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liminality, urban space, *maidaan*, openness, formal planning

Locating Liminality in the Urban: Emergence Between the Planned and Lived

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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies liminality as an important urban phenomenon that deconstructs patriarchal orders and hegemonic practices to establish an alternative middle ground that is dialectical and exploratory. It is crucial to recognize the liminality emerging in between time and space in order to understand the city as a transitional and transforming entity, constantly in flux between established structures and norms. The purpose of the study is to therefore, position liminality as a central concept in urban design. Using discourse analysis and case study methods to study a historical *maidaan* in Hauz Rani in Delhi, the study examines how the place went through a process of desacralization in the interim stages of its development into a sports complex, initiated by the state. The study further establishes that it was the liminality of the interim stages of development that led to significant social formations, that were unconventional though temporary. Analyzing the case study using historical and phenomenological analysis, findings reveal that it was the openness and incompleteness of the emergent liminal space that facilitated such formations in that duration of time, and were lost to formal planning later. A theoretical framework is thus developed to establish a liminal perspective towards urban space analyses, with an implication on urban design and practices.



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Introduction

In light of hegemonic and normative practices that have become normalized in our political and social present, the need to identify and establish spaces where alternatives can be imagined and articulated has become increasingly urgent. What kind of spaces truly have the potential of encounter and dialogue possible within their inherent structure? What are the conditions that challenge existing binary and taken-for-granted divisive structures that so fundamentally mark our current systems? Where does the phenomenon of transition exist and what are the ways through which we can describe them?

Developing a liminal perspective, thinking from the border as a way of challenging rigid boundaries, while at the same time grappling with their effects on the lived experiences of those caught in between, deconstructs patriarchal orders rooted in dichotomies and dualities. This perspective questions orders that are overly simplistic and possibly reductive- divisions between inside and outside, formal and informal, core and periphery, inclusion and exclusion.

In what follows, this study suggests ways of thinking about space and spatialities that transcend simple dichotomies through the examination of a situation where liminality of the space allowed a unique phenomenon to take place - in that space and for a particular duration. A liminal perspective on this situation, unfolding in between time and space, offers an opportunity to recognize liminality as a real occurrence and thereby make sense of its effects on those living it. Being a multi-disciplinary theoretical concept, liminality has a wide set of meanings adopted in various fields. However, what remains critical is to understand what it means to be in a liminal situation or space, what is liminality and how does it come through within the context of the city.

Methodology

To understand liminality within the context of the city in this paper, the methodology involved a three-step process. The first step identified the meaning and significance of liminality as a phenomenon by locating it in multidisciplinary literature through a brief discourse analysis. The second step recognized the existence of liminality within the interim stages of a project led by a government organization in Delhi. This case study is identified and analyzed using historical and phenomenological analysis methods. The third step involved making sense of this phenomenon and analyzing how it correlates to the larger body of urban theory. A theoretical framework was developed to analyze liminality, that stems out of discourse and emergent factors. In this way, a discourse on liminal perspective was developed to understand the city as a transitional and transforming entity constantly in flux between established orders and norms.

Locating Liminal in Literature

Originating from the Latin term *limen* the word liminal literally (and perhaps too simplistically) means transition 'between two states' (Press, 2024). Ethnographer and Folklorist Arnold van Gennep, in his book *The Rites of Passage*, written in 1907 and translated in 1960, developed the concept of liminality in the context of small-scale societies (Gennep, 1960). Stressing on the importance of transition in a society, he singled out the rites of passage as a separate category, and called the transition period as the liminal period, involving a territorial act of *passage*. Identifying the tripartite structure as the three stages of a transition namely, rites of separation, transition rites and rites of incorporation, van Gennep's elaboration detected a sequential pattern that helps describe this transition process. The ritualized forms of liminality include stages of life like pregnancy and childbirth, initiation and funeral as rites of passage, establishing these to be as significant as what they are transitioning from and to.

