

Rahul Mehrotra: temporality and elasticity of the urban system

Reception Date: june 7th 2013

Acceptance Date: june 28th 2013

KEY WORDS

Urban design | kinetic city | appropriation | public space | Mumbai

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April 24th, 2013

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As the Director of the Department of Urban Planning and Design of the Graduate School of Design of the University of Harvard, the Indian architect Rahul Mehrotra is focused on recovering the "speculative era" of urban planning and, at the same time, bringing back activism topics.

In order to add one more dimension to the discussion on cities and urban planning, Mehrotra proposes the concepts of "static city" and "kinetic city". Within the latter, the architect distinguishes three categories: elasticity, the strategy of appropriation for short periods and incrementality, which explores how to develop certain aesthetics from works that are built by small progressive progress.

Mehrotra argues that at present all city action is in the global south. Therefore, the new one will come from here.

As an introduction I would like to know how you see the relationship of time and speed vis à vis architecture and the city?

The notion of time plays out a little differently in architecture as well as in cities. I don't think that in our pedagogy and in our imagination as architects we are factoring time into our thinking. One of the intrinsic agendas of the modern movement, for example, was to respond to a necessity, shortage of housing, and the process of industrialization. So, speed was fundamental to the imagination of how the components of architecture are imagined and how they were deployed, and a very particular aesthetics emerged from this process. When you go to a place like India or when you go to South America, places that have very strong traditions, you see a resistance to modernism. That resistance is really a resistance, which comes from two factors: one comes from the phenomena that in many of our societies the aesthetics of modernism came before social modernity. In Europe you had the social modernization process and the aesthetics to represent this modernity intrinsically linked. So, you had a habitation, which was consistent with the intent of architecture; whereas in our societies, tradition resisted modern architecture because society was not modern. Therefore, that resistance resulted in a weathering and occupation of architecture in a completely different way, in the way it is appropriated by people. All the things all of us as architects react to -how badly buildings are maintained, people don't use buildings well in our society, etc.- only comes about because there is a mismatch between the modernization process of society and of architecture.

Also, in our societies, there is a different sense of time, and time is linked to memory. When things happen with speed, it is a loss of memory; and when things happen slowly, they are internalized and remembered in a way. So, in many traditional societies -like the ones that we all largely come from in the global South- memory is a very important factor that keeps the stability of society. Therefore, speed and time become very important.

Now in cities, and specifically in planning, the question becomes even more complex because architecture is objects -you can build a house in a year, you can build an institution building in three years-. In architecture the unit becomes the year, in planning the unit becomes the decade. Which means that things that you imagine on an urban scale are a whole lifetime. So, in planning, and I think this is a pedagogical question also, the point is how do you factor time? It is a large and complex question.

Through your work and particularly in your text "Negotiating the Static and Kinetic Cities: The Emergent Urbanism of Mumbai"⁽¹⁾ you have tried to understand contemporary urban environment considering temporality as a key and critical factor for design processes and, from there, you have proposed

There is a totally blurred area between the categories of what is formal and what is informal. That is why they are not useful categories. Many of the rich who live in the formal city are really thieves; they are dealers, they are part of the black market, of the mafia, etc. In fact, all of them participate more in the informal economy than the people who live in the informal city.



Mumbai is the capital of the State of Maharashtra. It is situated in an island inhabited since the Stone Age. With 12,4 million inhabitants, it is the 4th most populous city in the world. Its metropolitan area has 18,4 million inhabitants. It is India's main port city.

There is a static city and a kinetic city; the latter is the soft city emerging in the way people use the space and the form in which relationships are configured within the space. On the other hand, the static city is the one in which architecture becomes the instrument that organizes the city, but also the spectacle of the city.

new ways to operate that go beyond the traditional notions of formal/informal city. Can you frame the notions of Static City and Kinetic City in that context?

The way I frame the idea of the Kinetic City is really a reaction to the way in which the framing of urbanism has been constructed, which is the formal and the informal city. I call it a non-productive binary because they force architects, like a cult: to have an alliance with one or the other.

