

Examining 'Order in Disorder:' A Speculation into Space, Time, and the Human Subject, in Context of Urban Villages in Delhi

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Urban villages in Delhi are as undefined, diverse and peculiar as the other facets of the country. Delhi has at least 135 urban villages, all of which once existed as rural settlements. This transfer of identities kept such villages from the jurisdiction of the various urban development authorities and plans, as an act of preservation of rural habitation. But in due course, have become a free-reign for the villagers to use their share of lands for 'arbitrary, unregulated' purposes. This random growth has led to a culture defined by unpredictable, yet continuous change, since the permanence of life for these settlements rests upon the 'Fragility of Moments.'

The 2001 published book, "The Unknown City," enunciates the existence and possibilities of 'Architecture and the City,' in tandem, while opposing the trusted notion of 'urban professionals' – the ones who consider themselves as the producer, negotiator, advocator, shaper of space and form. In debate, it presents an alternative discourse concerning deeper systems of power, economics and social signification, that shape architecture, and hence the city.

Exploring a similar argumentative construct, this research, based on the triad of space, time and the human subject, strives to suggest and explore possibilities for developing newer understandings for the Capital City of Delhi and its enormous network of the fragmented identities, commonly known as Urban Villages within the planning framework of the country. The research would attempt to expose various forms of activity, both conscious and unconscious, that shape the objects and meanings which constructs the reality of these urban villages.

I am at war with my time, with history, with all authority that resides in fixed and frightened forms.

I am one of millions who do not fit in, who have no home, no family, no doctrine, no firm place to call my own, no known beginning or end, no 'sacred and primordial site'.

I declare war on all icons and finalities, on all histories that would chain me with my own falseness, my own pitiful fears.

I know only moments, and lifetimes that are as moments, and forms that appear with infinite strength, then 'melt into air.'

—Excerpt from *Manifesto*, by Lebbeus Woods

INTRODUCTION

The city of Delhi presents a peculiarly complex socio-economic urban fabric. The rich, eventful, historical trajectory of Delhi has contributed significantly in the making of the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of Delhi. It is therefore apparently natural that Delhi represents a vast range of contrasting, yet often dichotomous economic conditions, activities, cultural systems, religious patterns, values and life-styles. The physical growth of Delhi is often accredited to the acquisition of rural villages that existed in the immediate hinterland of the city. They were ensconced, as interstitial tissues in the expanded urban fabric. The idea and the term 'Urban Village,' was introduced in the first Delhi Master Plan in 1962. Presently, these urban villages form the dense and anarchical built contours of Delhi; that are maligned for their underprivileged living conditions, notwithstanding the fact that they house an unparalleled diversity of people and programs. Delhi has at least a staggering 135 registered urban villages which once existed as rural settlements and were kept away from the jurisdiction of urban development authorities, as an act of preserving space for rural habitation. Naturally with the influx of capital and economic growth, they have become a free-reign for the real estate builders as well as villagers to build and develop under arbitrary and unregulated conditions.

Kapil Chaudhry, an Urban Planner and Director of Spatial Designs, Delhi, while explaining the politics of the process that consumed such villages, into the mainstream urban area of Delhi, presses on the fact that nothing changed fundamentally apart from the land-use conversion of a 'rural village' to an 'urban village'. "One major concern that forever comes up in an urban village is the question of who's in control. In an absence of government policies guiding the development within such localities, each person literally is at work, trying to maximize the revenue from anything possible." This phenomena has two sides to it – one is the 'popular' rant that critiques the dismal state of such areas. The other side of the argument is optimistic and it understands the situation as an opportunity, created because of the absence of developmental guidelines. This approach is aligned towards ideas and benefits of a 'Non-Plan,' notwithstanding the application of wisdom and its contingent judgement towards the development paradigms.



