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Decay as 'Aesthetic' and Alternative Negotiations

Bhat, H.

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ATUT
PROCEEDINGS

5th Annual Symposium of Architectural Research
ARCHITECTURE AND RESILIENCE
August 28-30, 2013 Tampere, Finland

Minna Chudoba, Malgorzata Joachimiak, Mikko Laak,
Panu Lehtovuori, Jenni Partanen, Annuska Rantanen & Nathan Siter
(eds.)

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Minna Chudoba, Malgorzata Joachimiak, Mikko Laak, Panu Lehtovuori,
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INTRODUCTION: ARCHITECTURE AND RESILIENCE

Resilience is a dynamic concept. It concerns the delicate balance between change and permanence, a balance that defines the long-term sustainability of a city-region, city or neighbourhood. To study resilience, cities need to be conceptualized as dynamic systems: their spatial development viewed as a relational and complex process at all scales from building types and neighborhoods to city regions and cross-border urban networks. Currently, our cities and societies are facing challenges emerging from social, economic and political globalization, multiculturalism, and decay of the welfare state. Simultaneously, we are witnessing a fresh rise of the civic society, supported by an array of new actor-driven technologies. Due to the open-ended nature of urban process, future is uncertain. Nevertheless, it is likely that the features enhancing resilience in urbanism – diversity, adaptability and ability to invent new solutions – will have a crucial role for the continuity of urban systems and human civilisation.

Globally, a scientific conference that focuses specifically on architectural research is a rarity. Finland has been a pioneer in foregrounding architects' knowledge and their ways of knowing. The Annual Symposium of Architectural Research, organized by Aalto University, Tampere University of Technology, University of Oulu and the Finnish Association of Architects, has established itself as a key forum of knowledge exchange, debate and brainstorming. In August 2013, the 5th Symposium was organized in Tampere. The theme was "Architecture and Resilience", in Finnish "Notkea arkkitehtuuri". The Symposium was successful, bringing together 45 papers and presentations by scholars in architecture, urban design, planning and urban studies from around the world. This Proceedings Book presents a representative collection of the conference papers, peer-reviewed by the Scientific Committee. Its chapters mirror the tracks of the conference.

When preparing the Symposium, we realized that the theme of resilience is very topical in architecture and urbanism. Clearly, the constantly changing urbanity warrants a revision of theories, methods, design applications and professional cultures. A systemic transition of our society and space is underway. Starting from these broad notions, we collectively engaged in multiple discussions to find out why resilience is important, how to study it, and what in our discourse is meant by "resilience" in the first place.

The participants explored the current state of architecture and urbanism and their potential to shape the future. The complex and relational nature of this potential became evident. How should we tackle the complex, interlinked and inter-scalar social, spatial, natural and economic networks in constant flux? How to operationalize the links between architecture and the resilience of urban systems? What are the exemplary cases and projects?

The papers by researchers and practitioners in architecture, urban design, planning, geography, social sciences, ecology and other fields approached these questions in various ways: from history to contemporary and future challenges, from the role of architects to urban evolution and permanence in change. In addition to the presenters, the Organizing Committee wants to thank the Scientific Committee, where all three architecture schools of Finland participated, and the Finnish Association of Architects SAFA. Sincere thanks to the fantastic keynote lecturers: Halina Dunin-Woyseth, Lars Marcus, Juval Portugali and Andres Sevtsuk.

Professor Halina Dunin-Woyseth's diachronic perspective on the changes of practice, education and research gave inspiring and valuable advice about the premises and current applications of research by design. This was especially appreciated by many young researchers who are currently faced with the challenges of this method.

Professor Lars Marcus presented recent work of the research group on Spatial Analysis and Design in KTH Stockholm. Starting from Space Syntax and study of urban morphology, Marcus developed tools for an analytic of "Spatial Capital", the multi-factor role of urban space in framing and facilitating human action.

Professor Juval Portugali, in his presentation titled "Complexity, Cognition and the City" demonstrated the power of chaos and network theory approaches in analyzing the city. Cities are partly artefactual, partly "natural" evolutionary complex systems. Conceptualized this way, the dual nature of the city unfolds as a human construction and the context of human action. According to Portugali, cities are resilient in the same way as complex systems: they balance between ordered and unpredictable states, with inherent ability to recover from crises.

