

Dialogues with memory: three conversations on heritage



The tension between urbanisation and cultural heritage is acute in India, where the country's urban population has doubled from 100 million to 200 million in the twenty years between 1991 and 2011, and is envisaged to reach 500 million by 2041. Urban change, whether through rapid urbanisation or urban redevelopment initiatives, has historically posed real challenges and opportunities for cultural heritage. Indeed, within many countries, heritage legislation has been developed as a result of a fear that urban change will erase the history of places.

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Because the size and diversity of the city makes centralised collection, which focuses on diversity and the multiple layers of urban life, a difficult task, the Centre for Community Knowledge at Ambedkar University Delhi has initiated a multi-year Delhi Citizens Memory Programme, currently in its third year. Called the Neighbourhood Museum Programme, this multi-year research and documentation initiative travels around different neighbourhoods of the megacity, with each local event accompanied by an exhibition and public memory sharing forum. With a mandate to document the 'lived everyday' in Delhi, it does so by using memory, local history and the communication arts. Designed to make local heritage a local spectacle, these exercises in provoking multiple narratives of a shared place in a public setting are designed to make layers of meaning visible. By introducing oral (contemporary) and written narratives from history about the diverse experiences of place, the relational and dialogic take precedence over the static, in what is an attempt to transfer agency to the residents of the city.

The emphasis on public sharing emerged out of previous experiences by the author of this paper, as such sharing allows space for dialogue and discussion. As a cultural exchange and communication process, the exercise occurs on the border between art and life, as a performance with no boundary between performers and audience. The organisers of these events walk a tightrope in their attempts to explore diversity, rather than to simply consider it 'different'. The main questions facing the Neighbourhood Museum Team include – What marks the neighbourhood? What is to be collected (memory, image or artefact) and from whom? How is this exploration to be done? Keeping in mind the question, "Who have you met before me?", is not a formality but a move on the chessboard of local social relations; and an important question emerges: Who from the neighbourhood will introduce the team in the locality, so that every person approached will actually engage with the questions?

The comments in Scene 1 and Scene 3 emerged during public sharing at the Neighbourhood Museum events at Nizamuddin (South Delhi) and Shadi-Khampur (West Delhi). The comments in Scene 2 came forth at a workshop on local urban heritage in the neighbourhood adjoining Ambedkar University.

A moment in the memorialisation of heritage

Despite the relative isolation of village societies, the cultural patterns of a pre-industrial India showed a larger complex society. Across rural South Asia, the duality of traditions can be seen, for example, not only in some common forms of folk religion, but also in a stratum of beliefs and rituals that can be traced to a different past. This was explained to me once by a group of Korku tribal children from central India, playing in the sand in the hill town of Pachmarhi in Central India. Replying to my obviously ignorant questions, they pointed out the path one of them had traced in the sand, from her maternal village across the valley, and the walk along the

Memory and urban heritage

As urbanisation expands and the rural is incorporated into the urban, the pace and scale of urbanisation has often been called destructive. However, the continuing resilience of the urban populations, the adaptation and accommodation of urban informalities, makes it better to consider urbanisation as a complex churning of temporal and spatial layers of cultural heritage, resulting from the historical and contemporary fusion of incoming migrants with existing populations. Besides, rather than 'freezing' heritage into particular time periods, or genres, memory and place studies show how incoming migrants bring with them their own intangible heritages that shape the physical and mental urban landscapes in conjunction with existing populations.

Conceptualising heritage as fluid rather than static is central to understanding how heritage can survive in the age of contemporary globalisation. The contrasting approaches of 'formal planning' and the 'organic self-generated informal' can usefully reframe thinking on 'internally generated place' versus 'designed public spaces', or even 'aesthetic' versus 'kinetic'. Similarly, cultural heritage can be situated within its ecological and environmental contexts, which include crafts and vernacular heritage, and the ways this works with geography.

Memories, both collective and individual, are crucial for the understanding of who and what we are. When people preserve their heritage they are actually reinventing their past in order to interpret their present. The sense of a past consolidates an existence in the present and forms the basis of identity and social wellbeing.

Even though memories are within our minds, the physical environment plays a key role in creating and sustaining them. The urban heritage is the soul of the city and is created in the conjunction of memories and space, merging with the physical environment into what we usually refer to as 'place'. Visible modifications to the urban environment are indicative

of a broader relationship between culture and place. Urban landscapes can be approached in terms of this relationship, constituted and sustained through a series of informally institutionalised practices.

Every city and town contains fragments of historical landscapes intertwined with its current spatial configuration. When decoding these layers of time, the city becomes legible and 'place' makes sense. Cultural heritage is not just about old things. New or newly altered objects, places and practices are just as much a part of cultural heritage, in that they hold cultural value for today's generations.

