

Yeh to public hai!

Mutant Institutions and Urban Spaces: The Genealogy of CRIT

Internal Discussion Paper

By Prasad Shetty

Executive Member, CRIT (Collective Research Initiatives Trust)

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CRIT began in crisis, as its name signifies (crisis = criticality). CRIT took shape with the suffocation of the academics from within the architectural college of KRVIA (Kamala Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture), which was slowly being taken over by mainstream practitioners guarding their disciplinary boundaries, supported by a fundamentalist right-wing management. This take-over brought a temporary end to a practice from within the academy that was established over six years (between 1996 to 2002), the KRVIA Design Cell, where the academy was actively involved interventions in the city. Also under threat by this take-over were the fundamental pedagogic principles established on the basis of a research-oriented, multi-disciplinary and contextual education that had become the backbone of courses at the KRVIA. The space of practice for the academics was under threat. CRIT was born out of the needs of establishing an alternative space for practice.

I shall briefly summarise the practice in the city of these academics — the former KRVIA Design Cell — through four of their projects, towards articulating further directions for CRIT.

The first project was of Mill Land Redevelopment. With the complete or partial closure of the cotton textile mills in Mumbai, and the background of a development control regulation on redevelopment of the mill lands, several mill premises underwent immediate haphazard development. The city landscape saw a number of high-rise buildings coming up, burdening the already burdened infrastructure. Under pressure from the architectural community, the Maharashtra State Government appointed the Charles Correa Committee to prepare an integrated plan for redevelopment of the area. The Design Cell — which is the research and consultancy wing of KRVIA — became the research workforce for the Correa Committee. The primary data was the Development Plan, which clearly showed the lack of public open space in the area, and the consequent agenda of the research group was to use the opportunity of available mill lands to provide the area with public open space. The final proposal clearly identifies buildings that could be conserved for public use and proposes an open space structure. The notions of classical public open spaces dominated the proposal while the cartographic physical plan informed it. Case studies from European and American industrial land redevelopment were frequently used to argue the case. The undercurrent of the land economics and politics of development were however never understood. While the labour community never was able to the central concern of creating public open space, the owners of the mill saw the proposal essentially grabbing away their land for 'public use'. The proposal failed to gather support from any of the actors as their aspirations and opinions did not inform its production. It was the noble idea from the architects of creating a public space that had ruled the project.

The analytical failure of the Mill Lands Project, the research team at the academy started serious investigations into the methods of intervention. It was clear that the cartographic plan remains incomplete to inform planning practices. The Mill Project clearly indicated that aspirations and opinions of the community become essential in not only articulating an intervention but also providing momentum for the implementation of such an intervention.

The second involvement of the group in the Design Cell is of conserving an old residential precinct in the centre of Mumbai, the Dadar-Matunga-Wadala area comprised of Five Gardens, Hindu and Parsee Colonies. The high land prices of the area, and the policy of acquiring additional development rights for redevelopment attracted developers to invest on high-rise constructions. These new developments started burdening the infrastructure. The residential pedestrian roads had become parking spaces. Moreover the open spaces, which were at the core to establish a character of the residential district as a garden city development, were under threat of neglect and decay or of excessive haphazard development. The case was presented to the Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA), whose Heritage Conservation Society financed the study. The research group's first task was to present the problems of the area to the local residents. The research group was instrumental in manufacturing a notion of heritage through elaborate presentations of archival materials. This notion was further used to organise the residents to lobby with the government for regulating development in the area.

The research group's second task was to design the regulatory framework and implementation mechanisms. Learning from the mill land project, the aspirations of the resident's and the land-value dynamic had become primary. Hence, as against the conventional conservation strategy of preserving old buildings, the research group designed frameworks for encouraging development that would conserve the "public-space structure" which was identified as the most important character for the urban residential precinct. While the proposal made recommendations for articulating the building development, it also put together a series of suggestions for upgrading the existing open spaces. The residence group that was formed was to champion the process of developing these open spaces. While this methodological shift in the planning process was able to generate a participation from the community, it systematically isolated others who were not in this community, but were still a part of the larger "public". The large open spaces in the area were guarded by the newly formed community against the hawkers and the slum dwellers. The Public Open Space had become a private space, despite of all the efforts from the research group to involve the "public" in the planning process. We find several similar examples in the city where the local community, in the name of public, organised through NGOs or Private Practitioners, fight to acquire a kind of ownership over a public space, and finally fence the area for private use.

