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Crafting an Aesthetic for Habitats

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that habitats – villages, towns, neighbourhoods, settlements, cities – need to be understood in clearly articulated aesthetic terms that work on principles that are relevant to the processes through which they are produced. This connects to concerns in architecture, urban planning and other forms of urban and cultural practices. It is important to escape a dependence on abstractions that actually work on aesthetic principles but are not articulated as such. This produces narratives of an ideal city, a contemporary or futuristic city, dysfunctional neighbourhoods, dangerous settlements, slums, heritage neighbourhoods so on and so forth. Making explicit aesthetic judgments and connecting them to processes through which habitats are produced, including outside the practice of official architectural and urban practices, opens up a more creative world of images, metaphors and practices to work with. In this essay we touch upon the influences of textiles, crafts and communities in the story of crafting relevant aesthetics for diverse urban habitats.



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Introduction

This essay attempts to provide a framework – at present only a starting point – for an aesthetic for habitats. While architecture of individual buildings or complexes has a clear narrative, habitats as a whole – villages, towns or metropolises – mostly rely on visual framing devices such as images, photographs or films rather than an internal logic or perspective.

Such frames tend to evoke nostalgia or futuristic projections, typically becoming part of either heritage narratives or fantasies to get eventually tied into political economies with their own ideological agendas. We have explored these themes in previous essays such as, *'Speculative urbanism and concrete fictions: The future as a resource'* (Srivastava and Echanove, 2015) and *'The Fantasy of Heritage'* (Srivastava, 2005).

Here, we explore the possibilities of looking at habitats through the processes involved in their creation and maintenance, thus immediately integrating the emerging political rhetoric with questions usually not framed in such a context – primarily about aesthetics. Debates about artisanship, architecture, art and the political economy of cities subsequently get connected to each other.

Interweaving Metaphors – Textiles and Architecture

Rebecca Houze (2006) in her essay *'The Textile as Structural Framework: Gottfried Semper's Bekleidungsprinzip and the case of Vienna 1900'*, analyses how significantly Europe's rich traditions of textile design interwove themselves into architectural practices. Semper was one of the few architects who engaged with the dimension of architecture, connected

to weaving and the textile industry. Houze shows how Semper suggested,

"Architecture originated in the primordial need to demarcate interior and exterior spaces with dividers—fencing made of branches, for example, or hanging tapestries of woven grasses. Some of the earliest built structures were temporary tents of real cloth stretched over scaffoldings, often festively decorated with garlands, ribbons, and other kinds of soft ornament that today we might characterize as "fiber art"(p.292)

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characterized Europe's dominance in the world of architecture and design was building on its rich traditions of textile related creativity.

Anybody familiar with Indian history will immediately be compelled to make comparisons and recognize the wide gap that existed and exists between artisanal practices and the development of institutional knowledge linked to contemporary design related professions in this part of the world. While the great architectural schools and specialized institutions dedicated to design have paid academic attention to the enormous resource embodied in India's artisanal

traditions, especially textiles, a translation into modern, mainstream contemporary practice has not often been successful.

A couple of year's ago – “The Fabric of India” exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London was one of the few explicit statements about the interplay of textiles and architecture in India.

“When we visit historic buildings in India today, they are usually empty shells which give no idea of how they could function as liveable spaces. The missing element is textiles, whether in the form of lavish furnishings and patterned clothing, or basic practical additions like awnings on the building's exterior. Textiles can transform not just the appearance of a building but also its function” (Crill, 2015)

The observation fills in the tiny gap left behind in another major architectural commentary. This was made by Charles Correa in 1986 for the Vistara exhibition that was part of the Festival of India held that year (Kagal, 1986). It paid serious homage to a broad spectrum of materials from mud to bamboo, within the traditional Indian architectural tradition. While textiles and fabric were not included, some of their elements entered insidiously. This happened through an undoubtedly brilliant but unexpected inclusion within the varied landscapes from the *Pols* in Ahmedabad's textile district to the fabled Jaisalmer. This was the Bombay Squatter Settlement. Correa spotlighted the ability of the zhopad-patti dweller to use symbols and aesthetic gestures within their stressed environment.

