Politics of Urbanscape: 
Transfiguring the Image of Kolkata 
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Abstract

The claim of aesthetic modernity arriving before social modernity (1) is being investigated with reference to ‘intense experiments of city-making’ in Kolkata. This brings into focus the socio-political inclination of packaging cities to fit a ‘global image of efficiency’. Here a deliberate attempt is made to look for specific geo-political appropriation and/or reproduction and/or rejection of both the global and the traditional aesthetic- thus identifying role of aesthetic convictions of the masses, the bourgeoisie and the State, in Asian experiments of worlding cities (2). The recent tendency in urban studies to locate the geography of authoritative knowledge in specific cases of the Global South is the context of this study (2). The paper would touch upon three beautification projects of Kolkata, at different stages of the post 90-s neo-liberalization era. The subversive claims of the politically conscious masses juxtaposed with the refusal of middle-class global aspirations to remain in the ‘waiting rooms of history’ (3) and simultaneous knee-jerk policies to compete for global capital provide an interesting case. Kolkata, both suffering from and celebrating its poignant urbanscape- presents a specific referent of how 21st century Indian cities are not just borrowing Western urban aesthetics but are ‘inevitably home-grown’ in their construction of appropriate aesthetics. The attempt here is limited to an examination of the desired image of the city, politically defined but socially negotiated, as a locus of possibilities, thus recognising the creativity and violence of space-making in Kolkata as a source of broadly relevant urban theory.

Keywords: Urbanscape; World-class; Image-making; Kolkata; Global South; Worlding; Aesthetics, Operation Sunshine; Barnaparichay book mall; London

1. The Prologue

Lewis Mumford says that “The city...is also a conscious work of art….The dome and the spire, the open
avenue and the closed court, tell the story, not merely of different physical accommodations, but of essentially different conceptions of man’s destiny” (4). Aesthetics, as Rancière puts it, is a redistribution of the sensible (5) and here I enquire about what kind of urbanscape aesthetics makes sense to us now as our deeply historical cities of the subcontinent undergo worlding processes i.e. how does the shared public imagination envisage our citiescape? The polar opposites which make claims to our aesthetic sensibilities may include aesthetization of slums (6) or what may be termed a preoccupation with the informal, spurned by the 80-s search for Indian identity and, a Western aesthetic of spatial modernity, appropriated by global capital as the “regulating fiction” (7) of ‘image of efficiency’ (8). As Roy puts it ‘the modernity and globality of Southern cities is studied in the valence of surprise and dismay; they are seen to be weak copies of a Western urbanism, a betrayal of an indigenous urban formation’ (2).

2. Case-Studies

I look at popular response to three urban scale beautification projects based in Kolkata—project Operation Sunshine of early 90s through which the informal sector was displaced off the streets of Gariahat, project Barnaparichay through which the boipara—the neighbourhood of books—was planned to be relocated inside a mall and the more curious and current stance taken by the State to makeover the image of Kolkata by ‘recreating London’. The legitimacy of these case-studies as referents for social technologies that produce Global South models of urban space making, lies in the belief that “an urban situation can be at once heterogeneously particular and yet irreducibly global.” (2) The case-study events under scrutiny, spread across the neo-liberalisation era, are chosen such that shift in both popular and official imagination of the desirable image of the city can be traced over two decades.

These instances reveal contextually generated aesthetic convictions which might help relocate in the Global South what is called the ‘locus of authoritative knowledge’ about urban space generation. These hybrid modernities, not as culturally modified forms of singular idea(s) of modernity but re-read (and thus qualified) as originals, can be thought to be produced as a negotiation among the political claims of the masses, nostalgia for urban legacies, perpetuity of traditional urban networks and processes, and the free play of capital and what Guy Debord and later Henri Lefebvre calls’colonization of everyday life’ (9). The focus here would be the various aesthetic judgments associated with the creation, dissemination, reception and rejection of information and images with reference to the specific cases under scrutiny.

