

ALTERNATIVE PRACTICE¹

I would speak specific to a certain issue of “practice”. This becomes important for two reasons, firstly, because an understanding of the issue (particularly in the urban context) would be required, so as to clarify the nature of relevant practice and secondly, there is an attempt to hypothesise, that the roots of the contemporary practise and its understanding is highly linked to the structure and methods of the present nature of education.

i

Often it is the construction/alteration/modification of a *building*² that becomes synonymous with “practice”. This practice presumes a patronage (which supplies the programme) and enforces a type³.

A relationship between “practice”, “the client” (the patron) and “the type” could be established. Where the notion of practice becomes dependent on client and type.

In such situations, “practice”, then becomes a market activity involving buying and selling; producing a product and selling it. Innovation and vision become exercises for competition – maintaining the product oriented nature of the built-form.

ii

It becomes necessary to understand the way we understand, because it establishes the language structure that becomes the basis for any production. Or to put it simply, the way we understand is the way we respond and the way we produce.

The way we understand – at least we are trained to understand, in the academy – through the language of the orthography, is highly a cartographic understanding – of a manner where the self and the object of study (or of creation) are at a critical distance with each other.

While the cartographic understanding is efficient in establishing the positions of the objects of study and describing certain relations⁴ between them, it becomes inadequate to position the researcher in the understanding, where it assumes the researcher outside the boundaries of the study. Such a position only indicates the researcher as an instrument of a larger policy where the research is conducted for a certain purpose outside the sole concern of the researcher. The researcher is in no way able to investigate into the

¹ The first part “Alternative Practice” has been prepared specifically for the KRVIA seminar on architectural education in India, January 2001. The footnotes are added for the current writing. This text was prepared for the Newsletter of Kamla Raheja Vidyaniidhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies that is to be published in January 2002

² Building as a noun or more appropriately, built-form and not the verb or the act.

³ “Type” here is not as much in its classical definition of being typical but is more as an established norm in the built-form for that particular geography which has been instituted under a certain political and economical structure.

larger politics which are governed by economical and cultural relations. Quite often it is the state or the market who are the policy makers. The internal contradictions within the objects are selectively mapped depending upon the scale and the purposes of mapping.

While inherently, the orthographic language structure of the cartographic map – the plan – is able to elaborate the hard facts of position and relations of the object and can be used to make the “master-plan”, it can in no way describe (and hence understand) the way one experiences the object, or the way the object positions itself with all its contradictions with respect to other objects. This tactility and hence the “softer” relations⁵ that are formed at local levels, cannot be understood due to the distance between the mapper and the object of study. It is these softer relations that indicate the nature of political and economical forces. It is in them that the seeds of understanding the larger policies are present.

If one is to dig into the roots of the cartographic model of understanding, then one sees that this model was developed for executing (autocratic) visions (constructing buildings for instance) in a certain manner⁶ and probably, is not necessarily the model of understanding systems where interventions through softer negotiations are necessary.

iii

Practising in a metropolis, the term “intervention” is probably relevant.⁷

A metropolis could be mapped as a network of innumerable tangible and intangible fabrics, within which, a series of spaces of interest, (not interesting spaces) of disparate kinds could be located. In recent times, the various fabrics and spaces in metropolis of Mumbai, presumably like most other metros of the third world, shows a reinstatement⁸, in its conventional nature of being contested. This reinstatement could probably be attributed to the new patterns in economy, which generate polarities in the fabrics and spaces of the city. It is this polarity which causes disruptions in the fabrics and spaces and needs to be addressed, specifically when one considers urban management. The interrelationships of the fabrics and spaces within themselves and with each other obligate recognition for any address of these disruptions, even if the point of entry (for intervening) is through a particular fabric or space. When the spaces allotted by the state and spaces

⁴ These can be relations that establish organisation, spatiality or scale. The cartographic understanding also can derive patterns in the system.

⁵ say the price of the property or the rent or the street fights or aspirations of the individuals, etc. all contribute toward establishing softer relations which indicate larger social relations.

⁶ There are two aspects to this as far as architectural productions are concerned, first, the contextual aspect, where either the programme, policy, site etc could develop the built form and secondly, the methodological aspect, that is the assumption, that there is a dependence of the built-form to the representation and the language structure used for its development.

