

# THE NOMADIC CITY APPROPRIATES THE STREET...

...and disrupts its grid<sup>1</sup>

## Solomon Benjamin

Developmentalism' is now a morbid zeal, mobilized to survey, to GIS, to digitize, to research, and colonize 'Third World Cities.' And in this zeal, lies the panoptic desire to turn the steel frame of the Nation State into The Grid and the Rule of Law, the Master Plan that poses the activist academic as an emancipator, speaking on behalf of the voiceless poor. And with this, a formalization of the Grid into a distinct street away from the city.

***“Where does the street as ‘thoroughfare’ end and the city begin?”***

This question is asked by many – in these times of ‘illegal’ migrants, of street vendors seen to disrupt traffic flows and “legitimate” pedestrians, and the zeal for “policy advice, participatory planning and public consultations” and attempts to soften the hard edge of Master Plans – but not addressing the issue of property. These are also times the endorsement of the high art as a property circuit now seeks the ‘street as ritual’ disciplined into safe ‘heritage zones’<sup>2</sup>. Are these pointers of an implicit ‘fear of the street’ depoliticizing our conception of urban space? Does asking this question, and drawing from **Bromley**<sup>3</sup>, reinforce the discipline and violence of the Grid and the Rule of Law? Or, is there a need to reject the bifurcation between the Street and City, and with it, a view that the city is necessarily ‘striated’<sup>4</sup> whose singular forms property in land and commodity long been naturalized? Perhaps we should locate such questions and their associated interventions as a result of

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay originally appeared in a shortened form (in Catalan & Spanish) as *Transformative Urbanisms: Walter Benjamin strolls through Occupant Cities in Post it. Occasional Urbanities CCCB POST IT Jan 2008* Edited by: CCCB i Direcció de Comunicació de la Diputació de Barcelona Centre of Contemporary Culture of Barcelona along with the Communication Direction of the Diputació de Barcelona [www.cccb.org/en/livre\\_o\\_catalog-post\\_it\\_occasional\\_urbanities-22202](http://www.cccb.org/en/livre_o_catalog-post_it_occasional_urbanities-22202)

Since then, it has greatly benefited and influenced by conversations with Jeebesh Bagchi, Sveta Sarda, Rohan DeSouza, Prasad Shetty and Rupali Gupte.

<sup>2</sup> See: a) various essays in *Restoration & Renewal* a symposium on preserving our cultural heritage Seminar # 530 Oct. 2003 [www.india-seminar.com/2003/530.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/530.htm)  
b) *Mumbai Mills Project 2005.pdf*

<sup>3</sup> Blomley N. 2003 ‘Law, Property, and the Geography of Violence: The Frontier, the Survey, and the Grid’ *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 93, No.1, March pp 121-141

<sup>4</sup> I refer to Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia’ (Translated by Brian Massumi) University of Minnesota Press (December 1987) but also relying in great part, on an excellent essay by Christian Hubert accessible at [christianhubert.com/smooth\\_striated](http://christianhubert.com/smooth_striated). It will be evident that unlike Hubert, I suggest that a ‘Occupancy Urbanism’ has a “Nomadic” aspects that disrupts striations of corporate capitalism.

the fear of the undisciplined city, the complexity and fluidity of which subverts easy political and economic control.



*This image shows an elevated expressway that cuts through Bangalore's central wholesale trading markets. The earlier trades, here showing vegetables, persist to deform the planner's dream*

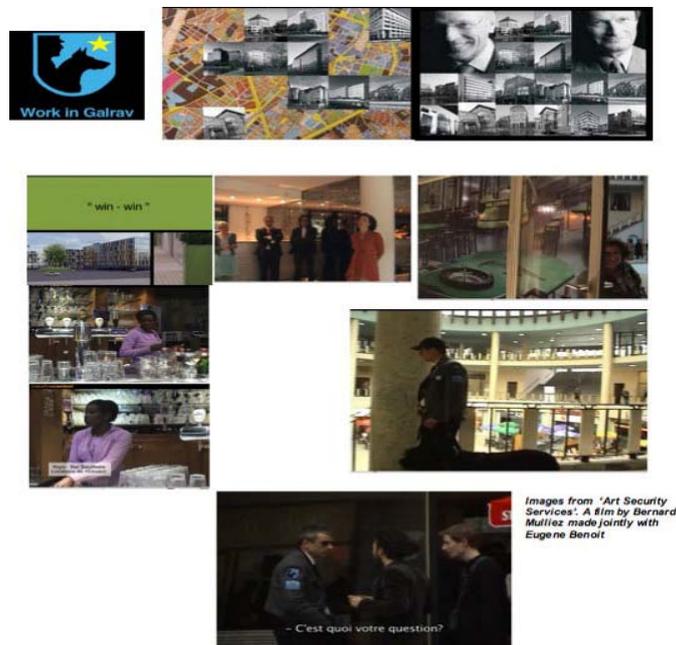
Let us move away from these morbid zeals mobilized to re-colonize 'Third World Cities.' Instead, let us turn to **Walter Benjamin**.

Benjamin's voice opens up a radical political realm in two ways. Firstly, there is his indication of high art as the realm of fascism. This leads us to usefully re-interpret popular appropriation and occupancy to have the same effect as his view of mechanical reproduction<sup>5</sup>. Unless the space of ritual, celebration, the bazaar, are visualized in the radical possibility of the disfigurement of singular forms of property, and an erasure of boundaries between 'The Street' and 'The City', there remains the possibility of the erasure of politics. Would such an erasure foretell the targeting of these spaces, appropriated during Christmas, Moharram, Ganesh Puja or those of ethnic bazaars, in order to be 'Disneyfied' and imprisoned within exotic, tourist

---

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin W. 1936 'The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction' Access from [www.marxists.org/](http://www.marxists.org/)

culture, designer 'heritage zones' within new regimes of Intellectual Property Rights<sup>6</sup>? Does viewing the boundary and the grid of the street as distinct follow the morbid aspirations of high society whose fears lead to the policing of the encroacher, the migrant, and the illegal? Some of these conflict-ridden spaces emerge in a very insightful critique of the politics of 'heritage zones', associated with an article and the film *Art Security Services*<sup>7</sup>. This film, by **Bernard Mulliez** and **Eugene Benoit** (2008), is a vivid account of Brussels' city centre pedestrian area, now zoned into exclusive 'art' spaces curated as exclusive property promoted by large corporations



Images from *Art Security Services* film by Bernard Mulliez & Eugene Benoit, 2008

<sup>6</sup> For and account of these in Bombay and Bangalore, see: a) Koppikar S., *Razing Crawford: Goods once sold. A BMC plan, a Bombay heritage. Will Crawford Market go down easy?* <http://www.outlookindia.com/>; b) *Citizens' Movements & Accountability Initiatives* [www.bombayfirst.org/](http://www.bombayfirst.org/) & [www.bombayfirst.org](http://www.bombayfirst.org/) c) KAUR H. "A Call For Conservation. Conservation of heritage buildings in Mumbai preserves a unique architectural character of their own and many request more involvement of private sector". Mumbai, 26 July, 2004 [www.dancewithshadows.com](http://www.dancewithshadows.com) d) *Mumbai civic authorities crack down on Juhu beach encroachments* *The Hindustan Times* August 18, 2006; e) Kulkarni S. *Walk the talk on better cities* [www.indianexpress.com/](http://www.indianexpress.com/)

<sup>7</sup> See this online at: [www.dailymotion.com](http://www.dailymotion.com) There are other new media groups and events that move conceptualization beyond the 'exotic East' perspective to raise more political perspectives: *On Difference #2. Politics of Space* [www.wkv-stuttgart.de](http://www.wkv-stuttgart.de)  
*On the Expropriation and Re-appropriation of Social, Political, and Cultural Spaces of Action* [www.e-flux.com](http://www.e-flux.com)  
*On the RAQs:* <http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/buildingsight.html#4>

This is not very different from those promoted in Mumbai's central downtown areas, and spurring a similar mobilization of 'culture' in other cities such as Bangalore and Delhi. The local - not inaccurate - term for this is 'culture vulture'.

A parallel can be seen in Toronto's lake-front Exhibition Grounds, that until recently hosted the Chinese lantern festival - a showcase of East Asian Culture as a public/corporate display of the city's multiculturalism. This downtown 'designer' Exhibition ground, sponsored by one of biggest corporations, Roger, can be seen as contributing to Toronto's role as global financial centre.



*Toronto's lake-front Exhibition Grounds<sup>8</sup>*

But the event can be compared with the more anarchic Chinatown business and retail hosted China Town festival. For the last nine years, the main street opposite Chinatown has been appropriated in the mild August air with food stalls and at least two bandstands at each end of the strip.

