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Urban Landscape Development and Rural Fringes in Delhi

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The paper intends to focus on the contemporary reality of peri-urban and rural fringes of Delhi, India's capital city. Particularly it analyse the housing along the Yamuna, which can be seen as a network of eco-corridors and uncultivated areas, hosting zones of third landscape. The inorganic growth of the metropolis has caused the birth and the development of territories that have given rise to alternative practices of stewardship. The permanence of agricultural practices, in these specific areas, are natural continuations of the classical behaviours: the Indian cultural tradition and its settlements consist of a history of rural development and an economy based on farming villages and on agricultural memories. In these peri-urban zones, between the countryside and the city, this new kind of encounter generates a new hybridization of architecture, spaces and natural systems.

Urban development and rural fringes



Figure 1 | Rural fringes in Delhi

In the last year, the urban development of the Indian cities has taken a direction different from that of all other parts of the world. This refers to the question of urban landscape negotiation; in terms of culture and sociality and in terms of organization and occupational forms of the territories.

The phenomenon is relevant and actual concerning his care of the urban shaping and of the imagination for the future development of the global cities. Citizens, in urban India today, are in the midst of a peculiar cultural moment caused also by the liberation of the economy at the beginning of the 90's.

This has created multiple visions of life by heightening the divide between rich and poor, between urban and rural. For the first time, Indians started to have access to global markets and, as a consequence, were offered a clear perception of the differences between cultures and between living styles.

The world's current tendency is towards sustainability and ecology, referring to rural and urban boundaries. This tendency aims to give a new start to the system of urban-agriculture, making more realisable the possibility to build sustainable systems in the rising parts of the city.

Regarding the specific case of India, in March 2012, in Mumbai, there was a symposium organized by Columbia University entitled "Urban India 2030: history, technology and community for sustainable urban futures"¹. During the multiple conferences, many papers were presented with the general aim to find a way to reconcile the good effects of globalization with the proper use of technology and remaining aligned with the history and heritage of the cities. The final goal was to develop a system for urban sustainability and to alleviate poverty.

Among the numerous contributions, my interest was sparked by the interventions that were proposed by the

1 More information regarding the speakers and the symposium can be found [here](#)

panel of “Livelihoods, history and tradition.” The arguments presented, have developed the theme related to how the possible realization of a big architecture, can be the cause of displacements and forced removals and linked to it a reflection on the globalization in itself, that with its economical fluxes, is changing the livelihood strategies of the urban residents, acting at the end, the necessity to invent new questions related to the access of the socio-cultural identities of the places.

The long-term goal of these arguments is to develop a new urban approach introducing innovative concept of design and policies.

The question more hot, linked with the Indian city, is the same for different areas: from the ecologies of everyday action to the relations, that necessitate creativity to find new and interesting solutions for the urbanity, as well as to integrate traditional heritage in the corpus of the city in an organic and respectful manner. In Kolkata for example, Amitava Bhattacharya reported a series of initiatives based on the use of arts and crafts products as a channel to provide sustainable development for the local regional communities; thinking that the support to the rural industries can be a way to continue the link between rural villages and the city. Also in Delhi, during the colonial period, a different approach to the urbanity was begun. In this view the city would be clean and ordinate, modifying the vision of the public spaces, that until that period was more connected with the rurality, and with all that implies: agriculture, ancient knowledge and arts and crafts products from the villages. Traditional elements are not always considered as a natural part of the urban imaginary landscape, but they are deeply connected with the ecology of everyday life.

So the consequent contrast to the construction of the shopping mall and the sub-urban residential complex, is that the surrounding urban public areas shift from the past spontaneous occupations of the territory.

Regarding the craftsmen, for example, the challenge is to create a space to protect the relationship between crafts and the public use of the territory, able of not cover and erase from the urban landscape also the visual conics of the rural origins and of the local traditions.

Another research that was developed some years ago from the CSH Delhi speaks to the Indian reality. This research compared and reflected upon the difference between India and Brazil, it is named S.E.T.U.P. Project². The research focused on the marginality and the encounters between formal and informal and between nature and human urban artefacts.

To be more precise the project looked at the changes that social exclusions and globalization had produced in the poor areas. It looked at the generated split between urban realities and the new nascent inter-relationship between urban and peri-urban. The research team was divided in two: the slum team and the forest team. The comparative analysis inside the slum was conducted by people from Delhi and Mumbai for India and from Sao Paulo for Brazil. The team wanted to understand the territorial matters and to make hypotheses about the new politics valid in similar contexts. The forest team concentrated on the study of Sao Paulo and Mumbai, observing how certain ecological measures of protection are necessary to preserve the biodiversity reserves along the urban metabolism. Of course the research organized in that way was an experiment to find a better way to proceed, in this particular moment of dispute between rural and urban margins.

