

TEMPORALITY and TENACITY

Potency of the Indian Panorama

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Keywords: Temporality, Tenacity, Rootedness, Reminiscences

Abstract

The urban canvas of India in its response to uncertainty of the global pandemic has unfolded a multitude of ethnic shades. While the plazas and squares in its pristine architecture shrunk to the geometries of space remaining a picturesque montage, a void that truly defined the public realm, the Indian context revelled in its new donned garb of utilitarian adornment. Transformation of public spaces as markets, civic awareness camps and as an assemblage of quarantine centres showcases the temporality of the space and tenacity to the context. In the new normal cityscapes of social distancing, the digital world has unleashed virtual convergence as the syntax against the expanding boundaries of the urban scenario. The booming issue of dens(c)ity becoming the contention and the flow of migrants defining the networks, the innate connect of sheltering the distanced and societal integration in the times of plunging economies exhibit the underlying chord of universality. The quarantine paving the way for rootedness of nature and uprooting of exploitive economy has led to introspection of the existential being and primal exploration of the inner realms of the self. The deeper meaning of people in space, creating a home from a house, reflecting the potency of the social domain of the house in applauding, entertaining and bonding in the privatised public realms of balconies, sit-outs, terraces paint the shade of awakening of the inner realm. The emerging typology of inner-scapes or inscapes redefines the residential quarter in it inclusive and exclusive spaces. The Indian landscape in its revival of folk arts and live performing traditions of the street has morphed to become an instrument of educating and creating awareness, reminiscences the deeply ingrained cultural legacy resonating camaraderie of oneness.

Introduction

Urban Landscapes in the time of a pandemic outbreak represents an ambit of triadic constructs (fig.02) of space, people and function that combine in unique permutations to respond, adapt and reconfigure representing a sense of tenacity rooted in the Indian panorama. The dictum of timelessness has transgressed to shades of ephemeral reality and the temporal nature of spaces is resurfacing as a means of resilient retaliation. The temporality of space in its inner realms of

the house and the outer sphere of publicness have evolved in its innate potential to absorb, resonate and react to mutant changes in the pandemic environment. The public realm and infrastructure revealed in its strengthened quotient of adaptive use manifest a new theory of latent potential in harnessing plug and play inventory. The underlying quotient of tenacious urban rigour has seen avenues of permeance amidst a state of emerging urban flux. The most visible, manifested and tangible dimensions reflected in the generic understanding of public spaces have been complimented in the Indian context through its display of tenacity, temporal resurgence and transcendence from its primordial function of a gathering space for exchange. The ingrained cultural essence of the Indian panorama rechristens streets as arteries of communication beyond social distancing norms to avenues for spreading social awareness. Revival of traditional wisdom, engaging folk arts and local artisans in creating the base for awareness campaign has brought the indigenous knowledge into the public urban forum. The connect in the time of distancing, established through conscious integration of dual modes of communication through digital platforms and analogous methods of reaching out have bridged the gap across the nation in its geographical rural urban divide. The pandemic landscape presents scenarios of coming together in spirit, the reconfiguration of networked and physical spaces amidst dualities of the real and virtual worlds.

The constructs of people on space in terms of defining densities have presented a different scenario with the slums and high dense core areas facing the brunt of the pandemic which needs redefining the boundaries of people on land. The connecting link of Geddesian triad stands to be questioned in the pandemic context as the concept of work from home rendered stillness in the mobility of the information technology corridors of the city. The duality in contrast was the exodus of migrant works creating unprecedented flows countered and encountered in its vagaries need introspection on urban employment based functions.

The case of Chennai city in the state of Tamil Nadu in India has been delved to understand public space resonance, social cultural reminiscences and the state of flux in redefining density and the urban form configurations of planning core facilities and economics. The experiential learning from the city reflects the understanding of the tangible and intangible manifestations as a resultant of pandemic induced urban changes to space – people dynamics. The planning strategies reflecting shifting boundaries of vital urban functions in its spatial connect, reworking densities of essential lifelines and surging through communal connect leaves footprints and reminiscences on the sands of pandemic times.

Revelation Process

The process adopted to understand the pandemic landscape in Chennai city had its primordial focus on transformation of the public realm in its dimensions of location, function and adaptability from information/ data revealed in the news media. The concept of publicness was interpreted in parameters that transcend the dimension of time to reveal temporality of spaces in its function, flows and constructs. The axiom of digitally shrinking phenomenon in terms of advanced integration of technology was profiled through the launch of Govt. schemes and private technology vendors/research groups. The thread of tenacity gathered in the fabric of the

community and societal patterning that celebrated its vibrance in ritual spaces and convergence to observing the regimen of the quarantine through empty streets (fig. 01,03) showcase adaptive nature in times of unpredictability.