Figure 1. The Ever-Growing Metropolitan : Delhi Source: NIUA Report, 2015

Paraphrasing Lebbeus Woods, we can consider the Urban Villages of Delhi as 'living laboratories', where 'living is experimental', and in which, the 'ongoing experiment is living'. The only goal of the people is to exist as fully as possible in the present moment. They have accordingly constructed their architecture, aspiration, technology and culture as means towards this solitary end. It is a culture defined by unpredictable yet continuous change, since the continuity of life for them rests upon the 'Fragility of Moments.'

Delving into the idea of laboratories, living experiments, and temporality, one might seek answers in the 'The Unknown City,' that enunciates the existence and possibilities of 'Architecture and the City.' It opposes the trusted notion of 'urban professionals' – the ones who consider themselves as the producer, negotiator, advocator, shaper of space and form. On the contrary, it presents an alternate discourse concerning deeper systems of power, economics and social signification that shape architecture, and hence the city. It is predicated on three concerns: space, time and the human subject – as the framework for thinking about interdependencies between Architecture and the City.

While examining the interdependency of Architecture and the City, one might find Walter Benjamin's perspective relevant. He seldom treats architecture as a set of isolated objects in space, but rather as an integral part of the urban fabric that must be experienced subjectively. He does not analyse architecture formally through a selection of specific buildings, nor describe them aesthetically or functionally, but studies them as a part of a larger system, that has been an outcome of the philosophical or historical ideas applied on to the city, therefore, establishing architectural representation or discourse as a dialectical image. His core concern centres around unravelling and understanding the stories hidden behind various fragments that formed that dialectic image – what he refers to as 'tectonics' (Benjamin, 1928).

Adolf Henrich Borbein, in the context of archaeology, explains 'tectonics' as 'the art of joining,' where tectonic indicates assemblage of not only building parts, but also allied objects that might form larger systems within cities. The most important criterion according to him, for evaluation of tectonics, usually must consider homogeneity,

definite-ness and complete situations, where the contradictory cases are generally eliminated from analysis. By investigating 'Architecture as Theme,' one understands how Ungers, through his interest in presenting architecture as a fragmented, discontinuous object, established an anti-thesis to Borbein, thus explaining that the concept of the fragmentary (as opposed to the normative criteria for evaluation) contains clues of stratification and layering, generating a degree of complexity, not generally offered within architectural frameworks or urban structures that are conceived as one united entity. Such a thematic assemblage brings in possibilities of unresolved continuity, spontaneity and plan, chance, often more than the established 'order.'

As the poetry 'Manifesto' by Lebbeus Woods suggests, these fragmented parts of the larger city (the urban villages) are in a constant state of war, laid over space, time, and people. "It is perhaps, in this sense that architectural and urban design theory must be 'active, catalytic' and most importantly, speculative." But apparently, there seems to be a dearth of contemporary research mechanisms to engage with the unique phenomena of this politically driven, rural to urban transformation of not only the physical environment, but also the multifarious traditional systems that have existed over decades. This state is also because even whenever such researches are conducted in academia, architecture and the city are often not considered as functions of each other (especially within the Indian Planning framework), thus rejecting a direct method of engaging with the multiplicity of the decisions addressing the qualities of the places we inhabit.

This research intends to examine established theories of post-modern to post-critical thought within the realm of architecture and urbanism, in order to read and analyse the present conditions of the urban villages of Delhi. Focussing on the triad of space, time and the human subject, the research emerges with three research propositions that present a radical reading and response for these villages, through an analysis of diverse theoretical precedents, in conjunction with different case scenarios. The ulterior motive of this paper is to raise questions and develop plausible speculative methodologies for future studies in the realm of urban villages, in order to identify and theorize the mutations happening within these entities.

EPISODE 1: HISTORY AS THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS AND IDEAS

The metamorphosis of urban villages in Delhi has been very different from its western counterparts. The critique of American Cities by Jane Jacobs, is often widely regarded as one of the largest influence on the 'urban village concept'. Jacobs rejected the modernist view that dominated urban planning and architecture even up to the 1960s and constructed an alternative philosophy that revisits the values built in traditional neighbourhoods and the role of the inner city models (Jacobs, 1961).