As I started using this idea and working in Mumbai, I realized that it is actually a complete blur. I realized that if you look at the category of economy, a lot of people who live in the informal city are actually working in the formal economy. They actually sustain the city within the formal structure, not just by hawking or vending informal things, but also by formal occupations. Then, I found that a lot of the rich people that live in the formal city were real crooks; they were engaging in the black market, they were part of a mafia, smuggling, etc. In fact, they were all more part of the informal economy than the people living in the informal city. I learned that Mumbai is an extreme condition, and I'm sure that this is true of many cities in Latin America too. There is a complete blur between what the categories are of the formal and the informal that we cannot, in today's world, with technology and communication, clarify. Something that looks like an informal city is actually a formal city in an economic or in a legal term. So, it's not a useful category.

That's when I started using the words kinetic and static. So you have a Static City and a Kinetic City, where a Kinetic City is the soft city, which is people, how they occupy space, how they configure relationships within space; whereas a Static City is one where architecture becomes the instrument that organizes the city, but also becomes the spectacle of the city. I started looking at things in Mumbai, and I found it was a very useful design category because it allowed a way to understand how people occupy space and how space can be made flexible through occupation. Therefore, that results in a kind of elasticity of the urban system, which we don't factor in.

So, our response as architects and urban designers is always looking at architecture as the problem-solving device. If you want to have big events, we build a stadium, and it gets used for seven days in the year. Whereas, when I see Mumbai, and I start seeing in open spaces people with clothes and bamboo that make spaces, they have weddings that disappear as something else happens. The whole landscape of temporality creates elasticity in the city.

(1) Published originally in the book *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing Age* (Andreas Huyssen, Ed.), Duke University Press, 2008, pages 205-218.

And you also recognized some categories in the Kinetic City, right?

Yes, I came up with three categories within the Kinetic City. One is the strategy of elasticity; the other is the strategy of appropriation over short periods of time, of how spaces are appropriated but with an understanding that this is not permanent. This is where time gets factored in; you need to get a timescale. Then appropriation gets limited to time, which means that it becomes less threatening and it doesn't become a permanent thing. And the last one is incrementality or incrementalism, which means really how one can imagine things being done in small increments, and how one can develop an aesthetics from it, which is what I've tried to do now in my projects, trying to develop an aesthetic of the incremental.

You have said that public space is the neutral ground in which the spectacles of the Kinetic City (festivals, community celebrations) and the Static City (architecture) intersect becoming "places", where everything blurs into a singular entity. What do you mean by that?

I would factor in the appropriation here. So, as opposed to how we imagine public space --let's say a plaza in one of your cities-- what happens within the notion of appropriation is that those spaces also get temporarily inscribed upon; that means, they are appropriated not just in the way that people come and sit there or do some activities, but they actually transform them physically. In India for example, there is a particular way in which streets are occupied by people during festivals, they transform them with lights. So, they take streets and blocks and then they put little lights from house to house and it becomes like a canopy, and then it becomes like a room, and then they show movies there, they have dance festivals, the traffic is closed, and in the morning they take it all out and it becomes a street. So, that is what I mean by appropriation, it gets appropriated and space becomes place, but temporarily through instruments and devices such as those.

I agree with you on the connection between the notion of place and appropriation but nowadays in many cities around the world (Santiago, Río de Janeiro, Nueva York, El Cairo to name a few) we can also see two parallel and even opposite situations. On the one hand, in recent years there has been a reassessment of public space by the people, through intense occupations and political demonstrations demanding better living conditions, and on the other, there is an increase of big events -such as marathons and parades organized by international corporations- that also gather a lot of people. Both are temporal manifestations and spectacles that transform public space. What happens there? Are both parts of the Kinetic City?

Not everything needs to be expressed in pure architecture as the only instrument of the city. If we begin to imagine public spaces and infrastructure as if they were elastic, we shall have to ask ourselves what can be incorporated there. And how.

The notions of elasticity, incrementalism and appropriation have to be found in the procedures and the protocols as well as in the way in which we imagine design.

Urban design is more of a practice, it is not really acknowledged as a discipline because it does not have a properly articulated theoretical history and therefore, it is rather an intervention.

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Ganapati (or Ganesh) is the God that removes obstacles and the patron of arts and sciences. In 1893, a strategy of anti-British nationalism gave its celebration a public character. The festival lasts ten days and it is held at the end of August or beginning of September all over India, especially in the State of Maharashtra.

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The Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China was an institution founded in the middle of the XIXth Century. In 1969 it merged with the Standard Bank of British South Africa, forming the Standard Chartered Bank, institution operating in 42 Indian cities.