---

<sup>8</sup> from [http://z.about.com/d/gocanada/1/0/M/4/-/-/chinese\\_lantern\\_cinesphere.JPG](http://z.about.com/d/gocanada/1/0/M/4/-/-/chinese_lantern_cinesphere.JPG)



*China Town Festival, Toronto*

This event, apart from the expected Chinese theatre, also includes Brazilian drumming and Bollywood dances. In between these two cultural outposts are eateries, and the retail sale of non-branded look-alike commodities flourishes.



*Retail sale at Toronto's China Town Festival*

These are alternated with the stands of politicians – announcing their plans for this rapidly emerging and vigilant constituency<sup>9</sup>.

Not far from this anarchic bazaar-like space is the adjoining Kensington Market. This is another location with a long-standing anarchic history and politics. Here a central development issue is that of gentrification<sup>10</sup>. This is not an easy process, in part due to the complexities of land tenancies – an issue reflected in the quote from the area councillor Vaughan:

*"...For years, Kensington worked because it didn't quite work. The market's eclectic chaos evolved organically, thanks to generations of immigrant merchants operating in tiny shops on narrow lots, many with residences opening onto rear service laneways. The streets aren't easily navigated, and fractured land-ownership patterns allowed Kensington to remain essentially unchanged for decades. "The market," area councillor Adam Vaughan says, "has naturally built-in deficiencies that allow it to survive..."<sup>11</sup>.*

Councillor Vaughan's pointer to the role of 'fractured' land ownership in constraining gentrification touches on a central issue from the perspective of the complexity of tenure that restricts corporate capital but also opens up space for competing economies around 'mom & pop' stores. This situation is characterized by a political consciousness that remains deeply suspicious of the efforts of City Hall to mobilize a language of

---

<sup>9</sup> See for instance, websites on the Canadian corporate giant Roger's sponsorship of Toronto Chinatown Festival at The more anarchic China town association annual August time festival: [blog.soluscious.net](http://blog.soluscious.net) and [video.about.com/gocanada](http://video.about.com/gocanada)

<sup>10</sup> See: a) *The new king of Kensington. The little market is the site of the next big battle for gentrification. Phil Pick leads the charge* [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/article1138497.ece](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/article1138497.ece) b) *Lorinc J., Is Kensington about to get a new suit? Developers - and the local councillor - have big plans for the market's quiet laneways* *The Globe and Mail* June 23, 2007 d) *Kensington Market Brews Both Storms and Coffee* [torontoist.com/2009/04/talking\\_to\\_kensington\\_market.php](http://torontoist.com/2009/04/talking_to_kensington_market.php) d) *Rob Roberts Starbucks in talks for Kensington Market location* September 25, 2008 [network.nationalpost.com/](http://network.nationalpost.com/) e) *Daniel Kaszor Store owners divided over a BIA to decide direction of Kensington Market* November 12, 2009, [network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/toronto/archive/2009/11/12/store-owners-divided-over-a-bia-to-decide-direction-of-kensington-market.aspx](http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/toronto/archive/2009/11/12/store-owners-divided-over-a-bia-to-decide-direction-of-kensington-market.aspx)

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Lorinc J., cited above; Also see: *A messy, inspiring urbanism* James Rojas, *National Post* Published: Thursday, October 18, 2007 at: <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/Toronto>

'people friendly' planning via 'pedestrian Sundays', viewing these efforts as a strategy to split local alliances<sup>12</sup>. My interviews within the local artistic and activist community suggest that such popular political consciousness well recognizes attempts at 'participatory planning' as rhetoric to hide the politics of the wider institutional structure of the Ontario Municipal Board and TEDCO in their efforts to gentrify Toronto's downtown. Also central here is the 1998 amalgamation of the surrounding towns into the greater Toronto area - a shift which saw increased power for the Mayor, at the cost of the elected council. 'Gentrification' is thus seen as a process, which is not just an effect of meta-economic processes but rather embedded in land and institutions, and their particular histories<sup>13</sup>.

What seems central, as we will see in this essay, is that the very same elements that disrupt the planning Grid are central to the opening up of an economy - usually of small firms. As for the institutional aspects of gentrification, we are led to consider the particular genealogies of the formation of urban property. This also implies that configurations of land and economy, while disrupting / subverting corporate capitalism, have not just evolved as a 'counter' force but rather, as per **Eyal Weizman's** argument on the conception of cities, operate on a completely different plane<sup>14</sup>. Thus, the opaqueness of particular forms of urbanism is a central condition that subverts neo-liberalism beyond co-option or discipline.

---

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Polo 'Market on autopilot: Will a car-free Kensington lead to gentrification of the bohemian enclave?' "...The prospect of businesses pulling out opens another can of worms - the gentrification feared by the same people who are pushing pedestrianization. Ron Keeble, a professor of urban planning at Ryerson University, says the latter scenario is a possibility. [www.nowtoronto.com/news](http://www.nowtoronto.com/news) ; Also see: Misha Glouberman "Cars over happy children? some trenchant reservations about Pedestrian Sundays." EYE WEEKLY [contests.eyeweekly.com/eye](http://contests.eyeweekly.com/eye)

<sup>13</sup> I am grateful for these insights to a variety of people: To John and Debbe O'Rourke for taking me on a walk of the Queen street area as a way to visualize the transformation in these areas, and a sense of the complexity of institutional politics. Also, as part of a community connected to the arts, but also as workforce in Toronto's fashion industry they and others at the ALPHA Alternative School have insights that somehow seem to get rarified in more professional realms. One exception to this however, is Prof. Richard Stren at the University of Toronto's Department of Political Science, whose detailed reflections of Toronto's institutional history pre and post the 1998 amalgamation remain some of the sharpest analysis that influenced my own thinking on what such efforts have meant here in Bangalore.

<sup>14</sup> See Weizman E., 'The Art of War' [www.frieze.com/issue/article/the\\_art\\_of\\_war](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_art_of_war)

**Walter Benjamin's** voice emerges once again, along with that of **Asic Lacis**, in their essay on Naples<sup>15</sup> which points towards more interesting spaces, via their use of 'porosity'. 'Porosity', here disrupts the boundary of the Grid, and allows the city to appropriate the street.



*These images show a temporary road side structure set up at Christmas time in the Juhu area of Mumbai. This is part of a wider set of popular interventions of shop fronts, terrace level modifications in the building behind. All of these are not 'informal' but rather have a genealogy of political (often stealth like) negotiations with local government on the regulation around the use of space that make public and private porous and temporally fluid.*

This also allows us the possibility for a 'subaltern' urbanism, transformative in the creation of complex spaces: dynamic, multi-use depending on the time of year, and also the time of day, and created via complex occupancies. Paradoxically, while porosity is one hallmark of this everyday urbanism, as mentioned above, the other is its 'opaqueness' to imposed controls that are now fortified by an urban renewal driven by the anxiety to be globalized and globally competitive. The observations of **Benjamin** and **Lacis** help us sharpen our analysis of the confusion of (well-meaning) progressive activists and some academics. This is at a time in the Indian context when the narrative of urban marginality sits alongside that of promoting 'rights to the Grid', but is welcomed by India's largest land developers and globally connected financiers promoting the harshest form of neo-liberalism. **Benjamin** and **Lacis** allow us to explore these anti-politics:

---

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin W. and Lacis A 1986 ' Naples ' (pg. 162-173) in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* Schocken Books, New York

- When the high art of Culture-Vultures describe the "ritual" of the street as 'an exotic popular heritage' that counters and disciplines popular appropriation;
- When planners, architects, and conservationists survey the street to draw & reinforce rigid boundaries;
- When planners, architects, and conservationists survey the street to draw & reinforce rigid boundaries;

Are we, in the three points above, describing elements of **Neil Smith's** argument of the 'revanchist city'<sup>16</sup>? And in doing so, is there a more complicated and necessarily uneven force at work in the way city processes develop a counter-drive? For instance, Sundaram highlights complexity and opaque urbanism, which incorporates fear and the potential that lies in conflict-ridden planes, and is driven by speed of change and fluidity<sup>17</sup>. But is this also a force that erodes and subverts the high art of culture, of modernist zeal, of neo-liberal legitimizing activism? In this radical perspective is urbanism a force that dissolves boundaries, shaped by the porosity of the undisciplined city where 'the street' disappears and the politics takes over?