It was not until 1989 that the concept of Urban Villages was born in Britain with the establishment of The Urban Villages Group. It included established names like Christopher Alexander, Leon Krier, Rob Krier and Elizabeth Plater Zyberk, to mention a few. As per their manifesto, released in 1992, an urban village typically would mean a well-planned set-up with a 'village' like concept of being fairly self-sufficient. What was most important perhaps, was their intention to tackle the problem of increasing population and sprawl in cities, typically through medium-density housing, mixed-use zoning, good public transit through an emphasis on pedestrianization and public space design. Thus densities, conveniences, social interactions etc., claimed priority.

Urban villages in Delhi on the other hand, are not just 'village' like concepts, despite sharing some commonality with their western counter parts such as mixed-use zoning. In this case, primary factors are the absence of development control, legislative framework and lack of informed alternatives for maximizing economic returns, thus completely transforming them into non-agrarian livelihoods. But above everything, what strikes the beholder are the ways in which these urban villages differ from each other, therefore becoming a melting pot of prominent transient culture worth a discourse.

EPISODE 2: SPACE - THE CULTURE OF COLLISION: ON A STATE OF CONFLICT AND COLLAGE

"The twentieth century architect has been the reverse of willing to think himself as the 'bricoleur.' Collage has seemed to be lacking in sincerity, to represent a corruption of moral principles, an adulteration". Colin Rowe suggests that collage is an approach in which urban objects are conscripted from out of their context, and is probably the only way of dealing with the ultimate problems of either utopia or tradition, or both; though one must understand that the provenance of the architectural objects introduced in the social collage might not be highly relevant. Contextualizing this 'Rowe-ian' theory in the case of urban villages of Delhi, one realizes the existence of collages at various fronts – economics, social structures and the physical built mass, that resonates with the interesting culture of 'The City in the City.' Such cases qualify to be examined as collages also due to the strong rural context to which they once belonged, and its transfer to an intensive urban reality. In this process, the original populace of such villages have been fairly eroded and in fact, replaced by the so called 'urban visionaries' who could foresee the opportunity of development within such excluded zones. These urban villages can be characterized by small footprint developments that need smaller packets of investment. This allows variation and flexibility in ownership as well as tenancy. As a consequence of this bottom-up tactical approach, the variety of occupancy that it caters to ranges from daily wagers to young IT professionals, from gym and yoga instructors to chefs working in nearby hotels, from African immigrants to trans-genders; a settlement which consumes whatever prospects of wealth generation happen to knock on its doors. And this informality leads to a distinct social collage of events and interactions.

Colin Rowe's heterogeneous city – one of collisions, juxtapositions, contradictions as well as a riot of architectural styles was the architectural and urbanist reflection of the post-modernist abandonment of the 'grand narrative,'



