] Master planning seen in Chandigarh and Brasilia remains the failure of the 'modernist' experiment. It was, on several counts, technocratic in terms of the unsuitability of technical norms like the building setbacks and bylaws. But the main problem was political-institutional: As large-scale interventions launched in the name of development, decision-making bypassed local society and especially the poor.

Madhu Sarin's account of the planning of Chandigarh reveals the harshness of planning authority on economy and housing.[2] What is central in such modernist planning is the severe restriction on emerging mechanisms of political representation. Its notion of aesthetics was in the large-scale conceptual moves, homogenized into the composition of the wider field – where cities were framed as compositions to be viewed up from a high mountain top vantage point, if not an airplane or, even, outer space. The city plan of Brasilia was formed to look like a giant bird, while the Chandigarh plan, which saw the city's roadways as arteries transporting a life-force, was inspired by human biology. A consequence of these larger conceptual moves was a banal local landscape boxed into rigid mass produced compositions restricting occupants to modify according to their life's changing circumstances.

Such planning was promoted as representations of modernity and development. Brasilia, for instance, inspired by the CIAM movement that sought to erase all private property, was a direct application of Le Corbusier's 95-point Charte d'Athènes (Athens Charter) that laid out functional segregated zones within the overall ideals of the Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Le Corbusier had, not surprisingly, satirized the winding roads of the medieval city as being 'donkey paths' – to be replaced by the grid as a modern respiratory system.

But as in Haussman, such modernist interventions were (and are) political interventions aimed at making cities 'slum free'. This is most visible in the disciplining of 'masses' whose varied forms of incremental settlement of land under decentralized political authority allowed an economy of mixed land use built around small firms. It is hardly surprising that the promotion of zoned territories under modernist planning set in place another form of economy oriented towards big business while facilitating associated governmentalities.

The counter-culture reaction (in Europe especially) of the 1960s to these strict disciplinary ideologies was intensely political. It not only produced the squatter movements to re-occupy empty public housing, but also attempted to humanize mass produced public housing by involving 'community architects' within the 'middle classes'. This was backed by influential thinkers such as Colin Ward and Jane Jacob critiquing centralized control and modernist planning,[3] and academic-professional and architect-theoreticians like John Habraken in Holland, Christopher Alexander in the US, and Lucian Kroll in Belgium, who attempted to undermine the notion of 'authority-as-expert'.

But these responses remained an 'alternative' embedded within a larger welfare housing system, as in Europe, or arraigned against an emerging real estate industry that strived to homogenize building bylaws and consolidate its hold over financial and insurance capital within conservative legal regimes. In effect, the production of aesthetics remained disciplined within the rationale of the plan, and in effect, its spatialization of a particular power structure. It is only in the emerging urban 'third world' of the early sixties in Latin America and, a decade later in South Asia, that we see more autonomous efforts.

One fundamental shift was to reject the notion of 'slums' as being breeding ground of crime and vice. Ethnography showed slum inhabitants to be just like any other person. Early works by mostly western scholars erroneously termed such intense activity as being 'self build'. Later ethnographic research revealed this to be a world dominated by small contractors and, even more significant, underpinned by mainstream lower level municipal bureaucrats who were pressured by political constituencies to upgrade these areas with basic infrastructure and services. These intensely political processes creating cities spurred a fascinating discussion about urban aesthetics as it reflected such 'politics on the ground'.[4] In effect, the intent was to locate aesthetics, not in the high ground of modernist planning, but rather in the more chaotic but democratic processes.

In critiquing these attempts by modernist planning to sanitize and make efficient cityscapes, one could explore a diagrammatically opposite vantage point: the value of the 'squatter' aesthetics, i.e. the clustering of houses around a courtyard that houses things of common value, and serves as a location for festivals and community events that enrich life. This is the aesthetics of the 'architecture without architects' which represents, despite the issue of poor sanitation, the modification of the rigid impersonal master planned city via the creative energy of 'the people'.

In this argumentation, one might explore how spaces are created via popular actions and represent an entrepreneurial and resilient spirit to reflect on. While this is useful to consider, the oppositional argumentation remains disciplined squarely within the terms of the planned city. Such disciplining becomes pertinent in our times where the normative intent and zeal around the practices of master planning are burdened by the anxiety of being 'globally competitive'.