Professor Andres Sevtsuk showed examples of thematic mapping for urban design in his talk on "Parametric Urbanism". The hyper-dense urbanity of Singapore provides a new benchmark for both real-life experience and analytic tools. Sevtsuk showed a detailed but still comparative study of Singapore's fully three-dimensional urban process and new urban typologies. His talk provoked a lively discussion on the relationship between the analytic and quantitative tools and existing urban problems.

Featuring keynote speakers Marcus, Portugali and Sevtsuk, professor Kimmo Lapintie and engineer/urbanist Eero Paloheimo, symposium's concluding panel revisited the notion of resilience in the context of architecture and urbanism. The dual – or indeed dialectic – nature of the concept became clear. Resilience is not about permanence as such nor about change as such, but about the ever-changing tension between the two that makes cities alive. Architecture should not be in the receiving end of the forceful urban process, but should find its shaping power. Both urban and architectural space have great powers in directing human action, both on the level of individuals and street communities as well as on the level of planning and management. In Juval Portugali's words: "Resilience is the shadow side of complexity".

Tampere, 18.12.2014

The Organizing Committee:

Minna Chudoba, Malgorzata Joachimiak, Mikko Laak,
Panu Lehtovuori, Jenni Partanen, Annuska Rantanen & Nathan Siter

DECAY AS 'AESTHETIC' AND ALTERNATIVE NEGOTIATIONS

Harshavardhan BHAT

*Research Fellow, Jindal School of International Affairs,
OP Jindal Global University, Sonipat Narela Road, Near Jagdishpur Village,
Sonipat, Haryana, NCR of Delhi 131001, INDIA,
+91.8930110912, harsh.s.bhat@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

A conversation on resilience would be incomplete without a conversation on decay. Throughout urban spaces in the global south today, one witnesses decay, which is accepted and negotiated constantly. In certain instances, it invokes a sense of poverty and sensibilities of curiosity and exploration which the sanitized space sometimes fails to provoke. The challenge is a complex narrative which crosscuts architectural theory, practice, urban planning and culture. This paper offers a variety of contrasting examples of how decay takes an aesthetic form and offers room for alternative negotiations to be identified at the same time.

As a conversation on new urbanism, this phenomenon can be tracked across a variety of urban cases. This paper presents two examples of such undertakings and attempts by meticulous documentation, comparative study and photographic representation to present a reasonable rationale. As a theoretical discussion, the paper also interrogates the need for bringing back the likes of Laurie Baker's style in re-synthesizing objectivity in equitable architectural manifestations considering the large impact of impatient capital on these new landscapes.

Keywords: Decay, Critical Theory, New Delhi, Impatient Capital, Architectural Purpose

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a conversation on resilience in connection with the idea of 'decay' as a controversial aesthetic element. As forms of 'impatient' capital flow through unplanned spaces resulting in confused manifestations of modernities, the role of decay and equity are problematized in a background of access and aesthetics. From a theoretical perspective, the city brings together a few interesting cases which demonstrate how decay is accepted, negotiated and processed in the everyday use of certain commercial and non-commercial spaces. But to expand on the primary debate of comprehending development and virtual decay in newer expanding urban geographies, there is an immediate need of change-comprehension to rethink and bring back valuable traditions and ideas about architecture from designers such as Laurie Baker, who was very successful in

proving the merits and performance of low cost sustainable architecture in the South Indian state of Kerala.

From a methodological perspective, this essay functions on three brief levels. Firstly, as a cross-disciplinary theoretical discussion, it uses the merits of analysis and dialectical thinking on decay, bringing together the examples of Connaught Place, Khan Market and Haus Khaz Village in Delhi. Secondly, as a problematization platform, the paper brings up issues of investment in architecture. Lastly, it seeks a 'rethink', tapping into Laurie Baker's epistemology of sustainable, low cost and equitable architecture and does so in juxtaposing these ideas in parallel to give the reader the reflective opportunity in connecting the dots. The paper utilizes photography, aesthetic discussions and social analysis in uncovering some of the perspectives it intends to produce.