The city in their heart – a personal map of memories, experiences and expectations that define relationship with the surroundings – is something that all residents have. By provoking an articulation of the imagination, this mass of interacting ideas, emotions and preferences can be stimulated into defining the urban space as residents see it.

Sharing and collecting urban heritage – creating neighbourhood occasions

The three "Scenes" on these pages come from a number of events organised in the context of the Neighbourhood Museum Programme in Delhi. Such programmes of documenting the history of everyday life and its diversity, in a city where the margins and peripheries are spatially located within (in the form of the old city and the hundreds of urban villages), are of vital importance to discover how the city is imagined and perceived. Unplanned additions continue to mark the character of Delhi, since they represent the oldest continuously inhabited areas of the city, besides being home to the majority of its citizens. A large number of monuments, from ancient to medieval, are also located in such areas, which in turn define perceptions of the city's historic identity. In human terms as well, Delhi's peripheral spaces function as a safety valve for the residential and the small-scale industrial needs of the capital.

ridge into town. A sand hill decorated with leaves and flowers located beside the village were not part of their recital, so I inquired about it. In return, they giggled, before the eldest explained to me that it was the hill of Bara-dev where they had offered a floral tribute before they came to town. And before I could say anything else, another stepped in to say, "You won't understand it. You live in Pachmarhi, not in the village." Then the first girl explained, "In town the Gods are found in images at home and carvings in temples, but in the village the Gods stay in the forest. So that is why we go to the hill to pray."

Tales like this are common across South Asia, as they are in some other parts of the world. Despite the existence of local deities, the uniformity of the shared cultural heritage follows patterns of market integration. Here, patterns of buying and selling, personal acquaintance, marriage alliances, the existential basis of agricultural life, and the travels of the carriers of specialised knowledge (bards and storytellers, blacksmiths, healers and others), among other factors, culturally integrate the hinterland of a given market centre. The peoples of village society borrow from and contribute to a common larger tradition, while the existence of a long standing permanent economic surplus makes possible the development of a distinctive urban-elite tradition and cultural heritage.²

The historical development of an 'authorised heritage discourse' (AHD) in India consequently reveals that the uses of heritage are often bound up with power relations, and specifically the power to legitimize and de-legitimize cultures. The transformation of a glorious past into a unique commodity that (after a little cosmetic touch-up) will do good business on the international tourism market, presupposes that the present only matters. The market can monetise every asset and liability, so heritage exists independently from its components, as the origin of assets and liabilities disappear.

It is, consequently, no wonder that the heritage value of urban cultural landscapes continues to be seen largely in terms of material artefacts. Arising from long-standing concern with the conservation of built heritage, this has several limitations when applied to the city. A city is more than a collection of pretty old (or new) buildings, squares, and parks. Urban space is also a reflection of the configuration of productive and social forces. Whose city is this? To whom does it belong? As a private, homogeneous entity, the answer is sadly obvious: to the people with money and power. Heritage in such a discourse tends to exclude understandings that are not focused on material assets but on people's attachments, identities or sense of belonging.

Dialogism, alternative voices, and contested heritages

Culture is the basis of all social identity and development, and cultural heritage is the endowment that each generation receives and passes on. There is a wide variety of cultural heritage. It can be tangible, such as buildings, landscapes and artefacts; and intangible, such as language, music and customary practice. It is not just old things, pretty things, or physical things and it often involves powerful human emotions.

This means that heritage emerges as a relational idea: it is about how individuals and groups actively take up positions in relation to sites, buildings, events, histories. It becomes 'a way of knowing and seeing'. In engaging with heritage, people are constructing a sense of their own identities, one that may be in opposition to, in concordance with, or simply remain outside the terms of the 'authorised discourse'. These positions are not reducible to the simple question of divergent opinions and values; it is rather about how people are caught up in a range of activities that involve remembering, forgetting, communicating, asserting identity, and so forth, as well as cultural values.

Lefebvre indicates how humans create the space in which they make their lives; it is a project shaped by interests of classes, experts, the grassroots, and other contending forces. Space is not simply inherited from nature, or passed on by the dead hand of the past, or autonomously determined by 'laws' of spatial geometry as per conventional location theory. Space is produced and reproduced through human intentions, even if unanticipated consequences also develop, and even as space constrains and influences those producing it.³

Our heritage is an inescapable part of our existence. It serves as an intangible structure, encompassing our behavioural patterns and conceptions, enabling some actions while making others unimaginable. Heritage is a bit like Felipe Fernandez-Armesto's description of history, "the more you shift perspective, the more is revealed. If you want to see her whole, you have to dodge and slip between many different viewpoints".⁴

Keeping in mind the notions of 'space' and 'place', we can look at the city as belonging to dual categories. On the one hand, it is a geographical entity; however, the city can also be recognised as a space upon which many different categories like modernity, progress, urbanity, citizenship and technology are inscribed. It is therefore, necessary to understand that the space we talk about is related to several other spaces that might not be obviously implicated.