2.1. Operation Sunshine: Cleansing of Informality

The following quote from a street trader in Maseru captures how urban informal sector in all developing nations is in conflict with the modern idea of desirable streetscape—‘My heart sank when we were told that we were being evicted because we- the people- spoil the beauty of the streets. It taught me that we poor people who are trying to make a living for our children have no right in this democratically elected government.’ (10) The bazaar aesthetic is notably a celebrated spectacle of the Indian subcontinent- a part of the repertoire of exotic images associated with an orientalist view of traditional India and is often appropriated in niche high culture architecture and urbanism, with carefully controlled reproduction of the messy visual vibrancy. The Delhi haat-s, Bangalore saanthe-s for example, in a controlled environment recreate artisans’ rural markets. This postmodern borrowing of familiar aesthetic is not formally recognized (nor does it really enjoy popular sanction) and has not percolated into official imaginations and thus urban policies. Thus the real bazaars- the informal sector- catering to the teeming masses is under constant threat of, what has been termed, vigilante urbanism (2). The distribution and the redistribution of this aesthetic is then essentially a political manifestation of unequal 'rights to the city’ (11) and urban commons.

The site of the first event under scrutiny is located in one of the old mixed-use, predominantly commercial areas of South Kolkata- Gariahat (the name itself suggests it might have been an oldhaat or rural market). As with all cities under developmental pressure, a vibrant informal economy thrived in the by-lanes of the area, exerting rights over almost all available and appropriate public space, contributing heavily in the economic processes of the area. Kolkata is home to about 15 million people and it has absorbed refugees and migrants for years, much before neo-liberalization started. It must be noted that South Kolkata is essentially an upper middle-
class stronghold, with a lot of erstwhile private households, apartments, Government staff-housing etc. As Partha Chatterjee puts it, Indian cities have become bourgeois (at last)(12), i.e., the empowered middle-class are today incidental winners in urban contestations of value-systems and thus it is often the middle-class sensibilities that get reflected in administrative decisions. And hence Operation Sunshine cleared the footpaths of Gariahat ‘tidying away the poor’ in 1996, amidst much resistance. It was simultaneous with a customary and unwise relocation plan, in complete disregard of the significance of the right location in street trade. It was a typical case of exploitation of the lack of citizenship of the dependent city (13). Roy has noted here a seminal shift in attitude on part of the political party in power, which had rose to almost uncontested power based on their championing of the refugees, migrants and all associated with urban informal sector. But this is not an instance of the uncontested hegemony of Western aesthetics. The twist to the story is the resilience shown by the informal sector and its subsequent resurrection. Today hawkers and informal shops continue to thrive on the footpaths of Gariahat. Steady and successful resistance and political claim staked on public space for livelihood was directed by the Calcutta Hawker Sangram Committee, a union of more than 32 local hawkers’ association. Continual resistance and campaigning for their rights prompted the commencement of the rehabilitation process, which started six years after the incident and was fully realized by 2013.

In the ““Politics of archiving: hawkers and pavement dwellers in Calcutta”, Dr. RitajyotiBandyopadhyay has argued that the critical role played by this so-called political society is their putting forward of an alternate image of the informal sector as vital entrepreneurial initiatives, strategically contradicting, putting in sharp contrast and in somewhat unflattering light, the unnecessarily negative image cultivated by bourgeois associations(14). This remarkable resilience on part of the proletariat can be said to embody strategic maneuvers through which the political society appropriates governmental policy making ((12) and in this case, makes claims on built environment. Sterility of modern aesthetics does not allow for the unpredictability, temporality and visual chaos of street vending arrangements but urban public space is an essential physical capital used by poor urban households everywhere. Hostility towards the informal sector is by no means restricted to the Global South and there are documented evidences of the same in the West. Everywhere a common causal factor seems to be the perception of the people and processes, lying outside the formal boundaries, as a nuisance. Street shopping in an informal market is an intense and critical part of the shared lived experience of the city and by extension, a part of a repertoire of images one comes to easily associate with. It has the possibility of being assimilated in the public imagination of a vibrant, safe and livable city. Both street shopping and the formal shopping malls enjoy popular patronage. There seems to be an easy co-existence of images different kinds shopping environments in the public imagination, each not necessarily denigrating the other. Thus we could explore the possibility of an accommodation of the informal aesthetic with global images, which might enable an alternate urban vision where the streets are not periodically and unnecessarily cleansed of people and where working in public space is progressively de-criminalized.