I think it is a cultural and a social thing. In some societies and cultures -and Mumbai is one where that happens- there are many spectacles in terms of festivals and political rallies which give expression to the "subalterns" of a society. Subalterns refer to the voices that never got recorded in history, which in the Indian condition are people from the lower class. So a lot of devices such as the festivals in Mumbai (e.g. Ganapati Festival) are all expressions of the subalterns, they are not corporate. The Chartered Bank of India -or something like that- will sponsor the marathon but there are many other ways and forums where the subalterns express themselves. So what you are hinting at, in terms of kinds of expression of the Kinetic City and at least in my studies, may vary from place to place. I think that my largest point is that I am not proposing the Kinetic City as a solution or as a proposition; I am merely saying that every city has embedded a Kinetic City and the Static City is the armature that contains the Kinetic City. Unfortunately, a lot of discourse about urbanism focused on the static city in the way it is theorized and the question is how one can theorize the Kinetic City, and obviously I think that the most interesting cities in the world will be the ones where this quality is balanced.

How do you see that in Mumbai?

I think that Mumbai is too kinetic. I am arguing that the Static City is critical to the Kinetic City because what the Kinetic City does is that it takes the Static City and it stretches its margins to a much higher efficiency. I give the example of the people that deliver the lunch box for three dollars in Mumbai: the man will come to your house -wherever you live in the city- he will pick up your hot lunch (that was packed by your wife or your mother) and he will deliver the lunch box at your office at one o'clock sharp; at two o'clock he will pick it up and will take the empty boxes home. It is an informal economy of 3,000 people of one community that do this but they use the railway system in Mumbai. So this is an example where the railway system, which is formal infrastructure, gets stretched to unimagined views in terms of its expansion and the informal economy falls into the formal infrastructure. There is a complete blur. The thesis is how we can create -whether urban space, whether the economy, whether it is housing or perhaps the synergy between all of these. Not everything needs its expression in pure architecture as the instrument of the city. So if we start imagining infrastructure being elastic, if we start imagining architecture being elastic, if we start imagining open public spaces being elastic, what can be embedded in it? And how? The idea is not like a counterpart proposition to the existing city, it is merely adding one more dimension to the discussion about cities or urbanism more generally.

How could Kinetic City's flexibility inform design processes on the Static City? Can we take some lessons from it? Can we develop new design strategies from Kinetic City's conditions?

It is a very difficult question. I think that there are two very broad sorts of responses to that. One is the factor of time which is very much integral to the procedures of planning processes, in the way space is given out and how it is appropriated by the people, or how you create legislation that allows that appropriation. I would give you the example of the historic district in Mumbai: one of its characteristics is that the whole district has *arcades* connecting it. Arcades are very crowded, hawkers occupy them, this makes it a bazaar with people selling things, it is a complete mess. So what is the planners' response to that? Every month they demolish everything; the police come and throw them out, because this is not part of the imagination of planning. But if you took the arcades, which is a very robust structure, and you had a designation in every arc with a little number on the ground which will create a system where different hawkers could be there at different times, then that is a design procedure that recognizes that places could be appropriated temporarily, and the license to occupy that space could be for one week or for 24 hours, and then you have the lottery again and other people could come, so you will have a dynamics.

As an abstraction of that example you have two things: protocols and products. Products are the architecture and protocols are the way you make architecture. In the same way for planning, you also have protocols and procedures, and then you have the end plan.

So I think the notions of elasticity, incrementalism and appropriation have to find themselves both in the procedures and the protocols as well as in how you can imagine the design. I think that is the way that one can begin to get design processes embedded. This can change the dynamics of the city, and of course it means risk, it means governance strategy, it means many other things. It is a mind change.

Nowadays there is a disciplinary tension between urban planning and urban design. Urban planning operates on anticipation and urban design operates on intervention. What happens to urban planning as a discipline today? Is it going through a critical moment?

These are super questions because they are critical questions. I am happy the way you framed the differences between urban design and urban planning. I would say the planning is very much a discipline because it has a theoretical base in which it is founded; yet, it has lost its speculative and its anticipatory edge. To put it in a simple way, planning has become very much about analyzing old data, and by the time you get that data it is already obsolete. So



At the end of the XIXth and beginning of the XXth Century, the British colonial authorities redesigned Bombay. The area of the Fort, which marks the consolidation of the port as a city, was the symbol of this transformation. Victorian gardens, arcades and buildings that housed a number of public and financial institutions were built in the place that had been occupied by the fortifications.