Much later, Gennep's work was relooked at by anthropologist Victor Turner in 1967, who rediscovered the idea of liminality through the study of Ndembu tribes. His essay *Betwixt and Between: the liminal period in rites of passage* (Turner, 1967, 1982) based on the study of human experiences in liminal states focuses on the liminality in the in-between states. Turners study not only helped in identifying the importance of in-between periods, but also understand human reactions to liminal experiences. His differentiation between a state and a transition where the former is a fixed, stable entity while the latter is a process which is in a state of becoming or a transformative condition, is useful in understanding the processual conditions within the liminal period of transition.

The works of both van Gennep and Turner bring out the characteristics of the liminal period as being blurry, ambiguous and lacking any specific status or property, what may be understood by society as a dominant category. The status of being 'neither here nor there', moving away from taken for granted structures and a temporary suspension of normal modes of social action and order, can be a constructive or a destructive transition. Adding to this discourse, Bjorn Thomassen discusses the contemporary relevance of looking at liminality, stating that liminality simply *is*, and living through it is an experience that has a transformational impact. Liminality can be defined as 'moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behaviour are relaxed opening the way to novelty, imagination, construction and destruction...' thereby having the 'potential to push social and political theory in new directions' which '...represents an unordered, chaotic element of creativity and freedom in a modern world that was drowning with too much rationality (Thomassen, 2014).

Looking at existing structures and orders from the liminal perspective constructs an engagement towards the significance of the emergent middle phase as bring a crucial phase. The middle, that is also the interstitial (Bhabha, 1994) stresses on what it lies within, usually in a both/and copresence defining its intermediateness. In relation to this, the in between has been elaborated as an important phase in various fields including philosophy,

psychology (Heidegger, 1971) and architecture (Hertzberger, 2005; Certeau, 1984; Brighenti, 2013). These readings position the in between as an alternative to the dichotomous categories which traditionally structure theoretical analysis and praxis, circumventing existing rules and laws. They approach and categorize in between situations. In the introduction to their book titled *Between Places and Spaces, Landscapes of Liminality*, the editors discuss the quality of liminal to be simultaneously 'places' and 'spaces' and also exist 'between' them (Dara Downey, 2016). Classifying it as an analytical tool, they point towards the conundrum of the shifting academic focus towards liminality while also a need for policing an overuse of the term in multiple disciplines often without a substantiated understanding of the conceptual frameworks of van Gennep and Turner. A term as ubiquitous, owing to its vagueness and indeterminacy, becomes easy to comprehend while remaining complex at the same time.

In urban studies, Sharon Zukin describes a liminal space as a growing personality of modern-day city (Zukin, 1991). Zukin argued that the localism of the modern city has been transformed into a post-modern transitional space and that blurring of boundaries between public and private space is a state of liminality. Other disciplinary literature interprets liminal space both in terms of spatial aspects and also temporal aspects (Thomassen, 2014) (Horvath et al., 2015), through related ideas of third space (Soja, 1996), third place (Oldenburg, 1997) space for cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), heterotopia (Foucault, 1967 [2008]). In these spaces, the vertical hierarchy of power is spontaneously replaced with networks of horizontal relations (Bey, 1991), thereby becoming capable of materializing freedom by escaping the established order. Furthermore, similar spaces have been conceptualized with related concepts such as, non-places (Auge, 1995), as residues of planning (Boddington and Cruz, 1999) and social practices (Cohen, 2000) intermediate city between the urban and rural (Sievert, 2003), terrain vague (Morales, 1995). Levesque (Lévesque, 2002) and Berger (Berger, 2007) consider such spaces of indefinite spontaneous practices as a resource, or reserves of indeterminacy, potential places for action (Corner, 2001). According to Routledge (Routledge, 1996) the third space is a place where existing social relations and institutions can be challenged, representing a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an imposed hierarchy (Bhabha, 1994).

