Critic Note

"Interpreting Intersections", notes by Critic-in-Residence, Sudeshna Chatterjee

"...architecture is like no other art. It is the most complex and compromised of the arts, subject to a battery of restraints, controls and conflicts of interest, always striving to find the line where art and utility meet. A building is not a studio work; it is the product of an enormous mixed bag of programs and pressures that go far beyond the unified vision that is possible for the creator, performer, interpreter or translator of other art forms. It is caught in an endless struggle between the aesthetic and the pragmatic on a battlefield of politics, money and power."

—Ada Louise Huxtable 1990

Intersections, the art and architecture residency, brought together two architects from Mumbai and an architectural firm from Delhi for a month at KHOJ. The residency offered a space to these very different practitioners to engage in deep thought and exploration of issues and ideas about architecture and the urban environment; ideas that are close to their hearts but often left unexplored in the routine practices of the everyday. Since the residency is in an arts space, the expression of ideas was expected to push disciplinary boundaries and seek meaningful representations to engage the arts and other fields in collaboration with architecture and spatial practices.

As the critic in residence for the art and architecture residency, I seized the opportunity to engage with this process as an interpreter or a decoder of meaning and values underpinning the acts of design. Few spaces in the Indian context offer this engagement and indeed the opportunity for reflection on the intersections of the practice of architecture and the art of architecture. Criticism of architecture is seen both as an art (Huxtable 1990) and a craft (Leatherbarrow 2009) that requires the discipline of intellect and the craft of language to interpret the work of the architect/artist who seeks representation through non-verbal means. As the critic in residence I recorded the journey undertaken by each of the artists/architects in the month of their engagement with Intersections in my blog interpretingintersections.wordpress.com/. The blog captured the creative explorations of the artists which were initially somewhat unsure of direction and outcome. As a critic, recording of the process was important to prepare the site for a more full blown critical account which will ultimately at least serve the pragmatic purpose of accessibility of the work that can be more widely shared than the work itself. As David Leatherbarrow (2009) points out: "Although criticism is neither philosophy nor theory, it implies both. If less profound than those two, its interpretations have more immediacy and effect, for conclusions made about specific projects not only allow designers to redefine the premises on which they work but also indicate the bearing those projects have on the world in which the project has been realized (p.98)."

Epistemology

A miniature model for an imagined city, a story about one man's experience of survival and negotiations in urban space, and an installation that sets out to explore the phenomenology of an interstitial space. How do you critique each of these works without knowing the epistemological

position of the author, the origin, nature, methods and limits of their knowledge, in short the journeys that led to these projects? In all three cases, the architect/urbanist/artist came to this KHOJ residency to further develop an idea they had while working in their practice, teaching or research. I spent some time during my initial interactions with the resident architects understanding what brought these practitioners to this workshop for a month. I further got an opportunity during the FICA talk on December 15, 2010 to learn how these artists came to shape their current works the way they have.

As I got to know the works and ideas of the architects I could not help but notice the similarities in the ontological questions raised by the three architects revealing a postmodernist stance underpinning their work marked by "the desire to disturb, to challenge and to disrupt the totalizing gestures that continually threaten to consume us (Malpas 2007)".

Rupali Gupte is one of the architects from Mumbai. As an urban designer, Rupali is uncomfortable if not rejecting of the inevitable power centrism of urban design practice. She had worked on a fictional history of Mumbai in the mould of Tenalirama and other stories. In this project Rupali narrativizes Mumbai's urbanism using fictional imagery and stories that challenge the dominance of a positivist approach to planning. She promotes the idea of a "Tactical City" that foregrounds 'tactics' or the "art of the weak" in skilfully negotiating the strategies of the powerful in a bid to survive in the city (de Certeau 1984). At the FICA talk, Rupali tells the story of the Mumbai chawls near the Mill Lands by placing the unrepresentables within representation itself; the building tells its own story through her detailed drawings that not only document the physical characteristics but also behavior traces, the stories of the legal, illegal and sublet tenants and their socio-spatial practices.

The KHOJ residency having placed Rupali in Delhi for a month made her aware of the top-heaviness of urban design in Delhi. This when coupled with the middle-class angst against lack of planning and desire for urban renewal, lead to situations where a lot of people fall through the gaps of the formal planning process. Rupali used the metaphor of potholes for these gaps in planned urbanism that many people are forced to occupy and called it "occupancy urbanism". She said that she had always been fascinated by the many cities, mini cities, which exist in these potholes. In her studio teaching too she had explored this idea with her students by mapping situational practices in these pothole spaces and then proceeded to design for the protagonists who occupy these spaces. Rupali's project for the KHOJ residency was titled "Pothole City".