The network of flows as in the major arteries and the edge of the city (fig. 04, 05) revered in its coastline and the longest promenade of the city donned the garb of space against place, bringing strength and the emphasis on the construct of people. The crux of public spaces being dynamics of people has brought to the fore of discussion the need to revisit the tenets of place-making as an integrated process in the planning and urban design of the city. The content and contained components of public space need redefinition as a container with multitude of possibilities of function and flows.

The largest public realm of Chennai city, the Marina Beach, the pivot of expression, demonstrative freedom and public voice (fig. 06, 07) that championed the cause of people in the administrative capital of Tamil Nadu adopted a grinding halt of functions to curb the spread. The evocative question that arises pertains to the concept of publicness in its axioms of naturalness, universal access and inclusivity, all of which hold potential in times of an unprecedented pandemic.

While within the premise of expanding social distance, the concentration of density and centralisation of essential functions of the city as in the wholesale market at Koyambedu in Chennai city has been discussed on the basis of planning strategies of the masterplan and the strategies in the context of the emergent pandemic situation. The sociocultural facets and essence of the community was focussed through the indigenous adoption of traditional techniques of awareness campaigns, integration of ethnic ways of transmission and engagement of the local folk artisans for dissemination of information. The city as a “category of practice” (Wachsmuth, 2014) representing traditional ideologies that could be revisited has been a thread of analysing the integration of timeless legacies of the society even during the contemporary context of a pandemic.

State of the Art – Digital Flows

The digital flows that networked people has become the new normal connect in virtual space, wherein the axiom of physical connectivity stands to be questioned and deliberated in the contemporary world under the pandemic. The spaces of flow (Castells, 2001) highlighting the information age in cities has come to a fruition in real terms by digital flow. The Arogya Setu mobile application launched by the Indian Government, a mandatory installation helped trace and track the spread, keeping citizens informed and responsive as a nationally accessible and connected network. The opening up of digital corridors, envisioned in the digital India scheme, a flagship program to empower the nation, wire and network the citizens to information, saw its culmination point in the use of information technology to profile the pandemic, in its spread, growth and access to awareness and support schemes.

The mobile applications launched by the urban civic authorities, access to dashboards and periodic information dissemination, has realised the larger vision of digital India mission. The Covid – 19 Quarantine Monitor – TamilNadu (by Tamil Nadu Police Department, Pixxon AI Solutions Private Limited), GCC- Corona Monitoring (Greater Chennai Corporation) and Co-buddy – Covid-19 Tool (FaceTagR, Notion Tag Technologies, Tamil Nadu) mobile applications using GPS (Global Positioning System) tracker and proprietary based face recognition systems launched in early March 2020 started with its supervision of more than 15,000 people quarantined at home in Chennai city (Lakshanae, 2020). The GCC application had enabled the citizens to record symptoms and also submitting photos of crowded spots in the city bringing to the fore public participation, responsive civic action and collective community involvement. State of the art public realm stands to be redefined in the revolutionary surge of digital networks bringing people together in a new typology termed virtual space.

Temporal Public Realm: Tenacious Blue Print

The decongestion strategy of the central business district of Chennai city in the master plan saw the creation of a centralised wholesale market facility for the Chennai city at Koyambedu integrated with access and transport networks. The onus on strategic siting of public infrastructure along major corridors, self-sustaining open spaces, active and passive in its functional nature in the neighbourhood and the database on the potential of new interventions can be read from the second master plan of Chennai city. The strategic decision to shift the wholesale market from the pandemic stricken Koyambedu to the satellite town of Thirumazhisai, at a distance of 20kms further away from the main city was due to the availability of access, plug and play facilities wherein a prompt rearrangement could be facilitated. One of the major transport terminals at Madhavaram on the periphery of the northern corridor of the city was the temporary holding post of the fruit market shifted from Koyambedu profiling the spatial connect in its transformative role play.

