Workshop on Pilgrimage: The Kumbh Mela
Session 5 Notes

October 15, 2012

Rahul Mehrotra focused class today on a discussion of the "kinetic city." Using Mumbai as an example, he raised issues of kinetic urbanism and how the relationship between formal and informal settlements in Mumbai may help inform our idea about urbanism in the Kumbh.

Mumbai has grown by about 9 million people in 9 years. With growth like this, urbanism evolves and becomes quite complex. City planning can become myopic and driven by politics rather than urban design principles. What results might be compared to Clifford Geertz's observations about the agricultural evolution of the concept of "multicropping". In multicropping, land is used for different crops at different seasons. Anything that puts one crop off kilter will result in complex changes for the whole system. Multicropping is thus highly and increasingly susceptible to malfunction. So it is with a city, when spaces take on multiple functions in a context of rapid growth. This is particularly evident when we consider the relationships between fixed and temporary structures.

Urban planning is traditionally categorized into binaries that are unproductive to a designer. For example, we contrast the "formal model" with the "informal city". In fact we need to throw out the binaries and blur them. City structure is not this or that, not a check box of alternatives, but a kinetic working together of multiple models. Indeed the city is in complete flux, with rapid growth of the "informal city" population, also known as "informal settlements" or "slums".

Within the city's informal population, people are fending for themselves, creating margins to survive. The historical transition in attitudes toward informal settlements is marked by shifts:

denial → eradication→tolerance (the 1980s) →improvement (the 1990s) →anticipation (present)

In India, city planners see that the informal settlements just won't disappear. Unlike China, where city spaces can be tightly controlled by technocrats, "India is more a mutinist democracy; people muddle through." It is critical that we think more carefully about such spaces. India also differs culturally from, for example, favelas in Rio, where the associative images include: violence, danger, a place to avoid. In contrast, ISs in India are more integrated into the fabric of the city, with common images of safety, happiness, bartering. 30% of Mumbai's commerce & production takes place in informal settlements. *Adjacencies* create a hybrid built environment, the city in India as something highly pluralistic. "Slumdog Millionnaire" caught these qualities in the way the movie got under the skin of the city, juxtaposing the close-up child's-eye views of the first half of the movie with the more distanced Bollywood style of the 2nd half. Indeed, both realities are true.

In many places, the power of a city is defined by images of specific architecture. The way this has been diversified in Mumbai is instructive.

Public green space is an important aspect of most urban plans; think, for example, of Central Park as it sits in the center of any map of Manhattan. Mumbai has only 0.03 acres/1000 people, compared to Delhi, at 4 acres per 1000 people (Delhi is comparable with London).

Mumbai is characterized by fragmented space. For example, a large cricket field on the waterfront doubles as space for wedding tents. One might literally see a cricket game in the morning, then teams building a tent space with bamboo poles during the afternoon. By evening the entire field (except the "sacred" center of the cricket game space!) is entertainments space, all removed when the wedding is over, so the team can play cricket again next morning.

Informal cities occur through expanding margins. The "five stages of squatting" illustrate how merchants claim space incrementally to avoid attracting unwanted official attention. The stages range from a merchant with nothing more than a brief spread (least security) to development of a market stall with an awning (most security). A summary with Rahul's illustrations is online at http://encounteringurbanism.blogspot.com/2009/09/five-stages-of-squatting.html.

In high population density settings, the social "resolution" (pixel concept) is very high due to proximity. Human contact becomes critical. People accommodate to one another. This constant shifting is very challenging for city planners.

Mumbai's "whitest wall" is part of a very expensive apartment complex, where residents engaged a strategy to deter squatters: They had tiles made of the entire Indian pantheon, and the tiles are placed at intervals along the wall, making it a sacred space, a sacred wall. Result: no squatters, no graffiti.

"Sachets" (small individual-size packets of commodities such as shampoo) are sold in street markets and hung in lines as dividers between market stalls (image of example). Such repackaging was a market response to incrementalism. The sachets are both functional and decorative.