An Argument for Liminality

This paper thus identifies the liminal as a powerful period and/or space with a distinct energy and potential, and attempts to identify, recognize and thereby establish the occurrence of liminality through the historical analysis of an urban neighborhood in Delhi, discussed in the following section. At an architectural-urban scale, liminal spaces that exist in the city like urban passages, transit corridors, movement pathways and connections, form connections between buildings or formal, defined spaces. At another scale, thereby specifying the importance of scale in our conversation, as taken up by this paper that identifies liminality of another kind of transition. This exists between formal ways of planning and lived experiences, that exists between two phases of development of a

project. It highlights the temporal and the spatial aspects that act together to create a unique experience - for a particular duration, in a particular space, for the people using it. The justification of this case study, thus lies in the position that it allows one to establish liminality as a groundbreaker that changed the way people lived in that area, even though for a short interim time period.

We also argue that the conventional and established disciplinary study techniques, like dichotomous categorization, may not be applicable to study the above spaces. There is a need to deal with such liminal situations using a framework that is unique to their own nature of existence, that emerges out of their form. Conventional frameworks would try to bring these back to predefined and standardized concepts. The first part of this framework involves an understanding that this phenomenon cannot be understood in isolation. It needs to be looked at through a historical analysis to understand the processes and context that were involved, at the confluence of the place, the position of its people and power. A processual understanding, therefore is a must.

Locating Liminality in the Queens Reservoir, *Hauz-I Rani*, Delhi

The medieval reservoir of *Hauz-I Rani*, located in Southern fringes of New Delhi predates the time of the Delhi Sultans and came to be revered as a sacred space since the fourteenth century by the local inhabitants. If we delve into its history across centuries, from its first mention in a Persian chronicle *Minh-j-i Sirj Juzjani*, finished around 1260 as cited by Kumar (Kumar, 2011) to the construction of nearby Satpul dam and the *Khirki* mosque (Chauhan and Hussain, 2022), what comes out clear is that the reservoir always occupied a spot along the development of the Delhi region. It is also interesting that the relevance of the reservoir meanders almost rhythmically along with the historical processes. Named after a queen of unknown origin, the *Hauz -I Rani* or the queen's reservoir, has stood through the centuries, with a settlement named Hauz Rani, as it exists even today, around it. In all likelihood, this predominantly Muslim neighborhood consisted of service-folks who either serviced the markets of the nearby cities that powerful rulers were building with their artisanal produce or worked in the capital cities of Delhi.

The historical study below outlines the changing perceptions that the city had towards this settlement and also the sacredness of the hauz. Large amounts of construction activities around the *hauz* around that time by the Delhi sultans and other rulers did draw some attention to the hauz, which was gradually accorded a sacred significance. This sacred status was primarily due to the cultural role attached to water, *ab*, also associated with *abadi*, in the medieval times. This sacred status was devoid of any visible religious significance, especially compared to some other hauz structures like the *Hauz-I Shamsi*.

Considered a hub of prosperity, water was thought of as a gift for life given by the almighty, and likewise the *hauz* was considered special because of its nurturing properties and association with Gods blessings. By the fourteenth century, these sentiments had started influencing the manner in which the local residents thought of the *Hauz-i Rani* as is visible from attempts of their constant efforts in its maintenance. Another impact to