For the specific case of India: from 2005 there was a new politic initiative that clearly defined the SEZ, the special economic zones, formalizing in this manner the inauguration of these new areas, which increased the tension between zones of the city and their usages.

This dispute, of course, is part of a wider conversation about environmental issues and of socio spatial justice: where the urban group is claiming to preserve the green belt around the city and the poor people are aiming the access to the city.

They want the right to live, to have an house and protect their lands and their free use. The problems that are present in these border areas, especially in informal settlements, are common in Delhi as in Mumbai but also in a many others global metropolises.

2 The results of the project can be followed on the website: <http://setup.csh-delhi.com/>

Delhi reality

In Delhi this controversial phenomenon over the use and of the appropriation of space has become stronger in the last years. This might be due to the urban modification that the city was obliged to support for the Commonwealth Games. This has augmented the peculiarity of fragmentation already typical of this city. Delhi was formed of a merger of contiguous villages and still today a big part of the city is occupied by a wide wild forest, green park and gardens that are mixed with housing enclave and colonies.

Delhi has one of the biggest ornithological reserve existing in the world.

One of Delhi's most unique traits is the peculiar configuration that characterizes its shape: an unpredictable alternation of architecture, green spaces, communication's channels, flyovers, streets and new neighbourhoods grown up only for residential purpose. The patchwork of urban language generates an undefined urban landscape. This is fed by the imaginaries of the new rich, that are completely in opposition with the reality that is always strongly connected with the past of the country. Situations generated from the absence of sensitive criteria are not able to suggest solutions to promote a sustainable development.

Delhi needs a well planned solutions able to foresee, for its complete territory, a complex system of new spaces and new ideas aimed to include architecture in the wider vision of sustainable development and also to include intelligent hypothesis aimed to create a space for dialogue and encounter for the inhabitants.

The city is formed from several languages and architectures: from the Mogul ruins, to the British colonial style, till to the arrival to the contemporary expression of the shopping mall and of the new edifications, that appears as a big mass of buildings without any logic of aesthetic.

The poor people can be seen as animals: like dogs they spend their nights sleeping along the roads, others take rest in their rickshaws or on the bench of their mobile-shop. During the day they are as fast and laborious as ants or squirrels. The content of their emotions, the signs on their faces, and the objects that define their lives, are completely alien from the material that composes the soul of the new middle class inhabitants of today's city.

The visual clash is also evident: between the metal of the metro station and the wood of the *keooca*³ that sometime are installed in the entrance of the metro.

The huge advertisements of Vogue that loom over the slums are a contrasting visual element: test of the absence of care in the systems of planning, also in the small area. No attention for the different needs of the social groups. Moving within the diverse areas of the city, the fragmented body becomes visible.

It is like a territory where things, people and architecture are merged together without any thought to their necessities and priorities, the space and the ideas of urban aesthetic was eaten by the powerful economic elites, that are growing in the social and cultural system. One of the more important issues for Delhi is, consequently to it, its green counterpart: an identity that can be the lifeline of its sustainable future in terms of contention between urban and rural issues.

Alternative practices of stewardship

The word "stewardship" comes from the term steward, meaning to take care of the dinner and of the other domestic affairs of the household. With the passing of time the steward has become the figure who takes care of the passengers on the air plane, in the train or in the ship. In general, a steward is someone who cares for the affairs of others, assuming the responsibility and the attention of their things. This split between compact urban zones, big green parks, agricultural areas and abandoned landscapes have permitted the birth and the growth of alternatives practices of stewardship.

It has prolonged the permanence of agricultural behaviours necessary to for survival of the cultural and settlement tradition that is made by the history of rural development and from an economies made by villages and agricultural memories.

The practice of stewardship can be spontaneous, not subjected to any regulations and sometimes accompanied by the reality of eco-corridors. The eco-corridors are existent in itself, like a part of the shape and of

3 Informal shop on wheels



the nature of the city, but in some cases, they can be also projected specifically for the wellness of the city. In the second case are strategies designed to permit to the wild life to live in itself, creating bubbles of nature, a passage between the urban world to the natural one. In each case a new system is tested: for demonstrate how urbanity can develop a new way of being, hosting inside its body also the rural elements. The outlook for Delhi it seems good. There are many prospects and possibilities to embody the new hybridization among the global metropolis and the new green utopic city for the third millennium.

Yamuna banks in Delhi

Considering the practice of *stewardship* and the *eco-corridors* in Delhi, it is interesting analyse the banks side of the Yamuna.

Along the river during the last years, many events have happen, including violent removals to build a new neighbourhood for athletes for the Commonwealth Games, a construction of biodiversity park, and several open discussions about the future of the Majnu Ka Tila colony. It is a Tibetan Colony, that lies on the Yamuna bank: from long time there are a rumours that will likely be destroyed following the Master Plan previsions to build a new urban expansions.