Incremental development is a phrase that has gone out of our vocabulary. In the 1950s/1960s, we used to speak of "open-ended systems". Capital has a certain impatience so open-ended systems have become dicey.

McDonalds has responded to space limits in Mumbai, where there is no space for the individual shop franchises. In response, McDonalds now operates largely by home deliveries via guys on little scooters.

Bribes are key to the informal economy, and are paid to municipal officers and police. Some numbers: Of an annual revenue of the informal economy=550 million Euros, 150 million Euros go to bribes. Thus funds from the informal economy circle back into the formal economy.

The Ganesh festival has now begun to define Mumbai. 5-6 million people participate in this 10-day festival. It was invented as a way to beat laws against limits on gathering. Part of the festival is the immersion of idols into the river, idols made of clay that then dissolve in the water. Numbers: 157,484 idols were immersed in 10 days, with 23,000 alone on the last day of the festival. As they dissolve, the festival dissolves.

Sometimes whole streets are co-opted and become like convention halls. Buildings are similarly converted. For example, the Asiatic Society of Mumbai is housed in a massive British-era Neoclassical edifice; this is the state central library, or town hall. British governors used to address crowds from the steps. Now it is a focus every August 15 (Independence Day), which happens to be one of the rainiest days of the year. Consequently, the building and steps are covered and enclosed entirely at the front by bamboo and canopy for the governmental addresses – only for a few hours, but subverting a colonial icon to create new meaning.

In the UK, architectural creators and custodians are of the same culture, and thus building is consistent, but when builders and custodians are of different cultures as now in India, the architecture takes on a new spin, new narratives, new significance. For example, statues of Queen Victoria and King George have been completely removed from original contexts to now line a compound wall at the Mumbai zoo. They are – and appear – totally dislocated.

Just whitewashing a large building can alter its use and significance (e.g. one of RM's projects with the city for new districts)

Lunchbox deliveries are another urban motion related to city design and economics in Mumbai. There is a railway system to deliver your lunchbox to your office. The trains are too crowded to carry your lunchbox due to the "crush factor". People prefer to eat home-cooked meals at work for many reasons (religious, public health, custom). Thus an elaborate delivery system with tin box markings and delivery processes has developed. The city becomes elastic.

Housing is the most complex aspect of the kinetic city. 60% of Mumbai lives in informal housing. Issues of legal ownership of property are so complex that people invest in anything *except* the house. Myriad uncertainties due to demolition, land market values.

Water delivery is another complex aspect. A wonderful Robert Appleby photo shows a girl going to school walking along the massive water pipes; to one side we see tents, where informal housing residents have illegally tapped into the pipes to get water for their business & uses. Some numbers: The city's informally housed use 30 liters of water (8 gallons) per day; while the standard figure is 300 liters (79 gallons). India has an obsession with washing cars, so much water for that purpose also.

Slum/Shack Dwellers International partners with more powerful organizations to help support needs of informal residents. Sanitation is a big issue. Planning needs to become a much bigger issue than it is, including how the city is re-engaged with the metropolitan area. There are 21,000 residents per square kilometer.

In sum, there are no answers – and lots of questions.

DISCUSSION:

Helen notes: interesting messiness and tolerance of mess. One contrasts the American concept of placemaking – animating or improving a place by intervention—which is neither organic nor authentic – with Mumbai, where the people take over. We might discuss "planned spontaneity" vs. "messy uncontrollable stuff."