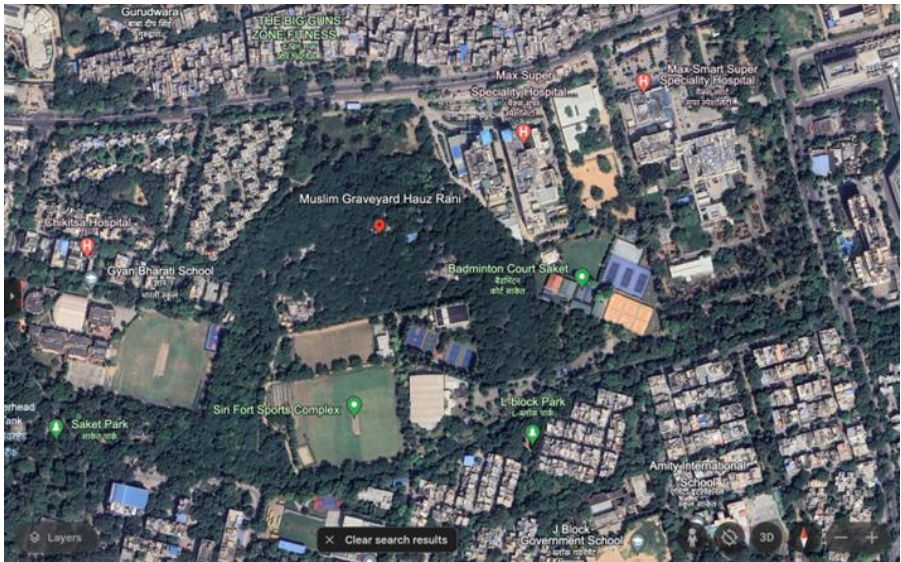


Figure 1: Present day location of the Muslim graveyard Hauz Rani, the DDA Sports Complex and adjacent neighborhoods. Source: Adapted by author from Google Earth (February, 2024).

perception took place when the area came under *sufi* patronage, and a sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325 AD) lent significance to the *hauz*, such that it no longer remained just a source of water but started to get associated with his miracles, making the residents his sacred disciples. This gave a certain amount of autonomy and importance to the neighborhood in the eyes of the Delhi sultanate. This status was unlike some of the other Muslim neighborhoods that were coming up under the patronage of the sultans, even though geographically, it always remained outside the extents of the main cities of the Delhi. In this regard, Koch writes about these areas as occasional flashes of a past glory (Koch, 2001). Gradually, as the city of Delhi saw multiple layers of development and its focus shifted elsewhere, for instance Firozabad and Shahjanahabad, the scaredness of the *hauz* became more and more obscure with time.

In the 19th century, the *Hauz-I Rani* was mentioned as a swamp in the survey maps of the Gazetteer of Delhi 1883-84, that sprung up seasonally, and as came to be known later, flooded the residential area nearby (Department, 2024). The memory and scaredness of the *hauz* further reduced with the coming up of a graveyard along the banks of the reservoir, as villagers started burying their esteemed members within the groves of trees.

It was not until the 1960's and 80's when South Delhi started developing around it, that the construction activities of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) focused attention on the *hauz* through the master plans for Saket, Pushp Vihar and Malviya Nagar (for its present-day location, see **Figure 1**). In the process of transferring land ownership, half of the land

around the reservoir was transferred to the DDA. Earmarked to be a sports complex, the first course of action inculcated digging up the southern wall of the *hauz* to make a storm water drain, a *pucca nala* along the lines of the ancient drains (Kumar, 2011) (Layton, 1999). At this stage, the residents of Hauz Rani were very supportive of the construction of the *pucca nala*, considering these developments as signs of progress.

Moving ahead in time, Hauz Rani emerged as a support settlement for the growing construction industry, providing commercial services like plumbers, electricians, welders, carpenters, and labor for the upcoming neighborhoods in the vicinity. Most of the inner areas of Hauz Rani remained occupied by Muslims, though some of the fringes began to see occupation by Hindu and Jain families, who set up shops facing the privileged neighborhoods of Saket and Malviya Nagar. In this manner, the inner core with a strong Muslim identity remained, while an outer face developed looking outwards to face the city. These inner-outer faces within Hauz Rani developed and, as discussed next, mirrored the status of the Muslims with respect to the outside world (Layton, 1999).

Within the developing social hierarchy, a strong economic and class disparity emerged between Hauz Rani and its surrounding neighborhoods, which were perceived as the more privileged groups. That DDA intended to build a Sports complex that was ostensibly secular structure was clear. However, what was not intended was that this development introduced communal polarization and tension in the region. This happened due to ingrained notions of class and confessional distinctions (Kumar, 2011) that destroyed some of the older patterns of usage. The DDA was simply constructing a wonderful facility for sports enthusiasts in the city in an *undeveloped* area and was establishing certain formal order amidst chaos, abiding by the principles of secularism enshrined in our Constitution.