### **Walter Benjamin strolls through Occupant Cites**

Invoking **Benjamin** and **Lacis**, we move through Central Delhi's Bhogal to enter an area known as the 'double storied quarters'



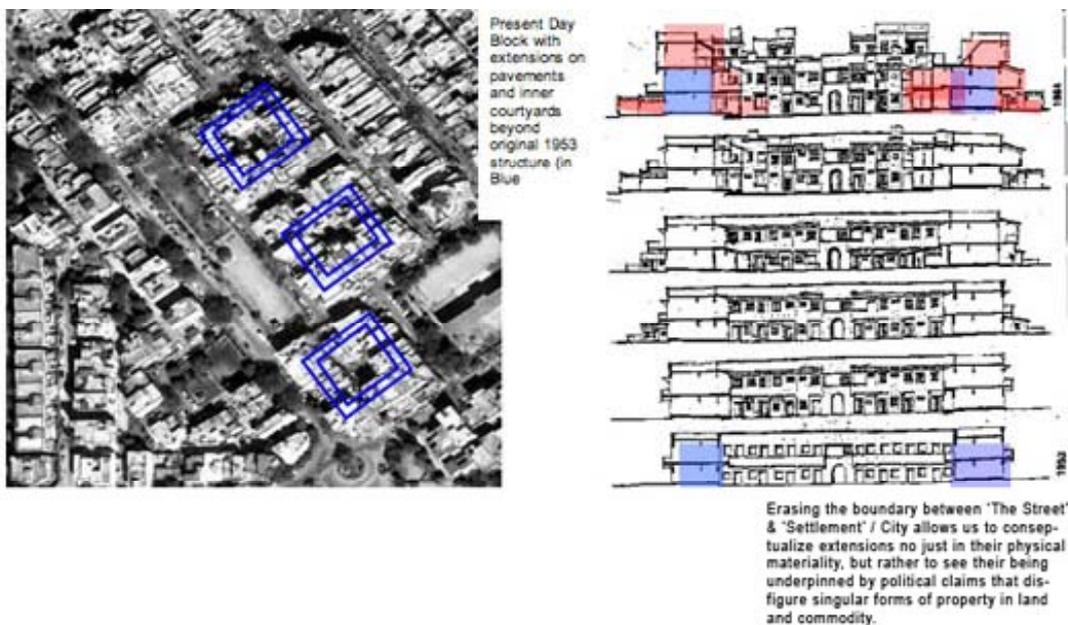
*'Double storied quarters' Bhogal, Dehli.*

<sup>16</sup> Smith, Neil. 1996. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. London ; New York: Routledge.

<sup>17</sup> Sundaram R., *The Visceral City and the Theatre of Fear*. Web based mimeo at: [www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/AD.pdf](http://www.raqsmediacollective.net/images/AD.pdf)

These mass-produced two-room tenements were built by the Refugee Rehabilitation board in 1953. But over time, underwent significant transformation.

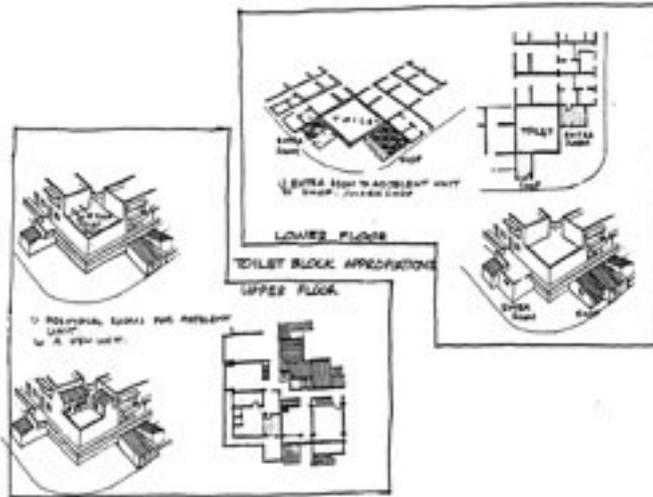
They now are vibrant areas with all the complexity of city life - its economy and politics. The blocks are both porous, and - in the eyes of the city planner and the high-level bureaucrat - opaque and 'un-organized'. Our account of such 'porosity and opaqueness' is central to understanding this progressive radical transformation.



*Bhogal Blocks, Dehli.*



*The transformation of Bhogal's 'Double storied quarters' refugee housing blocks.*



The 'transformative' aspect, emphasizing radical politics, is associated with its porosity: look closely at the blue lines and you can see the substantial buildup via the intensive community control of space, but also the economy, in the huge number of small and medium sized shops, small workshops, local daycare and primary schools, medical practitioners and walk-in health clinics, and, just as important, a weekly market that sets up stalls along the main streets. These images reveal an urbanism with significant anarchic aspects.

*"No one orients himself by house numbers. Shops, wells, and churches are the reference points-and not always simple ones'. .. 'Porosity results not only from the indolence of the Southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation, which demands that space and opportunity be at any price preserved. Buildings are used as a popular stage. They are all divided into innumerable, simultaneously animated theaters. Balcony, courtyard, window, gateway, staircase, roof are at the same time stage and boxes. ... "(WB & AL pp.166-167)*

*"...Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so, only much more loudly, the street migrates into the living room. Even the poorest one is as full of wax candles, biscuit saints, sheaves of photos on the wall, and iron bed stands, as the street is full of carts, people, and the lights. Poverty has brought about a stretching of frontiers that mirrors the most radiant freedom of thought. There is no hour, often no place,*

*for sleeping and eating. ... This sleep, which the men and women also snatch in shady corners, is therefore not the protected Northern sleep. Here, too, there is interpenetration of day and night, noise and peace, outer light and inner darkness, street and home."*  
(WB& AL p.172)

The intensive physical changes come about via intensive local negotiations and political resolution using municipal councillors to influence various levels of government - initially via the refugee rehabilitation board and the relevant Minister, and later, via the municipal council. Planners like to see these changes as "informal, or acts of desperation". This urbanism is a mainstream political process deeply implicated in self-organizing urbanisms.

These kinds of experiences dominate city terrains in almost all cities in the Global South, and with migration, underpin that of ethnic enclaves and city centres in Europe, and some North American cities too. The question then becomes whether we are describing a process of re-constituting and radicalizing property against centralized control, beyond the dirigisme of the homogenized 'globalized' market or centralized Nation state. This re-constitution happens via: Occupation of Land (via diverse tenures);

- An Economy (un-constrained by Intellectual Property Rights IPR);
- A politics rooted in municipal institutions shaped by the politics of servicing and 'regularization' of incrementally settled land, the economy consolidated around inter-connected firms;
- Fluidity of identity where varied ethnic groups with varied historicities inter-connect with those of the land, economy, and municipal politics.

The power of such urbanism lies in an autonomous political consciousness that is not dependent on social movements (although it shapes such events in substantive ways). Such consciousness is deeply implicated in common day to day acts of city building

and gives rise to municipal politics to use land for housing and the locally-based economy, and to resist and subvert Master Planning, as well as mega projects now promoted by international financial institutions and large real estate developers, under neo-liberal globalization. Thus, Occupancy Urbanism disrupts several current narratives that de-politicize, or renew colonialism: 'the planned city', 'third world developmentalism', or competitive cities built around the 'creative class'. As a concept it is beyond assumptions of Marginality, and it operates via acts of occupation - of land, economy, political processes and institutions, and identity. Its political substance lies in disrupting the assumed 'smooth' flow of Capital within the commodity process. Not just that, but with the encroachment on 'ownership' and 'property' it posits a radicalized view of 'commodity' and democracy<sup>18</sup>. Such a view of power and politics is not new, and references to **Foucault** are central. The issue here is not just fluidity, but its implications in urbanity, of complex, uncertain and often dialectical excitement, and of day-to-day consumerist rituals.