Thus, the popular practice of making a livable 'place' would remain subservient to a meta process. Place is thus abdicated and imprisoned within a larger politics. Put simply, such an argument can be narrow in its political project and one can visualize a master planner's statement such as: '…while we appreciate these efforts by the people at building living spaces, we need to make our cities sites to receive "proper" globally connected "economic development"…' The aesthetics of the popular city remains localized and, in being disciplined by the meta forces of progress and developmentalism, subject to the trajectory of 'time'.[5]

Such a disciplining is convenient as also driven in more material ways – by fear. For the elite, anxious to shape and secure property in their own image, this is the fear of the uncertain, the unknown stranger who inhabits and transforms, who occupies, and makes places that were once familiar different. Equally, the 'stranger', the immigrant seeking refuge, inhabiting spaces is also marked by fear – of being pushed away, and the need for quieter ways of entry and consolidation. If so, then the aesthetics emerges from complex processes that we witness and experience on a day-to-day basis.

This day-to-day city aesthetics, which includes the street bazaar, the unexpected extensions on terraces, the shop in the front room, and even the roadside temple or shrine, is connected to how we engage with the concept of the 'middle class': Are the 'middle' class's amorphous relationships to the city heightened by projections of modernity and reinforced by fearing the 'lower' class as an 'encroaching slum'? Or, are its relationships with 'the rest of society' more complicated, making concepts such as 'the middle class' redundant and locating them perhaps in a politics of brand consultants that seek to portray India as an emerging market?

My intent here is to consider the relationship between politics and aesthetics at a plane that rejects binary oppositions, and perhaps at planes that may not necessarily intersect and be subject to such disciplining. Rather than assume that cities must have a common aesthetics bound by a singular history or trajectory, we need to consider them as territories of multiple hues. In doing so, we embark on considering a more anarchic politics of the city. This politics is shaped in complex dialectical ways by the meta processes, but also by diverse levels of structural effect and appropriation. In this perspective there is no one aesthetics and nor is it static in some kind of predictive way. And this represents the heterogeneous terrain of what we call 'the' city.

This way of reading the city is necessarily 'ground up'. By this, I mean not the literal way which turns 'popular' practices into a study of the 'informal sector'. Such efforts return an argumentation into the critique of 'vernacular architecture': 'Oh, the beauty of the courtyard houses – why can't modern housing projects of the Bangalore Development Authority be that way?' or then, 'Oh, look how nice cities were before they got spoiled by slums.'

Indian city planners and senior administrators are then posed with the challenge of a particular problem set: rapid growth, congestion, unplanned growth, lack of infrastructure that creates slum-like conditions which also impairs economic development, the loss of power and control, and the related politicization and corruption that deters, among other impacts, a lack of 'proper citizen participation.' With all this, the loss of planned development. The vision is that of select city zones into heritage districts, urban renewal of slum like unplanned central city areas, the promotion of development authority planned housing areas that are supposed to provide housing supply, 'world class' gated communities for the elite and associated high-end infrastructure that will herald in economic development via efficient cities.

Such arguments place the 'local' in subservient opposition to history, and within it, a strange disconnected notion of culture, or of modernity and its torments. Instead, the idea of reading city territories 'ground up' implies a politics and associated aesthetics that emerges from a close consideration of the institutional practices implicated in popular actions. Of course, these include those settlements that planners and others love to term slums. This also includes practices of how IT parks, gated housing complexes constructed in the boardrooms of internationally connected financiers, or of the IT CEOs, for whom having a glass façade reveals a particular modernity.

As India's most famous IT demigod noted, these are the glass, steel, and granite faced facades that bring in extra dollars from their US clients. For instance, as an everyday practice, this aesthetics is produced and specialized into the legal and institutional spaces of particular regulatory schemes of public-private partnerships, whose contracts have a genealogy in the advice of international consultants paid for by international funding organizations viewing India (and China) as emerging economies.

Bangalore's 'globalized' landscape is conflated into the possibility and aspirations of a homogenized plan and thus, with the city's social, physical, and economic conditions within circular causalities: unplanned 'slum like' development, congestion, and rapid growth, lack of infrastructure. Such a conflation opens a path to other seductive rationalities – an anxiety over impaired economic development, increased crime and the degeneration of 'law and order', the possibility of disease, bureaucratic apathy and political corruption.

The counter vision is particularly seductive: clean roads connecting well-planned residential layouts to high-end office complexes complete with world class infrastructure, efficient traffic flows that incorporate both the latest cars, SUVs, hi-tech Volvo buses and the helmet adorned bicyclist, the inconvenient, misshaped roadside trees from an earlier era replaced by a more manageable species in designated parks, and finally, the roadside religious shrines, shops, and squatter camps evicted by cutting through their lower level political and bureaucratic clout. The last would have NGOs 'resettle' the more cooperative of the poor in planned mass housing.

