



**Living Landscapes - Landscapes for living
Paesaggi Abitati
Conference Proceedings
Florence, February-June 2012**

Planum. The Journal of Urbanism, n. 27, vol.2/2013
www.planum.net | ISSN 1723-0993
Proceedings published in October 2013

Sacred Bodies. Shahjahanabad Architecture

Claudia Roselli

Faculty of Architecture. Urban and Regional Planning Department. Florence.
School of Planning and Architecture. Urban Design Department. Delhi.
rosellClaudia@gmail.com
Tel: +393485190095

KW: art and the city, social integration, Muslim neighborhood, Shahjahanabad architecture

The ghazal 's phrase of Mirza Ghalib, the Sufi poet that lived in Chandni Chowk, is a metaphor for the fluxes and movements that composes Delhi's contemporary social life.

This paper will present a performance piece made in Shahjahanabad, one of Delhi's oldest neighborhoods: the place where Mirza Ghalib spent much of his life. Today the neighborhood is a tourist destination managed by Muslim families.

The performance piece, entitled Sacred Bodies was enacted as a walk from the India Gate to the Jaama Maajid. The path along the narrow alleys, through lively parts of the city filled with small shops and food sellers, was documented on video. The goal of Sacred Bodies was to explain sensations and impressions linked with space and to present an alternative perspective on the architecture and on the peculiar social life of this part of the city.



Figure 1 | Frames from Sacred Bodies

*“I asked my soul “What is Delhi?” She replied
 “The world is the body and Delhi it’s life!”
 Mirza Ghalib*

Shahjahanabad has a strong and evolving identity in the city of Delhi. In fact, it was one of Delhi’s seven original villages and takes its name from Shah Jhan, who built the fortified town on the bank of the Yamuna river. This part of the city has remained one of the most vibrant and authentic, in Delhi, surviving to the countless urban transformations, demolitions and reconstructions. It still is today full of charm and profound truth. The narration that follows is a sensitive analysis of the citadel of Shahjahanabad, through the lens of performance.

The performance piece, Sacred Bodies, was a tentative exploration of these urban space.

The body, with his senses, was the instrument used to scout the neighborhood directly.

The video documentation became a narrative tool to describe this exploration. The real exploration of the space through the body and the video documentation, are the means chosen to comprehend the composition of the structural soul of the old part of the city. To start a reflection on the considerable cultural and social-anthropological impact of the Muslim cultural presence in that area.

The project was developed as part of a fellowship program called “Old Delhi, New Media” which studied the interactions with the use of new media and the spatial and conceptual dimension of Old Delhi, the walled city.

This neighbourhood has profound cultural, social, politic and economic impact on the entire Delhi and so it was selected as best setting for the project, because profoundly able to inspire with his atmospheres. The project ended in February 2011 with a festival aiming to create a new audio-visual context to express the diverse characteristics of urban Delhi through mixed media.

The key issues addressed in this work were: heritage and memory, cultural sustainability, animations of the public spaces, revitalization of urban areas through artistic practices, creativity and innovation to discover new landscapes.

The ghazal ‘s phrase of Mirza Ghalib, the Sufi poet that lived in Chandni Chowk, - reported in the opening of this chapter - is a metaphor for the flux and movements that composes Delhi’s contemporary social life. Today, the urban identity is extremely complicated as a result of the uncontrolled changes and consequences of the political and economical decisions which are unrelated to the daily life of the inhabitants. Delhi’s residents, along with the city’s new migrants, create unexpected synergies and new spatial arrangements. This living choreograph, for a better life conditions, pushes and pulls the city, constantly shaping new zones and inventing new urban, social trajectories.

Making decision about how developing the city with intelligent and sustainable solutions is complicated. It is necessary to look carefully at the creation of a *palimpsest composed by multiple cities inside the unique body of the same city.* (Sundaram, 2012)



Figure 2 | Frames from Sacred Bodies

In the Indian capital several groups coexist in the same milieu: this implies different religions, different languages and different behaviours. These groups are attracted, in the city, from diverse polarities and they acting in the urban scenarios with distinguish finalities. They have different approaches, led by the intention to improve their conditions in terms of relations and interrelations one with each other. This creates complex relationships between them and their links with the city. The more problematic consequence is the evident discrepancy caused by the attractions of contrasting polarities and diverse finalities of the “city’s families”. Urban scenario has become a platform for change, and sometimes the “public” can be a violent place where the opposites play their roles deciding for the future of all the inhabitants. This can happen when there are different ideas for the development of a city and when the urban planners and administration are not powerful enough to make proper decisions for the community. Consequently, cultural, economic and public wishes generated by different communities create conflicting realities.

