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Ghats, Ganga, Cultural Landscape, Natural Archetypes, Spatial Practices, Embodied Perception

Death and Life on the Varanasi Ghats

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ABSTRACT

The ghats of Varanasi have been sketched, painted and photographed endlessly, especially the panoramic view, popular since the nineteenth century. This 'way of seeing' reflects the Western picturesque convention and is associated with the aesthetic experience residing in the view. I argue that the idea of the landscape as a picturesque view does not fully describe the experience in the ghats. Instead the cultural landscape should be interpreted as a 'situated event', of text enacted and performed, and experienced through all the senses. The sensual engagement of the body with the landscape is the basis of feelings and emotions in embodied perception. The spatial and formal design language of the ghats supports a range of spatial practices, some of which are spectacular such as *aarti* to Ganga and cremation rites. The spectacles mesmerize but also evoke *bhavs* (feelings) creating an aesthetic experience.



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Landscape as a ‘Situated Event’

The visually arresting unfolding panoramic views of the ghats seen from the river have dominated representations of Varanasi in paintings and photographs. The earliest picturesque views, romanticizing decay through the passage of time, were captured in James Prinsep’s engravings in the 1830s

I argue that picturesque views of the ghats do not fully describe their experience. Instead their cultural landscape should be interpreted as a situated event, of text enacted and performed, and experienced through all the senses.

(Kejariwal, 2009). These images influenced subsequent representations of the ghat skyline that is inextricably linked to the city’s identity. Sky and water frame the ghats in long views while in close ups of the river’s edge, details become apparent. Picture maps produced in the late 19th c. in Varanasi on cloth and in print show the ghat panoramas in long scrolls (Gutschow, 2006). The visual order appears to be complex, based upon irregular repetition of prototypical design elements, dominance of saffron, red, and beige colors of religious and historic buildings, and cream white flat-roofed residential buildings of the old city. In zoomed-in photographs of ghats and landings the focus is on people, their activities, and religious paraphernalia since distant views can be framed only at thresholds where streets enter ghats or from the open, airy pavilions and *jharokhas* (balconies) on the upper floors of historic buildings.

I argue that picturesque views of the ghats do not fully describe their experience. Instead

their cultural landscape should be interpreted as a situated event, of text enacted and performed, and experienced through all the senses. Social events centered on the Ganga involve the visitor in varying degrees of participation in ritual activities. The experience on the ghats is immersive, consisting of a combination of visual, kinesthetic, haptic, proprioceptive, acoustic, and olfactory perceptions. The landscape becomes ‘both structured perception and situated event, a way of perceiving action in place’ (Hays and Maschka, 2014, p.16). The embodied perception is responsible for a heightened awareness of the environment, inducing (syn)aesthesia, setting free the imagination, provoking memories and mental associations, and is accompanied with altered moods and feelings. While the picturesque view or its representation is

The design language consists of prototypical forms—bastions, balconies, aedicules, portals, pavilions and platforms—in different sizes and materials, and in many combinations

primarily a visual experience and associated with nostalgia, the idea of the landscape as a situated event communicates the dynamic quality of sensation, cognition, and emotion merging seamlessly in embodied perception. The ghats are defined by the quality of the aesthetic experience, an intensified version of the everyday, making it out-of -ordinary.

Design Language

The ghats are a thin sliver of public space, ranging in width from 50’-500’ on the Ganga between its confluence with Assi Nala and Varuna River. The open spaces mediate between the city and the river; temples, historic



Figure 1: Varanasi Ghats

palaces and mansions, and new residential and commercial buildings stretch out creating an impressive skyline (Figure 1). The design language consists of prototypical forms—bastions, balconies, aedicules, portals, pavilions and platforms—in different sizes and materials, and in many combinations (Figure 2). The historic architecture responds to the changing

water levels of the Ganga -the upper floors are porous with windows, balconies, and galleries for viewing the river while the lower floors of palaces are built solidly without openings, and with octagonal or circular towers to resist the thrust of rising waters when the Ganga floods. The formal grammar unites the vertical historic facades of riverfront buildings with the



Figure 3 : Visual structure of Dashashwamedh Ghat



Figure 4: Movement from street to ghat

horizontal surfaces of steps and landings. The towers are aligned with square, rectangular, octagonal, and circular platforms built over well foundations that divide the steps to the river into bays (Hegewald, 2005). Octagonal platforms (*marhi*) built to strengthen the steps

Movement through the narrow lanes of old Varanasi to the wide landings is a striking experience of contrasts—confinement versus spaciousness, and darkness versus light. In walking, visual perception is combined with kinaesthetic in moving from the congested lanes of the old city towards the open riverfront.

can be hollow or solid. Trees also have circular and rectangular platforms built at their base for shrines, and landings are dotted with movable wooden platforms used for a variety of activities.

