

Urban Collage: the Conformities and Contradictions of Kolkata

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Abstract: *Contemporary cities are dynamic entities, with constant addition, alteration and transformation of constituent heterogeneous layers, which qualifies them as 'collage of conglomerations' where diverse components interact with each other to ensure its continuance and growth. But in the recent past, proliferation of discontinuity in cities has necessitated renewed urban constructs which would enable dialogue among differential paradigms in future collage cities. This research paper investigates the emergent characteristics and discourses on contemporary cities which validate the 'Collage' inherent in them and lists down certain key constructs which would facilitate urban cohesiveness and stability in modern conglomerations. The assemblages of Kolkata, an eastern metropolis of India are discussed to illustrate the constructs.*

Keywords

Urban Discontinuity, Conglomerations, Collage City, Urban Constructs, Kolkata, Morphology

Introduction:-

Contemporary cities today present themselves as agglomeration of rapidly transforming amorphous spaces linked together by various transportation and communication network and can no more be considered a single entity. They merit representation as an interconnected mass of dispersed and heterogeneous components interacting with each other in various capacities to form a whole. This necessitates a relook at urbanity which would treat cities as a collage of different layers and objects, simultaneously operating at many different scales with a focus on mediating heterogeneity and the resultant discordance in these cities. Collage cities are the future of urbanism and so must be understood and appropriate urban constructs which would facilitate their efficient functioning within the framework of coherence and compatibility must be defined. The morphological constructs of built environment are the most visible tool of urban comprehension as they connect the 'memories and prophecies' with the aid of various urban enactment agencies and temporal cues.

Aim:-

To investigate the factors engendering collage cities and enumerate the urban constructs which act as agents of reconciliation of their heterogeneities. Assemblages of Kolkata is investigated to understand the collage inherent in its urban fabric.

Contemporary cities- The Collage Factors:-

In the recent years, the idea of cities as a composition of fragments and approach of weaving together parts into whole rather than designing the whole first has been gaining ground steadily in urban discourses (Collage City, 1977, Splintering

Urbanism, 2001, Recombinant urbanism, 2005). Overlapping of heterogeneous layers over temporal scale along with hybridization of urban realm has become the most eminent determinant of urban forms in modern metropolises thereby engendering a new space rhetoric to be negotiated. Certain commonalities are also embedded in these collage cities which if deciphered can be manipulated for urban good, few of which are listed below:

Coalescent Utopias: - These cities are often shaped by multiple utopias ranging from autocratic whims and fancies to democratic goals, which most often co-exist in harmonious relationship in the form of hybrid urban morphology.

Overlap of Layers: - Collage cities exist as juxtaposition of various urban layers often manifested into hybrid building typologies (Fenton, 1985). Juxtaposition of morphological, temporal and enactment layers (morphological composition carried out at different time through different policies operating under different political, social and cultural construct) is the life force behind collage cities just as "the overlap, and the resulting multiplicity of aspects makes any painting fascinating" (Alexander, 2016)

Hierarchical Overlaps: - Collage cities are constituted in parts that are not arranged according to spatial hierarchy but connected together by system of flow and circulation similar to semi-lattice structure which is layers in themselves (Alexander, 2016).

Patchwork Finish: - Collage cities are medley of heterogeneous patches depicting various political, ideological and economic allegiances kept in collusion by certain boundary mechanisms. These cities no more exist within an enclosure but exist as a conglomeration of multiple and fragmented remnants which are connected together by surrounding background and articulating networks (Neutling, J.W., 1992) and distinct patches in these cities must be reconciled to control disruptive contests.

Spaces of Transformations: - Change is the only constant in these collage cities and new challenge for urbanism now is to handle the rapid transformations (OMA, Mau, Bruce, 1995) of urban fabric in these cities to extract deliverable goods.