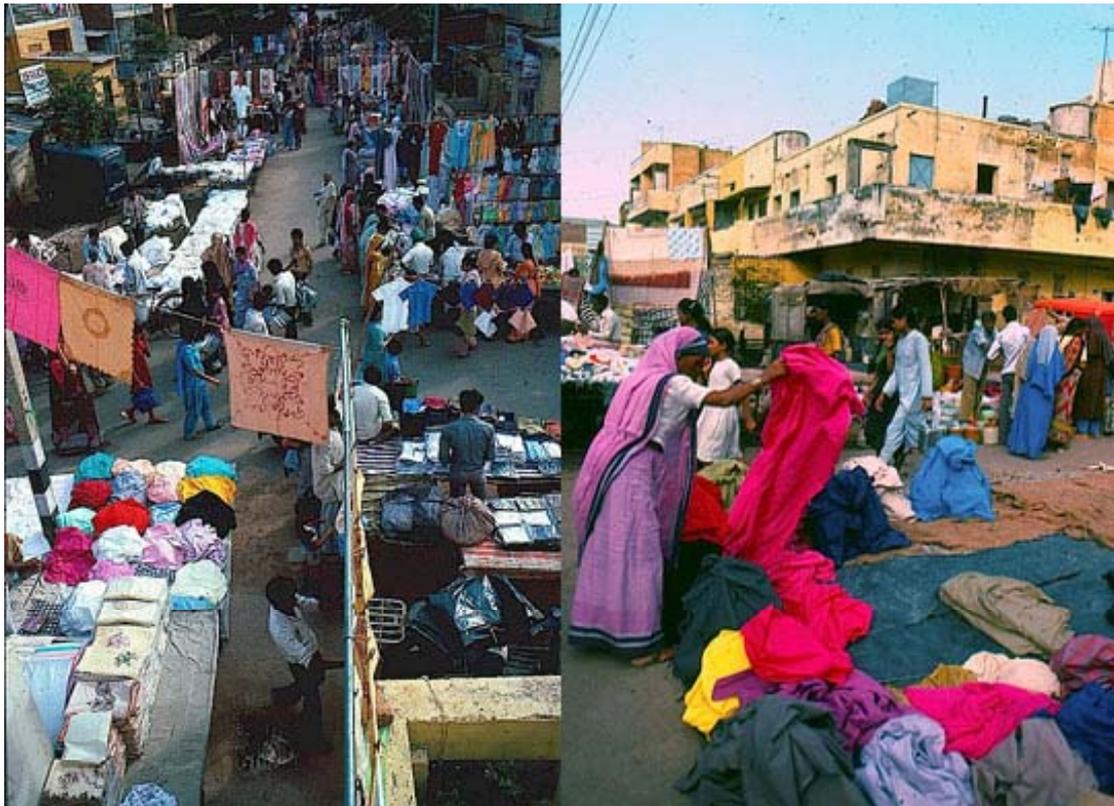
### **Planning Fear**

What is evident in the Bhogal Blocks is not just the physical changes, but also the huge economy that makes hard boundaries between the 'street' and 'living quarters' irrelevant.

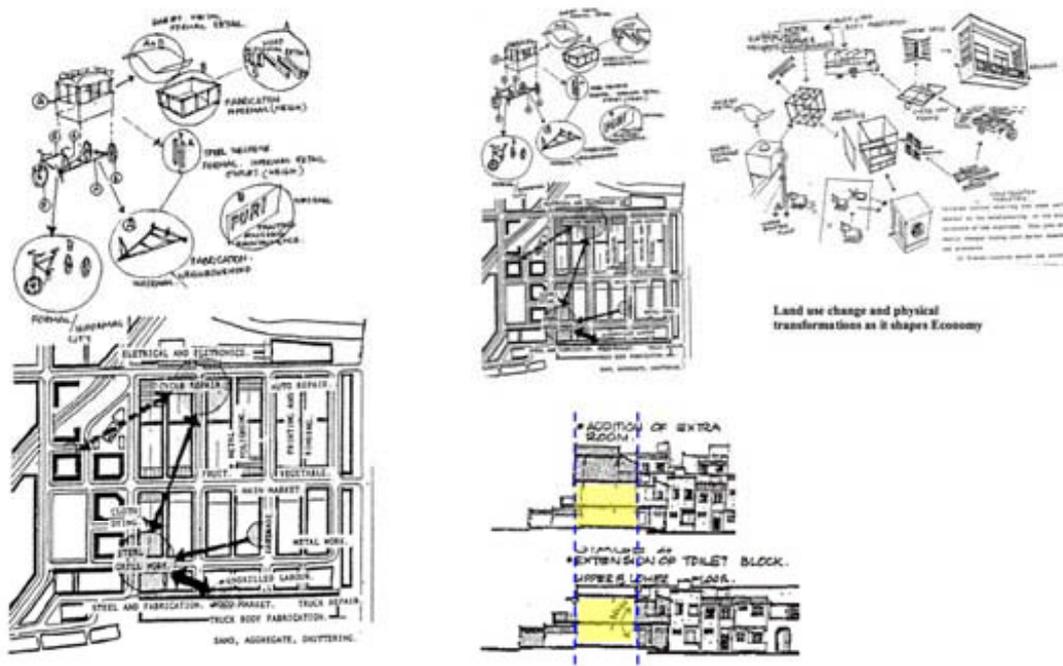
This is particularly true every Tuesday afternoon, when most of the street front hosts a weekly market that involves both local residents and traveling vendors. All this sends a chill of fear into the mind of the obsessive planner - with the drive for order within the Grid, to frame the Rule of Law, and to identify the 'encroacher'.

---

<sup>18</sup> *The point on disruption within the commodity process comes from Jeebesh Bagchi at the Sarai / Raqs Meda collective, while the notion of radicalized democracy draws from Peter Linebaugh's keynote address at 'Contested Commons/Trespassing Publics Conference on Inequalities, Conflicts and Intellectual Property' 6th - 8th January 2005 in New Delhi organized by Sarai-CSDS, in collaboration with ALF and PSBT. Linebaugh views a democracy without property. See his address at: [www.sarai.net](http://www.sarai.net)*



Market at Bhogal Blocks, Delhi.



Land use change and physical transformations as it shapes Economy

The obsession with planning to control and subvert the human spirit runs counter to the essence of cities and their dynamic transformation. Usually, this transformation is negatively presented as

'demographic growth'<sup>19</sup> that manifests itself in 'unplanned slums', and 'informal' economies that together fuel a regressive politics, a specter of fear and doomsday. Not surprisingly, in times when cities are forced to be 'globally competitive' or perish, such fears are used to justify dirigisme: on one hand a neo-liberal regulation aimed at promoting a homogenized 'free' (and global) market, while on the other, a repressive Nation State that uses state powers (in the name of public interest) to reinforce the power of corporate might. The current obsession with 'policy' is also not surprising. Critical analysis shows the connection between 'policy' and 'police' illustrated in fractured North American and European cities characterized by fear and raciality, giving rise to the need to control and manage 'growth' .

What we see in the exhibits of *Occasional City Post It City* is a stringent counter-force to such ideological terrorism: witness the overarching evidence that cities are self-organizing, incremental and even corrosive of the 'grand plan' or mega infrastructure. They reveal some important questions, which might include:

- Are we witnessing an opening of political space to a substantive urbanism that appears transformative in political consciousness?
- Is this transformative process beyond a specific ideology and rooted in day-to-day practices of occupying land, economy, and particular political institutions?
- In the cities of Northern Europe and America are we now witnessing the recent emergence of such spaces, spaces that emerged much earlier in cities of the Global South?
- Given the shape of city growth in the Global South over the next two decades, and the likely spurt of both migration and the consolidation of

---

<sup>19</sup> Dikeç, in drawing from Rachiere, provides an insightful critique of policy making. See Dikeç M., 2007 *Badlands of the Republic: Space, Politics and Urban Policy* Blackwell Publishing

refugee districts, do cities in the Global North also face radical transformation?

- How useful are the commonplace narratives of cities in both the North and South that view the issue as policies regarding 'Competitive cities', developmentalism, or, inclusive growth?

'Occupancy Urbanism'<sup>20</sup> as a mainstream (and not 'marginal') to re-configure Property. In an earlier work, I had proposed the concept of 'Occupancy Urbanism' as a conceptual lens to understand contestations over space and property. There is a possibility that such urbanisms are interpreted as a heroic 'tactics' to counter hegemonic 'strategy' (as posited by **Michael De Certeau** in his influential book *Cities of Everyday Life*. Put simply, when hawkers move to occupy part of a pavement, or locate under an expressway, the 'more established' shops that line the street remain unmoved. And such a view is possibly accurate - perhaps when seen in the context of cities in North Europe and America. But even so, this may only be part of it. There are two problems in the assumption of 'marginality'. The first is a conceptual one. Viewing these city terrains and economy and political spaces within a binary framework (Tactics- Strategy; Informal-Formal; Developed-Under-developed) removes politics, and sets such processes on a developmental trajectory. The second is empirical. Think of not just the distant future but also the present. While statistics have yet to catch up with this inconvenient truth, the bulk of city growth is in the 'global south', and such locations overpower the 'planned' city in terms of economy and the occupancy of space; they re-constitute city locations and culture, and underpin political consciousness. The 'northern' city may not be very different: as immigrant shaped neighbourhood districts, and several of these exhibits show, streetscapes rapidly resemble their multiple histories but also global connections via economy and culture.