The second architect from Mumbai was Prasad Shetty. Prasad is very interested in mapping the softer aspects of cities. These aspects, he feels, are ignored by the formal mapping techniques commonly used in planning processes. Prasad is in fact suspicious of formal mapping attempts such as those undertaken by several JNNURM projects where some people were unable to get into the map whereas some who desire anonymity and cover are made visible in the maps. While talking to Prasad I sensed a sense of frustration in him about maps. On asking him about this he readily explained that this maybe an artefact of the hypermapping context he found himself in Mumbai. The city is heavily into archiving and cartographic mapping, and increasingly more so through its modern avatar of GIS. Several alternative mapping movements flirt with social issues through evocative photographs and writings in digital spaces. Prasad is deeply concerned about the tokenism of such representations and engagements.

Prasad's presentation at FICA questioned and problematized the meta-narratives of the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission projects as formulated in the central government guidelines, as well the reform and restructuring efforts at the municipal level in conformity of those guidelines

seeking legitimation while ignoring local realities. Prasad's project at KHOJ was called "The Demapping Project" and was an exploration of possibilities of engagement with a hypermapping context.

Anagram Architects was the Delhi-based architectural firm that participated in the KHOJ workshop. During the FICA talk, Anagram began their presentation with their most iconic work— a brick screen wall which redefines the dead end of a building to better interface with the street and fill the interior spaces with light. This innovatively crafted brick wall plays with the courses of bricks to create a spectacular screen that not only challenges established building practices that treat the end wall as a solid barrier particularly when abutting a lower-income settlement but also effectively decenters the subject, the building itself. The building remains almost hidden and enigmatic behind the brick screen. Anagram through this work invites viewers to do some work while viewing and interpreting the wall as also the building that it fronts. The desire to challenge, disturb standard practices, and create alternate interpretations pervades most of Anagrams's works.

Anagram's concept for the KHOJ residency emerged from their observations of client behaviors and aspirations in their architectural practice. Inevitably even in the case of house projects on smaller plots of land, Anagram encountered the client's aspiration to claiming extra territory outside their legal boundaries. The architect is challenged to make apparent to the owner as well as to the outsider the extent of the owner/occupier's claimed space. The claiming of territories is not only limited to the external spaces of a house/home but also within. Who gets how much space next to whom is often a subject of acrimonious debate within families. Anagrams's project for the KHOJ residency explores the idea of an edge as a space where boundaries between territories flow into each other.

The creative forms of each work and styles of presentation were different for each architect. However as postmodernist critiques, the architects questioned the contemporary world and the over reliance on scientific approaches to production of space. Each in their own way sought to humanize the social and spatial environments by deconstructing and challenging assumptions about space, urbanism and urban practice rather than working with rationally organized, functional grand schemes.

Pothole City: A model and metaphor for non-planned urbanisms

The Pothole City emerged in a freshly dug hole in the center of the courtyard of KHOJ's workspace in Khirkee village. Cement blocks of different shapes moulded out of everyday objects such as the butts of plastic bottles and children's kitchen sets were carefully arranged in the courtyard pothole. Rupali in constructing her Pothole City in the courtyard of KHOJ borrowed references from around Khirkee and used her imagination to produce a space that is outside of the planned realm. She lovingly detailed the Khirkee mosque and a water tank and sent them to Mumbai for 3D printing. These well sculpted white models stood out as landmarks in the cement grey Pothole City. Working as a bricoleur, Rupali produced an imagined morphology of the Pothole City by absorbing and tracing over the contours of many urban conditions in many informal settlements encountered by her. The result is a production of a place that is partly symbolic, partly abstract and partly reminiscent of actual places. The Pothole City is a place quarried from the memory of other places.

During the construction, Rupali explained to me that she sees the Pothole City as a metaphor for the non-planned, occurring outside the rational but not as a counterpoint to the master planned city. To her, the Pothole City represents a discursive space that has its own agency. As an urban designer, on

encountering such a space, Rupali is happy to step back and observe without feeling compelled to intervene.

On more than one occasion Rupali had referred to the Futurama pavillion, constructed by car producer General Motors in the 1939 New York World Fair. 25 million people lined up for hours to gaze at this utopian model of an automobile society that portrayed a vision of the world as it might be in 1960. This fair epitomised a key moment in which modernist planning ideals were mainstreamed as a cultural and political brief (Hajer). Futurama offered a new imagination of a city where it was possible to reconfigure society to function according to purist planning ideals driven by technological progress most notably by the possibilities of the automobile to segregate work from living in planned environments.