Fig 2.1: One Major Street of Khirki Village
source: www.thehindu.com

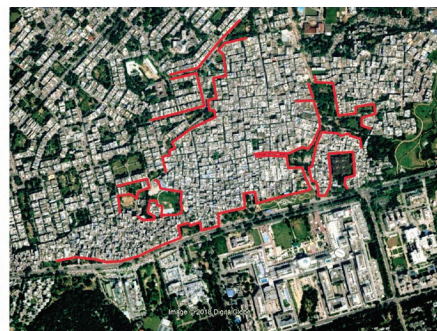


Fig 2.2: Spatial conflict along edges
source: google.earth.pro

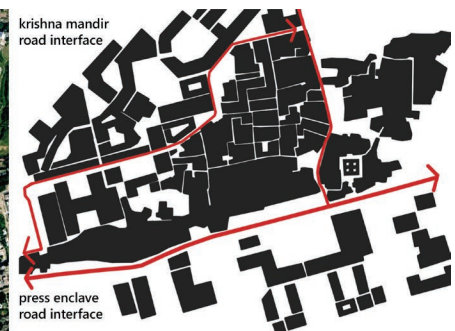


Fig 2.3: Figure Ground of Collage
source: author

which found its highest value in the 'modern project.' But when considering the trajectory of urban design theory, it reinforces the notion of Modernist public space as a formalized void and recognizes the weak contribution of the space occupied by built mass in providing manner and order to the universally abstract 'free flowing' Modernist space. It gets interesting in these urban villages, when it comes to the figure ground assessments. The dichotomy of heterogeneity and homogeneity is intriguing. It is heterogeneous, in terms of ownership, usage, accessibility, typology and visual form. On the other side, we can consider it homogeneous in terms of densities of built, unbuilt, people and activities. As a result of which, these villages often perform visually as one single huge building with multiple roles and aspirations to respond to. But the procedural evidence of a true collage occurring over time lies in the modification of the figure ground, especially along the fringes of these villages that meet the planned city of Delhi.

Let me discuss a specific case of Khirki Village and Khirki Extension, which meets planned neighbourhoods like Malviya Nagar on one edge, (embanked by the Krishna Mandir Road) and Saket District Centre on the other side (flanked by the Press Enclave Road as a segregator). Through close examination, one finds a distinct pattern of the urban grain sizes reducing on the outer crust of the village, as opposed to the ones near the core. This pattern accommodates more density, more accessibility, less investments, more surface for frontage, and an eclectic collage of programs, majorly because it sits on the frontage of the abutting road. While on the other side of both the roads, the planned city – presents itself as an inert creature to all such parameters, which leads to a state of collision, conflict, which is under constant negotiation, as a seeming state of war for existence.

EPISODE 3: TIME - THE CULTURE OF "THE COLLECTIVE": MAPPING MEMORY AND MONUMENTS

One can surely adapt Rossi's methodology, to consider and analyse an urban village as a unified element (one big

architecture) - as an overall synthesis of its different parts over time. However, one must recognise the significance of realizing the same organism by parts. The city and its parts are always undergoing transformations due to natural and man-made reasons, whereas "the monuments are the fixed points and the only sign of the collective will" – an element that explains permanence in cities.

The cumulative form of these urban villages emerges from the idea of maximizing land usage. Lookalike building skins with projecting balconies, minimal thoroughfares, narrow streets with linear, informal vending zones are the primary architectural characteristics that describe these urban villages, as manmade objects. Though often, one finds sudden open spaces such as a Village Choupal, a cow shed or a typical, local shrine or tomb, which when considered as a part of the original rural village, presumes the suddenness of their occurrence, along with their existence as monuments. Although these villages have experienced a lot of developmental pressure, such typologies tend to stay for much longer spans. This brings us to the other aspect of the theory, the 'Urban Artefacts of Collective Memory', which like the urban villages, are characterized by their own history and form. Since Rossi is primarily concerned with the form of a city as the culmination of its functions, one needs to understand that, this form determines the individuality of every urban artefact.

Let's take the case of Kotla Mubarakpur in this effect to get grounded with Rossi's ideas. Despite being subject to urban influences on an intensive scale from premium urban adjacencies, like South Extension and Defence Colony, Kotla Mubarakpur has managed to retain many of its rural characteristics (the village square, the village well, typical rural street pattern, mud clad houses with dung cakes studded on walls), not only in the physical realm, but also in its social organization and structure. Presently, it is one of the biggest service-based markets of Delhi that cohabits within a rural premise, which includes the Tomb of Sayyid Shah centrally located within the settlement. In this case, the 'collective



Fig 3.1: From Tomb to Temple
source: www.thehindu.com



Fig 3.2: Tomb of Shah Sayyid circa 1434
source: www.thespeakingarch.com



Fig 3.3: Lodhi Era Tomb in Lado Sarai
source: www.sarsonkeket.in



Fig 3.4: New Monuments: Lado Sarai
source: *Johny ML photograph*

Figure 3. Collective Memory, Urban Artefacts and the Neo-Monuments of Populism.

will' of the society, over time, has resisted against the perils of radical transformation, thus consequently tagging the rural components and historicity, as the 'Urban Artefacts of Collective Memory.'