Such city aesthetics around 'The Plan' is thus implicated in the rationalities of developmentalism and anxieties of modernization. These concerns, now located in a time of making cities globally competitive, have a complex genealogy. Most explicit were the creation of new towns and cities – while Nehru called upon Le Corbusier to visualize Chandigarh, Juscelino Kubitschek invited Lucio Costa for the new city of Brasilia.[6] These were creations to bring new territorial formations away from earlier ones implicated in what were assumed to be feudal power structures and cultural practices – the latter seen as signifying the unhealthy Oriental practices which had set the stage for the spread of the plague.[7]

But Bangalore, like other cities, is more complex. Our ethnographic work on Bangalore's central city market revealed more complicated arrangements in a society where a large section of residents, even those better-off, were intensely engaged in the city's bazaar economy and its politics.[8] These relationships extend to vast terrains in the North-West parts that house between a third to half of Bangalore's population, but with just a sixth of the city's infrastructure. In these western precincts of Bangalore, along Mysore Road's Azad Nagar, we would discover a vast terrain of such places, and also another form, *Vattarams*, the tenement structures that once housed silk manufacturing, but now lend themselves to other forms of economy.

The economy here becomes significant when we consider the analysis by regional planner, Darshini Mahadevia, revealing that the IT industry in the last Census count provided only about 4-6% of the city's labour force. Before the extension of Bangalore's city corporation in 2007, master planning accounted for between 10-12% of the city's territory. After the incorporation of seven smaller towns and many more villages with the expansion of the city territory to more than 840 sq km (double that of the Greater Mumbai region, and larger than Delhi's), master planning and its aesthetics of nostalgia and modernity relates to probably less than two per cent of the overall city territory. The social and political relationships in this outer city are just as complicated.[9]

This city's eastern fringes in Whitefield and parts of the south have the glass-steel-granite complexes that most upper class Indians and people abroad associate as being India's IT capital. But set within the IT terrains, if we look carefully, are also vast territories of small plots strung together into what is locally known as 'revenue and *gramthana* (or village) layouts'. Many of these settlements pre-date master planning, and all of these are territories developed under very different institutional, legal, and territorial processes. The important point here is that each of these territorial formations embody both popular action by occupants, small developers, and various levels of public administration – especially local government.

The other important aspect of such territories is that these are related in intrinsic ways to an economy that provides almost all of Bangalore's jobs and probably makes up a substantive part of the city's economic contribution estimated under the rubric of the 'unorganised sector'.[10] For instance, consider the city's central trade areas of Kalasipalyam (transport repair and component retail), Cubbonpet (reconditioning of silk manufacturing machines) and Azad Nagar and Magadi Road (various small manufacturing activities). All of these are settled as mixed land use. These economies are connected to an 'everyday' politics of getting infrastructure upgraded, especially during elections, and built in an incremental 'ground up' way. From both the economic and political perspectives, such processes of city building are not reflections of marginality but rather form a dynamic urbanism.

Given the scarcity of funds for infrastructure to develop land, and more basically, to decide on where to locate infrastructure, it is not surprising that in recognizing the heterogeneous structure of cities, we also find that complex territories intersect and contest. In our studies of land markets and their embedding in the political economy of Whitefield's development, there were several aspects of such contestations worth highlighting.

First, these were central to political arrangements in that part of the city. In other words, while the 'meta' narrative of Bangalore and the rest of the world and global capitalism is important, it is the locality of power that formed a fulcrum of forces shaping place; second, these arrangements and their particular territorialization were dynamic with little sense of absolute resolution one way or the other. City terrains seem far too complex to allow easy incorporation within the linear logic that underpins planning.

Third, this complexity embedded in the politics of place was shaped by fluid alliances and identities. While caste (and, in South and West Bangalore, religious) politics and its associated mobilization played a central role, how people defined and saw themselves, as being of a particular caste group itself, was fluid. This was also shaped by local government politics and the working of the various power circuits within the political party system.

This heterogeneous terrain and its multiple aesthetics are important to consider in relation to the recent efforts to mobilize a depoliticized aesthetics argument around 'heritage' to shape public interventions and justify investments of great significance. Thus, in this depoliticized language set in a linear history, Bangalore's aesthetics is reduced to: the modernist dream of IT and BT (Bio-Technology) that represents the way forward, nostalgia posed within the colonial landscapes of the cantonment, and the 'well planned' layouts with tree lined avenues from yester year: Jayanagar, Basavanagudi, Malleswaram.

And then, there is the rest of Bangalore. The Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) planned layouts of Koramangala and Indiranagar – made passable by their elite 'citizen' initiatives in recovering parks from being taken over by 'encroachers' and as one elite resident welfare association (RWAs) in Koramangala put it, secure from the 'riffraff'. At a micro cosmos, reflective of larger fears, we find the loosely fenced, mud-surfaced playing ground used by children and youths from a variety of class and ethnicities being displaced by the landscaping and fencing that restricts use to the well-disciplined – walking in a clockwise direction!