The flat surfaces of steps and landings are articulated into volumes through niches and aedicules whose forms are shared with temple architecture. For example, the walls of Panchkroshi Temple consists of hundreds of niches that represent shrines visited by pilgrims on the *panchkroshi yatra* (circumambulatory journey) around Varanasi (Gutschow, 2005). Besides receding niches, temple walls are also articulated by projecting aedicules; the ghats similarly have freestanding shrines, occasionally embedded in walls. Make shift places are created from lean-tos built from bamboo and jute/canvas housing *lingas*, *aghoris* (holy men), or snacks sellers. Thus a volume is created with the use of found materials on the planar surface of steps and landings.

The prototypical architectural elements are repeated erratically, setting up a syncopated

rhythm and unifying the complex visual structure (Figure 3). Their layering, i.e. occurrence at different heights on the sloping embankment, adds depth. Stairs set up an interesting rhythm especially when they cascade down the streets and from buildings located at higher levels. The spatial grammar is composed of volumetric enclosure created by buildings, colonnades, pavilions, and niches, situated at irregular intervals on the ghats, and experienced in movement

The ghats are an urban mise-en-scene where not only the drama of everyday life but also death and celebration of life plays out. *Aarti*, i.e. daily felicitation to the Ganga and cremation occur on the riverfront, most spectacularly at Dashashwamedh and Manikarnika Ghats, attracting large crowds.

and rest. Movement through the narrow lanes of old Varanasi to the wide landings is a striking experience of contrasts—confinement versus spaciousness, and darkness versus light. In walking, visual perception is combined with kinaesthetic in moving from the congested lanes of the old city towards the open riverfront. The haptic experience in the narrow alley is of tight spaces with sharp slivers of sunlight piercing the darkness; stairs lead down to shrines and tanks below the street level; and street textures become visibly prominent. From the balconies and galleries of historic mansions, Ganga and the ghats are seen in expansive views (Figure 4). In walking on the ghats along the Ganga, with the embankment lined with large solid buildings punctuated with stairs on one side and the wide expanse of the river on another, the body experiences verticality and horizontality simultaneously. Sightlines shift continually in climbing up and down the steps, as the riverbank curves, dips, and rises again.

Spatial Practices

The formal and spatial language of the ghats is activated in everyday spatial practices bringing vitality to the riverfront. The design vocabulary of the ghats is similar everywhere yet the landscapes as constituted by events are different and carry profound meanings about the role of Ganga in sustaining life, removing pollution, and promising liberation from the cycle of death and life. According to Michel De Certeau (1984), cultural practices are spatial in that they are defined by places; built forms and practices mutually constitute the cultural landscape, each impacting the other. Steps and landings, pavilions, platforms, shrines, and niches become behavior settings, loci of activities that are congruent with formal language of the ghats. Steps to the river facilitate bathing and other rituals centered on the holy waters and washing clothes, while those above the landings are used as sitting spaces to watch public life. The top of *marhis* seats groups in a circle suggested by the octagonal shape; the interior of hollow ones could be changing rooms or a shop. Movable platforms are used for rituals, massages, selling trinkets and religious paraphernalia, and as performance stages. These social rhythms are tied to circadian experienced in the body in temporalised space in everyday life (Lefebvre, 2014). The patterns of ritual and recreational activities have a diurnal rhythm tied with interaction with the river—bathing and worshipping the sun at dawn and early morning, washing and cleaning in late mornings and afternoons, leisure activities in the evenings, and waving of lamps (*aarti*) to Ganga at dusk.