⁷ I have clarified this point in the following writing.

⁸ Particularly in the case of Mumbai, after the liberalisation and globalisation processes (in the 90's), there has been identifiable instances and events starting from the riots, new industrial policies, the conservation movement, the rise and fall of real estate value etc. that shows this reinstatement of the contested physical urban space. This point is further elaborated in the following text.

occupied by the entrepreneurs are governed by the new patterns of economy themselves, then the role of the academic institutions is probably to provide the alternative space⁹.

The Design Cell of KRVI is probably one such alternative space that is as much a real space (as if questions of reality, inside/outside are important).

iv

The model for alternative practice probably requires a more cognitive understanding – understanding that starts with the self – the position – the relation of the self with the surroundings because it is here where the soft negotiations starts.

Maybe then – the mere drawing of the plan is inadequate.

TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE PRACTICE

The previous text has already clarified the contexts and the positions within which the Design Cell¹⁰ operates. In this part I would indulge in the specific issues of mapping, their purposes, their problems and the attempts of the Design Cell to resolve these problems. I would attempt to write a postscript for three of the projects of the Design Cell (The Mill-Lands Project, The Project of Dadar Parsi Colony/Hindu Colony and the project of making an architectural archive for the city in the Tate Modern).

The context for the mill lands of Mumbai was set in the changing nature in the economy of the city where the operation of the large scale industries had become uneconomical to operate within the city. A huge amount of land within the city¹¹ had become redundant on account of either complete or partial closure of the activity in the textile mills¹². On account of this (and under a certain regulation in the Development Control¹³) each mill

⁹ Alternative space for practice. There is a contradiction here; since the academy itself is situated in the cultural sphere of economy and politics, it cannot hold an autonomy. However since, I have already established the relation between the educational activity of providing tools of language structure for architectural production and the production itself, probably this is the relevant area to begin the process. I am presumably assuming the positions of academicians as from where choice is possible for alternative practice.

¹⁰ The Design Cell is the professional body of the Kamla Raheja Vidyanihi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies with the Director of the Institute, Prof. Trilochan Chhaya as it's head and Prof. Anirudh Paul as it's Principal Co-ordinator. It has a team of architects and other consultants for history, economy, social geography, infrastructure and planning. As it's first project, it prepared an integrated development plan of the mill lands for the Charles Correa Committee appointed by the Government of Maharashtra in 1996. It further completed the project of documentation and preparation of guidelines for conservation of Dadar Parsi, Hindu Colony precinct which was sponsored by the MMRDA in 2000. The Design Cell recently completed an exhibition on architecture and urbanism in the city of Mumbai which was featured in the Tate Modern, UK as a part of their inaugural exhibition. Currently the Cell has undertaken the research on the Eastern Waterfronts of Mumbai.

¹¹ Physically in the centre of the city, including areas of Parel, Lalbaug with the edges being the sea to the west, Tilak Bridge to the north, the harbour railway to the east and the Jacob Circle to the south.

¹² There are 58 cotton textile mills in the city of Mumbai. Of these 26 were deemed "sick" and were, therefore, taken over by the Government of India. 25 of these are managed by the NTC (National Textile Corporation) and 1 by MSTC (Maharashtra State Textile Corporation). The remaining 32 mills continue to be in the private sector.

¹³ Regulation 58 of the Development Control (D.C.) Regulations, which came into force in March 1991 provides for the development of the lands of sick and/or closed cotton mills on condition that:

1. One-third of the land is given to the Municipal Corporation for public open spaces.
2. 27-37% (depending on the area of the site) is given to MAHADA (housing authority) and PSUs for housing.

was being developed piecemeal and haphazardly. This new development not only brought the gentry into the area, but also became a threat to the already burdened infrastructure of the area. On the other hand, the labour group was also under a great threat.

The Government of Maharashtra in February 1996 set up a study group¹⁴ under the Chairmanship of Charles Correa together with members in the Municipal Corporation, MMRDA, Department of Urban Development and HDFC to prepare an integrated development plan for the area. This group then appointed the Design Cell to co-ordinate the study and document the area for preparing the base upon which the Government Group would evolve their report.