Art can be an experimental way to test the level of communication between these social layers.

A new tool to explore the cultural differences and to feel the present possibilities of the Indian metropolis, it can activate non conventional dialogue to create new systems of relation and new engines of knowledge.

Art can be used to open door through neighbourhoods and through different cultures.

Art can be an activator of attention and can also represent an attractive lighthouse for people normally absorbed from the occupations of the daily-life.

The American artist Susan Lacy explains the importance of interactions between the public and art. She exhaustively explains the process by which public art can filter into the private sphere and pass osmotically in the public sphere. Lacy posits the artist as a possible executor in the development of a city. Of course this can also be valid for the collectives of people using creative solutions working for the urban resilience. The force and the resonance of its usage it depends on the used art typologies, on the kind of areas dedicated to this specific modality of experimentation and ultimately on the presence and weight of the authorities.

She deepens the concept of her theories, individuating a gradient from private to public where the artist can play his role as *artist experienter*, *artist reporter*, *artist analyst* or *artist activist*.

Public art then, can plays a significant participatory process in starting grass-roots movements to designing a city. Obviously involving people in art can increase its importance and capability to arrive to certain thresholds, rising up till the point of real and open communication. The miracle of art is that at this point, it becomes an activator of attention, denouncing social abuses or the lack of basic necessities.

In the condensation of events of the big metropolis, the repetition of the everyday actions, sometimes due to the necessity of habit and of the cruelty of poverty, does not permit always to activate the awareness and the sensitivity, necessities to understand the deep aims of the public art.

Some people say that Chandi Chowk, that means the *silver street*, is the most important road that cuts the

neighbourhood of Shahjahanabad in an horizontal way.

The ancient walled city individuates a special zone that, still today, preserves a genuine and intense atmosphere for its complex cultural origin, readable in its compositive urban path. The most evident buildings in that area are the Red Fort and the Jama Masjid Mosque, together with the bazaar and the buildings of the commercial area. Apart from these architectural landmarks there are several small lanes and alleys composing an interesting and unique labyrinth of landscape.

Shahjahanabad was once part of the walled city, the oldest place of the metropolis, today a cohabitation of the old and new. The tradition and the present live together giving a living example in how the contemporary evolution of the city will go: in a mix of cultures and in a overlapping of interests. Since its past, the ancient city of Shahjahanabad has always been hierarchically composed of different wards called *thanas* which are subdivided in smaller pieces called *mohalla* or rather courtyard.

The *mohalla* are preserved by a series of gates that, once closed, are able to generate an intimate and safe place, an evident architectural logic passing from the semiprivate to the private space. The space from the alleys to the hidden *mohalla* is a very interesting area to be studied. In terms of negotiations of uses: there are seats composed by steps and platforms made with recycled materials. Inhabitants are used to sit, talk, and interact while children play in a protected place. *Mohallas* are often linked to a specific space that was under the name of the tenant of one traditional house, called *haveli*. In other words, *mohallas* are the result of people coming together on their own and deciding to live together.

There are the lanes of the carpenters, of the leather-workers, or of the cloth-printers. Every inhabitant of the walled city traditionally relates to his mohalla, which is a social unit that was related to some particular occupation, or to a specific trade, language, religion or geographical origin of the mohalla dwellers. After 1947, a large number of refugees from Pakistan were relocated within the walled city in abandoned properties or in unauthorized shacks, without having any regard for the traditional rules that govern occupations and community customs. (Mikhael, 1998)



Figure 3 | Frames from Sacred Bodies

The peculiarity of Shahjahanabad is in the hierarchical transition from public to private zones.

This interesting arrangement generated a possibility of shared spaces for different families and different groups of people. It also created a different approach to the liveability of the place. These differentiations are created with the use of the existing architecture.

Most private spaces are inside the walls of the beautiful *havelis*: the characteristic houses of the ancient architecture in that part of the city. The most important *havelis* are along the Yamuna river or near the Red Fort. The *havelis* have an arched entrance that leads into an open space. The habitation generally has many terraces

and defined spaces that are categorized according to the private Muslim rules of separation between men's and women's areas. The openings and the windows, except for the entrance, are mainly in the interior wall that faces the courtyard. The exterior walls are generally smooth and bereft of windows.