2.2. Boipara: Reigning in the neighborhood of books

‘I could not even imagine that books were sold with clothes and vegetables.’ - A citizen response to the idea of selling books in malls, as recorded in the paper ‘Barnaparichay – a mall in progress, a street in transition’ by Anurag Mazumdar(15)

We move our discussion to the older part of Kolkata- the North, replete with memories, associations of old Calcutta charms. The intellectual pulse of the city was, from the time of Bengal Renaissance, centered around her
prestigious academic institutions, e.g. the Presidency College, Sanskrit College, University of Calcutta, in an area which developed into the College Street boipara - a neighborhood of books, catering to students, academics and booklovers of the city. The images one fondly associates with boipara are the narrow by-lanes lined with second-hand book shops, bigger establishments on the wider main roads, and of course, the oft-celebrated smoke-filled image of the Indian Coffee House, where all the intellectual stalwarts of the city would once gather and raise storms in teacups. It is a thriving economy, largely informal, where books are the predominant commodity. Conjunct to a move to upgrade all old municipal markets, the State decided to build a mall dedicated to books to relocate all the bookshops. And in keeping with mall typology, the bigger publication houses were to serve as ground floor anchors. The smaller shops with small margins, dependent on impulse purchases, were designated to occupy higher floors, effectively the layout ensured that they would not be able to bank on the natural shopping tendency of buyers to stroll along horizontal routes.

The mall as a shopping destination was introduced relatively late in Kolkata, arriving only in early 2000-s, much later than the rest of the nation. The familiar and culturally celebrated boipara had a poignant aesthetic which made a sharp contrast with the generic image of a shopping mall. The loss of both tangible and intangible heritage, the violent disregard of the shared aesthetic, economic and lived space value of the historic area was negatively perceived as, besides being commercially unviable, an attempted commodification of the boipara culture in the shared urban imagination of the citizens, in this case, both the marginal and the bourgeois. The official imagination had failed to gauge the significance of the iconicity of the area in public imagination. The project found wide unpopularity and unlike, the previous case where vigilantate urbanism(2) could get punitive action implemented against the informal sector, even if temporarily, this project found heavy resistance from all sectors.

2.3. Recreating London: Addressing the colonial other

The recent State decision to makeover Kolkata along the lines of London has met with skepticism at best if newspaper articles are to be believed. It is the choice of desirable image that is curious and fit for intense deliberation. To elaborate on the existing culturescape along the Hooghly riverfront, it still has dilapidated remains of ports of the British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, Danish from colonial times, besides unique assemblage of temples, ghats, kumartuli(clay artisans’ settlements), old river-facing mostly neo-classical mansions of the babu-s reminiscent of 18th century Calcutta, besides the iconic Howrah Bridge (Rabindra Setu) and Vidyasagar Setu. Recent interventions have converted a limited stretch into a landscaped promenade, while the main stretch remains as a neglected repository of images of the city’s eventful past.
Back in 1989, Harvey wrote about how ‘Bread and circuses’ is a well-tried formula deployed to pacify restless or discontented elements in the population(16). There is a lot of pressure on the State to attract industry and capital, given the pessimistic economic condition. The current strategy of the State to recreate the Thames riverfront along the Hooghly ghats in Kolkata is concurrent with tendencies across the nation to borrow ‘images of efficiency’ e.g. the National capital Region’s stated master plan vision is that of a ‘world-class city’. The reflex urban regeneration strategy in Kolkata had so far been the predictable carrots to capital- unnecessary flyovers (notably and surprisingly criticized by mass media) to evade the congested real city, a new and expensive international airport. And now it is this curiously unique idea of tapping into a possibly deep seated aspiration towards the colonial other - London. It is worthwhile to mention that a more likely reference would have been Asian examples like Singapore, Hong Kong or Shanghai or even American cities.

The idea of public-ness of urban commons in India is a colonial construct where the shared public spaces traditionally would be dependent on the bazaar spectacle and perceived within the diad of the sacred and the profane. The colonial power-subject configuration and the percolation of Western urban design as a desirable superior ideal in the Indian mind is a well-researched phenomenon. The here vs there thus created has more to do with, both the imagined and the omnipresent neo-classical and neo-Gothic aesthetic in the colonial parts of the city-

Figure 4. (a) The paved promenade of Millenium park- a part of the ongoing Hooghly Riverfront project.; (b) Thames riverfront with the London Eye. [by Amartyabag (left) under CC BY 3.0 and Kalaha (right) under CreativeCommons Attribution-Share Alike 1.0 Generic]

Figure 5. Architectural vocabulary in the colonial parts of Calcutta is essentially revivalist- where the skyline is deceptively European while the public realm is disengaging- freely appropriated by contemporary flows. [by P.K.Niyogi (a) and BiswarpGanguly (b) under CC BY 3.0]