Spaces of Imposed Homogeneity: - According to Lefebvre (1991) urbanism is: "A politics of space that imposes homogeneity through a process of rigorous planning, suppressing 'symbols, information and play'" (Lefebvre, 1991) and collage cities strive to force homogeneity on heterogeneous formations by flattening diverse cultural and social norms. In collage cities the processes of assembly, reassembly, and creative encounters: contrasts, opposition, superposition, and juxtapositions mediate separation, spatio-temporal distances for coherency.

Urbanism of Plurality: - Collage cities accommodate the diversity, the multidirectional movements, the new lifestyles and urban entities. Graham and Marvin suggest that "our new spatial imaginaries must acknowledge the critical importance of heterogeneous interaction and continued mixing in present

day urban spheres as the very essence of the city” (Graham, 2001).

Multi-Scalar Adaptation: - Collage cities are apt in adapting to spatial and temporal requirements through ideological and physical restructuring. They adhere to Aldo Rossi’s definition, “they bring the past into the present, providing a past that can still be experienced and tend to synchronize with the process of urbanization because of their form-one which is able to accommodate different functions over time (Eisenman, 1984).

Heterotropic Spaces:- Collage cities are assemblages of heterotropias which are defined as heterogeneous spaces that ‘handle or sort disparate flows’, may be specialized or hybrid form of enclave, with multiple ‘sub-centres and sub compartments’. They accommodate multiplicity of meanings and by doing that stand out from the surrounding urban fabric (Shane, 2005). Heterotopias mix the stasis of enclaves (specific districts or units which act as focusing devices like a city square) with the flow of armatures (spaces of connection and flow) and builds the whole from parts.

Intertwined Networks: - Collage cities are heavily dependent on proficiency of networks to connect the patches. Graham Shane introduces the concept of armature (Shane, 2005) to acknowledge their importance. These networks dissolve connect the differential existence across patches physically as well as through meaning mediation.

Dispersed magnets: - These cities contain multiple magnets i.e. points of attraction both physical and aspirational dispersed in various differential backgrounds which link the city in mental imagery of the people. Rather than a single dominant structure, multiple nodes interlink to generate the cityscape.

Museums: as Opposed to Singular Visions: - Collage cities mostly aspire to be museums, which can be used as a tool of global branding. The exhibits are often eclectic mix of local derivatives along with foreign imports held together under a scaffold. By welcoming diverse stimuli and response and being amicable to diverse contexts these cities aim to reconcile their local identity with global ones.

Urban Constructs-Search for Anchors:-

Heterogeneity, diversity and change are the reality of contemporary collage cities and their march towards drastically different future continuums at a very fast pace is inflicting a state of deep delirium and identity oscillation upon the urbanscape. So, certain constructs must be identified which can anchor these cities amidst constant flux. These constructs must be easily comprehensible and contextually valid. Built spaces fit the bill well through the paradigms of morphology, enactment and memory and can be groomed to function as stabilizing agents of these collage cities.

Morphological constructs:-

Legibility and Walkability: - The heterogeneity of patches can be negotiated when they are legible and walkable as it is a means which links partial images to a coherent whole and thus it enables definition of diverse urban fields.

Public/private realms: - Establishing an interconnected public and private realm increases the possibility of diverse interpretation and engendering common interest in the cities we live.

Contextual presence:-Whenever an object performs in a context i.e. becomes part of urban texture its iconic status incorporates meaning provided by the context which is very important for stabilizing collage cities.

Relationship between solid and void: - Relationship between the building (solid) and its setting (void) decides the involvement of particular work of architecture in urbanistic processes. Insulated property accentuates boundaries whereas the buildings that merge into surroundings and act as urban infill play far more active role in sustaining collage.

Typology:-Typologies carry meaning and even if various heterogeneous patch exhibits different typology, their consistency can anchor transformations. Typology is useful in introducing the much coveted local identity to collage city patches as well as can be used for establishing parts with strong identity in the city whole.

Object –texture dialectic: - Collage cities must incorporate “ambiguous and composite buildings” which “quietly collaborate” with their locale at the same time as “strenuously asserting themselves” (Rowe & Koetter, 1978, pp. 168-169). This strategy unifies the urban realm where differential morphology is dominant.