Urban design, as a practice, was invented to create critical comments between policies imagined by urbanists and the three-dimensional implications of those policies in architecture.



Josep Lluís Sert (1902-1983) was a Catalan architect. Between 1927 and 1963, he collaborated with Le Corbusier (in 1942 they published the Athens Charter, formulated during the CIAM of 1933). In 1939, Sert took up exile in the USA. Between 1953 and 1969, he was the Dean of the School of Design of the University of Harvard, where he organized the first program of Urban Design in the world.



Neil Brenner is Professor of Urban Theory at the Graduate School of Design of the University of Harvard. He has a PhD in Political Science (U. of Chicago). One of his latest books is *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*, edited with P. Marcuse and M. Mayer (Routledge, 2011). He coordinates the Urban Theory Lab GSD.



Diane E. Davis is Professor of Urbanism and Development. She has a PhD in Psychology (U. of California, Los Angeles). Her latest book is *Cities and Sovereignty: Identity Conflicts in Urban Spaces*, edited with N. Libertun de Duren (Indiana U. Press, 2011).



The Urban Theory Lab GSD began to operate in 2012 with the seminar "Planetary Urbanization—Theoretical Foundations and Frontiers".

the synchronicity between the moment of the data and the basis with which the data has been used to speculate has to become very flat in order to be effective. So that edge today is gone. Urban design is more of a practice, it is not really recognized as a discipline because it does not have a history of a well-articulated theoretical base, and therefore it is more about intervention, so I think that your use of the word intervention was correct.

Considering the above and from your position as Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design at a school where the world's first degree program in urban design was created by Josep Lluís Sert: what is your agenda today?

When Sert invented the notion of urban design, I think he was driven by nostalgia for the clarity of the inner cities of Europe, nostalgia of the integrity of those compact cities in a historical moment –post war- where North America was suburbanizing into a much-fractured urban space. That clearly limited Sert. But at least for me, when I came here as a student many years ago and then when I went back to India, I understood that urban design was a practice that came out of a reaction to the site specificity of architecture –because architecture was never taught beyond the site- and the abstraction of urban planning that had been transformed into something very two dimensional.

Urban design as a practice was invented (and that it is why architects were made familiar with the jargon of planning) to create critical feedback loops between the policy imaginations of planners and the three dimensional implications of those policies in architecture. Because of that, to me, urban design was intrinsically about advocacy, it was about being an activist. That is how I understood it. So when I went back to India that was what I did.

When I came back to North America 15 years later, people asked me to show them my portfolio, and I had only policy and legislation studies. But in the meantime, under the neoliberal policies implemented here in the 80's and 90's, cities were being determined much more by the private sector than by the public sector. Therefore, urban design became big architecture and it lost its advocacy role, it lost its activism role and it became appropriated by builders and developers and private enterprise too, to legitimize big architecture: it became trivial.

So what I am trying to do here, in the pedagogy, is two things. One is trying to bring the speculative age back into urban planning, in that direction we have brought on board people to cover theory (Neil Brenner, Diane Davis). They have started an "urban theory lab" which is speculating at planetary scale issues as –for example- global urbanization. The other one is that in urban design I have focused on studios that bring back the questions of activism, and I have organized it on a matrix. On one end of the matrix I have "models of practice" because I think that –both for planning and urban design- we have to teach people that there are many ways you can engage with planning, many

ways you can engage with urban design: you can work with the government, you can work with the NGO, you can work as an activist, you can work with the poor, as community organizer, and so on. All are legitimate practices; it is not just one model, which unfortunately is what a lot of postgraduate programs have become. And on the other end of the matrix, I have geographies because I believe that a lot of present planning theory premises that come out from the industrializing west of the XVIII-XIX century are obsolete. Nowadays all the action in the city is in the global south (Mumbai, South America, South Asia, Africa) so the new theory for planning has to come out from where the action is occurring and therefore it is important for us to look at those geographies of extreme urbanism.

My aspiration as Chair is that we begin to construct new forms of theory, to construct a new set of lenses allowing us to see what is so specific about these cities that the world can learn from. I am convinced that the intellectual capital that we have in our countries is enormous and that is why I really think that it is very crucial that we have a direct dialogue and not always speak to each other through the academies in the Global North. [m](#)