Perhaps, the most interesting fact regarding the few alterations that the village has experienced, is their submission to the existing form. The built form in such cases results in an evolutionary organism that has developed over time, gaining historical richness through the sum of experiences of the collective and the memories related to them. It can house various functions while maintaining their original and formal qualities. The history of such settlements, is the 'collective memory' of the people who have always been the participating subject and it expresses itself through the architecture of the city – through the various layers of existence. This is also established by Bernard Huet as 'instruments of monumental values' in his treatise "Architecture against the City, 1986." Similarly, Ungers also reinforces the symbiosis of time and architectonics, through a series of recurrent themes that discuss and reveal the temporal qualities of architecture and the city.

EPISODE 4: THE HUMAN SUBJECT - THE CULTURE OF CONGESTION: DEBATE ON FORM AND PROGRAM

"It is architecture that promotes a state of congestion on all possible levels, and exploits this congestion to inspire and support particular forms of social intercourse that together form a unique culture of congestion." Studying the urban villages of Delhi through this lens, one starts connecting the density and socio-economic mix of population inhabiting these villages, to the exploration of the 'mass culture' and production of a city; one that is logical and is endowed with an inner *raison d'être* of its own, though it might entirely look feature-less through decisions and interventions governed only by the quest for profit rather than form.

Koolhaas, if paraphrased in our context of study, would say that the indeterminacy of the built form suggests, that in the metropolis – no single specific function can be attributed

to a single place, thus removing the building's Form from Programmatic exigencies. Koolhaas further explains the disjunction between 'Form' and 'Program' by claiming them, as the exterior skin and interior core respectively, as two parallel architectures, where the former is only concerned with the mere appearances of the sculptural object, while the latter is in a constant state of flux – of themes, programs, iconographies. The volatile metropolitan citizen (Delhi-ites staying within these urban villages for benefits through density such as subsidized real estate, accessibility to resources, plethora of programs at the ground etc.) with their over-stimulated nervous systems, might combat the perpetual threat of 'discontent.'

We can also connect such models of uncontrolled development, with Rem's ideology, that of a 'spontaneous city'. In order to anchor this argument, one must here consider the Koolhaas' philosophy that leads to his understanding of form – "Where there is nothing, everything is possible. Where there is architecture, nothing (else) is possible." This ideology advocates a freedom of action, leading to 'Non-Architecture'. This is conceptually very similar to Price's theory of 'Non-Plan', both of which create systems that can absorb an interminable series of meanings. This can be achieved through mechanisms of density – by exploiting proximities, provoking tension, maximizing friction, organizing in-betweens, filtering, and blurring identities. Putting few of these mechanisms/processes to test might be appropriate, in order to connect the present context in research, to this Koolhaas-ian theory.

Maximizing Friction, Provoking Tension; Lado Sarai: Friction through complex scenarios of cohabitation of modernity and the vernacular, of contemporaneity and historicity. Instances like the presence of Cow Sheds and milking businesses adjacent to dense rural homesteads, small scale daily convenience retail sprouting out into a lane of plush, hip art galleries and boutique design offices, and the entire transformation occurring beneath the shadow of the towering 12th century minaret 'Qutub Minar,' visited by hundreds of tourists every day.



Fig 4.1: Exploiting Proximities: Party District Hauz Khas
source: www.gqindia.com



Fig 4.2: Blurring Boundaries: Mahipalpur Hotel Strip
source: www.indianexpress.com



Fig 4.3: Filtering: Fashion Hub Shahpur Jat
source: www.pressreader.com

Exploiting Proximities, Filtering; Hauz Khas: This is a gentrified, elitist hang-out place, on the face of an urban village. It lies adjacent to the archaeological park of Hauz Khas and the Deer Park within visual proximity. The village has become a hugely popular public destination due to its boutique designer outlets, contemporary art houses, swanky cafes and pubs. Additively, all these have pushed the reminiscence of the residential quarters even deeper and has also transformed much of them into youth hostels, boutiques, co-living, international tourist accommodations etc. Thus, the renewed dense program has led to newer meanings.