Contribution of poche:- ‘Poches’ are solids in a plan which separate principal spaces of buildings from each other, act as a solid matrix to frame spatial events and also assist the legibility of adjacent spaces. In collage cities buildings act as poche and they must be designed to dissolve boundaries and enhance permeability of disjointed spaces.

Urban rooms: - Urban rooms are the spaces, indoor or outdoor where citizens can mingle, with or without fixed agenda. These act as an instrument of field recognition, an identifiable stabilizer and a means of collective orientation and thus prevent cities from disintegrating into anarchy (Rowe & Koetter, 1978, pp. 83-84).

Enactment constructs:-

Multifaceted architectural approach: - This approach can be illustrated by Isaiah Berlin’s quote “the fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing” (Berlin, 2013). The hedgehog concentrates on a single idea whereas the fox is preoccupied with multiple stimuli. In collage cities, temperamental qualities of fox must be preferred over hedgehogs so as to accommodate plurality. Collage cities will only survive if they respect pluralism and reflect the collision of interest. Enactment paradigms must accommodate “interstitial debris” along with planned intervention (Rowe & Koetter, 1978, p. 107).

The collage approach:- Collage cities display a balance between unplanned and overtly planned endeavours for delivering a meaningful urbanscape (Rowe, C. & Koetter, F, 1978). Spaces are conceived through combination of fragments, interpretations and utopias representing the past, present and future simultaneously. Collage city is shaped by the juxtaposition of part designs into a whole rejecting totalitarian approaches, and prioritizes memory, localized contexts, and individual meanings so as to derive its form and function from borrowed fragments.

Bricoleur as the Executor: - Collage cities need ‘Bricoleur’ as the planner, executor and facilitator. Levi-Strauss (1966, cited by Rowe) defines the bricoleur as someone performing a large number of diverse tasks, with but he is not dependent on the

availability whatever raw materials and tools are at hand based on previous experience and solutions. Bricoleur combines the rational with irrational to arrive at solutions and is particularly useful where contesting viewpoints might exist.

The Time Constructs:-

Memory as meanings: - Collage cities must respect memory and meaning along with improvisation particularly through built form for better negotiation of differences.

Kolkata- A Functioning Collage:-

Introduction to complexity:-Kolkata, capital of West Bengal state of India is a metropolis accommodating 5 million citizens and is the economic and cultural capital of Eastern India. The seeding of urban Kolkata dates back to 1690 when British East India Company's agent Job Charnock bought three villages namely Kolkata, Govindapur and Sutanuti to establish a trading post. It became the imperial capital of India in 1774 and enjoyed royal patronage till the capital was shifted to Delhi in 1912. During 20th century, Kolkata emerged as a hotbed of nationalism got infested with famine and partition induced refugee influx multiple times, suffered massive economical and social setbacks but at the same time reached the zenith of cultural and literary achievements through amalgamation of diverse impacts. In its three hundred years old history, multiple cultures have left their mark on present Kolkata. These include indigenous Indian ethos, with innumerable variants, the influences of distinctive style of French, British, Portuguese, Parsis, Armenian colonizers, and signature variants introduced by the migrants like the marwararis, parsis and Chinese introducing multiple layers in the urban fabric of the city, each of which have been absorbed, adapted, and developed in this spatial organization and collective psyche. This city of star contrasts between wealth and poverty, hope and despair, order and chaos today is losing its identity and coherence due to developmental pressures and glaring infrastructural inadequacies which necessitates mediation of contrasts and reconciliation of heterogeneity. The idea is not to preserve Kolkata as a monument manifesting its embedded history but to accept the dynamics of change within the life of the city and the urban constructs identified above must be active participants in this campaign.