2. LIKE THE WOLF

In the first session of 'The Beast and the Sovereign', Derrida talks about idiomatic expressions involving a wolf. The wolf perhaps is as "insensible" as he claims because "one neither sees nor hears it coming, because its invisible and inaudible, and therefore nonsensible." (Derrida, 2011). This feature takes an interesting reflection to what decay perhaps takes form as - it might be caused because of the wind but then again, it acts like the wind in a virtual sensibility and therefore transforms the experience of walking by territories that it has invaded. Decay here takes on an invisible form - invisible not because it cannot be rationally identified but because it just passes by like anything else through perception and therefore becomes an existential issue. So a debate about decay in new geography becomes a debate about perception that is paradoxically accepted and that is not accepted. The difference between sanitized spaces and spaces left to the romantic eye, becomes a matter of one's own preference. I claim this preference is cultural and therefore, architecture falls into the cultural realm of negotiation within the order this preference produces.

Is decay therefore desirable or is it an inevitable consequence? No matter what the answer to this question is, there is a growing audience to the forms and representations of decay in space and architecture, because of the sheer increase of its elemental nature in today's urban landscapes. It is not just about the Mumbai slums or Delhi's river-shore dwellings but it is a larger characteristic of the respective urban landscape. It is an elemental essence of the city itself. Comparing a city like New York with Delhi will bring in a wide range of comparisons but the sheer shade and color of the city is a factor associated with decay itself. While Delhi has been strongly influenced by ancient Mughal architecture and British colonial architecture - the decay I refer to however is of a contemporary nature, not a historical one although one will not deny some of the links between the two. This issue is also the result of the constant motion of 'development projects', infrastructural turnovers in urban space and its expansions in territory resulting even in what some people would call "landscapes of dust". It is not just plain pollution in an aesthetic sense but rather a product of uncontrolled development. While this development arguably poses several positive consequences for a range of actors, it is largely and most assumedly the result of fast growth and therefore - impatient capital, which is not a new problem for architecture. However, it takes an 'interesting turn' when this kind of capital erases architecture's role in the urban dream-place. It takes an 'interesting turn' when this kind of capital creates illogical urban constellations, projects in places in the "middle of nowhere" and results in displaced imaginaries, of objects that do not connect with local space, local culture or local comprehension of what the object is meant to be in the first place.

3. WALKING BETWEEN APPRECIATED DECAYS

Decay arguably takes the facade of art for it to gain appreciation and life. Art and Politics, as Ranciere often describes, are points that are intricately linked in a “specific space and time” (Ranciere, 2009). Decay in cities like Delhi, often represents and recycles a politics of memory - a memory of the colonial and historical past. Connaught Place in New Delhi, which was established in 1931, is architecturally placed as a circular body with both inner and outer circles with commercial establishments within. I claim this space is in constant battle with the status quo idea of Delhi - it exists some place ‘in between’ a more historical aesthetic and a modern comprehension of the city. The central Connaught Place area is also not reflective or visually connectable to the Nehruvian imagination of the Corbusier placement (Nehru had advocated and invited Le Corbusier to India for projects in the country (including the city of Chandigarh)). The Connaught Place experience is nevertheless always witness to a process of ‘maintenance’ and ‘civic disregard’ of space at the same time. The openness, harsh utilization of its public space and frequent inability of the local administration in its upkeep, results in virtual contradictions and most importantly, architectural decay.



Figure 1: Pillars of the inner circle, Connaught Place, New Delhi



Figure 2: Constant 'development' and maintenance, Connaught Place, New Delhi

The Khan Market of Delhi is an example of a place that represents a public appreciation of 'timelessness' because of its simplicity, 'decay' and proximity to a privileged neighborhood. The Khan Market has often been claimed to be the most expensive retail space in the country but it paradoxically doesn't seem so. The stench of the Monsoon, flooded pot holes, corners of spit, unpainted corridors, dusty walls and a very chaotic parking space are some of the features of this cosy little market place. What makes it exclusive is certainly the posh surroundings and its clientele but most importantly is the 'internalization' of the aesthetic form where the shop takes its independent role of conditioning the customer to be a part of a special space. Here, the ignorance of the sanitized space gives architecture an opportunity to remain what it was when the market was created. Of-course, the 'ad-space' in the market of protruding sign posts might keep changing but the pathways and brick stones seem to remain the same. For architecture to play such a role, the public enforces both carelessness and acceptance of the existing form of the market and therefore, it embraces its being. The possibility of a modern mall to replace this marketplace would arguably be unthinkable for a local Delhi resident. Decay, perhaps here takes an ambitious omnipresent reciprocity in the local imagination, playing with the reflexivity of architecture in its public applicability.