*"This domain of lived experience is, I believe, full of contradictions and seeming opposites ... If we try to conceive of it or translate it into discourse by mapping it we change it. If we try to perceptualize lived experience we change it as well. It can only be understood on its own plane of lived experience in the here and now. It then becomes both/and as opposed to either/or ..."*⁵

Urban heritage for urban lives

If heritage has to matter to the people who inhabit its landscape, heritage definition and actions must integrate elements, patterns and practices, and encompass the complexity, richness and layers of meaning in urban life today. To conclude, for a definition and practice of heritage wherein people matter, it must:

- belong to communities and its diverse publics with an emphasis to include those whose voices are unheard, not only of experts, institutions or governments;
- concern itself with the whole urban condition, and incorporate places, landscapes, traditions, memories, stories – all aspects critical to a community's cultural and social fabric;
- be present-centred – with more focus on local history and identity, social inclusion and cultural vitality;
- diversify, thereby broadening the approach, and rethink what is meant by maintaining heritage successfully.

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Scene 1



Neighbourhood Museum Exhibition, Nizamuddin East Community Centre, New Delhi, India, April 2015

Like many other parts of India, Nizamuddin is a mix of class, religion and archaeological heritage. The older Western section is poorer and predominantly Muslim, and home to medieval religious heritage. The Eastern section, a post partition residential colony, is more middleclass Hindu, and is centred around the twin foci of monuments and the railway station, a gateway to Delhi for trains from the south.

The local exhibition at the Neighbourhood Museum included evening cultural performances and public discussions by residents as part of the temporary exhibitions on memories and history of the neighbourhood. Made by a mix of local residents, local civic associations and institutions working in the locality, the temporary neighbourhood museum became a platform to describe the converging diversity and share the unique individual memories of physical space, monument and everyday life.

A young tourist guide living in the neighbourhood and working at the monuments of medieval Nizamuddin, could not stop commenting at the gathering of local residents: "I wish the two Nizamuddins could meet more often like this". It was a feeling shared by many at the cultural evening organised by the *Hum Sab Nizamuddin* (We are Nizamuddin) Neighbourhood Museum group.

Scene 2



Workshop on local heritage, Ambedkar University Delhi, Kashmere Gate, Delhi, April 2014

Finding a free moment at the workshop, Sarla, a boatman's wife from the adjoining Yamuna riverfront said with a smile on her face, "The guards at the university gate did not want to let me come in, so I showed them your invitation. We are neighbours after all, aren't we?"

This rhetorical question invoked a notion of shared ownership of the riverbank and the adjoining section of the old city of Delhi, harking back to a time in living memory when residents of the old city used the riverbank around the clock, from religion and ritual, to riverine trade, seasonal flood plain farming, or simply for relaxation, health or for drinking water.

Reconnecting the tangible and intangible in the urban landscape, aligning the different ways of seeing the structures of everyday life that connect city and river, allows us to identify Delhi's transforming imagination of the river. Since the mid-twentieth century in Delhi, this has moved from active use by humans and animals alike, to one of apathy, and then as real estate.

Today as commodity aesthetics change the riverfront from a neglected 'non-place' – riverbed flood plain to a high value riverside destination for private and public corporations – it imagines a value by excluding the 'non-consuming people' from the river. While at one level the contestations can be seen as 'enclosure of the commons' or 'accumulation by dispossession', the eco-cultural landscapes of the river remember the periodic floods that overwhelm the riverbanks. Nature's way of reiterating ecological limits, emphasising that the floodplain of the Yamuna continues to be a place that defies commodification.⁶

Scene 3



Neighbourhood Museum Exhibition at the Studio Safdar Theatre, Shadi-Khampur, New Delhi, March 2013

Having moved into the neighbourhood and set up a theatre studio a year ago, the group wanted to establish a connection to the locality despite being a recent arrival. For three months, the studio space was transformed into a neighbourhood museum, with images, artefacts, printed panels and audio-visuals, highlighting and sharing memories from this mostly overlooked and lesser known part of the city.

A team member and local resident pointed out that the exhibition showed how "Common people have a history worth recording, worth telling, worth documenting, worth showcasing, and everybody who comes in here feels that. Some people just come in for that one photograph of their house, but those who read the panels are impressed by how many different aspects, how many different levels, how many different layers we have gone into. When locals visit, putting the social diversity of the neighbourhood in the same room forces them to engage with it. The engagement began unexpectedly, as life stories tell of a known and shared history of urban development, but the voice was of a neighbour otherwise unremarkable and invisible because of their low caste and social status" (*Sudhanva Deshpande, Theatre Director and Co-Curator*).