Assemblages-Overview of Collage:-

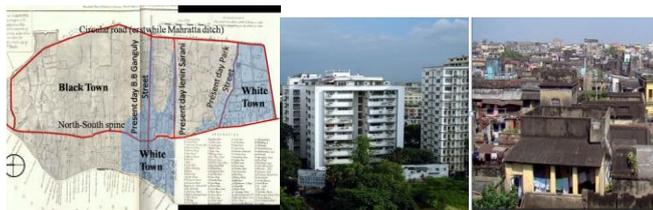


Figure.1. Mark Wood's 'Plan of Calcutta', 1784 (Mitra, 2012) and North and South Kolkata :The differentials

Since its inception, Kolkata grew up in two contrasting patches, 'Black town' inhabited by native Indians towards North and 'White Town' towards the central and South Kolkata meant for the Europeans centred on the Fort William

and Maidan. These two parts were distinctly different in terms of tangible built fabric and perceptual image. North Kolkata is a fascinating district dominated by narrow little lanes and hundreds of century-old mansions built by rich babus (Bengali aristocrats) in a hybrid style which combined neo-classical architecture with vernacular architecture of Bengal and influences from Islamic and Hindu architecture whereas South Kolkata was monumentally planned with spacious neo-classical bungalows and wide avenues. Though, lack of physical boundary led to expansion in both towns, often getting into each other and abundance of connecting routes and hybrid buildings in both parts of town progressively connectors and hybrid buildings mellowed down the differences these two parts still showcase their distinct identities quite forcefully. After independence South Kolkata has seen immense development, mostly in the form of multistory buildings and New Towns like Bidhannagar and Rajarhat have been developed to accommodate the increasing population. The urbanscape of Kolkata has changed immensely but a common past and continuity of certain urban constructs have bound the different urban assemblages of Kolkata in a harmonious relationship.

Though numerous distinct patches are an equal participants in Kolkata's Collage a few of them merit special mention e.g. 'Park Street' in central Kolkata is the 'Time Connection' of the city, and a collage in itself as it connects the European Calcutta, with its grand colonial structures to the slums as one walks down from east to west. 'College Street' in north Kolkata houses academic institutes of international repute, dating back to 1817 and book stalls strewn over footpath constitute the largest second hand book market in the world. Apart from these street, discrete patches with distinct identity are dominant in this collage, first one being the 'New Market Chowringhee' area (primarily commercial heart of the city from Colonial times with pompous gothic buildings), second being 'Dalhousie Square' (first administrative and business centre developed by British in Kolkata with primarily neo-classical architecture), third being 'Chitpur' area (oldest residential part of North Kolkata with many palatial mansions of wealthy Indians), fourth being 'Kumartuli' (distinct because of idol making activity but deterioration apparent in urban fabric), next 'Gariahat' (commercial stretch of South Kolkata with predominant modern building) and final one being the 'Jadavpur 8B' area (mixed use centre of South Kolkata mainly established as colonies for refugees). In spite of being different from each other in spatial disposition, morphology, cultural-social realms etc. these assemblages relate closely to each other through certain conformities which enable functioning of this collage called 'Kolkata'.

Conformities-Strengthening the Collage:-

Hierarchical organization:-Wherever one is in Kolkata, one belongs, to a 'para' (neighbourhood). The morphological divide of the big city is negotiated through its dissolution into by individual paras, having distinct spatial, social and cultural identities but having permeable and interconnected boundaries which unites the prurality of urbanscape thereby unifying elements of Collage into a single entity.

Walkability and legibility:-Be it north or South Kolkata, the paras (local word for neighbourhood) are compact physically

entities with diverse urban elements scattered within the purview of pedestrians, thus making them highly walkable and legible. Walkability is also supported by frequent resting places like 'Roaks' (elevated house plinths fronting streets), tea stalls etc. The legibility is also increased by cultural factors, like presence of people on streets all times in day to guide a visitor. Abundant public transport renders the entire city legible through appropriate enactments. Paras being little pockets of sociability kindle common memory for unification of collage.