What were these older patterns of usage rendered dysfunctional? Immediately before the DDA built its formal sports complex, at the interim stage of development, a *mairaan* comprising of the three large fields, connecting the development of Saket and Malviya Nagar to the graveyard of Hauz Rani was left earmarked but untended. This *mairaan*, a common ground, enabled residents of either side to move around freely throughout the area. To top it all, a paved pedestrian path and a bridge built by the DDA further connected the two areas. This interim structure, the *mairaan*, was unbound and unfenced; and became an accessible common ground for children from both the localities to freely play play cricket and football with each other. Moreover, the non-structured regimen of this interim structure resulted in unregulated fraternizing and resulted in generating a barrier free social space.

This space became an extraordinary place where residents from both sets of neighborhoods intermingled. There was little memory of the sacredness of the *hauz*, and the space gave strangers a chance to mix without any class or caste difference. In this manner, the *hauz* became desacralized and the *mairaan* forgot its class and ethnic differences resulting in harmonious fraternization.

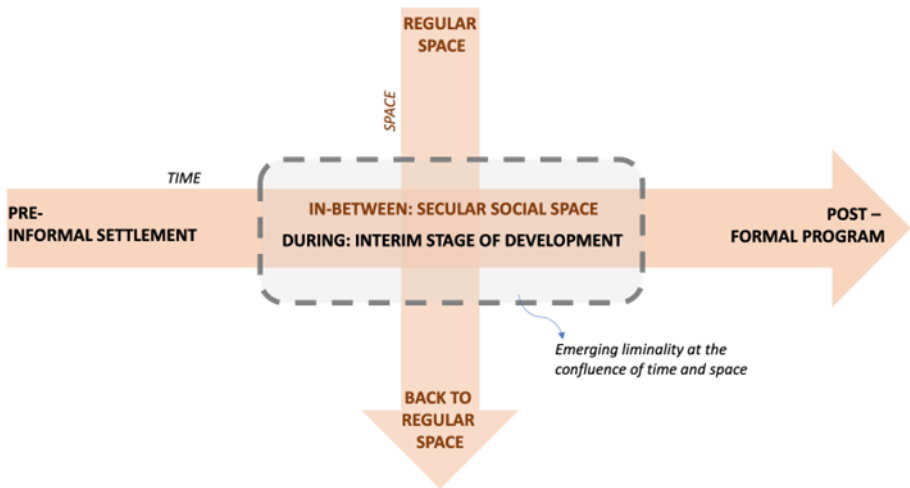


Figure 2: Diagram illustrating emerging liminality at the confluence of time (X-axis) and space (Y-axis).
Source: Authors

This ‘accidental’ harmony and the resulting secular lung lasted for only as long as the interim structure remained. Soon, in 1990, this interim structure was razed and replaced with a much more elaborate version of sports complex. As soon as DDA finalized its formal sports complex, fences were erected and boundaries were created. The open maidan was now replaced by a ‘members-only’ array of sports activities like badminton, tennis, cricket, aerobics, yoga, horse, riding etc. The sports complex, catering to the upper middle-class colonies of Saket and Malviya Nagar, had little memory that it was constructed on half of the bed of the *hauz*. Notably, its orientation was not towards the village as that was considered ‘low class’, filthy and unsafe by the DDA engineers (Kumar, 2011). The DDA insulated itself from the supposedly hostile environment of the village by zoning off its own spaces inwards. Towering walls were erected and a single entry was kept from the Saket side while the pedestrian pathway built earlier was fenced in and heavily secured. In response to this denial of access, the residence of Hauz Rani village, aware of their minority status and insecure about their property ownership in the hands of the state, started defending themselves through a systematic strengthening of their Muslim identity. Propagating a strong sacred history linking the land of Hauz Rani with their ‘sacred’ ancestors through the graveyard, they began renovating their mosques and imparting religious instructions. The residents of Saket appreciated the positive impact of building the sports complex and the great divide helped in improving the profile of their neighborhood. As a result, extreme polarization happened (**Figure 2**).