Figure 6. The old photographs of the city which celebrate its poignancy- the traces of colonial heritage lingers behind all the visual clutter [(a)’A bewildering mass of billboards at the corner of Harrison Street (Burra Bazaar) and Strand Road, Calcutta, 1945’ by Clyde Waddell, Public Domain; (b) by Rajesh Saha under CC 4.0]
the CBD area representative of (the colonial construction of) Western superiority in public imagination. As an exercise if a photograph of colonial Calcutta is divided above the ground floor in two parts, distinct eras, geographies and sensibilities would be revealed - the top portion can be from any part of old London while the bottom part, teeming with humanity, is again a scene befitting a ‘bursting at seams’ Global South city.

The reference for the current scheme is however contemporary London with the London eye as one of the models which are slated be faithfully translated on the Ganges bank. The worlding here, triggered by demands of aesthetics of ‘planetary capital’, is curiously rooted in local and contemporary negotiations of public imaginations both of colonial pasts and global contemporaries. All the images we are made to associate with Kolkata, by popular media, is that of acute nostalgia while this moment in history, demands that we break free from our implied lock-in in the ‘waiting rooms of history’.

3. The Epilogue

3.1. Popular Imaginations: the Vernacular – Western binary

Ong argues ‘There is no single teleology of modernization, no prescribed ladder of development to climb. Instead, the postcolonial condition hosts a multitude of performative and speculative enterprises, all of which operate through geographic referent’. Here the point of enquiry is the socio-political imagining of desirable urban aesthetics on the part of a wide range of participants, often with conflict of interests and convictions. As Goldman puts it, ‘Worlding is the “speculative urbanism” of information technology, finance capital, and real-estate development, but it is also the anticipatory politics of residents and transients, citizens and migrants’. The State in its official imagination of the future of the city again has to negotiate between these contesting aesthetic appropriations.

Kolkata is a city which both suffers from and celebrates its poetically poignant urbanscape. Its portrayal in movies, literature and critical writing, unfortunately can fit in perfectly with the universal image of cities of the Global South- ‘megacities, bursting at the seams, overtaken by their own fate of poverty, disease, violence, and toxicity. They constitute the “planet of slums,” with its “surplus humanity” and “twilight struggles.”’ The billboards, newspapers, the government policies etc. however promote the spectacle. The image the State wants to portray, today, to attract capital investment might be more in agreement with ‘modern’ middle class aspirations, and more critically, the “everyday experience of world-class aesthetic discourse”.

The omnipresence of images of the ‘good life’, defined in the West and produced by global capital, construct a utopia which had led to overvalorization of capital and geographies of contradictory spaces, characterized by contestation, internal differentiation and sharpened inequality. The billboards, print media, television, academic musings as well as fiction all are proliferated by images tailor-made for our consumption. The punctum effect produced by mass media- ‘everything that appears is good, everything that is good appears’ - the ever insatiable- competes with nostalgia for the seemingly inherently tenacious traditions- (though the vernacular too is allegedly appropriated by capital). Continental postmodern philosophy (Barthes) reiterates that experience no longer exists in a Kantian pure state, – where visual media become messages without a code- as direct links. Images are authentic traces of always only a part reality, and lean heavily on either of the two poles- images of ‘good life’ of un-satiated desire constructed by capitalism or that of memory, association, myth, nostalgia and baggage. That is both the sets are empty- endlessly
redefined simulations with manipulative agencies. The case studies are expressions of yearning and conflict and negotiation while both sets of images in circulation airbrush out the conflicts, reinforcing our convictions of ‘lack’ (Debord) in both counts.

3.2. Charting new Territories: Re-reading the Overlays

Negri long back had expressed hope about the present juncture of free flow of visuals as a potential moment of free and easier forms of communication- a contemporary culture emancipated by images. Notwithstanding the heavy critique of the same, for example by T J Clark, who dwells on the manipulative compressed pseudonarratives of images, I think Negri’s notion in our context warrants some merit. The free flow of images, ideas and their juxtaposition in our context might not mean an ‘endless slippage of meaning’ but the creation of new meaning – not empty codes- but a detournement- a new ensemble of pre-existing elements, undermining the originals in its search for relevance- not schizophrenic or apologetic hybrids but a deliberate and conscious construction of the blind-spot of Lacanian visual field where identity is pleasurably fragmented.