Pothole City according to Rupali is another kind of imagination for shaping urbanisms occurring outside the planned environments in the future of Indian cities. Rupali hoped to tell us something about such urbanisms of the non-planned in her Pothole City project. The miniature city that Rupali carefully created in her dig in the center of the KHOJ courtyard had a great sense of order in it. On Opening Night at KHOJ, a string of blue lights snaked its way across the Pothole City giving it a festive mood as well as according to Rupali representing a sense of infrastructure penetration such as electricity. Tiny sprigs of plants dotted the mini concave landscape and were the only signs of life in this city.

Futurama was both a reference and a point of departure for Rupali's Pothole City, her metaphor for the non-planned. The kind of spatiality that the Pothole City sought to represent, typically nurture urbanisms shaped by circumstance driven opportunistic occupations. Such spatialities are shaped by a social Darwinian process of organic and incremental evolution where the driving force of citymaking is the agency and tactics of people as Rupali herself had engaged with in previous works. The spatiality of the Pothole City falls in the narrative mode of thought. The Pothole City is not an intervention as Rupali had time and again pointed out even though the model tends to suggest otherwise. The mode of representation, the miniature model, created a symbolic physical environment for the public gaze and had a strong sense of order in its layout. This perhaps was the incorrect format for representing socio-spatial narratives of the unplanned and occupancy urbanisms, and needed to find other ways of expression through non-verbal means.

In seeking a representation of the non-planned in the manner of the utopian project of the Futurama, Rupali perhaps inadvertently created an abstract imagination that universalized the morphology of very local accidental urbanisms despite some references to the geographic context of the Khirkee village, the macrosite of her miniature city in the courtyard of KHOJ. The miniature Pothole City as an bstract imagination disconnected itself from the social-cultural-political contexts and the pace and prose of everyday life that form the backbone of occupancy urbanisms in the Indian urban landscape. The model Pothole City achieved being an imaginative visual representation of informal spatiality. But it fell short of representing a living spatiality shaped through the agency of people and practices of everyday life in unplanned places.

The Demapping Project: A fictionalisation of tactical narratives

Prasad calls his KHOJ project the Demapping Project. It is his attempt outside of his regular practice to find ways of engaging with the contexts of certain over mapped urban spaces. Khirkee village, where KHOJ is located, is itself a hypermapped context due to the myriad research and art projects

undertaken at Khoj that used this urban space as a site for engagement. Prasad spent the first week at Khoj going through the archives to understand how KHOJ maps urban space, particularly Khirkee. Other than scanning of maps at KHOJ such as mapping done during Urban Typhoons, other community projects with photographic recordings etc., Prasad also busied himself collecting unusual information on Khirkee itself. His face lit up when he told me that there are world famous pet shops here where animals of all sizes are kept, and there are about two lakh odd enterprises in Khirkee.

Prasad has identified several projects from the archives of KHOJ that exhibit a range of mapping techniques from hardcore cartographic mapping resulting in design solutions to mapping of near invisible micro-narratives of people's everyday lives in Khirkee. These projects are:

1) 'Proposal for Khirkee Village' by the TVB School of Habitat Studies on behalf of Delhi Urban Arts Commission in 2006.

2) 'Community Aspirations vs. Metropolitan Megadreams' by Urban Resource Group in 2008.

3) '1mile² Delhi' by Astha Chauhan, Kelda Free and David Brazier along with Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group in 2009.

4) 'Khirkee ki Kahani' by Vandana Ram and Tim Carroll in 2004.

5) 'Khirkiyaan' by Shaina Ashok in 2006 (Prasad is interested in one episode that records conversations between workers inside factories around Khirkee)

6) 'City (In)visible' by Sreejata Roy and Mrityunjay Chatterjee in 2008.

7) 'Hamari Sadak' by Rahul Srivastava, Matias Enchanove, Aastha Chauhan and Jose "Cole" Abasolo in 2010 for the Urban Typhoon Workshop.

These sources allowed Prasad to view Khirkee from different perspectives, and hear many voices telling different stories about urban space and everyday life. Other than these projects Prasad had also unearthed several allied stories about disputes over property, caste, possible projects etc. Prasad's demapping project in the hypermapped context of Khirkee was guided by the question: If we have to reconstruct Khirkee with these materials how would Khirkee appear?