RM: Organic messiness happens out of sheer need. We might compare Mumbai today with Dickens' London. Climate plays a big role – canopies are more likely in a hot climate. About 20 years ago, people's habitation in America was very mobile. As cities become more beautiful, things change. Human contact has become less utilized. 40 years ago it was said that human contact is the biggest task; things like Farmer's Markets have tried to target that issue. In India pixilation and social resolution comes out of need. In the Ganesh festival the podiums follow the idols. ("and most people in that procession are really drunk")

RM & a student note: Different at the Kumbh is:
Flows of people – mapping, e.g., for refugee camps
Energy, food – become very limiting for the people who live there
Space, mapping – how can we learn from the social infrastructure?
Application – relevance for rapid deployment

RM: What is a grid when it's a pedestrian city? KM is a kinetic city but has a fixed city next to it, raising particular tensions.
Entertainment: recreating the community together
What has corrupted it is the re-entrance of politics into the whole thing, creating other tensions, social structures to affect lobbying, voting, etc.

A student asks: How do corruption layers shape the physical form of the city?
RM: reduced speed, reduced scale of any sort of development. It becomes best to do small incremental moves. Corruption affects the rich as well as the poor, since everyone does it. The acute incrementalism reflects in the physical.

Rahul gives the example of his work on the waterfront land in Mumbai owned by the "Bombay Poor Trust." There had been absolutely no composite mapping of the area; the land does not belong to the city, yet it is very important land. It is composed of many old warehouses (comparable to the London Docklands), 100,000 squatters, terrible public health issues. Total space: 1800 acres. Rahul presented a lot of information to encourage a big vision for city planning, but everyone shied away from it. It's the antithesis to planning. We need projective thinking about big moves. Instead, planning has become rearguard action. "That's the down side of democracy – not the city beautiful but the city messy."

A student observes: The result seems to demonstrate *effects* of a complex network of forces. Chaos is not the right word, since what's happening is in some way logical consequence of preceding effect. It is interesting to think: What's causing the motion in different places? What can we learn from the "whitest wall" movement?

Students ask: In city we think of needs but "no one thinks of the Kumbh in terms of needs"
(RM: unless you think of religion as a need)
Extended discussion on what needs people are responding to when they attend the Kumbh – Rahul suggests further discussion with Diana
RM: What constitutes the metabolism of such a place – energy, waste, food? How do we capture and communicate the statistics, patterns, numbers of the Kumbh? (*Handbook of KM*?)
Thus a big question: how do you represent such kinetics? Thus Nashid's project.
Rahul has a map that was used for KM construction 12 years ago, but it's unclear what construction teams work from. When they put the pontoons in, are they working from drawings? We just don't know.

Helen notes: It's hard to reconcile planning and spontaneity. Is there a capacity limit to the Kumbh? How much should you provide to keep people coming to a site that is too small for people to cope with?

RM: This is a question for planning in general. How do you spread improvement to decentralization? The government doing "enough" to be safe but not enough to be comfortable? The Tourism department puts up posters but only in Allahabad. The Allahabad airport is half the size of this auditorium – and no conveyor belt! The train station is 5-7 miles away. People walk, a heartfelt walk. People speak of "spiritual need" – that's why there are so many really old people. The high population of aged pilgrims is part of why they have a lost-and-found people section – those with dementia, etc.

RM: The need to reconnect with religion lately has exploded. People are articulating that globalization and trickle-down is getting nowhere. Rich use it to claim land. Many religious-based organizations are very engaged in social transformation process

Helen asks: is the KM comparable to a massive music festival in the US? Why do people feel the "need" to go? Is it just because it's the "world's biggest"?

Oscar notes: The geography is very complex. He feels family reasons play a large role.

A student notes: Social interaction is a need. When you live in informal settlements, contracts are all these social interactions.

Helen notes: But what about those who may not share religious sensibilities? "Human contact is what makes us human"

RM: Many go for anonymity. They go to be lost anonymously in retreat.

[questions about religious diversity at KM continued to percolate discussion]

Helen notes: It might be interesting to compare with the World Youth Congress, expecting millions of Catholic youth for a gathering next year or so in Rio.

A student asks: How did the "situationists" of the 50s and 60s in France influence urban planning today?

RM: Maybe indirect, osmosis, as ideas influence other ideas.

NOTE: Next week (10/22): Speaker will be case writer from HBS.