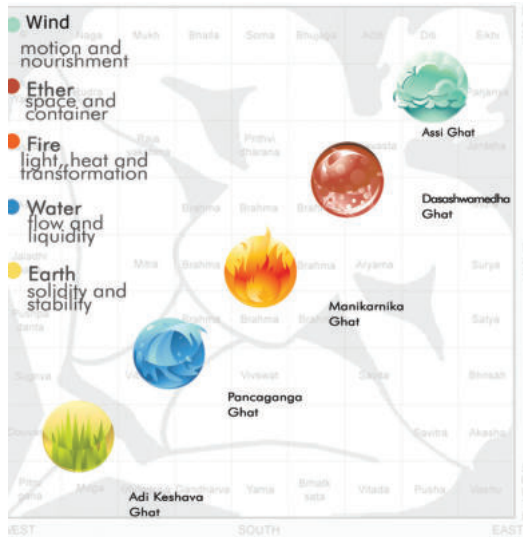


Figure 5: Ghats as symbols of panchmahabhutas and tattvas

The ghats are an urban mise-en-scene where not only the drama of everyday life but also death and celebration of life plays out. *Aarti*, i.e. daily felicitation to the Ganga and cremation occur on the riverfront, most spectacularly at Dashashwamedh and Manikarnika Ghats, attracting large crowds. In life and death processes considered to be polluting in Hinduism, fire and water are purifying agents, and they are part of both events. Ganga is venerated with fire (as are other gods and goddesses) and on the ghats, the faithful worship at dawn the rising sun. On ancient water bodies such as Lolarka Kund on Assi Ghat, it is believed that life symbolically begins when sunrays strike water. Fire is the agent of destruction—mortal remains of a Hindu are cremated on the riverbank, in the belief that Ganga will purify the pollution associated with death.

Natural Archetypes

In Hindu and Buddhist thought, all matter is composed of five constituent elements (*panchmahabhuta*)—earth (*prithvi*), fire (*agni*), water (*jal*), air (*vayu*), and ether (*akash*). They are

associated with and sometimes interchangeable with *tattvas* meaning ‘thatness’ or sensorial qualities of physical matter, for example ether is synonymous with space experienced in hearing; air with movement felt in touch; fire with energy (*tejas*) experienced in form (*rupa*) through sight; water with fluidity (*apas*) tasted as *rasa*; earth with solidity smelled as *gandh*. Fire and water are believed to be complementary principles; sun, the energizing cosmic force governs fire; and moon, the symbol of nourishment rules over water. *Tattvas* as conceptual abstractions of sensations are thought to be the basis of all experience and consciousness. The five most important ghats are symbolic of five elements and visualized as chakras on the spine of *vastu purusha*, genius loci of Varanasi (Figure 5) (Parry, 1981).

This way of understanding the connection between matter and consciousness threads through the French writer Gaston Bachelard’s writings on poetic imagination. Following the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung, he calls the four elements—fire, water, air, and earth—of ancient Greek philosophy and medieval alchemy, natural archetypes, rooted in the human collective unconscious, and discerned through images.¹ His exhaustive studies of meanings of literary images of fire and water revealed them to be the source of ‘material imagination’ (Forsyth, 1971). Fire and water share meanings of purity, life and death; fire as masculine principle representing strength and courage, and as a source of light representing enlightenment is complemented with the feminine character of water expressed in maternal images (Bachelard, 1999). Bachelard wrote about the capacity of elements to induce reverie, a state of mind produced by the awakening of senses, in which the



Figure 6: Manikarnika Ghat

imagination gets free play and creates new images (Gaudin, 1971).

In Varanasi, fire and water are sources of rich iconography in Hindu mythology, associated with life giving powers as well as destruction in cosmic conflagration at the end of time. Sun, the divine symbol of fire in the sky, is worshipped as it rises out of the Ganga every morning bringing the end to darkness. The location of solar (*aditya*) shrines on the ghats corresponds to position of the sun in solstices and equinoxes, prompting devotees to bathe in the water bodies (*kunds*) and worship sun at the shrine located close by (Singh, 1994). Ganga, the supreme symbol of archetypal waters,

purifies and sanctifies, washing away physical dirt and moral sins. She is mother, Ganga Maa,

At the river edge are many square platforms, solid and well as hollow with niches where *lingas* are washed by the Ganga, with poles with canvas strung above them as shade structures. The visual order is layered and complex with temple spires, flat roofed pavilions, aedicular shrines, and platforms built on the sloping embankment.

and a young maiden, consort of Lord Shiva who slows her descent from heavens, catching her in his locks to break her tumult. Ganga invites