Exploiting Proximities, Blurring Identities: Mahipalpur: This village sits on a major arterial corridor that connects the Airport Terminal of the city with its other parts. The village has exploited this proximity, turning into a hard skin fruit, a custard-apple; fragmented yet coexisting, with crevasses of disjunctions in between. The outer crust is a series of hotels, with varied grain sizes, ranging from budget options up to the likes of Radisson. The inner, softer, fine grained village shows not much movement of guests and tourists, also because the outer layer holds various other entertainment facilities, intermittent between the big hotel blocks, some of which have recently started percolating into the crevasses of the so called fruit.

Organizing In-Betweens: Khirki and Khirki Extension: This village has a long, established historical significance, dating back to Feroz Shah Tughlaq's reign over Delhi, circa 1351 AD to 1388 AD. Currently, the historic monuments are in a state of slander, though Khirki Village has spilt beyond its historical perimeter and has unlawfully encroached into the protected lands of the monument (Zone of Collision). This betwixt zone is known as Khirki Extension today, which is the new hotbed of a brand new Start-up ecosystem. The striking aspect is the programmatic bandwidth accommodating Gyms and Yoga Clubs, Music and Dance Centres, Start-up offices and innovation labs, reprographics and design boutiques, bakeries and salons, with a huge variety of residential options at the upper floors.

CONCLUSION: SPECULATING POSSIBILITIES FOR RESEARCH

Through these "Now we are left with a world without urbanism, only architecture, ever more architecture. It exploits and exhausts the potentials that can be generated only by urbanism, and that only the specific imagination of urbanism can invent and renew." Koolhaas presented this argument, based on his study of Manhattan. He further elaborates that if ever there is a 'new urbanism' in the future, it will be on the stage of uncertainty, abolishing the idea of permanent objects and replacing them with territories of potential, an idea that has to be directed towards discovering unnameable hybrids

and the psychological space. Culling out inferences from our discourse on the urban villages, 'black boxes' of the city of Delhi, we can describe them as fragmented yet massive, rejecting the ideals of permanence, exploiting the potentials of edges and cores, and above all is in a constant state of tension or conflict with the larger city, in a quest to defy its boundaries of existence.

Similarly, for that honest reason of research on these villages, one has to emerge with newer mechanisms (specifically pertaining to the contemporary processes of urban structuring) or perspectives in order to document, analyse and theorize such a wide variety of urban villages. Few questions or observations that can be taken forward for detailed investigation might be –

1. Can one understand these villages through the perspective of 'Storage Containers?' This speculation arises from the fact that a large part of the existing traditional systems are getting eroded due to the dynamically changing populace of such dense localities. Most of these entities seems to foster 'staying' rather than 'dwelling' today.
2. Can one exploit the idea of potential territories and their significant consumption patterns, in process of theorizing these urban villages? Such a study might delve deeper into distribution of potential territories in Delhi and the responsiveness of proximal urban villages.
3. Examining the figure ground patterns and their transformations microscopically, one might consider theorizing small scale mutations of public spaces within such urban villages as a response to changing capital markets and how the private entity encroaches upon common geographies of the public.
4. Koolhaas suggests in 'Theory of Bigness' that an architecture beyond a certain critical mass, no longer needs the city, rather it competes with the city and finally ends up being the city. Can this process be applied to these urban villages to assess their position of contestation with the city of Delhi?

Through research and proliferation of architecture-urbanism theories, one can absorb multiple explanations behind these urban villages, which exhibit such immaculate patterns of conflict and tension, collective and shared ideology, and the aspirations of humans who base their lives on the transformation of economics and events. Animating the entire mass of such entities with intentions of control is idiocy, therefore might instigate the post critical notion of a 'free program' as an instrument for theorizing the dynamicity of such villages.

Keywords: Urban Villages, fragmentation, meanings, collective memory, collage, Bigness, culture of congestion.

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