If we understand the language of these symbols and gestures we see how much they cross-reference with designs from traditional textile traditions, which in turn have been inspired by everyday ritualistic and artisanal practices. Thus, even though textiles were not explicitly mentioned in the Vistara exhibition, the elements that are part of its aesthetic traditions somehow got their due.

In Crill's examples we see very clearly how the motifs from textiles and embroidery morphed into designs and carvings on walls and *jalis*. Such interplay and cross-referential evocations are frequent in the world of design. Semper sees textiles as integral to the evolution of architecture, along with the world of masonry, ironwork and carpentry. European architectural practice was built on technological innovations of diverse physical materials, but also included design processes from traditions of textiles.

Building Skills

For many artisanal traditions (including textiles) in India, the path of change was much more complicated. One reason could be that the structures that energized artisanal traditions in Europe were based on apprenticeship models of skill learning quite different from India. In India artisanal practices were enmeshed within the logic of caste and were responsible for a higher level of productivity in terms of quality and scale – while being simultaneously anchored to values quite incompatible with modern impulses. Attempts to extract aesthetic and design skills while filtering away social bonds that sustained them became enormously challenging to say the least. From crafts museums to special

markets, valiant efforts have been made and quite a few succeeded, but the need for a change on a scale that permeates down to all relevant levels of the related practice, remains

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far from satisfactory. Especially in terms of working conditions and settlements where most workers and artisans live.

On the whole, government initiatives to preserve artisanal traditions were reasonably funded and their attempts to be integrated into contemporary economic exchanges were partially successful, but the difficulty in reconciling caste based modes of organization with them remained difficult. How do you preserve traditional modes that are encoded into social structures for their talent and skill and yet demand radical changes in those structures for the sake of modern social objectives?

This contrarian challenge lies at the heart of many urban realities in India and confound visitors. Its poorest neighbourhoods inevitably have some of the most formidable talent and skill in fields as diverse as embroidery, leather work, intricate wood-carving, stone sculpting among others. It is not uncommon to see exquisite craftsmanship embedded in simple designs up for sale in grubby shops on polluted streets.

Dharavi, Mumbai's most resilient settlement, reduced to a slum thanks to bureaucratic discourse and lack of civic infrastructure, is also considered to be the most productive space in

the city. Traditional skills of ironwork, textiles and pottery constantly adapt, like these skills have always done, to contemporary economic needs. In Dharavi, it's not just old leather work, that are sold in shops in India and abroad, but manual skills that have adapted to new needs of technologies connected to computers, mobile phones and automobiles that also thrive. Not being able to deal with the social and economic knots into which these highly prized skills are tied, has made India pay a huge price, evident in its poor social and economic indicators and under-serviced urban neighbourhoods.

All through the world, from Japan to China, the African continent to Europe, economic specialization and attempts to organize crafts, manufacturing and trading processes, have been integral to urban life. In Europe, medieval guilds that interacted, resisted or cooperated with the State and the Church have impacted political and social trajectories involving, power, monopolies and conflict for centuries. Even after the spread of industrial capitalism and the rise of corporate globalization, European cities still show traces of the influence of guild-based systems. This can be seen in the way economic activities from wine-making to copyrighted design, from brands and labels to architectural styles, try to bridge traditional practices and modern demands.

While contemporary urban planning practices and norms do not always respond as flexibly to economic activities as they did in the past, the legacy of strong lobbies and traditional elites controlling the urban landscape is still visible.

According to scholars such as Max Weber, guilds played a special role in the emergence

of a certain kind of economic urban character – distinguished significantly by an attempt to control urban life, create protectionist systems

The continued dominance of European design in contemporary production and manufacture, the strong control of local natural resources, innovation in technology, the persistence of high living standards in terms of habitats are to some extent continued legacies of systems that paid attention to artisanal skills, valued excellence and were open to all within the shared space.

as well as maintain secrets connected to trade activities (Weber, 1922, 1978).