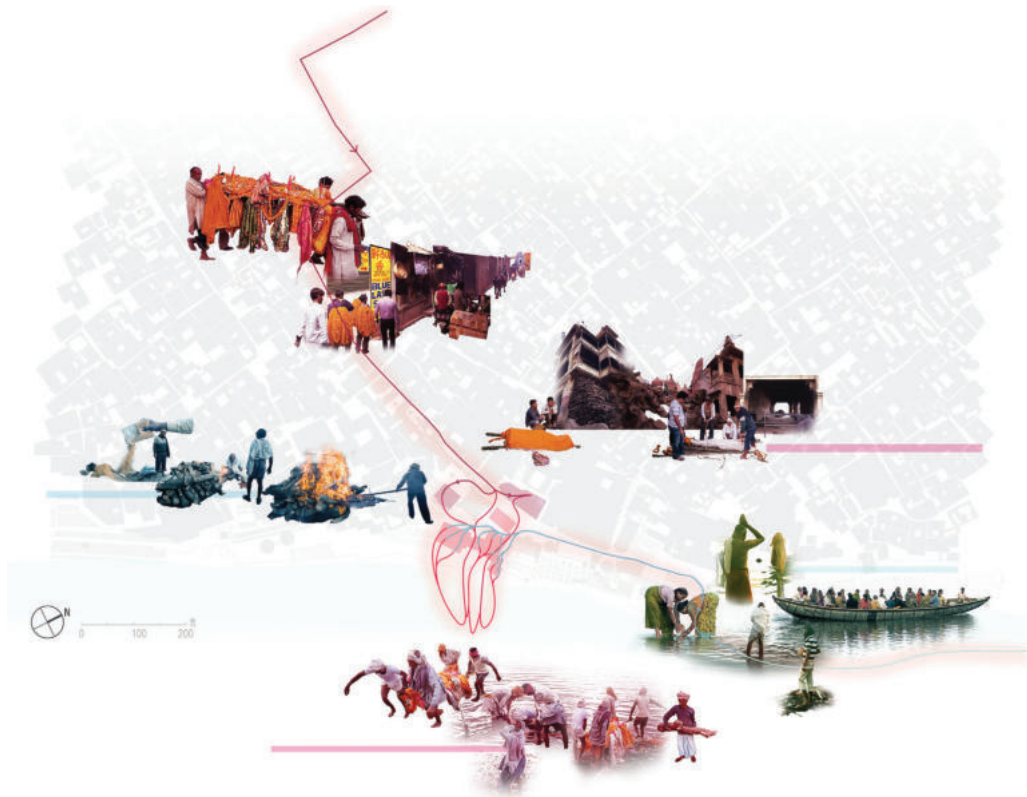


Figure 7: Cremation rituals at Manikarnika Ghat

rich visual and tactile experiences in everyday humdrum activities, and ritual bathing at festivals and life cycle events. Immersion in the Ganga by millions on auspicious days is a grand spectacle on the ghats.

Fire offered to the Ganga in the *aarti* and in cremation is the symbol of archetypal fire. It signifies the germination of life and burns away the impurities. As Jonathan Parry (1994) has shown, the homology between body and cosmos in Hindu thought implies equivalence between individual death and apocalypse (*pralay*). At Manikarnika Ghat shared by Vishnu and Shiva, the individual cremation is a

sacrificial fire, leading to rebirth, and mimetic of cosmogony occurring through sacrifice. The dismemberment of the corpse in fire is necessary for its reconstitution (as funerary rituals indicate) in another body, similar to the recreation of universe (*shristi*) after its end through conflagration. Manikarnika Ghat, popularly known as the burning ghat where the funeral pyres never die out, is thus outside of time, signifying the perpetual cycle of destruction followed by creation, in which fire is the chief agent.

Death

Manikarnika Ghat is instantly recognizable by its smoking fires, soot-covered buildings, and stacks of wood piled on boats and landings (Figure 6). As the center of the three-mile long sweep of the ghat stretch, it has the sacred *kund* (tank) believed to have been dug by Lord Vishnu and the cremation ground, symbolic of the universe burning at the end of time. It is the abode of Lord Shiva who presides over *mahashamshan*, the great cremation ground. Here Shiva is known as Tarakeshwar, the one who whispers the *tarak mantra* in the ears of the dying. Although Shiva is the reigning deity of this ghat, Vishnu shares the place as attested by his footprints and Manikarnika Kund, the site of his austerities (Eck, 1993). The myth describing the co-existence of both gods is allegorical of the Hindu belief that creation is preceded by destruction. Manikarnika Ghat distills all of Varanasi's sacred energies in its waters of creation and fires of destruction. Although the ghat has been a popular subject of representations, having been sketched and photographed extensively in the last two centuries, only a few historic facts are known about it. Its fame was well established in medical