---

<sup>20</sup> See: a) Benjamin Solomon "Occupancy Urbanism - A thesis on radical space" in *Sarai Reader 07: Frontiers* [www.sarai.net/publications/readers/sarai-reader-07-frontiers](http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/sarai-reader-07-frontiers); b) Benjamin S. 'Occupancy Urbanism: Radicalizing Politics and Economy beyond Policy and Programs' *Int. Journal of Urban and Regional Research (IJURR)* Vol. 32, Issue 3 September 2008

Such Occupancy urbanism is much more substantive and rejects conceptual binaries or developmentalism. Instead, such urbanism is about events and processes that merge economy and politics. But, rather than the old political economy that assumes linearity of development shaped by technological progress (transforming political consciousness), what is valued here is the fluidity and uncertainty of space that binds economy and politics in an immediate materiality, and the substance of such urbanism is in being 'occupantist'. This refers not only to the scale (the vast area of city terrain), but also the radicalization of property: in land, in the media, in economy. Most significantly, as noted by **Jeebesh Bagchi**, such radicalization happens "within the commodity process". This last point is important in understanding the 'Transformative' as being substantive and not the tactics of a dis-empowered marginality. Such a perspective points to an oppositional concept, to borrow from **DeLeuze** and **Guattari** (1987) of a 'Nomadic' city that appropriates the streets and disrupts the Grid. If so, than our traverses through central Delhi's Bhogal, and its economy, reinforce the irrelevance of the language and frames of developmentalism and planning, including its oppositional 'alternatives'.

Rejecting this narrow discourse, allows us to enter an expansive urban terrain trance-like realm unbound by dogma.

Let us instead, in a spirit of intellectual travel, visit to the main souk in Eilat, Israel.



*Main Souk, Eilat, Israel. The municipal council's notice board at the entrance enforces parking regulations and rates for this public parking square now turned shopping arena*

Here we look at the multi-city/town traveling market that competes with that country's malls. The event, held on Tuesdays and Thursdays, dramatizes spatiality into an outdoor Mediterranean bazaar. We can see that the municipal council's notice board at the entrance enforces parking regulations and rates for this public parking square now turned shopping arena. Fees in lieu of parking open up claims made by the association via municipal politics - only one of the many moves to occupy space. Similarly, such occupancy of territory is witnessed in the tiny town of Karkur. Here, a townspeople after noticing initial occupancy on 'leftover' spaces, negotiated with *Eged*, the country's main bus company. The company, like others in a previous era of grand master planning, had been over-allocated space that remained relatively unused. The arrangement here involved the townspeople leasing the entire space but then sub-leasing these to the traveling market's individual traders whose requirements for smaller spaces were shaped by differential rates for location and the complexity of spatial economy. Economy here is not about free market 'entrepreneurialism' as these types of cases

are often used to justify. In fact, there is hardly any 'free market' at all. Not surprisingly, the Karkur souk ended after neighboring shopkeepers in the planned, 'allocated' shops, mounted a campaign centered around a typical planning issue: congestion! It would hardly be surprising if it turns out that the planning campaign too had its bureaucratic 'ins and outs'- just like the process to establish the souk in the first place. Thus, the 'political consolidation' here is not just a physical act but one that is political, mainstreamed into bureaucracy, and specifically where administrative procedures reflect cultural associations with a space of trade, excitement, and urban life.

The accompanying photos show Bangalore's St Mary's festival - a month-long celebration around St. Mary's Basilica located in Shivaji Nagar - a central area in the city.



*St. Mary's festival, Shivaji Nagar, Bangalore*

In this month, huge crowds take over the space, set up stalls, and sell patently look-alike brand products and juicy tropical fruits. Local Muslim financiers help to sponsor this event, which is a Catholic one, but where the Infant Jesus and Mother Mary are driven around in a Hindu inspired chariot on the last day. This is indeed an event that mixes various different kinds of people seeking blessings - for day to day material and immaterial questions:

those who are sick, those looking for success at job interviews, exams, help in business downturns, and those just wanting to be part of this exuberant display of human spirit. So much so, that one major attraction is a model of the Bhai Temple of Delhi that symbolizes such a congruence of faiths.



*Bhai Temple, Bangalore*

*"This music is both a residue of the last and a prelude to the next feast day. Irresistibly the festival penetrates each and every working day. Porosity is the inexhaustible law of the life of this city, reappearing everywhere. A grain of Sunday is hidden in each weekday, and how much weekday in this Sunday! (168). During the night of September 7, bands of men, up to a hundred strong, roam through every street. They blow on gigantic paper cornets, the orifice disguised with grotesque masks. Violently if necessary, one is encircled, and from countless pipes the hollow sound clamors in the ears. Whole trades are based on this spectacle. Newspaper boys drag out the names of their wares, Roma and the Corriere di Napoli, as though they were stick of gum. Their trumpeting is part of urban manufacture." (WB& AL, pp.168-169)*

These are not the property-stratifying landscapes of post urban renewal East Manchester (Mc Neill: 191,195) or Brussels's central pedestrian zones, that witness the violence of art's aura reinforced by exclusive urban design and designer arcades (Mulliez Nd in Eugene 2008:10;). Instead what we witness is the disruption of singular property to subvert exclusive heritage conservation - attempted with great designer zeal via corporate business in Mumbai and Bangalore and Delhi's state power. My point here is not just the urban ritual, but to underline how, from a planner's point of view, this act would be highly illegal; it is also illicit in the eyes of those promoting Malls, given the extensive sale of branded products. Months like this, so common in the Global South, defy all control by centralized capital, and this intensive anarchic consumerism defeats Capital via its very erosion. Another wonderful illustration of subversion within the commodity process!

Reading city terrains reveals how mega infrastructures and corporate might are threatened. Yet the threat comes not from visionaries leading social movements. Rather, with a superficial similarity to de Certeau, and beyond, it happens by means of ordinary day-to-day acts by ordinary people. These groups, as Diane Singerman notes in Cairo, act in ways that are highly political even though they may be invisible to the political act. Secondly, it occurs both stealthily and in common place institutions: the municipal council. Thirdly, such transformative politics is highly material and underpins urbanism. It is centered on land, seeking infrastructure and services not just for housing, but also small factories and manufacturing units, and the commerce that often takes place on lower floors of these in a vast terrain characterised by mixed land-use<sup>21</sup>. But with this comes a realization of extensive breaching of IPR, rampant piracy, and zoning

---

<sup>21</sup> *This economy is hardly 'marginal'. Recent studies from India's most conservative economic institute, the NCAER in Delhi, aim to set a potential market share for global capital accessed points out that the 'unorganized sector' relates to 67% of economic value addition, and 95% of city employment. All this happens in 85% of city terrain rather than the 10% that is master planned .*

violations<sup>22</sup>! The materialism of land and economy (a livelihood that is immediate) is highly politicizing. Even children know the politicians, and meet them on weekly, and sometimes daily visits, and know of the lower and middle level bureaucrats who figure out official procedures to ensure technical loopholes to subvert evictions, and de-facto land tenure.

**The magic of bureaucracy: Occupancy Urbanism is magical.**

Of course the magic of St. Mary's feast in tropical Bangalore's warm, wet August evenings is highly alluring - especially when inebriated by the swirling masses and their celebratory spirit. But here, I point to another kind of magic, which is normally seen to be quite the opposite.

Master Planning is the darling of corporate business - which sees it as a way to replace unplanned development that subverts competitive globalization. It is also attractive to the classical leftist and many progressive activists who assume that the central concept underpinning the plan is that of ensuring 'social justice'. Master Planning is rendered ineffective by the very regulation that forms its *raison d'être*. Here, we introduce the magic of the lower and middle level bureaucrats and small time politicians, and the centre of this grand subversion, the municipal council.

---

<sup>22</sup> Lawrence Liang's (of the Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore) work on media, piracy in Bangalore is another useful parallel that builds on a view of law that is fluid and drawing from Santos, 'porous'. See Liang L., *Porous Legalities and Avenues of Participation* [www.altlawforum.org/PUBLICATIONS/](http://www.altlawforum.org/PUBLICATIONS/)



*Main Income Tax Offices, New delhi, India*

The images above show a parking lot of New Delhi's main Income Tax Offices which also house, apart from Lambretta inspired scooters and motorbikes, a range of retired bureaucrats and agents, "notary" publics, street level lawyers who are all well versed in creating and maintaining a 'porous' legality catering to popular society's appropriation and radicalization of urban territory. Rather than dispose off such fallacies of social justice, the bureaucratic apparatus is pushed into forming new administrative procedures, expanding loopholes to allow the inter-mixing of land use to allow for home-based commerce, manufacturing, and the extension of infrastructure and services into 'illegal' areas - in effect strengthening their 'de-facto' tenure. The diagram on pg. 555 in the Sarai essay describes this effect and makes a fundamental point: this re-appropriation of mainstream political and administrative institutions takes place in a cross causality of land being claimed and its transformation as an economic setting, both of which lie within the commodity

process. Thus, the issue is not the creation of an 'alternative' that competes with an all encompassing 'mainstream', but rather, when the Mainstream, now so supportive of big business, finds itself eroded, yet again, within its own commodity logic - in economy, in the occupantist settlement of land along diverse tenure regimes, and central here, the magic of the bureaucracy that re-constitutes its administrative politics<sup>23</sup>.

There is no greater fear for the centralized planner and global capital than that of the lower level, murky, stealth-like bureaucracy and local politics that bogs down their assumptions of smooth flows.