While the group realised that the city is the function of interests of its actors and interventions remain irrelevant if these interests are not acknowledged or mobilised; methodologies had to be articulated to understand these interests and map them for relevant action. A series of mapping exercises were experimented in the academy towards such an articulation. Questions on purpose of the map, position of a map-maker, defining the boundaries of the area of study, ways of entering the area, collecting data, representation of the map and the impacts of the map were discussed elaborately through theoretical investigations, field study exercises and design studios. Using linkages of accessible actors or other objects like predominant products/commodities to trace other actors and agencies and their interests; using

methods of “posing as one of the actors” to enter; and using routine gossips to trace undercurrents in aspirations and opinions were some of the experiments in the field study exercises. Individual investigations of students becoming a part of the larger map of the entire class of students giving a larger picture of the area not only through the volume of data, but linkages in them and their representation had become the key strategy for these studios.

The third project that I would describe actually starts in two studios in the academy where experiments of mapping were undertaken in the Port and Dock Lands of Mumbai, or Eastern Waterfront. The non-modernisation of the port infrastructure, the reduction in the industrial activities with the city and the development of several other ports along the western coastline of India had substantially reduced the port activities in Mumbai. While there was an opportunity to utilise the large port-lands to reduce pressures of increasing development and densities in the city, these lands were locked in larger political, institutional and administrative muddle. The studios were developed for two reasons, firstly to undertake a routine survey of physical space and secondly to understand the interests that contributed to the muddle. On the basis of these preliminary studies, the study group was then able to access some financial support for a larger, detailed and more serious work on the Port Lands. Data was acquired from the formal and informal sector in the Port Lands with researchers from the study group posing as students or some interest parties. When the actors and their interests were mapped, the port-lands were anything but empty land for the city. On the other hand the funding agencies of the study project and other powerful groups had several visions for the area like making the port-lands into a large public space, developing them into high end commercial usage, establishing the sea-link with the other side of the harbour etc. The study group decided to develop these conflicting interests into scenarios and presenting it to the “public” for a debate. Subsequently a conference and exhibition was held in February 2004, and the government appointed a special task force to study and suggest development in the area. Ironically however, the study group never found an independent position in this task force. The task force was made up of senior bureaucrats, planners and even the funding agencies of the earlier study group. We understand that the study group members would be individually sub-contracted for some parts of the project. On the other hand, the management of the academy, under whose umbrella the study took place, was never interested in pursuing the project.

The weak support from the management of the academy, KRVIA, and the appropriation of the Port Lands project became the most important catalysts for the establishment of CRIT as an alternative space for the academics. The Port Lands project raised several new questions on methods of research. Though we had attempted to map most of the actors and negotiate their interests, the interest groups never considered the authenticity of their representation. The Bombay Port Trust fiercely guarded its documents since the study was made public. Moreover, once the interests are mapped, how to negotiate these interests so as to underplay the powerful interests and foreground others was also an unanswered question. But more importantly, the project once again raised very important questions on the “public”. The trust on the homogeneous, all lawful, right public was disappearing after the task force was made. Again the powerful agencies had appropriated the project in the name of the public.