The development of patents and intellectual property rights are specifically connected to the history of guilds, which have been equally vilified by both, right and left wing economists in equal measure. However, Weber points out that the special quality that European guilds had was their direct connection with city based spatial regimes, local resources and in-house apprenticeships, which were often open for anyone with skills who belonged to the city, town or village. At the same time guilds were also closed when it came to taking in people from outside – sometimes discriminated on the basis of region or language.

This was unlike in India where exclusion was based on a more abstract principle, caste. Caste was capable of making someone from the same village or town socially distant. Someone from a different caste could be from your village or neighbourhood but physical proximity did not transcend social distance.

In the European context, while ghettoization and segregation did exist, especially in terms of the designated “outsider”, there was a deeper process at work in which economic associations played a strong civic role in shaping urban centres.

The guilds may have had several problems, as they were often monopolistic, exploitative of labour and resistant to the control of mercantile capital from elsewhere, which explains their antipathy to right and left economic practices. But they did leave a huge impact on urban Europe in terms of the development of cities and towns, and towards the modernization of several crafts and artisanal practices. The continued dominance of European design in contemporary production and manufacture, the strong control of local natural resources, innovation in technology, the persistence of high living standards in terms of habitats are to some extent continued legacies of systems that paid attention to artisanal skills, valued excellence and were open to all within the shared space. For example, leather based brands as well as pottery from Europe – represent a completely different trajectory than what we see in India.

European urban landscapes are definitely a direct consequence of the way in which economic associations played their role in shaping them. Combined live-work spaces and neighbourhood streets as economic sites of exchange were as integral to the experience of medieval European cities as in contemporary Asian ones. While modernization of urban planning practices destroyed older, hierarchical and exclusive systems, it is undeniable that the strong role of economic associations through guild

systems also shaped the way in which these transformations happened.

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is as much a factor of co-dependence thanks to specialization of roles than anything else. While professional associations are highly organized across territories, almost always affiliating with their own kind, the principle of urban space is inevitably splintered within, making inequalities starkly visible.

A neighbourhood like Dharavi sits in a place like this. It is not simply a physical space. But one that is shaped by social and historical contours to which it belongs. Leather workers and communities involved in tanning, processing and making finished leather goods as well as the potters have shown great enterprise and been victims of traditional marginalization at the same time.

Work-Live

It is important to see how factors beyond the distribution of resources, urban planning or political intention can change cities. These deeper factors have do to less with psycho-

cultural mechanisms than with historical factors that shape two important aspects of urban life – livelihood and shared living. Most cities around the world have grown around trading and making activities in which the traditional internal configuration of the cities were shaped through these basic activities. Live-work conditions were expressed in individual structures, such as the Shop-house, Tool-House, Home-factory or on a larger scale where habitats emerged around specialized economic activities, like textiles in the case of the *Pols* of Ahmedabad – to make entire neighbourhoods part of the story of livelihoods.

As we have stated elsewhere,

“One of the most enduring artifacts of pre-industrial society in contemporary times is the tool-house; the habitat of the artisan where work and residence co-exist amicably. Conceptually located between Le Corbusier’s machine for living and Ivan Illich’s convivial tool, the tool-house is an apparatus fulfilling economic and sheltering purposes. ... Yet, as a structure epitomizing such dual use, the tool-house, does not have the legitimacy it deserves. In fact in many places it is considered outdated, or worse, an invalid urban form, thanks to strict zoning laws and rigid conceptions of urban order. With the universalizing principles of the industrial revolution becoming mainstream, homes and workspaces have been decisively cut off from each other” (Echanove and Srivastava, 2009).