Deconstructing the many narratives ranging from cartographic maps to micro narratives of tactics used by people to survive and thrive in Khirkee, Prasad constructed a much richer context of life in a powerful fictional narrative called 'Stories of Here'. This story constituted the main body of his project and emerged as a new narrative that is part fiction and part grounded in the real experiences of people in Khirkee. It is a work of immense power for it realized that only through seeing people act in specific circumstances that the meaning of places can be read. Even though Prasad shared the concerns for understanding life in non- planned contexts with the Pothole City, in choosing to tell the story of one man, KT and his journey of finding out the implications of formal planning processes for his life and livelihood in the non-planned context of Khirkee village, Prasad placed the reader/audience within the lived experience of KT in Khirkee.

'Stories of Here' has a very strong conceptual structure that builds narrative links between key events in KT's life to give direction and emotional weight to the story. Such strategies are effectively used by seasoned storytellers and differentiate their work from dry academic writing based on the same data

(Childress 1998). Methodologically 'Stories of Here' falls in the genre of fictional ethnography where truth "is not a realist narrative but rather a sensual, magical, lyrical truth. The feel of the experience—verisimilitude—is what the writer is after. Exact recordings of words said are less important than what the sayer meant to say" (Rinehart 1998, p.204). In adopting a fictional ethnographic narrative mode, Prasad achieved an affective feel of the lived experience as well as its cognitive truth and conveyed a "been there" feel by integrating fantasy, imagination and parts of real experience. The very well crafted 'Stories of Here' vindicates Denzin's contention, "Seeing is not understanding. Understanding is more than visual knowledge. Understanding is visceral" (Denzin 1997, p.46). This visceral understanding was missing in the representation of the Pothole City. It pulsated furiously in 'Stories of Here'.

Prasad also put up six A3 sized posters as abstract representations of some of the ideas touched upon in 'Stories of Here'. KT's moment of truth was the discovery that the Master Plan was not a man but a paper document. This very powerful idea is conveyed in the posters as a series of human figures cut out of yellow cartographic maps of Delhi. In another poster, Prasad drew a brick wall to etaphorically represent the wall that accommodated KT's barber shop on a platform and highlighted the importance of unlikely spaces for hosting informal economic activities in megacities. The wall on which the posters were displayed had some cracks and crevices. These hollow spaces were innovatively used by Prasad for showcasing the diversity of animal life commonly found in the public spaces of Khirkee. The viewer had to look through an eye-piece to see miniature cattle nestling in the crevices of the wall. Just as the story was an innovative frame and product of the Demaping Project, the visual materials in the form of A3 posters despite some good ideas failed to impress or add new layers of meaning. The sizing of the posters (too small), the content as well as the badly lit space of the terrace in which the display wall was located further contributed to the failure of the visual material to tell a story of their own or compliment the evocative 'Stories of Here'.

The Edge: An installation exploring the edge between territories

Anagram started this residency with an idea of discovering the possibilities of the edge that exists between territories, understanding the layers that make up the edge, and experiencing the liminal space when such an edge is inflated into a volume.

Anagram explored this concept by making the edge between KHOJ's own space in Khirkee and the street in front as the focus of their examination. The questions they asked of this examination are: to what extent do the private territory of KHOJ and that of its public realm, specifically the street, overlap? To what extent are outsiders allowed to push the boundaries inside KHOJ? Anagram's project was a many layered installation inserted at the edge of the public and private territories of KHOJ.

Anagram discussed some iterations of the idea of their installation over our weekly meetings at KHOJ. Being a practice based in Delhi, Anagram was not physically located at KHOJ during the residency and could only make it to the weekly meetings for discussing ideas and concepts with me and the other resident architects.

After rejecting some initial ideas such as of creating a new entrance for KHOJ through the residential part of the property to directly enter into the courtyard, Anagram came up with the interesting concept of two surfaces snaking into KHOJ. These surfaces start off being close to each other but once they cross the threshold of KHOJ, the inner surface penetrate deeper into KHOJ's inner space before

coming out in the street again. Thus a bulbous concave space is created between the two surfaces inside KHOJ's entrance sitting area. Anagram suggested making the inner penetrative surface a reflecting one. This surface starts from the street outside, a few meters away from the entrance, and about three inches from the outer wall of KHOJ. The outer surface, which is transparent, starts almost similarly outside KHOJ more or less parallel to the inner one but does not infiltrate as much as the inner surface thus creating an inflated space between two edges, one transparent and the other reflective. The materiality of the two surfaces enables two things: the transparent outer surface which forms the outer edge of the inflated edge space created inside KHOJ, allows an outsider to look inside KHOJ and possibly enter; the reflective inner surface dislocates the outsider from the street outside and places them inside KHOJ by way of reflection.