In standing or sitting close to the performance, the viewer is immersed in acoustic space created from singing and music as sounds emanating from the river's edge describe the acoustic horizon stretching over the ghats and the Ganga. From the boat, the aarti is even more of a spectacle; the viewer looks up to see the performers outlined against the steps and buildings

times as attested by the fifteenth century text *Kashikhanda* that describes it as the place where people surrender their earthly bodies and become

one with Shiva. It was the first embankment to be clad in stone in the thirteenth century although its temples were built in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. At the river edge are many square platforms, solid and well as hollow with niches where lingas are washed by the Ganga, with poles with canvas strung above them as shade structures. The visual order is layered and complex with temple spires, flat roofed pavilions, aedicular shrines, and platforms built on the sloping embankment. Some people die in hospices on the ghats, others are brought from the city and nearby villages, and their bodies carried on bamboo poles on the shoulders of mourners. After being washed in the Ganga, the cremation ritual commences—the eldest son circumambulates the body five times and puts the fire taken from the *doms* into the mouth. Midway through the burning, the skull is broken with a wooden pole in the ritual, *kapal-kriya* for the soul to escape. As the fires die down, the son breaks a clay water pot and walks away without turning back. The ashes are gathered from the funeral pyre and immersed into the Ganga (Figure 7).

There are three ways of perceiving the event—on the boat, in the lanes, and from the terraces above (Tiwari, 2010). In all cases, the perception is embodied, i.e. the landscape is sensed in the body even if one is not physically present on the ghat. For visitors not directly engaged in ritual activities, this landscape is a spectacle and death rituals an unintended performance. Manikarnika Ghat appears as a stage set in a theater of death where the drama of the end of life plays out. On the moving boat, as the smoking pyres and grimy temple towers come into view, attention is focused almost involuntarily. The scene arranges itself to the eyes—sandstone buildings describe



Figure 8: Aarti at Dashashwamedh Ghat

a concave arc because of the slight curvature of the riverbed, behind which rise the cream and whitewashed new buildings of Varanasi. There are many lines of sight because of landings and terraces at different levels, plus the boat is a floating space, on which sightlines moving continuously with its movement. On coming closer, one sees men, but no women, dispersed in small groups, bodies lying on the ground waiting to be cremated, burning bodies, and fires being stoked. Spectators, including the bereaved, watch impassively while tourist on boats watch curiously, clicking photographs. Fire seems to be erupting here and there; each fire creates a space around it, a zone of intense heat and flying embers, the air thick with smoke.

Walking through the lanes of Varanasi towards the ghat is a somewhat different experience with all the senses assailed. Dead bodies are being carried on the shoulders on men who chant ‘*Ram naam satya hai*’ (God’s name is truth). Wood is stacked everywhere, small shops in every nook and cranny are selling incense, flowers, and other ritual items. Olfactory, acoustic, and kineasthetic geographies created from activities and ritual paraphernalia are intensely stimulating. One can

see cremation up close as it occurs on an upper terrace. Broken clay pots, roaming cows and goats, and temple spires are props and backdrop to the central event—cremation—in which the visitor participates as a voyeur. A few tourists find their way to the top floor of an abandoned building and from this vantage point, the scene arranges itself in a different composition. Cremation fires, animals, onlookers, locals fishing for jewels in the ashes, boats on the Ganga, are seen from above, the composition shifting with their movement. The three points of view capture different facets of the urban *mise-en-scene* in which landscape becomes the situated event as space is generated through movement of fire, smoke, people, and animals.

Life

The largest and most popular of celebrations occurs every evening at Dashashwamedh Ghat drawing large crowd of visitors. *Aarti* to Ganga is a performance for about thirty minutes at dusk by a local organization called Ganga Sewa Nidhi. Fire is the key element here as well but unlike Manikarnika Ghat where it is a conflagration consuming the body, here it is an oblation offered to the Ganga as a visible reminder of how life begins. Dashashwamedh Ghat is a popular ghat—one of the main roads of Varanasi bifurcates on either side of a large produce market and turns into steps leading down to the river’s edge. It is named after the sacrifice of twelve horses performed by the creator of universe, Brahma. The archetypal act was repeated by rulers, most notably by the second century dynasty of Bara Shiva Nagas. It is believed that by bathing at this ghat, one reaps the benefit of this ancient sacrificial act performed by gods and kings. Its design grammar is similar to other ghats—the edge

is activated by hollow and solid octagonal platforms, plus there are semi-fixed platforms

In participating in the aarti at Dashashwamedh Ghat in listening to the songs, in cupping hands over the flame, in following the movements of performers as they prostrate, kneel, raise and fold their hands, the sensations combine in creating a vivid immersive experience of being aware, feeling the performance in the moment, in praesent.

on landings that are hubs of activities. Niches containing Ganga and Shiva deities activate the vertical plane.