### **Some "subaltern" trans-national aspects?**

*"Trade, deeply rooted in Naples, borders on a game of chance and adheres closely to the holiday...Lotto, alluring and consuming as nowhere else in Italy, remains the archetype of business life. Every Saturday at four o'clock, crowds form in front of the house where the numbers are drawn. Naples is one of the few cities with its own draw. With pawnshop and lotto the state holds the proletariat in a vice: what it advances to them in one it takes back in the other. The more discreet and liberal intoxication of Hazard, in which the whole family takes part, replaces that of alcohol..."(WB& AL pg.169)*

One interesting question is whether this political consciousness is a false construct of capitalism and one that actually enslaves? Here I turn to the immigrant communities in Toronto, the suburbs of which list more than 50% of the population as visible minorities or first and second-generation immigrants. Listening to Canadian Multi-cultural radio (CMR 101.3 FM) gives us the impression that the new immigrant communities in Toronto's large ethnically characterized suburbs are captivated by the great Americanisms: car, two garage house with den and hardwood flooring. Is this the way Capital recoups its surpluses, from a newly arrived migrant workforce, as well as inculcating conservatism? At a

---

<sup>23</sup> See Fig. 12 (pg. 561) in an essay for the Sarai reader, which provides more evidence of these circuits. Benjamin Solomon: "Touts, Pirates and Ghosts" in Sarai reader 05 'Bare Acts' Feb 2005 [www.sarai.net/publications/readers/05-bare-acts/01\\_solly.pdf](http://www.sarai.net/publications/readers/05-bare-acts/01_solly.pdf).

closer look this consumerism is shown to be layered with other complex materialities that diffuse centralized control. Advice on the subtleties of immigration, stringent political commentary on George Bush's US splitting the Shinas and Sunnis, several pot shots at Canadians' efforts to integrate diverse ethnicities and comments on the famous criterion of 'Canadian experience required', along with the grounded realities of 'reasonable adjustment' that contests its official 'multi-culturalism policy'. Other hints point to one of the central politics of immigration: the need for an international labor force to work the country's land, its highly polluted oil sands economy and tough agricultural systems, and to fund the future health care of an aging white Canadian population. Inter-spaced in this critique from ethnic groups are efforts to access the Nation state and root it in a daily life of children's college education funds, ways to learn Canadian accented English, disability insurance for truck and taxi drivers.

But the real erosion of capital in Toronto takes place via its reconstitution of the haunts of consumerism: the reconstituted Malls and the city's China Town and other immigrant haunts! The largest ever Pacific Mall catering to East Asian groups, the biggest ever planned South Asian Mall, The Sitara, and smaller older shopping centres: China Town versions of Dragon City, and China town centre<sup>24</sup>. Set in the cold of Canadian winters, these interior spaces parallel the bazaar venues of warmer climates. Inside, rather than brand names, are discount floors full of 'seconds' garments, pirate CDs, look-alike labels, and cheaper, non-brand names. Other malls and smaller shopping centers house a variety of daily consumption goods. These, then, represent almost an antithesis of the Mall as a centre for branded enterprise!

***"A priceless example of such business is the auction. When at eight in the morning, the street vendor has begun unpacking his goods - umbrellas, shirt material, shawls, presenting each item singly to the public, mistrusting, as if he has to test it***

---

<sup>24</sup> [www.thestar.com/living/Shopping/article/244046](http://www.thestar.com/living/Shopping/article/244046) also see: [www.pacificmalltoronto.com/](http://www.pacificmalltoronto.com/)

himself.. Blissful confusion in the storehouses! For here they are still one with the vendors' stalls: they are bazaars. The long gangway is favored. In a glass-roofed one there is a toyshop (in which perfume and liqueur bottles are on sale) that hold its own fairy tale galleries. Like a gallery, too, is the main street of Naples, the Toledo. Its traffic is among the busiest on earth. On either side of this narrow alley all that has come together in the harbor city lies insolently, crudely, seductively, displayed. Only in fairy tales are lanes so long that one must past through without looking left or right if one is not to fall prey to the devil. There is a department store, in other cities the rich, magnetic center of purchasing. Here it is devoid of charm, outdone by the tightly packed multiplicity. But with a tiny offshoot - rubber balls, soap, and chocolates - it re-emerges someplace else among the small traders' stalls." (WB & AL pp: 170-171)

Such radical territory extends to the streetscapes - seen most explicitly in Toronto's China town. Here the occupation of pavements pushed via the city council into designated hawking spaces continually challenges the limits of these negotiations.



Image showing designated extension zones along China Town's pavements.

The accompanying images show not just the hawking but also the white line on the pavement demarcating the territory negotiated with the city council via the trade associations. This particular case is a spatial parody, when a designated space is used to sell pirate DVDs!

In other locations, very poor, elderly Chinese and Vietnamese women attempt to claim even more of the pavement, defying the council inspectors whose rounds attempt to move trade into their designated, negotiated zones. Selling their wares at a dollar a mound, they are expertly abusive in Mandarin when confronted with this illegality!



*Sales at China Town Toronto.*

This assertive spirit gets particularly energetic in the annual China Town festival, when an entire street is cordoned off for the two-day event. On display there are not only 'dress' shirts for a seventh of their price - a blatant illegality challenging piracy laws, but also the booths of the main politicians - a reminder of such intensive political acts.



*Stall at the 'China Town Festival' Toronto selling non-branded 'Dress Shirts' at CAD \$ 5 a piece*

What we see here is the consumerism that represents non-corporatized flows (occupying the space of branded goods) effecting a major subversion within capital itself.

*"Similarly dispersed, porous, and commingled is private life:.. each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life. To exist, for the Northern European the most private of affairs, is here, as in the kraal, a collective affair." (WB& AL pg. 171)*

Such retail economies now assume trans-national connections. Most Indian metro cities, and smaller towns too, have 'China Bazaars'.



China Bazaars in Mumbai, Kolkata (Calcutta), images Zainab Bawa

China Bazaars in Mumbai, Kolkata source commodity products from various parts of East Asia, especially South East China<sup>25</sup>, but some say, from other small firms in the industrial areas of Delhi and Bombay too, in a sort of make-believe China! Some of these occupant economies defy the stringent regulatory discipline that the management of influential "Brand conscious" Malls seeks. (See image)

<sup>25</sup> See India commodities trade with Yiwu to grow by 50pc every year' [economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2681037.cms](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/articleshow/2681037.cms); Yiwu Megamarket–The Inside Stories of the Outsiders 06-28-2005 CCTV at <http://idm.cctv.com/program/RediscoveringChina> ; Yiwu: The mother of all flea markets [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China\\_Business](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/China_Business) ; The Calicut Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) to market Chinese goods in Malabar. <http://www.hindu.com/2006/05/18/stories/>



*outside the 'Forum' mall in Bangalore*

### **Spaces of Occupancy Urbanism**

How do we relate to such street level transformations when we also confront a media and academic discourse (across ideological positions) that locate an urban narrative to be vantage to a meta level, reducing the city to a 'contingency'? For instance, the common narrative of Chinese urbanism is located in films

like *Manufacturing Landscapes* and accounts in several issues of the *New York Times* in 2008-09. These emphasize the regressive urban change promoted by land developers being 'hand in glove' with local administration and driven by speculative real estate exploitation. This narrative, of a meta-modernity subjugating 'tradition'<sup>26</sup>, reduces the complexity of city politics to one of a high-aesthetics: The revealed value of the 'Hotou' residential districts of courtyard houses especially in modernizing Beijing. Here, just as some heroic individuals decide to take on large land developers and an authoritarian state, we are told of the 'heroic' efforts of (usually western educated) individuals who "value" these environments and with their access to capital, work to preserve "heritage structures and zones"<sup>27</sup> They bring with them, liberal notions of democracy (and its generative capital) that "authoritarian" rules seem to find no place for. Both these aspects converge in a common narrative, which assumes as a given reality or as an immediate inevitability, 'the Grid' to form the basis for Global Capitalism. In effect, what is being erased, even in the critical perspectives, is the replacement of political space with a replacement of a unilateral economic one.

My point here is not to dismiss the harsh eviction and demolitions that the *NYT* and other media point to. These are important and harsh realities. Instead, my argument is if there is a need to complicate how we conceptualize the complexity of city contests, and pose the question if such types of narratives from the *NYT*, in effect, and across ideological lines, accept the 'High modernism' as exemplified by Shenzhen as inevitable?