Jean Baudrillard, in his seminal work ‘America’ argues that contemporary society knows itself unreflexively, only through the reflections that flow from the camera’s eye(19). Since the discussion here is of popular dissemination of representations, let me briefly focus on the evolving portrayal of Indian cities on celluloid, with reference to a few popular commercial Bollywood films (and not in serious parallel cinema).

The Indian city was the other- a dystopia as seen in Shree 420 (1955), Pyaasa (1957) where protagonists would find themselves alienated. Simultaneously, for the Nehruvian post-independent young nation, confidant in modernist visions, utopia was located the West (mainly Eurocentric), and celebrated in cinema as well e.g. An Evening in Paris (1967). This trend was lost in the 80-s when a broader cultural struggle for search for identity (as reflected in angst of protagonists and loss of faith in the erstwhile convictions) was in prominence. However in the popular films of the post-liberalization 1990-s one again finds frequent foreign locales- the West again had captured the popular imagination as seen, for example in one of the Bollywood blockbusters of the time DilwaleDulhania Le Jayenge (1995). If we jump-cut to the early 2000-s broad cultural commodification tendencies, seen in all spheres of culture, finds application in cinema as well. One notices a deliberate attempt to portray a part realistic ‘version’ (high culture reproduction of messy vitality) of the city, replete with popular socio-cultural references, as seen in the reference of Lajpat Nagar refugee colony in ‘Vicky Donor’(2012) or the Jat settlement in urban villages of Gurgaon or the placeless DDA housing in ‘Tanu weds Manu returns’(2015).

The broadly accepted impression might be that the social realism of Indian parallel cinema was a tool of resistance till Neoliberal "Niche" Globalization took over and the images were set for popular consumption. As signs, they lost critical resistance. However Tewdwr-Jones(20) reflects that the city is not only that which appears on the screen, but also the mental city made by the medium of cinema, subsequently re-experienced in the real private and public spaces of the city. With time the notion of the other might be thought to have been at least partially assimilated in the self, leading to a relaxed attitude about the perceived conflicts. Popular aesthetic judgment in all spheres might have turned amicable to a peaceful juxtaposition of conflicting value-bases- the arrival of the ‘Indo-chic’ in the cultural politics of consumption being a case. For example in the fashion scene, we see the Kurti-jeans ensemble has conquered our imagination. The interesting exhibition Jugaad Urbanism: Resourceful Strategies for Indian Cities, curated in 2011, explores and celebrates the ‘making do’ (jugaad) way of designing built environment and life by citizens in contemporary Indian cities- a resourceful but messy alternative that might as well serve as an example of bricolage of essentially inconsistent ideas as an acceptable state of affairs.

In his remarkable essay ‘Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?’ Ramanujan elaborates on the Indian openness to a multiplicity of possible ways of approaching a problem (21). The Indian way has been throughout history that of slow assimilation. To explain the plurality of applicable and valid procedures Ramanujan refers to a tool-box of ideas- and each situation apparently calls for a ‘bricolage’ of applicable ideas- from ‘a cluttered arsenal’.Ramanujan says that the ‘modern’, the vehemently context-free, becomes just another context for us to assimilate, though it is not easy to contain’ (21). This attitude might not necessarily reflect vulnerability or easy susceptibility to new ideas, options and variations but a deep-seated societal inclination to steadily accommodate, appropriate and finally assimilate changes, reproducing contextual versions which qualify as originals in due course.

Tewdwr-Jones says that images or representations communicate ideas about places that can sit heavily on people’s emotions and sense of attachment to the represented locations and, additionally, to people’s own ideas about the identity and meaning of the place.(20)We are conditioned to the overlaying of various times and spaces in
our cities. The old the traditional and the western and alien, in their juxtaposition, may thus cease to be merely interdependent binary notions but as an overlay necessitate a contextual re-reading- uncertainty and doubt and loss of control in interpreting meaning in these images might just be an opportunity. As designers of built environment the objective would be to be speculative and optimistic(22) about of this moment. Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about our non-historicist history consisting of heterogeneous temporalities- ‘our present epistemology is everywhere at every historical moment from the past up to now’ and so to be authentic our images need to be true to all our simultaneous temporalities(3). The production of desirable aesthetics of built environment and the consequent public consumption of the same thus has to tactically accommodate the contradictions in an easy hybrid, socio-culturally sustainable and contextually negotiated.

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References