Figure 3: A premier market place? Capitalism and Decay, Khan Market, New Delhi



Figure 4: Contradictions, Khan Market, New Delhi

Haus Khaz Village, a quasi gated community which is currently an upscale area for art, cafes, bars and restaurants, is not an obvious location for an 'upscale' space. Yet, what started out as a niche project by frequent hipster visits and artistic dwellings has now become a much sought after retail space. What gives the "Village" its character is the Haus Khaz Complex, lying adjacent to it. The complex consists of a mosque, a seminary, tombs, a large water tank and is essentially a historical space that traces its roots to the 13th century rulers of Delhi. So, right next to a space of incredible history is a space that has manifested to feature art, coffee and a few good hamburgers. Architecture here plays a dual role - firstly, the extension of the past to the new almost seems seamless yet ironical in its newer modalities on the one hand. On the other hand, it plays a role of public acceptance (with the hanging wires, narrow lanes, unmaintained new concrete architecture) where the commercial invasion of newer 'hip' and trendy establishments brings in a youthful and teenage audience to the historical Haus Khaz Complex, thereby, redefining the very function of space of the complex itself. The thereby becomes joined with the historical complex, negotiating a unique role for visitors. The central juxtaposition of this venture is a sensibility that is primarily communicated by parallel architectural decay - one, with the historical complex as a relic, is a space for appreciation and two, the village as a space built by impatient capital constantly in a struggle for upkeep and sanitation. Therefore on the one hand, the village attempts a regular fight against decay and on the other, the complex as a historical ground only seeks to be preserved for its value in history.



Figure 5: Bikes vs. Pedestrians, Artisan Cafe's and Art Galleries, Hauz Khas Village, New Delhi



Figure 6: Monuments part of the historical Hauz Khas Complex walled from neighborhood housing providing for a 'contrast', Hauz Khas Village, New Delhi

4. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Perhaps the most contemporary interjection in decay as a confused aesthetic is due to the confused role of architecture in certain geographies of 'development' taking place in landscapes of the global south today. More specifically, in India, one witnesses random arrangements and erections of large buildings in landscapes that don't really offer such a sensibility. The building of these large structures away from the central urban realm, near rural areas is a speculative decision and investment. Real estate developers and locally linked investors wanting to tap into the emerging market of the urban expansion. As Indian cities grow, one of the biggest challenges of the city is to think about how planning can actually comprehend with the speed of all these changes taking place. As the planning process is far behind the pace of change, architecture loses its purpose in mass production of housing and infrastructure and becomes just an obstacle for the investor to "get it done with". Such a hasty attitude generates landscapes of dust and decay as the development process is never really completed and therefore the constant process of construction emits pollution and over time erases the purity and quality of the constructed infrastructure. Therefore, the audience is subjected to live and work in these geographies of decay without a choice of an exit. If the "organization of space as a social product", as Soja discusses, is supposed to be equitable and fair, the capitalist dimension here takes an enormous problem in satisfying the need for equity (Soja 1989). Especially, when regulation and architectural purpose are not able to manage capital effectiveness and investment, the uncontrolled effects result in the emission of an incomprehensible geography. While arguably in spaces such as Dubai and New Mumbai, impatient capital give the investor and the architect the power of creation, on a grander level, it reduces the

role and power of architecture to the basic modalities of the civic engineer thereby reproducing often substandard buildings within a misplaced sense of modernity.