The next project was the first done outside KRVIA, and was one of the first projects of CRIT as an independent organisation. All Members of CRIT were earlier employed in the Design Cell of KRVIA. This project conceptually attempted to address the

questions raised in the previous projects in the academy. Several newspaper articles alleged that a piece of land along the sea in a wealthy suburb of Mumbai, Bandra Reclamation, was being “gifted” to builders for commercial development. This piece of land was designated as a recreational ground in the development plan. The neighbourhood resident’s group, the General A.K. Vaidya Nagar Rahivasi Sangh, alarmed by the newspaper article, wanted to approach the court of law for retaining this land as a “public open space”. This resident’s group wanted a bargaining document to present its case and approached CRIT for preparation of such a document. CRIT saw it as an opportunity to develop this bargaining document as a map that would be made by the community, and which would empower them to fight their case in the court of law. The map was designed as a community diary that would keep developing with the community. Elaborate surveys of the community through large number of questioners and interviews were conducted to gauge the opinions and aspirations of the community. The diary also made empirical arguments on the requirement of open space in the area. The diary was then presented to the government with a consequence that the political leaders were forced to say that the piece of land would be developed as a public open space, and they would develop it. On the other hand the resident’s group wanted to be sole proprietors of the open space and develop it as a public space. The diary was successful in shifting the power from the political group to the resident’s community. But the survey of the community indicated several more questions that remained unanswered. The resident’s group was not the representative of the community. The community had extremely mixed opinions on the development of the land. Most of the members wanted to develop it into facilities like swimming pool and gymnasiums. Some of the members were not interested in the land at all. But the community almost unanimously did not want to see the existing encroachments and slum dwellers using the piece of land. While the diary mapped these interests, it had to foreground the plan of the resident’s group. The resident’s group now wanted to develop the land into newer facilities for the residents around the area. While the exercise was successful in involving the community and empowering them through the bargaining document, it was still unable to resolve the question of “public”. Invariably some members of the public remain outside.

There was a methodological fault in the entire exercise. In the efforts to map all interests and present them equally, we were not able to distinguish between the interests of the slum-dwelling family to simply survive, the interest of the resident’s to take their dogs for a walk or convert the place into a swimming pool, the interests of the developer to make some marginal profits or the interests of the politicians to get some votes. All interests looked the same through our lens articulated through years of rigorous methodological investigations without ideological clarity. As academics we assumed ourselves to be trustees of the community, but the question on who is the community was unresolved. Moreover CRIT Members styled themselves as academics, but the pressures of sustenance force them to behave as mainstream consultants. Doubts on the discourse of the “public” were more acute than ever.

The Urban Space project is aimed to address these problems. The conventional mainstream planning process is critiqued through its inability to engage other sectors, to engage various actors, to have a strategy for implementation, and is predominantly top-down in its approach. On the other hand the new models of planning based on public participation and developing strategies and specific action, suffers from extreme appropriations by the new powerful groups. Academy through the absence of a private space, neutrality in interests and availability of the intellectual infrastructure seems to be a powerful and appropriate agency to investigate into the newer planning processes.

This investigation has to undertake the first task of conceptualising the “public” which is becoming increasingly problematic in recent times.

The Urban Space project is intended as a vehicle towards establishing a full-fledged academy. To articulate the institution and the working of the academy and initiate activities for such an establishment, certain short-term components will have to be initiated. The project envisages three short-term components:

1. Reclaiming Academic Space
2. Re-imagining the “Public”
3. Intervening in the City

Reclaiming Academic Space

- a. Cities Programme, an inter-institutional network and studio
- b. Specialised Training Programme
- c. Research Fellowship Programme
- d. Public Dissemination Programme

Re-imagining the “Public”

This is an internal research component undertaken by the members of CRIT themselves.

- a. Shifts in the imagination of the “public”, through an assessment of new projects and policies
- b. Problems of the new imagination: Social implications of the new planning paradigms, new urban policies, new built form and the programmes
- c. Strategizing the new imagination

Intervening in the City

Three areas are articulated based on existing work done to initiate these projects. These are: Peripheral Metropolitan Environments, Mass Housing for the Informal Sector and New Policy Evaluation

- a. Metropolitan Periphery: Vasai-Virar Sub-Region
- b. Mass Housing for the Informal Sector: Collaborations with CBOs
- c. Policy Evaluation 1: The Heritage Conservation Policy
- d. Policy Evaluation 2: Development Right