This observation is particularly relevant to a discussion in a place like Dharavi, which works hugely on traditional skills, and the physical arrangements that are part of the history of these skills. With people working from homes

or entire neighbourhoods working through co-ordination and co-dependent mechanisms most of which are based on community ties.

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However, unlike in the case of other cities with rich artisanal traditions like in Japan or Europe, these communities are part of social hierarchies that are marginal and often treated as illegitimate. Interestingly, one of the several reasons for this illegitimacy is the fact that they defy zonal laws and restrictions, most often to do with work and living conditions.

Europe, these communities are part of social hierarchies that are marginal and often treated as illegitimate. Interestingly, one of the several reasons for this illegitimacy is the fact that they defy zonal laws and restrictions, most often to do with work and living conditions. While similar neighbourhoods in other parts of the world may have been encouraged to improve through heritage narratives, may even be preserved and celebrated, places like Dharavi have a different trajectory. The prejudices that cause their emergence in the first place— (they are historically unwanted sites in which skilled, but poor communities are given some occupancy rights) continue to operate generation after generation. Civic authorities continue to treat them as illegitimate. The city's economy may thrive on their skills and labour, subsidised as they are by their lower status, and cheap costs, but this rarely means better lives or improvements of the neighbourhood. The potters of Kumbhar

Wada in Dharavi continue to produce their goods in circumstances that are unhealthy. They find it difficult to organize themselves to demand better services from civic authorities like their counterparts could have done, through guilds or trade associations, in other parts of the world.

Tear in the Fabric

In such a scenario, the various skills embedded in these neighbourhoods – embroidery, jewellery designing, weaving, pottery, rarely harness their full potential in terms of production, design or simple enhancement of incomes.

It is no wonder that modern practices of any kind in the contemporary economy, from architectural work to designing industrial products, rarely enter into creative dialogue with traditional skills except in very tokenistic ways. Our best design initiatives, studios, creative schools that harness traditional skills emerge as stand alone, semi-museumised, academic ventures that have little impact on mainstream practices. From Auroville to Dharavi, Bareilly or Agra, there remains a huge distance to overcome.

Our design traditions, enmeshed in India's historically dominant, textile related artisanal histories, still find it difficult to merge into a contemporary sensibility of building and architecture. However, what has been encouraged, at least academically, is an alignment with traditional building practices as a source of ideas and creativity. There has emerged a body of work based on older spatial and structural principles and a spirited defence of indigenous styles in response to 'western norms'.

One important architectural voice who works consciously with artisanship is Bijoy Jain. He has developed a practice connected deeply to local artisans. It involves carpentry, iron smithy and stone work in the studio that

By revisiting Semper, we would like to argue that the patterns and elements of collective construction - as seen in the world of home-grown settlements is something that needs to be valued deeply - both as a practice and as an aesthetic. The idea of an urban fabric is a powerful one. It at once values the role of several weavers - home makers - tied to a logic of relations that produce patterns in and through the processes of construction.

works like a collective crafts workshop. His strength has been recognising these processes and developing an elegant framework around them. His emerging aesthetic often reminds one of Japan, which constitutes a story of similar encounters with crafts and architectural practices. It may well happen that in the coming years, more innovative young architects from India try to consciously evoke the Semper moment by building on design elements from textiles to interweave them into contemporary building materials and practices by combining them creatively with Jain's processes.

The Urban Fabric, New Metaphor

Within the European tradition the architect, at some historical point, became the master of several practices involved with building and construction. 'He' worked with engineers, masons, carpenters, artists, providing his

authoritative signature to the structure produced. Typically, the work was commissioned by the Church, royalty or the aristocracy.

Yet, there remained a world of building outside this appointed role, a world that did not require his signature. This world - for a long time remained closer to Semper's primitive building spaces in which the metaphors in use were closer to textiles than masonry. Homes were woven of reeds, cloth and mud, which dominated simpler societies - peasants, slaves and tribal communities. Where the arch builder, the master was not needed. (It must be said though that some more technologically advanced societies like China and Japan also used woodwork and paper to produce very sophisticated building traditions that used weaving as a principle rather than masonry, and produced exquisite structures in the process).