What Anagram was proposing though this installation was a phenomenological understanding of the space between territories at the edge. In creating a space that is open to interpretation and appropriation, the space between the two layers are endowed with multiple meanings making the edge between KHOJ and the street a heterogeneous space. What is the nature of this place? Is it a real place? The introduction of the reflecting surface or a mirror as a constant backdrop to the transparent surface makes it a placeless place, an utopia or "an unreal virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror (Foucault 1967)". The other interpretation of a mirror is that it is a heterotopia "in so far as the mirror does exist in reality... it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal" (Foucault 1967).

I visited the architects hard at work the night before Opening Night. I was surprised to find that the installation design that Anagram had discussed with us a week ago and outlined in detail above had changed quite dramatically. This I was told was due to the sizing problems of the material (acrylic and vinyl) and its inability to bend as a smooth surface with a reflective film pasted on it. What resulted was a series of 4 layers of thin acrylic sheets with perforated and/reflective vinyl film stuck on them. These panels hung from a frame that protruded about 3 feet outside and about 4 feet inside the main entrance of KHOJ. The level of the entrance had been raised to the street level with a podium about the same size as the frame above. Gravel lined the top surface of the podium. These flat panels were hung from the top to stop 2 inches above the gravel. The panels were hung in a zigzag pattern so as to create several interstitial spaces forcing one to meander through them to enter KHOJ.

This installation design was a major departure from what Anagram had conceptualized earlier. How does the new design address the initial objectives for the project? The previous concept for the installation placed the metaphoric edges or the surfaces well outside the entrance of KHOJ with a strong visual presence in the street before snaking inside. This gesture was an opportunity to start a dialogue between the inside and the outside while drawing the eye and interest of outsiders into an interior private space. What was finally installed was a 3 feet projection from the entrance of Khoj to drop the panels from. The plane of the KHOJ entrance is considerably behind the street edge of adjoining buildings which protruded much beyond even the projecting frame. On Opening Night, this entrance was in the dark. One only realized something was different about the KHOJ entrance as one stood right outside. The reflective surfaces reflected the dimly lit street. On zigzagging inside, through the many layers of the gently swaying top hung film coated acrylic sheets, a sense of the inside was only felt as one came to the last layer of sheets.

For an installation of this nature that is so dependent on the visual aspects of experience, quality of light is of great importance. At night, both the KHOJspace and the street outside were dimly lit. As a result, while looking out through the layers of installed acrylic sheets one had no visual sense of the street at night from inside of KHOJ. There was however an audio connection. As one walked in, negotiating the layers of the panels, which invariably prolonged the process of entry, the crunching sound of gravel carried a sense of the street inside. This aspect of the work was pointed out to Anagram during the Opening Night.

However Anagram graciously conceded that the gravel was thought of to visually extend the feel of the street inside; the acoustic connection was an accidental gain.

The daytime experience of "The Edge" (as the installation was called) was different. Even though the multiple layered zigzagging spaces failed to create a rich heterogeneous space between the layers unlike the previous conceptualizations of the installation, the reflective surfaces of the layers caught the light and dislocated images of the streets in its many folds thus generating real, virtual and imagined spaces, utopias and heterotopias at the interface of KHOJ and the street. However, I did feel that some more depth of the layered edge would have better conveyed a sense of interior space.

This work was framed as a phenomenological exploration of the edge between two very different kinds of territory: private interior space and the very public space of the street. It involves seeing and exploring space in different ways, being open to the possibilities of the phenomenon. But does everyone see and experience space in the same way? Obviously not. According to Lefebvre, perceived space or "representational space", in his spatial triad of perceived-conceived-lived space, is the space which "the imagination seeks to change and appropriate (Lefebvre 1991, p.39)" by injecting symbolism and new meaning in physical spaces. It is no wonder then that just as I, with my detailed knowledge of Anagram's journey during the residency, found the installation at Opening Night somewhat of a disappointment after the exciting ideas discussed before, a noted architect of the city bowed to the young architect duo for creating a work which he thought had tremendous power and allowed him to experience liminal space at the threshold in a new way. For me, the four layers of swaying acrylic and vinyl, some with reflective surfaces, and some transparent with barely 2 feet of space between them in a dark setting afforded a disturbing spatial experience during the Opening Night. My perception of the space was partly colored by my indepth knowledge of its making. To me the final installation detracted from the powerful previous concepts and produced a space that had clearly not considered the possibilities of seeing at night. Seeing "The Edge" during the day however was a different experience. It brought out the complexities and layers of liminal spaces and shattered any possibilities of absolute truth at the edge bringing to life Foucault's heterotopic imagination of spaces that are at once real and unreal.

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