On 2011, in commemoration of Earth Day, an association called Delhi Greens organized an *Urban Ecotour* to re-connect the citizens with the city's natural areas. The initiative was planned in partnership with Delhi based environmental groups and with a local association that cares for street children and teenagers.



Figure 2-3 | Everyday life along the Yamuna

Delhi Greens organized the *Urban Ecotour* along the Yamuna river and the ridge of Delhi, both constitutional elements of the natural aspect of the city.

The river and city's green corridors (wild or tamed) are significant elements for Delhi and represent an incredible encounter for the biological future urban transformation. Humans, animals and a variety of plants coexist in these biological zones, developing an incredible potentiality.

The *Ecotour* was organized on bus, starting from the Delhi University headed to the bank of the river and the famous barrier of Wazirabad. It stopped near the Pontoon Bridge, located very close to the Tibetan quarter of Majnu Ka Tila. The second part of the day, the bus accompanied the group to the ridge of Kamala Nehru, a big forest in the northern part of the city. The urban landscape along the Yamuna banks is unique for many reasons. The river is one of the most important distinguishing elements of the city and also a significant cultural and spiritual symbolical element. There is not enough space here to treat the sacred value of the water for the Indian population but of course we can say generally that water is one of the more important elements for the Indian spirituality.

The Yamuna has a quotidian presence in the lives of the citizens: they perform rituals and prayers, purification and everyday actions linked with the usage of the water.

It's necessary, here, to make a reflection on the river in its self and in his today ecological status. Yamuna it is called the dead river because is seemingly no life in itself, probably because there is no oxygen. In May 2012, the Hindustan Times, published an article explaining that air-conditioning systems of metro trains and of the private homes in the northern part of the city⁴, had been affected by the toxic gases emitted by the river. This damage was caused by a significant loose of polluted material from the Shahdara drain, affecting AC systems, refrigerators, coolers, gold and silver jewelry and cars. Needless to say, this pollution is also extremely harmful to humans.

Ravi Agarwal, Till Krause, Nina Kalenbach curated an art project in Delhi and in Hamburg. It was an initiative to bring attention to this fluvial part of the city, an artistic work designed to the Yamuna and the Elba River. The Yamuna river was once long and powerful, extending on thousand kilometers from the Palla village to Badarpur. It passed through the city of Delhi for many kilometers. Before arriving to the barrage of Wazirabad along the banks, it passes through many villages and cultivated fields till the place where the inhabitants of Delhi received their drinking water.

After that point the river transforms drastically, becoming completely polluted and dangerous to the human people who live near. The thoughts to the garden along the river, in the Tibetan colony, are generators of an important question: what the people can really receive in terms of nutrients from the vegetables grown in this sewage dump.

The last artistic event organized in India and in Germany, involving German and Indian artists, was an initiative to show the natural potential of that places through artistic pieces interlaced with the idea of ecology⁵. The project was totally made across the use of solar energy and Eco-friendly fuel and all the material used by the artists, were recycled.

The pressing question of today is, how to improve the river and keep floods plains that embank and the river clean. It is necessary to educate at the ecology, the eyes of Indians.

After the works-storm, post Commonwealth Games, the city is in a reflexive mood, trying to develop a good solution to reinvigorate her strong relation with nature. (from always inside the mold of this unique city).

Like Ravi Agarwal wrote: *The idea of equity and democracy are deeply interlaced with the idea of ecology. This is true whether we speak of waste, forest destruction and rivers.* (Agarwal, 2011)

Spaces, architecture and natural system

This art project on the river reminds to the city how it is becoming increasingly more urgent to reconcile architecture, natural system and urban imagination to propose a new answer for its future.

Considering that it is increasingly more important to prevent the wild urbanization, that constantly eats pieces of landscape, not taking in consideration the richness of human complexity.

The potential of a new concept of a bio-organic city or bio-logic city is underestimated, not noting, really, the homogenous scheme where human, animals and all the other living elements exist in one breathing system with the architecture and the massive infrastructure of communication.

Referring to the particular case of Delhi it is evident that new flyovers, the metro and the cycling paths exist without any physical, sensitive relationship with the green zones or with the new urbanized enclaves that are buildup recently. They also ignore the historical identity of the city.

It is necessary to remember the teachings of Patrick Geddes and to incorporate the importance of his respect for the ecology. Looking towards the future of Delhi, today the green knowledge must applied to develop new spaces for the bio-organic growth of the city.

After the big crisis and the architectural failure that followed the realization of the Commonwealth Games, the city is today ready to develop new ideas and new projects in a more sustainable manner, just starting from her existing status.

4 In the neighbourhood of Mayur Vihar, Vasundhara Enclave and Noida.

5 To deepen the informations: <http://yamuna-elbe.org/river-city/>





Figure 4 | Urban garden along the Yamuna in Majnu Ka Tila Colony

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