---

<sup>26</sup> See for instance, *Architecture Lost in the New Beijing: The Old Neighborhood* July 27, 2008  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/27/arts/design/>

<sup>27</sup> See *In Ancient Alleys, Modern Comforts* DAN LEVIN Published: July 24, 2008  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/24/>



*Shenzhen worker housing*

Does the image as shown in a landscape of factories reinforced by monotonous and de-humanizing blocks of worker housing form a metaphor for loss, and one that erases the possibility of cities being viewed as more complex political and economic territories? Should we not look more closely at histories and political

genealogies, unbound by what Tang and Roy<sup>28</sup> pose as 'western lenses', and emphasize what Robinson<sup>29</sup> points to the everyday life of 'Ordinary Cities' and the spaces they open up? In doing so, perhaps we need to accept narratives that are necessarily confusing incomplete, fluid and chaotic. These are not unlike what Simone points to when looking at African urbanism<sup>30</sup>. This view, not easily acceptable by policy makers and academics across ideological positions who lay their rational in 'the grid'. The city in their view is a terrain of fear whose complex uncertain dynamic is "psychedelic", where political terrain lies un-disciplined by programs and policy. In the Indian case, the last issue is particularly highly threatening to activists-academics. While they are rightly at the forefront of condemning evictions as witnessed in Delhi, and Mumbai, their power and legitimacy lies in re-creating a progressive panoptic vision to make the logic of the city transparent, surveyed and enumerated<sup>31</sup>. Not surprisingly, as one radical activist mentioned while discussing India's biggest ever surveillance program, the Unique ID no, they become apologists of such governmentalities<sup>32</sup> laying their hope in the Nation State to materialize their panoptic dreams. Such rationalities are immersed in, what one academic usefully termed as, 'salvation army type developmentalism'<sup>33</sup> - which the city on the ground disrupts and unsettles.

### **Is Occupancy Urbanism inherently 'Nomadic'?**

To recover a political narrative, we start a re-think with one of the most important signifiers of such

---

<sup>28</sup> Roy A., 2004 *The 21st – Century Metropolis: New Geographies of Theory Regional Studies* pg.1-12,

<sup>29</sup> Robinson Jennifer 'World Cities, or a world of ordinary ones? Ch. 4 (93-113) in *Ordinary Cities: Between modernity and development* Routledge 2006

<sup>30</sup> Simone AbdouMaliq *Pirate Towns: Reworking social and symbolic infrastructure in Johannesburg and Douala Urban Studies* Vol 43 No. 2 February 2006 (357-370)

<sup>31</sup> This argument came out of discussions with Jeebesh Bagchi, Svehtha Sarad, and Prasad Shetty in considering the evictions in Delhi, Mumbai, and the new GIS based surveillance technologies, including India's recent Unique ID no based on biometrics.

<sup>32</sup> This emerged in a discussion following a lecture by Dr. Usha Ramanathan on the UID in Bangalore, December 2009.

<sup>33</sup> This term was mentioned by Katherine Rankin in the context of how a critique of NGOs becomes very emotional among some student groups.

'narratives of loss': Hong Kong's Kowloon Walled city<sup>34</sup>. When viewed as a narrative of 'place' we are presented with a narrative of the loss of an anarchic space, and one rich in economic and political possibility – subsumed both by globalized capital, modernity, and the Nation State. I looked at some of these issues in the Indian case, but a recent visit to Guangzhou and Duggaun in mainland China suggests a wider and more complicated geography to consider. It is important to clarify, like in the Indian case, the idea is not to dismiss harsh evictions and regressive urban renewal in Beijing and elsewhere in China, or to dismiss the connection between local governments, land markets, and large property developers. Rather, my intent is to suggest a political realm of complex possibilities that include evictions and in other cases subversion. Some of this includes, a position similar to critical theorist, an examination of the role of large institutions like the World Bank and IMF that through their loan conditionalities lay the ground for harsh urban renewal<sup>35</sup>. But it also includes a consideration, without necessarily an agreement over their perspective, of the works of Hsing who with others point to a complicated dynamic of local government engagement with land issues, and the way economy gets entangled in this administrative politics<sup>36</sup>.

---

<sup>34</sup> Girard G. & Lambot I., 2007 *City of Darkness: Life in Kowloon Walled City* Watermark UK; Also see *Kowloon Walled City: The Modern Pirate Utopia*. Also look at the youtube video

<sup>35</sup> Gaubatz Piper 'Globalization and the development of new central business districts in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou' Ch. 6 (pg. 98-121) in *Restructuring the Chinese City: Changing society, Economy and Space* ed. by Laurence J.C.Ma and Fulong Wu Routledge London & New York 2005

<sup>36</sup> See for instance, a) You-Tien Hsing 2006 *Land and Territorial Politics in Urban China* *The China Quarterly* pg: 575-591; b) Ho P 'Who Owns China's Land? Property Rights and Deliberate Institutional Ambiguity' *The China Quarterly* (2001) 166: 394-421 Cambridge University Press; I have elaborated more on this in a forthcoming article 'Subaltern' Globalism: Thinking beyond the 'Designed City'. Here part of the argument lies in the way ambiguous land titles allow for political autonomy and also an economy that is deeply threatening to centralized authorities – that of the national government but also of Trans National Corporations and their legal consultants, and also institutions like the World Bank and the IMF. For instance, the case of Pearl River New Town, the Master Planned township demarcated with clear property rights, that has, after 14 years since the plan, only 30% of the planned new construction (Tian 2008: Fig. 6 on Pg. 293,294). Tian points to multiple reasons, including the 1997 Asian Financial Crises, but notes that Guangzhou planners point to the 'distorted' price mechanism as one of the main reason for the failure of planning implementation. Another way to view this 'distortion' is as a reflection of the multiple tenures that subvert the official land price planning rationale. If the 'occupants' of these settlements - not as individuals but as village collectives - materially benefit from what Tian (2008: 296) terms as the 'incompleteness' of legal property rights even when notional and locational economic values are identical to planned areas, then, in effect, this is revenue drawn away from higher level government planners. This is also not very different from the case of East Delhi's industrialized neighborhoods. In those areas, residents play the municipal system to access higher electricity loads via diverse procedures around 'non-conforming uses' to be 'regularized,' evolved outside policy (Benjamin 2004). This is not very different from Delhi's 'urban villages' which, in the 1960s and 1970s, and especially in the industrial expansion times of the mid 80s, negotiated a non-applicability of by-laws and regulation - this spurred extensive small scale industrialization (Benjamin 1996). The appropriation of procedures is, not surprisingly, accentuated when, as Tsai writes, policy implementation is relatively decentralized, and where local officials have

Here, let us look closely at what we could see to be an interesting feature of urbanism: What has come to be termed as 'urban villages'



Left: entrance gate to urban village, top right, urban village garment trade; bottom right urban village eateries. 'Urban Villages' in China - more complicated than villages these are particular political and economic space shaped by the genealogy of land development led by the village committee in negotiation with both land developers and various parts of local and provincial government

The issue here is much more complicated than just villages being engulfed by urbanization. Instead, these are particular political and economic space shaped by the genealogy of land development led by the village committee in negotiation with both land developers and various parts of local and provincial government. It is significant that at least 70% of the populations, especially migrants from other parts of China, live in 'urban villages'.

---

convergent interests with local citizens – for example, promoting local economy growth, hiding revenues from higher levels of government, protecting local industry, bending rules to attract external investments' (Tsai 1996: 123; 130). But it is critical to underline that the politicization of institutions shaped around 'adaptive practices' into quasi-legal and extralegal grey areas arises in a context where local political and economic actors face incentives to promote private sector development, but where formal institutions at the national level lag in adjusting to new businesses and associated externalities (Tsai 2006: 127). Tian L. *The Chengzhongcun Land Market in China: Boon or Bane? – A Perspective on Property Rights* International Journal of Urban and Regional Research Vol. 32.2, June 2008: 282-304; Tsai, Kellee S. 2006 *Adaptive Informal Institutions and Endogenous Institutional Change in China* World Politics – Vol. 59, Number 1, October, pp. 116-141

The metropolitan area and the core city of Guangzhou have several urban villages that house particular types of economies: Garments, electronics, and hardware. And it is not just the main garment center that is important, but also the ancillary units.



Main garment centre, Guangzhou, China



Chinese urban village: door to a residential-work complex



*Garment and textile trade Guangzhou, China*

Their adjacency to wholesale trading markets, and also manufacturing that drives the city economy. Look closely at two images in particular:



*Left a small factory unit making buttons, and right a retail store that sells not just items for domestic use but also bundles of twine, tape, plastic packing material*

Such imagery leaves us with a much more complicated and necessarily diverse narratives than the easy one suggested by the image of the Shenzhen mentioned above, and most important, its logic located in the perspective of the 'Nation State'. We are not clear, and like small firm economies the world over, how

definitive the line is between the worker and the management, between who the land owner and the developer, and of the exact location of political agency. This agency is certainly not in the Nation State, nor as an oppositional one. What are their inner lives, that include religious shrines including those of village deities, and what are their claims on land and location that is shaped and fueled by the play of land market in conjunction with local and provincial government. Suddenly for instance, the easy causality posed by the NYT confronts serious complications if not a disruption. And if we look at the surpluses generated from real estate but also from commodities being produced undisciplined by 'the brand'



*Components sourced in the garment industry*

Here we witness even further confusion of the easy narrative that treats 'property' as an inevitable finality whose control lies in a higher plane - the binary of a global and homogenized market, or then a realm regulated by the Nation State. We could also trace, and these are necessarily only traces due to their stealth like complex institutional politics, the political logic that plays out. This again, is

not set within a binary of the global homogenous market regulated by international conventions shaped by corporate power, or then higher levels of government as the Nation State. Instead, this politics is embedded into the occupancy of terrain and of commodity circuits - where local party officials are embedded in their most material realm.