This is an aesthetics where the gardens are neat and clean, the grass green, and bounded by concrete park seating where 'nefarious' activities are prohibited. The RWA installed notice boards prohibit, in their panoptic vision, 'playing and running'. Children are perhaps reduced to memories remaining in photos long after they have left for the US, and grandchildren entertained in clubhouses or with the latest video games. Such closure points to two types of fears: the first is obviously the slum city; second, and more complicated, is the fear of one's own 'middle class' being drawn to the excitement of the 'bazaar' economy.

For instance, an evening walk in the markets around the IT dominated neighbourhoods of Koramangala and BTM layout reveals the higher end coffee chains struggling for customers, but what is locally called the 'by-two' smaller *darshini* (eat outs) and even pavement hawkers doing a roaring business. The question remains whether the dynamic of city transformation forms a disruptive edge to the assumption of a neat urban aesthetics and a materiality of economy located necessarily as the 'undisciplined city'.[11]

In terms of territorialization and city growth, it is not very useful to view cities as being necessarily conditioned by an overarching plan that would homogenize it or shape 'growth in an

orderly' way. The 'promise' of the plan is necessarily conflictual. As Chandan Gowda notes in an email communication with the author, 'The arrival of new architectural forms alongside the older persisting ones gives a sense of the changing form of Bangalore which, in turn, reflects, among others, changes in the city's political consciousness, its power structures, its varied politics of apportioning precious resources of water and energy.'

All of these represent contested terrains not overlaid or set against the smoothness of a normative plan, but rather where 'the plan' and its associated aesthetics is just one of the attempts at territorial formation that contest other forms. Hence, we need to move from the aesthetics of an individual architect to a politicized aesthetics from an urbanist perspective of a dynamic 'ground up' city – one that is 'open source',[12] local historicized, and responsive to an economy that creates jobs. It is quite possible that the seemingly chaotic elements of an 'undisciplined' city might be, in fact, representing progressive possibilities.

Footnotes:

1. I refer here to David Harvey's masterpiece, *Paris, the Capital of Modernity*, and Caro's account of Robert Moses as 'The Power Broker'. Moses reworked NYC and Long Island, and in effect facilitated the path for large business groups to control that city's economy. D. Harvey, *Paris, The Capital of Modernity*. Routledge, 2003; R. Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. Knopf, 1974.

2. Madhu Sarin, *Urban Planning in the Third World: The Chandigarh Experience*. Mansell Publishing, London, 1982.

3. Jane Jacob, *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Random House, 1961; Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*. Allen & Unwin, London, 1973, and *Housing: An Anarchist Approach*. Freedom Press, 1976.

4. The classic work here is Edward Popko's *Transitions: A Photographic Documentation of Squatter Settlements*. Dowden, Hutchison & Ross Inc, Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania and McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1978. This work had a particularly influential foreword by the anthropologist Lisa Peattie.

5. This issue comes from critical geographers like Doreen Massey who attempt to bring back spaces of 'locality', rather these being contingent to the progress of 'time'. See Doreen Massey, *For Space*. Sage, London, 2005.

6. David G. Epstein, *Brasília, Plan and Reality: A Study of Planned and Spontaneous Urban Development*. University of California Press, 1973.

7. Myron Echenberg, *Plague Ports: The Global Urban Impact of Bubonic Plague 1894-1901*. NY University Press, 2007.

8. See: Solomon Benjamin and R. Bhuvaneswari, 'Democracy, Inclusive Governance, and Poverty in Bangalore'. Working Paper no 26, IDD, School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham, UK, 2001.

9. Solomon Benjamin, Bhuvaneswari Raman, P. Rajan and R. Manjunath, 'Fractured' Terrain, Spaces Left Over, or Contested? A Closer Look at the IT-dominated Territories in East and South Bangalore, in Darshini Mahadevia (ed.), *Inside the Transforming Urban Asia: Policies, Processes, and Public Action*. Concept, New Delhi, 2008.

10. Some useful starting points for such an analysis are those by The National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) with SEWA from Ahmedabad to research the substantive contribution of the garment workers in that city. Also see: 'Contribution of the Unorganized Sector to GDP: Report of the Subcommittee of a NCEUS Task Force'. Working Paper No. 2, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, June, 2008.

11. I borrow this term from a seminar of the same name, arranged end 2009 by the Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.

12. I refer here to a useful essay by Prem Chandavarkar, 'Rethinking the Social Contract: The Open Source City'. I suspect the concept of 'open source' is mobilized not in its 'software' context, but rather as a pointer to what Doreen Massey, cited previously, argues for open ended politicized space.