By and large though, these home-grown homes, sometimes spawning large neighbourhoods, and always working through an internal energy of livelihood generation and work-live combinations remained robust, simple affairs. They emerged through the basic skills of making homes that traced their genealogies to weaving and making use of easily available resources and materials. The homes were expressions of the people who lived in them - as communities or inter-dependent groups and families.

Such spaces of "woven" homes produce newer creative possibilities of thinking about places. Perhaps a good interpretation of Semper's observations is to evoke new metaphors - one of which is that of the "urban fabric".

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logic of relations that produce patterns in and through the processes of construction. This represents a completely valid form of urban life and an emerging aesthetic that exists all around the world.

Constantly improving favelas in Brazil, uncertain occupied spaces in Kenya, highly productive, skilled but marginal settlements in Mumbai, and incrementally grown neighbourhoods in Tokyo have started being recognized as having an aesthetic of their own – a narrative so far mostly monopolized by “heritage” precincts in European cities. Significantly, the reason most people see them as illegitimate spaces is not so much linked to their occupancy rights, poor quality, or misplaced and anachronistic exoticness (as in the case of Tokyo), but as Ivan Illich would have reminded us – because they are produced in ways we consider illegitimate (Illich, 1973).

They are made through a collective intelligence, through processes that weave

entire neighbourhoods with actors working in dedicated ways – without the master-builder providing a signature. Homes are woven into neighbourhoods through processes that produce their own patterns, which when seen through a historical gaze, have an aesthetic. But seen without imagination, are considered to be without any whatsoever.

Mumbai's diverse homegrown neighbourhoods, stimulate all kinds of questions. What exactly is the role of an architect within such a densely and intricately woven fabric of networked homes? Where a temple, a mosque, a tiny house are all part of a cacophony of intense dialogues and debates. Collectively, they become part of a landscape that seems to be emerging with its own pattern, its own style.

One way to start framing this expectation is perhaps by recognizing that habitats as a whole, not just individual buildings or complexes or graphic representations of urban life, have an aesthetic.

The Aesthetic of Habitats

In her contemplation on subjectivity and aesthetics in the public realm of architecture and living spaces, Pauline von Bonsdorff asks some thought-provoking questions.

“What is the relation between everyday – tacit, uninformed, confident – environmental experience and the significance of the built environment? What are buildings and how do they become what they are, on the street?”

Is there stability in the roles of the elements of the built environment and in their capacity to be valued?" (Bonsdorff, 1998, p.18).

Her attempts at answering these questions provide powerful conceptual tools to

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understand contemporary urban realities, and of course, much more than that.

Individual architectural subjects have been a perennial feature of practice and criticism. In the medieval past, the biggest and most glorious practices of architecture were shaped by an economy of sacred power and imperial strength. These influenced themes, sizes and costs of each structure. The aesthetic could spill over cultural boundaries and reflect all kinds of fantasies, providing for a pastiche that only in retrospect became respectable with dignified and definite narratives.

Thus Islamic influences on Christian styles and vice versa, themselves amalgamations of a myriad local influences, got naturalized gradually, with a continuous play of remembering and forgetting. However, strong pronouncements of what is beautiful and truly glorious were integral to the process of construction, even though the particular constituents of aesthetics were debatable.

Today, in mainstream practice, it seems as if technological advancements in the fields of spacecraft technology have become new frames of reference, based on contemporary notions of the sacred – with faith in modern technology and its accompanying aesthetics. Futuristic universal structures punctuate cities all around the world, and create comfortingly familiar environments, becoming naturalized as smoothly as before. Glass and steel structures in Bangalore sooner or later become part of the local scape like colonial structures once did. There is a reaction to this as well – with grunge, organic aesthetics inspired by environmental discourses doing their own thing. Artistic and creative counter or sub cultures play their role in shaping such forms and expressions.