Within this sequence of events that shaped the social and cultural life of these areas, the middle phase became most crucial to their existence as secular social spaces. The three maidans were interconnected without any fences or barriers between them and the

neighborhoods. Also, the interim sports complex was unstructured in terms of program, which resulted in imparting a sense of freedom and flexibility to its users, both in terms of selecting the kind of activity they want and also who they could interact with. The openness of the maidan, a result of the porous flows between the two sets of neighborhoods, was instrumental in it becoming barrier free, both in spatial and social forms. The porosity was not just the physical access of the space but also the inclusivity of people from different religions and economic backgrounds. It became an inclusive and accessible space during the interim phase of its development. For that particular moment, people were accepted as individuals irrespective of their caste, class or at ground. This was a truly democratic space and a secular space as strangers interacted with one another in unfamiliar spaces. The moment this unstructured character was changed to the formal structure, this sense of freedom was lost to existing biases, normative notions of class and religion. As mentioned by Sunil Kumar in his two essays on Hauz Rani, it was the liminality of the *mairdan* that desacralized the *hauz* for the brief moment (Layton, 1999) (Kumar, 2011). This is a clue for urban designers.

Developing a Framework for Urban Liminality

The liminality of the *mairdan* that brought people together for unstructured fraternizing was lost to the formal structure built by the state. What resulted was the complete loss of the communal harmony that had emerged between the two sets of neighborhoods during this phase of its development. The loss of liminality of the sports complex, the interim phase of which had successfully bridged gaps between class and sector differences, was now instrumental in polarizing the two sets of neighborhoods.

The *mairdan* had characteristics of 'in-betweenness' as can be seen in three ways – it was in between the stages of development; it was not completely formal unlike the subsequent form and was in between a formal and an almost formal structure; and was not functionally structured to be a sports complex but was still earmarked for being a sports complex. Despite not being as formal and structured as the subsequent complex, the *mairdan* was not as loose as the earlier settlement before being earmarked by the DDA for development. This positions the *mairdan* as held in tension between where it came from and where it is about to reach, what we call being in a liminal space. This liminal space is a construction of both the *pre*, what it was and the *post*, what it was going to be, and would cease to exist without either of them. So much so that the definition of the liminal space is contingent to these, and the loss of any one would result in the loss of the liminal space itself.

The in-betweenness of the *mairdan* therefore, was occurring in terms of a continuum of both time *and* space, and this continuum is attributed to and at the same time produces liminality. It was at this time that the *mairdan* was neither a space solely for the Hauz Rani residents nor for the Saket residents and had a characteristic 'otherness' of not belonging to anyone and everyone at the same time. This otherness also created a space that no

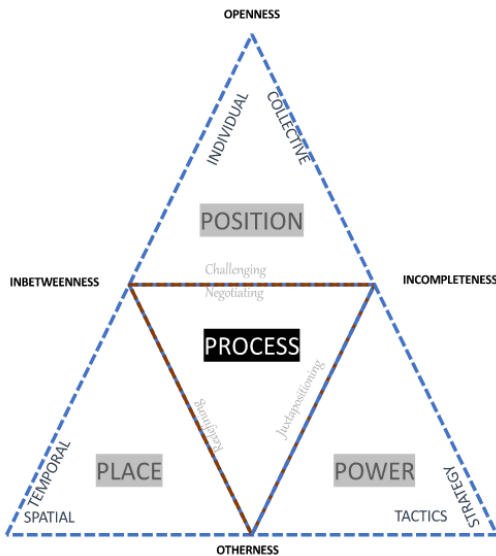


Figure 3: Framework for the study of liminality

longer held on to the scaredness of the hauz nor declared itself completely modernized. This was a third space, that had a unique otherness of its own.

