



PROJECTS  
FOR :  
**KOLKATA**

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the regeneration of the hooghly riverfront

edited by

Vasiliki Geropanta & Eleonora Lucantoni



## PROJECTS

### FOR :

«Projects For:» is a book series dedicated to architectural design in international contexts. Looking at our own way of practicing architecture through the lens of “difference” can help magnify its identity, pointing out its most relevant characters and providing an appropriate ground for critical thinking. Creating designs – or reflecting on projects – conceived for “elsewhere” can, in our opinion, become a powerful tool to understand how to make architecture. The series wants to provide a space dedicated to this critical activity, where the pretext of a specific location around the globe can serve as the center of gravity for design-oriented considerations.

### Series edited by

Federico De Matteis  
Luca Reale

Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy  
Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy

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info@aracneeditrice.it

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+390693781065

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## MAGIC AND LOSS

Notes on an international design workshop  
dedicated to the waterfront of Kolkata

Luca Reale

«Town Planning is a fundamental human consideration» (1)

*Patrick Geddes*

Speaking of his recovery plan of Calcutta's Bara Bazar in the 1920's, Patrick Geddes explains that urban planning is not just work for planners, nor just simply place-planning or work-planning, but relates more strictly to the human sphere and cannot succeed if it doesn't translate into a folk-planning, which acts on spaces and activities, reaching the level of the people. It is the level that Rabindranath Tagore often called the world of personality (2), something not merely individual, but also universal, and that is essentially presented in art; meaning by "art" a way of interpreting reality, reducing the gap between the individual and the world. Geddes, with the eye of the naturalist (which he called "unscientific but visual"), reads the material signs of the city and weaves them with the intangible signs of assets and hopes of the people. He moves slowly through the city, listening to the voices of its residents, exploring places in continuous surveys («with the same wonder with which a child explores a tropical garden») and activating the curiosity for the ways of living spaces, as well as a future plan of action centered on the maintenance of craft, commercial and religious activities.

Designing water spaces and their margins is a very critical operation, especially in a megalopolis like Kolkata, one of the ten most populous cities in the world, with great previsions of demographic growth in the coming years (15.5 million in 2010, 18.5 million in 2020) (3). In Europe, in recent years water has been attracting growing consideration from the planning standpoint. For several decades waterfronts were abandoned, used to locate industrial facilities, sometimes blocked by highways, closed off by walls, used for storage places, and warehouses. Post-industrial cities are evidently turning the face towards their rivers by creating new waterfronts with pleasant environments for leisure and work, places for bars and restaurants, urban beaches and sports clubs, promenades along the river, new landscapes, including the restoration

Fig. 1: Gondolas at the edge of the river



of riparian vegetation. All activities are part of a developing process and aimed at improving the overall quality of urban life (4).

Is it conceivable to renew the relationship between the city of Kolkata and the Hooghly River, which will necessarily be enhanced in the coming years, without destroying its special feeling of place?

Today Kolkata “ends” in the west with a system of fragile vegetation, dotted by small temples, idols and places to pray hidden in magnificent banyan trees, landing places for the boats leading to Howrah, on the opposite side of the river, and real “gates” to the water formed by the accesses of the ghats. The ghats today, with an enormous fascination and character, are a decaying architectural patrimony; however, as in a momentary break of history, the traditional Hindu daily routine still remains intact. Within a short time the pressure of the city will invest this area and its magical aura: this makes the work of analysis and reflection on the future of these 17 km of riverfront that the Department of Architecture, City and Regional Planning at IEST Shibpur is carrying out very important. In my opinion, the most difficult issue consists in the protection of the fragile balance between spontaneous and imposed, informal and planned, working not only in determining fixed activities, but mainly in fostering the freedom of the spontaneous use of these spaces.

Fig. 2: Daily rituals in the Hooghly  
Fig. 3: Holly banyan trees for praying  
Fig. 4: Open-air hairdressers





### The area from Nimtola Ghat to Sovabazar Launch Ghat

It is difficult to make relevant statements on this area in the short time span of a workshop which lasted only five days. Our group's study area along the river is made from a continuous series of ghats that work as an embankment defending from flooding, but are primarily the places where the city bathes in the sacred river (the Hooghly river is in fact a distributary of the Ganges). To deal with such a large area (about 500 meters from Nimtola to Sovabazar Ghat) it is necessary to outline a strategy; in urban planning the ideas used in solving design problems are termed as concepts, also generating alternatives within the same evolving process of transformation.

Furthermore, we cannot only consider the space of the ghats and the thin strip of land along the river. Slums have grown on one end of the railway track, along the length of the area. Presently this part of the city, I mean a thin strip (about twenty meters wide) between the railway and the river bank, constitutes - due to the presence of the railroad which runs parallel to the coast - a "back side" of Kolkata. But the space of the ghats represents the spirit of a community, not only in a religious sense; even if for me, as a foreigner, in India it is not so easy to distinguish precisely what is religious and what is not.