As dusk falls, activities cease and for a brief period the ghat is transformed into a spectacle. Two groups of young male performers prepare the wooden platforms in two stretches for the *aarti* ceremony. The platforms become stage sets for a choreographed event performed in unison. This involves invoking the presence of Ganga and venerating her prowess by singing her glories. Sounds of conchs, drums, and bells accompany the song sung by accomplished singers and blared over loudspeakers. Peacock feathers and fly whisks sweep the air; incense and camphor in brass pots are waved in circular motions as if the performer is inscribing a mandala in space with his gesture (Figure 8). Lastly fire in tiered brass lamps are offered to the Ganga with uplifted arms. Then the performers prostrate themselves before the iconic (statue) and phenomenal (river) forms of the Ganga, paying her obeisance. Gestures, posture and clothing dramatize their actions.

The audience has multiple points of view to

observe the ceremony. They can see the *aarti* from above, from steps, balconies and terraces of adjoining buildings; from below on the boats, and at the same level as the performance by sitting on the landing and steps. In standing or sitting close to the performance, the viewer is immersed in acoustic space created from singing and music as sounds emanating from the river's edge describe the acoustic horizon

The spiritual life of the ghats intertwined with social and economic, stems from material imaginary, and can be made accessible through interpretation to the tourist and pilgrim alike who share embodied perception but differ in cultural literacy, life experiences, and personal memories.

stretching over the ghats and the Ganga. From the boat, the *aarti* is even more of a spectacle; the viewer looks up to see the performers outlined against the steps and buildings. The linear edge is transformed into a stage with the river and ghats revolving around it, a dynamic landscape in perception. By floating candles in leaves on the Ganga, one is participating in the veneration ritual; by cupping hands over the burning wick in the *diya* (small leafy cup), one is imbibing its energy.

Embodied Perception

“Aesthetics could be said to be a science—the science of how we learn and know through our senses. This return to the root meanings of the term allows aesthetics to become a powerful tool for creating and assessing experience, as opposed to mere superstructure that is subordinate to economic and politics. By using a somatic interpretation of



Figure 10: Proposed site plan of Dashashwamedh Ghat

aesthetics—which understand aesthetics as an indivisible blend of sensation, emotion, and knowledge—we can be active agents who chose what is best for each of us.”

- Cranz, 2013, p.156

Embodied perception is the building block of emotions. Moods and feelings are emotions if they are temporally extended, i.e. they are not fleeting, and develop over time, integrating memory, imagination, and knowledge. Emotions elevated to spiritual state, characterized by detachment, are believed to be the bedrock of aesthetic experience across cultures (Higgins, 2008). Indian aesthetic theory is based upon

emotional expression in performance—a combination of drama, dance, and music—leading to an experience of *rasa* meaning taste. According to Bharata Muni, author of ancient second century Sanskrit text *Natyashastra*, *sthai bhava* (permanent emotions) performed and experienced in theater (or other art forms) become *rasa*. The eight or nine *rasas* are considered to be universal emotions and can be performed through training. The aesthetic experience shared ‘in the gut’ between the performer and audience, is sensual and cerebral, somatic and intellectual (Schechner, 2007).

shared among the mourners is all too evident in their facial expressions and postures. Visitors may respond through ‘embodied simulation’, i.e. through empathy created by motor circuits or mirror neuron systems in the brain that become active when one sees others performing an action (Mallgrave, 2015). Cremation in the public space

The riverfront landscape is an urban mise-en-scene for drama of everyday life but with heightened effects and vivid sensory impressions. Among the many situated events, *aarti* and cremation celebrating the natural archetypes— fire and water—are spectacles engaging the observer viscerally in embodied perception.

incites curiosity, anxiety, fear, and unease—a mix of emotions, difficult to clearly articulate, but an aesthetic experience nonetheless. Interviews with German, Norwegian, French, and Finnish tourists in January 2015 on the ghats revealed their fascination with the ‘burning ghat’ whose meanings are not well understood. A few remarked the sight of burning bodies was something never experienced in Europe where death is a private affair.