Is there then, a radical of contemporary urbanism via its logic beyond the plan or the grid. If so, it is useful to return to **Deleuze & Guattari** (1987: 481):

*"...smooth spaces arising from the city are not only those of world-wide organizations, but also of a counterattack combining the smooth and the holey and turning back against the town: sprawling, temporary, shifting shantytowns of nomads and cave dwellers, scrap metal and fabric, patchwork, to which the striations of money, work, or housing are no longer even relevant..."*

With this, it becomes useful not to see the urbanism of Kowloon's walled city as a historic event but rather to move across to Guangzhou, and as we shall see below, even more so, in the thirty-one village towns that now constitute the manufacturing district of Doug Guan. Such 'urban villages' are where porosity at the best, and a form whose politics keeps urbanism 'smooth and nomadic'. Guangzhou is reputed for instance, with its autonomous politics and distance from Beijing, to have been more relaxed and progressive about 'Hokou' or residency permits. After all, if these 'occupiers' of space form an economy, which implicates the economic and political clout of local government, this would be hardly surprising. Locals mention how the trading center of Yiwu, discussed earlier in this essay, formed due to the space shortage of this city. But if Guangzhou inter-spaces its terrain with urban villages, Doug Guan is a vast conglomeration of urban villages. Here too, and in a far more reinforced way, is the building up as mentioned by a senior planner in the Guangzhou administration, a 'ground-up' highly dynamic economic territory.



Advertisement outside one of the main furniture 'clusters', Douguan, China

The advertisement outside one of the main furniture 'clusters' in Douguan is a sharp contrast to the more official 'grid' of urban designed and starkly barren Science City<sup>37</sup>.

But let us move beyond the boundaries and anxieties imposed by place to then ask a more interesting question that is the crises of contemporary capitalism one in which it confronts not a distinct other enclosed by the binary of the Nation State now placed even if tacitly in the service of an assumption towards a globalized homogenized 'The' market, but rather one that appropriates and disrupts singular forms of property, to bleed it of values but into complex fluid forms within the commodity process. Are these then spaces that are linked across place? Guangzhou, with it's estimated 100,000 Africans, and at least half that number of South Asians and small time traders from the Middle East, a center of 'subaltern' trade that feed the global 'china towns'. Are we then seeing, not just a nomadic

<sup>37</sup> When this author was taken around the Science City in January 2010, he was struck by the vast empty spaces in contrast to his visit to Douggaun. An official mentioned, how while the Science City had provided all the infrastructure, the planning, it still had not 'taken off' as compared to the 31 town-villages of the Douggaun area which had very poor infrastructure, no 'planning' and yes, had managed to do very well. This contrasts with the 'official' descriptions, which publicize this city building as a way to promote innovation and trade. See: Master Plan of Guangzhou Science City [www.lifeofguangzhou.com/](http://www.lifeofguangzhou.com/)

shift of the Kowloon walled city political space into mainland China, but further, via "subaltern" trans-global flows into other parts of the world?



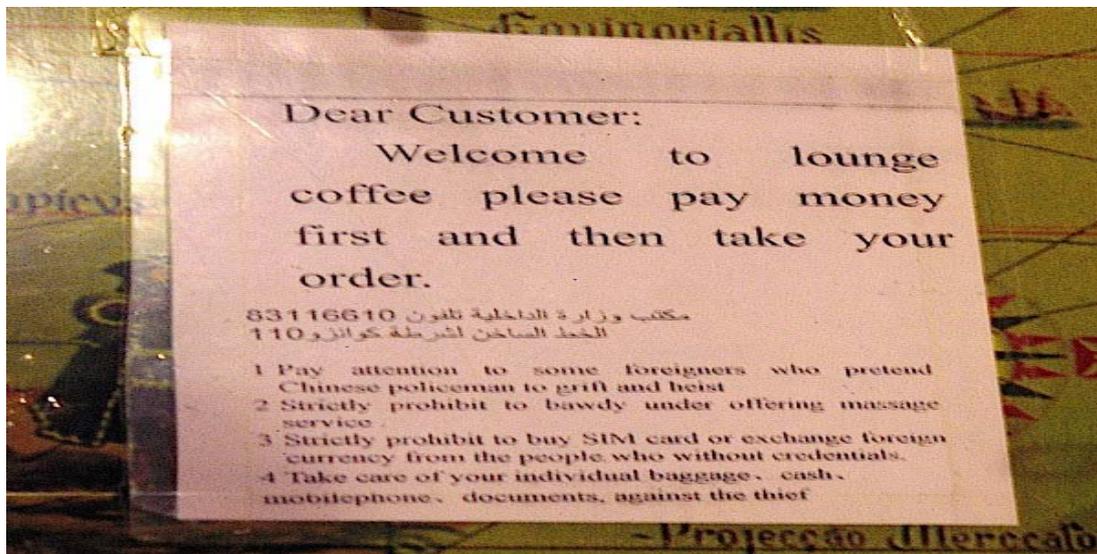
Images from Guangzhou, home to 100,000 Africans. Left: Cargo; top right; African dress; Bottom right: Doug Guan, China

## Mainstream Politics is necessarily "Psychedelic"!

*"(African) Cities are characterized incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used..(African) cities survive largely through a conjunction of heterogeneous activities brought to*

*bear on and elaborated through flexibly configured landscapes..* "38

Such a perspective on the disfigurement of the possibility of 'The Market' would be deeply unsettling to lawyers from NYC whose corporate clients seek surpluses in China and India. It would be deeply threatening to the US Senate or at least induced into being so. An indication of the extent of how threatening such "psychedelic" spaces is reflected in the lobbying by large North American (and European) corporations at the US Senate. The move here is to suggest not just these groups, but rather entire forms of urbanism being criminal<sup>39</sup>! Of course these efforts are driven by competition over economic and political space, locking branded retail capital within exclusive Malls. My point here is the political terrain we explore in this essay is mainstream and underpins the various layers of such 'occupation': of space, of economy, and the complex leasehold-based tenure systems. The last aspect underpins not just spatiality and economy, but also reflects materiality in administrative procedures via 'the magic of bureaucracy'.



*a notice pasted on the table of a restaurant frequented by West African and Middle Eastern traders in central Guangzhou.*

<sup>38</sup> Simone AbdouMaliq 2004, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Public Culture* 16, 3: 407-429

<sup>39</sup> See Chow D.C.K 2003 'Organized crime, local protectionism, and the trade in counterfeit goods in China' *China Economic Review* Volume 14, Issue 4, , Pages 473-484 Also see: 'Dispatch Investigation | Fighting Fakes In the land of counterfeit. Organized crime runs the Asian fakes trade' Sunday, November 25, 2007 <http://www.columbusdispatch.com>

If we use as a metaphor the famous film on Honk Kong Chung King Express, than the by lanes of Guangzhou, Dounggaun, Yiwu, evolve into a mix of Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, Punjabi, Urdu, Bengali, and several others, but also perhaps a form that is impenetrable to anyone seeking clarity and predictability as a first step towards centralized control by the Nation State, Globalized capital, their lawyers, bankers, and planners. Politics here, not surprisingly via the Porous Bureaucracy, would remain of stealth and secret glances!

*"...True laboratories of this great process of intermingling are the cafes. Life is unable to sit down and stagnate in them. They are sober, open rooms resembling the political People's Café, and the opposite of everything Viennese, of the confined bourgeois, literary world. Neapolitan cafés are bluntly to the point. A prolonged stay is scarcely possible. A cup of excessively hot caffè espresso - in hot drinks this city is as unrivaled as in sherbets, spumoni, and ice cream - ushers the visitors out. ... Only a few people sit down briefly here. There are quick movements of the hand, and they have placed their orders. The language of gestures goes further here than anywhere else in Italy. The conversation is impenetrable to anyone from outside. Yes, here his cause would be hopefully lost, but the Neapolitan benevolently sends him away a few kilometers on to Mori. "Vedere Napoli e poi Mori." (WB&AL pg.173)*