This part of the city was built in the XVII century and was mostly inhabited by Muslims. Today the inhabitants are a mix of different genres.

The alleys are crowded and full of people, the ancient family of *tanga* riders and the Muslim boys from the Koranic school mix themselves with the groups of tourists that come to visit the old Delhi.

The idea of the *Sacred Bodies* performance was born from this contemporary situation of old and new co-habitations and addressed the continuation of the poetry of places that follows the secret sounds of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib.

In Europe there are many examples of art used to revitalize spaces and to create dialogues with the local population or new systems of interactions in the city. Art acts as a Trojan horse to decode the needs of the poor and the powerless that do not have access to the political platform of discussions. In this way, art can have the power to attract the authorities with the bright light of a new urban interpretation. It makes it possible to see the places from a new point of view.

Art is a way to awaken and evoke memories from an intangible heritage. It is a way to develop representations and imaginations for the future of the city.

The role of art must be inserted in a wider argumentation of the creative city, where it can help to discover new urban landscape. The performance *Sacred Bodies* allows to use the body, its senses and rhythms, to approach profoundly the city and its hidden soul.

“We experience an organic spatial constellation not only with our eye, which de-constructs what is seen into images, but also through our body movement. Thereby, we live within the organism; we become a part of it” (Sloterdijk, 2004).

This concept can be embodied in the idea of performing urbanism, where the urban landscape becomes a stage for the ordinary actions. It gives sense to the overlapping possibilities of meaning, created by the complexity of architecture, old and new spaces, new economies and new uses of objects and areas themselves.



Figure 4 | Frames from Sacred Bodies

The performance piece entitled “*Sacred Bodies*” was primarily performed in the oldest neighbourhood of Delhi: Shajahanabad, a place where the Sufi poet Mirza Ghalib spent some time of his life, that today is an important tourist area managed by Muslim families.

The performance was part of a more structured initiative called “ Old Delhi, New Media”, a fellowship that investigated the use and the importance of the media and its role in reshaping the city.

The body arises as an intimate reflection of the sacredness and the antiquity of this part of the city.

It is elaborated by architecture, the culture and the signals of ancient Muslim and migrant families that belong to this part of the city (there are truthful descriptions that compare the numerous bazaars in Chandni Chowk to some Pakistani bazaars).

Sacred Bodies, was a procession through the alleys from India Gate to the Jaama Maajid.

The movements of the performers acted as exploratory drifts along the space, focusing on intimate courtyards, abandoned and forgotten areas in evident need of restoration.

Through their walk the two performers aimed to create a new interpretations of the lanes and connect them with a stimuli for their future development. They hoped in the continuation of their fascination and in the restoration of the original character of that place. The performers were a woman and a man, dressed as Muslim.

The movements of the performers were like a perceptual study of the traditional character of the place and of the people there. They respected the holy traditions of the living space, not invading it in any way.

The experience and the charm of walking through the intricate narrow lanes of Purani Dilli seems to be ageless. “Old Delhi never sleeps.” Among old architecture, pedestrian traffic and never-ending musical sounds and voices, some people caught our glances. Shajahanabad with its never-ending thrill is an encounter of old and new. Sacred Bodies is a space exploration made by bodies.

Performative body perceives the soul, the memories, the relation between people, buildings and the holiness of a place. The narrow roads of Old Delhi are inhabited from some human peculiar characters.

To explore old Delhi through the “actors body”, we walked into the narrow roads of the ancient city. The two bodies represent two kinds of meanings, that are interlinked with the architecture of the neighbourhood: the first body is representing the impulses taken from the space and the human interactions, and the second body is representing the archaeological beauty of the real space. The walk is embedded with the different physical perceptions from male and female bodies, who have heard diversified inputs and energies from Shahjahanabad.

(from *Sacred Bodies*, Basa M. and Roselli C., 2010).

The event consisted in a composite mix of projections, live performances and music sound-landscape, with also the words of Ghalib. The sustainability and the resiliency of the city are embodied by the demonstrations of the encounter of cultures as an example of cohabitation of religion (gurudwara, churches, mosques, small temples and shrines...) in the same neighbourhood.

Art became the way to explain the complex composition of urban space and to empower a dialogue among cultures and groups that live in this complex Indian city.

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Acknowledgement

All the images of the article are frames from the video “ Sacred Bodies” filmed by Murali Basa. Performers: Claudia Roselli and Happy Ranajit.