The otherness created a neutral ground for social experimentation, as is evident from the obscurity of religious significance following the desacralization of the *mairdan*. This constructive potential as a result of the liminality, even though for a short duration, can have a lasting impact on the urban spaces and its users. The characteristics of liminality induces a potential for exploration and experimentation, resulting in the emergence of alternative urban use and organization (Bey, 1991) possessing the potential to manifests freedom, within no established hierarchy (Pittaluga, 2020).

Liminality in the *mairdan* thrived in its 'openness' and 'incompleteness', both of which may not be mutually exclusive. As discussed above, the structural, functional, social, temporal and spatial openness allowed for, what Sennet refers to as an open system (Sennett, 2018) (Ellin, 2006). The openness gives a chance to the structure to evolve without any pre-decided norms and remains open to unconventional new uses, for instance the social encounters between the two neighborhoods in the Hauz Rani example.

Openness recognizes the space as a product of spontaneous interactions between diverse groups of people, inhaling deeply the complexity and noise, and having the potential to scale up to dynamic and emergent shapes. Similarly, the incompleteness in all of these forms played a role in keeping the place open for exploration and can actually be steered in any direction. The edges of this liminal space were blurred, possessing an ambiguity of not being recognizable for a specific period of development. Lacking a specific status and

defined identity, where the presence and correlation of different dimensions are not individually characterizable. It belonged to no one and everyone at the same time. The multidimensional aspect of being spatial and temporal at the same time along with historical, cultural, political.

A framework for the study of liminality emerges, as illustrated above, and requires a processual approach for understanding the phenomenon as a continuum, with an emphasis on the middle. The middle is characterized by qualities of in-betweenness, incompleteness and openness within the confines of its blurry, multidimensional edges. These spaces become neutral grounds for experimentation and possess a strong creative potential that triggers new unconventional occurrences. This phenomenon takes place at the confluence of position (people and perception that is individual and collective), place (possessing spatial and temporal dimensions) and power (established norm, tactics and strategy). Hence, when we study the impacts of people, place and power that come together and manifest liminality through a complex set of processes. A processual understanding at the intersection of these three important core elements, together with the processes of redefining, juxtapositioning, challenging and negotiating, helps develop a framework for analysis of liminality that manifests through the qualities of openness, in-betweenness and incompleteness (**Figure 3**).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the recognition of liminality in urban design praxis and theory is important as it provides a sighting into what such spaces of potentiality, or even danger as per definition, can be and what are the conditions necessary for this to happen. As we know liminality is not created or designed, rather it takes place, and a recognition of the conditions under which that happens is critical to effective urban design. Within the tripartite, as already identified by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1982), the liminal is the middle stage, and in the above example, it is perceived to be still an undeveloped stage by the establishment.

This lack of recognition of liminality and its manifestations, actually led to a further loss of a potentially viable social space in the city. The secular community formation was attributed to the liminality of that place, and is therefore valuable to identify and acknowledge in urban design. It should not be relegated as being unimportant or nonexistent owing to its blurriness and ambiguity, or simply go unnoticed like in the above example, but needs to be incorporated as an important component of dynamic urban environments. The above example illustrates that when left unrecognized, such occurrences will be brought back to standardized concepts based on disciplinary tradition of a priori defined needs and established forms of rationality. As we have seen liminality in the urban is associated with oppositions, ambiguities, mutations and transformations, being in tension with the future and involves dialectical interaction rather than opposition between binaries. Unburdened from traditional design practice, being unplanned they have the potential to be laboratories of institutional change. They can be creative and productive, and can offer an

opportunity towards reversible, dialectical and non-resolutive design processes. Open practitioners of liminal spaces require to put themselves at the service of inhabitants, postulate an immersion in context and need to eliminate epistemological barriers that characterized traditional patterns including contextualized forms of rationality and hegemonic practices. ■

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