Heritage Conservation

The ghats are a venue for global tourism and presenting and representing their heritage will enable a richer experience in which visceral engagement is complemented with opportunities to reflect on what has been perceived. The spiritual life of the ghats intertwined with social and economic, stems from material imaginary, and can be made accessible through interpretation to the tourist and pilgrim alike who share embodied perception but differ in cultural literacy, life experiences, and personal memories.

The built fabric and traditions expressing the centrality of Ganga in Hindu culture are heritage that is presented through the enacted landscape but is not adequately represented. Representations are necessary since they frame, interpret, and situate the object or event in wider spatial and temporal contexts transcending the here and now. Vibrant folk art by local artists—images of gods and goddesses, quotes, icons, sculptures made from silt—competing with space for hotel, restaurant, and shop advertisements can be found on building facades, water towers, steps, and on boats. The many ghat surfaces are proposed to be canvases in a coordinated program for narrative art depicting myths and legends lending identity to each ghat. This will increase landscape legibility and reduce disorientation faced by most tourists. Historic palaces such as Chet Singh Mahal are ideal venues for dynamic multi-media sound and light shows in which history and myths can be narrated.³

The historic palaces and temples upon being listed as heritage buildings will be protected but the ghats too should receive recognition as a cultural landscape worthy of protection and preservation. The landscape understood as a situated event encompasses both material/tangible and intangible heritage— physical fabric and ritual enactments—that are mutually constitutive. Its conservation means acknowledging the formal and spatial language of the ghats as they are repaired and extended. The congestion of Dashashwamedh Ghat during the *aarti* event, for example can be reduced by designing amphibian spaces. Floating docks supported by buoyancy billets and revetment walls are proposed to augment the performance space, especially during monsoons when the Ganga rises and covers the ghats (**Figure 10**).

At Manikarnika Ghat cremation occurs haphazardly on the silted flood plain and ashes are dumped into the Ganga adding to pollution. Historic photographs taken in 1922 and 1947 show cremation occurring on built platforms on the ghats, Cremation platforms are proposed to be rebuilt in tiers to organize space in addition to a dock for loading wood from the boats (Figure 11). Ashes from 300-400 bodies burnt every day accumulate to about 550-1000 kilograms, all thrown in the Ganga. Instead a spoonful can be immersed as a symbolic gesture and the rest can be collected in bio-urns for a proposed memorial grove on the east bank. The biodegradable urn will have a lower layer of creamed ashes and an upper organic layer with tree seeds that will germinate and use ashes as a fertilizer. Thus the cycle of life will continue.

Conclusion

The concept of aesthetics, usually understood to be visual order of the landscape, when expanded beyond the static object to the dynamic event, creates new possibilities in heritage management. The aesthetic experience of the ghat landscape comes about from immersion in public life in which one senses, feels, and contemplates. The formal and spatial language of the ghats has evolved over seven hundred years as a result of spatial practices rooted in tradition. The riverfront landscape is an urban mise-en-scene for drama of everyday life but with heightened effects and vivid sensory impressions. Among the many situated events, *aarti* and cremation celebrating the natural archetypes— fire and water—are spectacles engaging the observer viscerally in embodied perception. They evoke the material imagination fostered by natural archetypes and induce reverie. The meaning of death and life rituals in Hinduism is not universally comprehensible or

only dimly understood by the observer; however the experience in the ghats is an occasion to imagine, ponder, and construct one's own meaning about mortality. ■

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All figures courtesy of Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign collection.

Notes:

¹ A distinction should be made between elemental natural archetypes and form based archetypes. The latter category includes natural such as hill-water dyad and trees, and architectural such as temple, tanks, and ghats that constitute the design language of the built environment in South Asia (Sinha, 2006).

² As Machon points out (2013, 44), the Latin root form of ‘present’ implies a state of being or feeling in ‘being at hand’ from *prae*, ‘before’ and *esse*, ‘be’.

³ Most historic palaces have already been turned into five star hotels and are encroaching upon public spaces. Private commercial interests appear to be winning out in the struggle to save the cultural heritage of ghats as a public good.

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