The Study group after documenting each mill for its physical features decided that, rather than seeing each mill as a pocket for development, the entire mill-land with all the 58 mills should be considered for an integrated development plan. In this case the policy for development of each mill no longer remains true, this policy is applied for all the mill lands which, are pooled together and considered for development. The master plan thus developed was intended towards the possibility of generating useful urban spaces along with mass housing for the area, which the area lacked.

The mill-land project, being initiated by the State and the Design Cell being in its formative period, the methods of understanding the area were highly conventional and relied on the cartographic map for information. It was this “Master-Plan” approach of the project that led to its failure in recognising various other softer relations in the area. The internal details of the actors (may it be the owners, the labour or the government) was not recognised in the format of understanding. Evidently the policy decisions were taken somewhere else. However the Mill-Land project was able to foreground the issue into a public forum and start a debate.

The analytical failure of the mill-land project forced the Design Cell to identify its role and position and re-examine the nature of practice in the city. It was realised that the contemporary metropolis of Mumbai does not require great “master-plans”, but requires integrated efforts towards managing its highly threatened resources and plans for negotiating this management. This required a structural change in the analytical format where understanding the city had to be elaborated.

The Design Cell identified that the older parts of the city due to developmental pressures are under a great threat of burdening infrastructure and ruining their existing character¹⁵. The Design Cell approached the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority for documenting and preparing guidelines for conservation of the Dadar Parsi Colony, Hindu Colony, Khodadad Circle and Matunga precincts which were developed by the Bombay Improvement Trust in the early 20th century as a suburban development to the then city of Bombay in Central Mumbai. The Design Cell was appointed to do the project.

With the shifts in the definition of the area in the 1990s i.e. from being a distant suburb to the well-connected centre of the city with highly priced premises for occupation, it has attracted incongruent developments of

3. the remaining land could be developed by the owner for residential or commercial uses as may be permissible under D.C. regulations in force.

¹⁴ Later on the Study Group was popularly called the Correa Committee.

various natures. These activities, by private and government organisations, with varied interests, have resulted not only in disruption of physical environment but also have pressurised the existing infrastructure. The existing blanket-rules¹⁵ of the city contributed to this phenomenon.

The Design Cell started the process with understanding the nature of problems in the area, the various actors and agencies involved as interest groups and analysing the existing set of rules.

The area was essentially residential in nature with an open space structure that lends the area with its particular character. The area also has a number of sub-precincts, composed of neighbourhoods inhabited by different communities. Within the area are some of the most important public spaces of the city. The problems identified were of physical decay in the built form and open spaces. The public spaces were also exhibiting chaotic conditions with regards to traffic and developmental problems.

The proposals sought to form a local body and harness citizen participation in the act of conserving their own environment. A set of institutional and financial strategies was formulated so that the varied interests and resources could be realigned to benefit the area rather than disrupt it.

A set of specific local rules were drawn for the area for which would not only arrest decay but also govern and ensure the character of the physical space including the built-form, the open spaces and the public spaces.

The Design Cell was instrumental and successful in forming a local group of residents, which is acting as a pressure group in the area. The legislative and physical guidelines proposed for the precinct are in the process of getting implemented.

The project on Dadar Parsi Colony, Hindu Colony, Khodadad Circle and Matunga precincts by the Design Cell could be seen as an effort towards organising communities and them becoming active participants in the otherwise polarised processes of urban conservation.

The formation of the Local Development Committees should be distinguished from the existing systems of elected representation in a democracy, which in India is vulgarised by party politics making the citizen passive participants. The Local Development Committee seeks to involve the residents as active participants in the developmental process making possible, the entry into the hard held fort of the bureaucracy.

But the problem of forming smaller organisations (for looking after the resources) within the city with shared resources ends up making the resource the private property of this organisation where citizens outside the organisation have a limited or no stake. The public spaces in this case become bounded entities controlled by only a set of people. One is reminded of Fredrick Jameson's warning that the post-modern understanding against the grand narrative (in this case, the "master-plan") of the modern is actually the cultural logic of late capitalism. The researcher engages in a myopia – leaving the grand narrative of late-capitalism aside – unexamined. In making new pockets within the city, represented generally by the more active, new middle-

¹⁵ Physical character of generally low rise high/low density, certain local set-backs, type and nature of open spaces, ground cover, buildings themselves as resources and further issues of scale.