However, it is doubtful if either of these templates go deep enough in satisfactorily addressing the full range of expressions of built environments and the needs of users, dwellers, inhabitants.

According to historian and novelist scholar Umberto Eco (1973), our contemporary responses never really transcend medieval impulses. Whether in terms of the glories of grand structures or the sacralizing of nature. It is not transcended in popular culture, nor (in more insidious ways) in high culture, where aesthetics, with all its post-modern twists, continues to have its say. It continues to pass judgment about what is good and bad about buildings, cities, neighbourhoods and all kinds of cultural artefacts. Here past and present, medieval and modern get mixed and re-mixed to create their own anxieties about what is appropriate and beautiful and what is not.

There are other things that remain the same as well. In the medieval past, it was rare that the habitats and dwellings, bazaars and streets surrounding sacred structures got the same investments in terms of attention, expense or investment. In our appreciation of historical architectural grandeur, we sanitize memory all the time. It is only in realist works of fiction and detailed historiographies that we become aware of the everyday contexts as they existed in the past. It is difficult to remember those realities since they have now been sterilized for tourism or to appeal to contemporary tastes. In the past, peasant quarters outside feudal estates, bazaar streets or artisan quarters at the fringes of religious and royal grounds, were not perceived differently from primitive habitats that existed at the edge of or in forests. They were rarely bought into any frame of aesthetic appreciation.

Similarly, in contemporary urban worlds, habitats and dwellings within cities often become invisible or obscure in the public imagination. In visual culture they get subsumed within gated colonies, and high security buildings on one hand or shanties and dark, dangerous alleyways on the other. The aesthetics of the habitat itself, where people live and work have become about interiors or – at the most – about inner protected worlds within open cities – like gentrified streets, heritage enclaves, tourist friendly villages and art neighbourhoods.

When the economy and polity cannot accommodate people who are unable to afford any of these spaces – their habitats and dwellings are only evoked using the most extreme of anti-aesthetic terms – Slums, shanties, run-down neighbourhoods. They

become both, the embodiment of all that is not beautiful and something more absolute, that which can never become beautiful. Unless they completely undergo a metamorphoses. Any attempts at seeing an aesthetic within those spaces becomes immediately immoral – as if one is validating the context as a whole, including its apparent brutality.

If you look more carefully, there is a deeper structure that pulls most such habitats into coherence. Often, you can still see the genus of older dwellings underlying those spaces. Their spirit is evoked from the act of people coming together and building their own environments, using local networks, and all kinds of affordable technologies, relying on community and family networks and using living sacred sites to organize the neighbourhoods.

At the same time, shadows of the pasts, or from elsewhere, persist. They reproduce structures from villages far away, even accommodating primordial markers of habitats like wells and orchards, within a contemporary urban fabric of immense density.

Conclusion:

Bonsdorff's work asks important questions. It provokes us to go back with more fierceness into understanding what exactly is the aesthetic of a habitat. Why has it been subsumed within a larger discourse of architectural practice? Or become a sub-set of planning in which it is rarely expressed with the same sophistication as architectural or planning practices are?

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variety of forms linked to distinct histories. Traditional villages, artisanal colonies, working

Mumbai's thousands of so-called slums, are composed of habitats that include a wide variety of forms linked to distinct histories. Traditional villages, artisanal colonies, working class tenements, temporary structures, modern dwellings, – all of them hurriedly subsumed within a generic category that has little basis in reality.

class tenements, temporary structures, modern dwellings, – all of them hurriedly subsumed within a generic category that has little basis in reality. To recognize the distinct histories of each of these neighbourhoods is a very important exercise. And an effective way of doing that is by understanding their form, their specific story.

The gaze from the outside and the inner experience of living in those spaces must converge at some point. Such a convergence will make it possible to appreciate what these neighbourhoods really mean to the story of urbanism. In this regard, the question of aesthetics as it applies to habitats and dwellings is crucial to this story.

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