Fig. 5: The Hooghly from Banda Ghat, on the opposite bank

The ghats are also not all equal to each other, but they diverge in form, in the relationship between the level of the city and the water level, in the uses that the inhabitants make of them, in the function of docking for the ferry service. Starting North, Sovabazar is a launch ghat used in the area under the wharf where the steps are located as a bathing ghat by people, generally slum dwellers, even if the conditions of the banks are quite degraded. The bathing ghat of Beniatola is the longest ghat in the area, and the most crowded, used for daily activities and largely for worshipping, cremation ceremonies and other holy household rituals. The slums have grown on both sides of the railway tracks along the length of this area. In Ahiritola Ghat we find the greatest richness in terms of different activities, very close to each other, sometimes overlapped in the same space: worshipping, selling flowers and various objects for ceremonies (simulacra, figurines), docks, bathing. In this part the street is chaotic, encroached by cars, trucks, rickshaw traffic and market stands. Ahiritola is also a launch ghat, from which you can quickly reach the opposite bank of Howrah.

The last ghat, Nimtala, is primarily a burning ghat, characterized by the presence of the crematory. The riverbank is used to dispose of waste and storing trunks of bamboo and wooden pyres. The opposite side of the road is saturated with flower sellers and food stalls for people coming here for cremations. The bathing ghat is separated from the burning ghat by a distance. The cremation site is traditionally placed on the banks of the river: a few days after the cremation, the ashes of the deceased are dispersed in the sacred waters of the river, accompanied by flowers and votive lamps, in a ceremony called Visarjanam.

Unlike the typical Western approach for designing riverfronts, that considers it as an urban project tending to establish «connections between ecology, flood protection and amenity» (5), in this peculiar case the approach should be completely different, deeper and lighter at the same time. The core of the project is not how to manage engineering problems and dislocate facilities for leisure, but to respect meaning, spirituality and the vitality of the place, without freezing the existing condition through a merely conservative approach.

The main idea of the project is to maintain the ghats and their extraordinary atmosphere as similar as possible to the current condition, respecting the actual uses – people go to the river to wash clothes or dishes, to brush teeth and to immerse the body in holy water, or to pray or worship – trying to establish a new relationship between the city and the river.



We imagined a hybrid use of the ghats, not only for spiritual ceremonies, or crematories or ablutions, but also as a public space, a good place where to meet, socialize, chat, spend time or just look at the river flowing, without defining specific activities, but suggesting different opportunities and possibilities. We also think that it is necessary to foster the view of the ghats from the river, not only from the ferries and the boats that sail on its waters but also imagining floating structures, albeit of seasonal use. This could be possible, first of all, by encouraging the access to the banks by completely changing the nature of the street between the slum and the ghats, now encroached by commercial shops, temporary shelters, and parked trucks. This street could become the main path for pedestrians and the “backbone” of the whole intervention, enlarging the pavement and maybe creating a footpath also on the city side. We also suggested rethinking the linear residential settlement along the railway, which is now precarious and informal, directly facing the tracks, with all the dangers and discomfort that this implies. People living in the slum now use the rail space as an “expansion” of their home, where they pursue outdoor activities and the children can play, when of course the train does not pass. Many inhabitants of Kolkata utilize the rails as a street for pedestrian use to get from one place to another without being in a traffic jam of cars, tuctucs, handcarts, rickshaws... We think it could be correct to confirm this residential function – that now greatly contributes to the vitality of the area – completely reversing the present pattern. The houses included in temporary structures, but less spontaneous than the existing ones, could look out on the main road, hosting on the ground floor small commercial activities (related to ceremonies, sale of flowers, small altars dedicated to the gods, etc.) now present but improvised. The new structures, therefore, completely open on the road, should instead have a protective shell from the railroad.

(1) Letter to Arthur, 14.III.19, in: P. Boardman, *The World of Patrick Geddes. Biologist, town-planner, Re-educator and Peace-warrior*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978.  
 (2) R. Tagore, *Personality*, London, Macmillan, 1917.  
 (3) United Nations Human Settlements Pro-

gramme (UN HABITAT), *The State of Asian Cities*, 2010, p. 56.  
 (4) A. Stokman, D. Stimberg, S. Zeller, *River, Space, Design: Planning Strategies, Methods and Projects for Urban Rivers*, Birkhäuser, Basel, 2012, p. 10.  
 (5) *Ibid.*, p. 50.

Fig. 6: Life on the ghat: bathing, laundry  
 Fig. 7: Flowers spots: slums  
 Fig. 8: Slow degradation of the ghat  
 Fig. 9: Ahiritola Ghat  
 Fig. 10: Life and death in the ghats