¹⁶ The Bombay Improvement Trust in the 1920's had very simple, local rules to develop the area. The rules included one-third ground coverage and ground plus two buildings. Since independence there have been certain sets of blanket rules for the city of Mumbai. These include the Rent Control Act, 1948 which freezes rents at the 1940 rates and hence the owner has no incentive to take care of the building causing severe dilapidation, The rule of Floor Space Index(FSI) (1964) where the index for the area is higher than what existed and hence attracting development and the new Cess Rule which allows practically a limitless (FSI) for buildings to be reconstructed if they are dilapidated. Along with these there have been regulations like the Urban Land Ceiling act (1972) which causes the increase in price of the property since the commodity is restricted and the blanket rules of set-backs, building dimensions, heights etc. These development control rules do not show any sensitivity to the existing character or infrastructure of the specific area.

class that emerged in the 90's, one often fails to recognise the unoccupied but the existing parts of these pockets. These may be the hawkers, the household maid or any kind of service labour. The researcher becomes a part of the greater grand narrative that late-capitalism constructs. The cartography of capitalism itself had seeds for its critique, which the cognition of late-capitalism does not have in its format.

The project of making an architectural archive for the city of Mumbai (during the 1990s) in the Tate Modern featuring nine metropolis, which they called "global cities" was actually an opportunity to resolve many of the problems of mapping that were earlier encountered. Geeta Kapoor¹⁷ defined a global city as a place for the stopover of international capital.

The limitations of the cartographic map and the cognitive understanding when applied separately to a study had become very clear as elaborated above. In mapping the metropolis then, it became necessary to keep shifting positions and understand it as a network of innumerable tangible and intangible fabric within which series of spaces of interests of disparate kind could be located.

The Design Cell started looking for its entry into this process of map making. This was through the most accessible modes of advertisements and brochures made for architecture. These indicated, along with the physical kind of architecture; the socio-economical placement of it. It indicated the aspirations, the affordability and the living standards. By then it was necessary to look at architecture as a "production" in and of the cultural space, rather than it being an independent isolated creation. With this assumptions some of the first entry points were the way formal architecture of the metropolis was perceived – generated through and resulting into various kinds of recent cultures. The cultures of luxurious housing complexes with all necessary and unnecessary amenities, the culture of new urban spaces and the culture of new consumption. These recent cultures were being overlapped on some earlier cultures and quite often took form of violent clashes. Certain softer contradictions were already evident. Immediately a shift in position was necessary and it was found that the city's economy was undergoing rapid change – formal industry was becoming unsustainable in the city and the existing industries were undergoing dereliction. A new middle-class (rather a consumer class) is fast developing. The city was becoming the city of agents – agents who are not involved in the process of production but merely take advantage of it. There existed simultaneously the other layer of the city, the layer which inhabits in the interstitials of the city. This layer does not enjoy the infrastructure but serves the city and contributes to the economy. The polarisation between the two layers was considerably increasing. The nature of practices that were emerging in the metropolis was responding to these shifts in the economy and the social relations attached to it. Architectural production was seen as being moulded by the different kinds of agents and their interest attached to it. This was required to be mapped to understand the new urban landscape.

The understanding of the city being a physical entity of built forms and open spaces and conceived through cartographic physical plans was dismantled after the failure of the Mill Lands project. A newer understanding was articulated after the realizing the limitations of a cognitive model employed in the Dadar Project. The return to a modified cartography in the Tate project implies that the contemporary Metropolis of Mumbai

¹⁷ Geeta Kapoor, an art critic based in Delhi and Ashish Rajadhyakshya, a film critic based in Bangalore were the two curators for the Bombay Exhibition.

needs to be seen as a contested domain of various kinds of interests. It is clear that Mumbai does not require grand master plans of physical development but rather requires a model to understand and manage the varied interests and the highly threatened resources and plans for negotiating this management.

In the process of mapping or developing a model for understanding the new metropolis, it becomes extremely important to locate practice and to intervene. The Design Cell has been at this task for the past five years and is constantly reviewing the process. It's proximity to the academy, which not only provides intellectual and physical infrastructure, but also a space for operation, is probably the advantage that it has to evolve an alternative practice.

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