The temporal changes that the pandemic registered has rendered an additional urban property to the functioning of public infrastructure as in play areas and transport terminals. Nearly fifty smaller neighbourhood markets were shifted to playgrounds, while 90 shops of the strategically and centrally located Chintadripet market were shifted temporarily to the nearby May Day Park in the south of Chennai city. The decentralised approach resurfaced at the time of the pandemic to contain the temporary markets within neighbourhoods thus isolating and diversifying the concentration of people at the core. Strategic location of corporation owned play areas in major neighbourhoods and bus terminus played a crucial role in transforming to centres of essential lifeline services. The tenacity in reassembling the essential services, reinvesting the facilities at varying hierarchical scales, making a contingency blueprint is a pointer to governance and advocacy planning measures.

The pandemic proved that the centralisation of Koyambedu wholesale market had to make way to the shift of functions to neighbourhood, urban nodes and satellite /new town settlements in the developing suburbs envisioning essential urban landscapes in extended outgrowths. The larger spectrum of urban planning goals has a new paradigm as in resurgence at times of un-certainty

as a premeditated axiom in the 3rd master plan for the city which is in its nascent stage. The siting of major infrastructure, return to decentralisation and decongestion mode, density norms to be addressed in the residential neighbourhoods and new developments in contradiction to the subaltern spaces are the emergent planning codes to be decoded.

Discussion-Urban Metamorphosis: Social Resurgence

The age of new normal saw the closure of public spaces across the globe but the opening or unfolding of varied dimensions and opportunity in the Indian context underlining the integral quality of constructs for people. The Indian public realm, celebrated in its everyday urbanism (fig. 08, 09) rose to utmost adaptive power donning the role of quarantine areas, makeshift markets and gathering spaces for essential supplies, the true public lifeline. The traditional street art and graphic culture in its new-found expression became conduits in creating aware-ness, spreading social messages and fostering visual convergence.

The case of Chennai city saw the emergence of typological variations of the public realm as temporary markets; hold areas for migrants and quarantine spaces each with a varied construct of function. The metamorphosis and redefinition of the public realm as adaptive and resurgent spaces, universally accessible and conundrum of self-sustained containers have established a new dictum in the design of public spaces.

The coming together of the community in organising temporary shelters, pit stops for the migrants on the move and the private groups volunteering to open educational houses/institutions to house the stranded people displayed the resilience and responsive measures to ensure equity to secure shelter and access to basic services. The Indian Government took stock of the looming movement of workers by introducing the Shramik Train Services for the stranded people. The Indian Railways as stated in the news reported that as on 27th of May 2020, 3604 Shramik Special Trains had transported nearly 48 lakh migrants (Nag, 2020). The special services had addressed the needs of transporting students, pilgrims, tourists and others beyond the focus group of migrant workers. Though the emphasis on flows of economy and power has integrated the networks of communication investments and capital is yet to reinstate emphatically and bring to the fore the physical existence of the migrant workforce.

The private realms unfolded in a unique way in the coming together of people in applauding the health workers from the inner - scapes of homes has brought a new wave of community networking . The new found potential of opening out corridors, eyes on the streets, bonding from the balcony and linking across the arteries has outlined new challenges to be integrated in the architecture and design of spaces of the city. The psychologic inner realms have been revisited with small neighbourhood communities collating essential stocks to be shared and distributed to the stranded, migrants and the outsiders to the city celebrating the ancient Indian scriptural saying in Sanskrit, "Athithi Devo Bhava" (treating guests like God, *Athithi* is "guests", *Devo* is "God", *Bhava* is "like").

Conclusions

Urban landscapes have the inherent potential to redeem, regenerate and renew itself in its myriad forms of adaptive resilience. Design of the public realm has to be an extension of every-day urbanism and transcend beyond expression to existential essentialities. The avenues that revolutionise densities should begin resurrecting land economics through an understanding of the shifting boundaries between place of work and residence. Question of density needs a paradigm shift from only blaming the subaltern spaces to granting of high densities in neighbourhoods of minimally equipped infrastructure which tends to lay pressure on land and services. The work flows need to be inclusive in addressing the migrant population, their temporal access to land and services and vulnerabilities in transforming landscapes of permanence. The zoning and land use parameters prompt at revamping in terms of the emerging culture of work from home, reducing travel, mobility patterns, flows of people and mix of typologies at the urban context. Pandemic landscapes have created a plethora of changes in the accepted doctrines of zoning, concentration of activities and a rethinking on public and private realms.

The future of the existential world is not in its temporalities of change and tenacious resilience during an unprecedented pandemic outbreak, but a proactive continuum that fosters people and their constructs in the hearth of responsiveness to nature and its veracities.