5. BRINGING BACK THE BRICKS

Therefore, what we need today is a possible mediation between administration, capital and architecture to produce sensible structures in harmony with the local space, culture and society. Through the cases and the thought experiment earlier, we see that decay takes on a range of roles in its aesthetic formulation and consequence. The fading and gradual peeling of built structure is not just an issue about material quality and workmanship but is also a central subject of the larger system of governance (builders and government) and usages (by users/the public). The mediation however is a challenging one. To locate architecture in a humble placement and to design a structure that is low cost, equitable and comprehends with the locality with a pleasing aesthetic is a real challenge. Laurie Baker's work is a humbling and inspiring example of such a project. Baker's initiative with the Centre for Science and Technology for Rural Development (COSTFORD) continues his exceptional practice and ideas in implementing housing projects for low income groups. The mediation I present here is interestingly not seeking to be a controversial one. I say this because the need for housing to be equitable and accessible is a dire problem in India and that the aesthetic function in the creation of this problem in the first place is an issue in itself. Baker's adaptation of Kerala's techniques in architectural practice have had beautiful yet pro-sustainable results. His use of local material, low cost approaches, elemental and strategic design of brick laying and absorptive nature of structure in its harmony with the environment etc give the spaces he creates a great value that is not just arguably almost humanitarian but also rethinks the contemplative experience within architecture, all done in an ecological fashion. As Gautam Bhatia puts it;

"..What makes his work even more remarkable is the way in which he draws creative sustenance from the environment in which he works, absorbing vernacular patterns of construction and individual styles of living to such a degree that he is able to give his clients the comfort and ease of homes and institutions that are firmly rooted in the soil upon which they stand" (Bhatia, 1994)

He brings back tradition in the most fruitful of ways yet with his track record of having designed and built 1000's of houses and buildings in Kerala and beyond that this kind of architecture holds powerful meaning in the 21st century. Why cannot bricks and simplicity be markers of a respectable "neoliberal post modernity"? Does impatient capital require to be more strategically moderated to help architectural decisions lead to dwellings harmonious with the local culture and environment? If the city, Delhi for example, today is virtually imagined with a shade of 'brown' due to the ~~the~~ constant fading and peeling in the exteriors of structures aligned with histories and more contemporary aspects of development, then can decay here take a counter-aesthetic role in determining a place for itself in the state of new imaginaries. Architecture, to be fluid in adaptation therefore must understand the community and gradually assimilate with it.



Figure 7: Brick wall at the Centre for Development Studies in Kerala designed by Laurie Baker, (Picture source: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/draconianrain/3003397698/> - on a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 2.0 Generic License accessed August 2013).

6. POLEMIC OBJECTS

While this paper does look into these elements and phenomena from a contemporary perspective, the issue and epistemology in understanding decay is no new debate in architecture or aesthetics. But in evaluating critical relationships between capital and the built environment, I think there are a range of subtle necessities that provoke contrasted points of juxtaposition. The reason I call this juxtaposition is because I think there are two parallel but critical conclusions here. Firstly, for architecture to regain its purpose, the modulation of cultural participation is clearly in order. This cultural modulation will not only offer its diversity in a country as complex and varietal as India but will also have to be facilitated by actors of interest in design, governance and investment. Within this, there is a clear space for mediation such as Baker's simplicity and dignity production projects to exist. Secondly, this phenomenon of impatient capital and decay is in many ways in reminiscence of Zizek's argument against 'post-ideology' that ideology takes on newer shapes in the way it interrogates and lives in our society (Zizek, 2009). While right wing "development" and politics might be taking quite a leap in Indian politics, the infrastructural, information and 'emerging economy' revolution is no excuse for escaping sustainability and access to 'aesthetically dignified' low cost housing. But are these alternatives in modernity manufacturing generating the same kind of consensus? The polemic notion here is that there is a stance beyond "turbo urbanism" (Vockler, 2008) which must be made possible and that the nature of development existences needs to be re-evaluated. To identify the manufacturing of this kind of 'impatient' space and urban realities as ideological manifestations is perhaps in initial ground to generate a sensible discourse. Cities have

experienced such shifts catalyzed by art, radical politics and a wide range of imaginaries in the past but it is time for the aesthetic moment to enter new spaces under construction, not in its exclusive mentality but from democratic participation that is culturally provoked and remembered.

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Note: All photographs except 'Figure 7' taken by the author.