Contextual presence:- In both quarters of the city, transformation has embedded contextual change and history into physical spaces thus weaving common threads through the city. Hybrid buildings of north Kolkata mansions speak of social cultural milieu through space differentiations like 'Andarmahal' (private quarter), 'Bahirmahal' (public quarters) and the 'Thakurdalan' (space for Durga puja while European mansions speak of grandeur reflecting the social position of colonizers and their struggle to adjust to local climatic discomfort.

Private-public interface: - North Kolkata houses directly open in street and presence of large entrance porticos and 'Roaks' diffuse the public-private boundaries. South Kolkata mansions open themselves to the streets through huge front gardens. The citizens of this city have unique aptitude of turning any outdoor space into a public space through 'adda' which unifies the urban space by dismantling boundaries.



Figure.2. Roaks and Porticos(public interface of the private)

Object-texture:-Kolkata has always given predominance to texture rather than buildings. North Kolkata has a very fine urban grain, with compact and close buildings but south Kolkata makes up by providing closely related open spaces flowing into each other. Open markets camouflaging buildings are the dominant texture wherever you go in the city thereby hiding the disparity in objects.

Solid void relationship:-Though this relationship varies across the city, the commonality lies in the human scale of voids. Inside the paras, voids are mostly doors and window openings whose proximity fosters communication. In wider contexts, voids are shop-fronts but they are also scaled down.

Typology: - Certain building typologies are planted at otherwise inappropriate patches i.e. neo-classical buildings in North Kolkata or a Rajasthani haveli in erstwhile white town in support of the freedom of mobility of citizens mediates differentials through collective memory.

Poche: - North and the South Kolkata display completely different but complementary poche which unites the city through contrasts. Southern poches yearn for voids whereas northern ones look for openness with both converging at maidan-the lungs of the city.

Urban rooms:-Kolkata boasts of uncountable urban rooms at all scales ranging from para clubs, roaks, football ground, library, bus stops, moving buses owing to its public culture of

congregation. These urban rooms unify the image of the city into a coherent whole.

Contradictions-dissociating the collage:-

Gated communities: - Housing complexes screened through impregnable boundaries disrupt public private interaction and hence generate individual islands in cityscape. 'Eye on street' is replaced by guards and cameras bringing in individualistic enactment constructs.

Typology dissolution: - Typologies are abandoned in favour of mass produce apartment blocks thereby nullifying contextual unity of the collage. Modern typology of dominating voids has also affected the image rendering qualities of this collage.

Disruption of routes:-Urban expansion and widespread congestion in the city has promulgated need of new connections, both outside and within urban boundary resulting in numerous flyover project disrupting visual and spatial correlation, sometimes dissecting the 'paras' and hence the memory frames of the collage.

Change in public space idioms:-Restrictions in public spaces in the form of controlled access induced by commoditization highly discourages amalgamation capacity of the collage. Rapid changes in space experiences e.g. transference of cinema viewing experience from great art deco style movie halls to modern multiplexes severely affects the time and memory constructs of this functioning collage

Formalization of urban rooms:-Urban rooms in Kolkata are gradually changing from informal congregations to designed interventions which are reducing their role as an agent of urban mediation.

Conclusion:-

Present day cities are layered in their existence with heterogeneous constituents and function as living collages where every disparate patch communicates with the other to deliver a coherent whole. Certain commonalities of these cities anchor them through transformations and certain other morphological, enactment and temporal constructs enable mediation of differences. These constructs must be respected in order to amalgamate the old with the new and the accidental with the planned urban interventions so as to accommodate contrast and avoid discordance. Urban complexity arising out of coexistence of disparate elements reinforced by multiple meanings is nowhere as prominent as in Kolkata. In order to guide it to a coherent future and deduce a functioning model, a renewed reading of its urban constructs become mandatory which can discern the conformities and contradictions facing this functioning Collage. The technique and state of mind of 'Collage' can solve the inherent conflict of collage cities by balancing the scaffold (whole) and exhibits(constituents), structure(urban fabric) and event(spaces), memory(past) and prophecy(future) to support the particular physical, social and cultural continuum where imported constituents acquire a new identity from the changed context in which they are used by juxtaposition.

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