

Politics of Spaces in a public digitized domain for democratic India

Sub theme: Space as an Expression of a Democracy

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Abstract

The public and the private domain are catered in distinctly different physical spheres. Architecture today finds its expression in built and unbuilt space through collaboration across various communities, gender, socio-political groups, and religion. However, Post-Independence Architecture that emerged and grew as an aspirational narrative to create an image for India gradually saw an acceptance and later a brutal vilification as new modern ambitions were set ablaze for the cityscapes. In a democratic nation the socio-political hierarchy dominates over the medium of expression and controls planning policies as well as the built environment. This paper studies conceptions based on openness and accessibilities in the public space. It argues that religious and political advocates of public domain are supporting restrictive design practices that limit democratic expressions. Following the study, a conceptual analysis of the new digital space as a medium of expression in a pandemic takes high precedence for futuristic trends in architecture. The cyberspace has enabled controlled access of ICT (information and communication technology) for a country that struggles for creating healthcare ease of access to its citizens. The expression of architectural values through multiple mediums has undergone a significant change with evolving narratives of people's civic history in the past two years. The paper further argues that democracy requires a particular kind of publicness and highlights the absences in the planning policies of the urban spaces that increasingly fluctuate between the virtual and real.

Keywords

Communities; Digital Space; Gender; ICT; Narratives; Space Politics; Virtual Space.

1. Introduction

Our world is constantly changing (stirring) with newly-emergent polarities such as order and disorder, state and non-state government, globalisation and regionalism. It brings us to ask this fundamental question of 'how will we live together in the future?' With a global pandemic slowing and shutting down mainstream institutions thereby exposing the scale of not just the planet but an intimate scale of people, we realise a few things that might not work regarding problems of the future. Mass migration, global inequalities, climate change, diminishing resources on the planet are contributing factors to a changing space equation. This refiguration of people's changing relationship with space in the cities and their growing virtual accommodation needs to be addressed for both, its inclusivity and exclusion.

1.1 Democracy and space: Defining the boundaries

Spatial disciplines like human geography and urban studies offer various definitions and understanding of democratic spaces.

Public spaces bring communities together. They are pursued and viewed as safe, open and accessible spaces for all groups of people. In a democracy, this environment paves way for not just recreation but also civic activism. Democratic spaces encompass public boundaries of visibility thereby bringing the micropolitics of everyday life on public view. The built and unbuilt public spaces offer different degrees of freedom to citizens to occupy them for various purposes.

Contemporary architecture in Post-Independence India created a veritable mix of accessible built and unbuilt public spaces. These were occupied by the masses as open, free recreational gathering spaces. In the event of population overgrowth and densification in urban centres, these gathering spaces shrunk in size as they were fenced off citing reasons of security and safety by governments. Currently, the nature of these open spaces is relegated to a dictated time frame of use by citizens. Unlike the past decades, when public spaces were a hotbed for shared radical movements in the cities, today their occupancy is threatened with political interference. This polarization has created a sharp segregation between physical and digital interaction. How do we connect these two mediums that cater to diverse multiple groups? Where do we transfer the accessing rights of the masses not belonging to these groups?

1.2. Space and State vs. People

The state has a much higher claim on public spaces than the actual people. It is a question to ponder "whether architecture can intervene in a political reality and thereby confront extra-architectural problems with physical solutions." Early soviet pioneers believed that good architecture was important in solving the problems of social justice. In modern times, architecture of the past is significantly being discarded as vestiges of an older political milieu that needs to be replaced with what is termed as nationalist in essence. The idea of a utopia has been important to modern architecture. The emergence of a new global society that has led to a new world order places emphasis on demolishing institutions from a previous era that were formed to regulate political affairs of the ruling class. The need to demolish is strong because these structures appear to be outdated and are representative of the politics from a bygone era. The constructs that are being offered as new alternative replacements do not necessarily reflect the new world ideas. Instead they are based on an increasingly divisive political and religious composition. An increasing shift towards polarization of these spaces by superimposing narratives of religion has led to a disarray of architectural chronicles from the past.

The advent of digital mediums has provided a voice for architecture from the public that sees, uses and experiences this infrastructure. What the state imposes on its people is ideas of architecture that may uproot their engagement from these edifices of the past, through its own superimposition of new design on the existing ones. Is architecture required to respond to the utopian ideas of politics by making a statement? Is architecture used as a statement to respond to the utopian ideas of political forces? We are attempting to understand whether globalisation and iconism are relative movements that decide on the future of territories by emphasizing on social order and people's participation.

Architectural inclusiveness for the future must include the people's civic history, their consumption of public spaces both through digital and non-digital media, curation of public spaces absolving the state and a separate identity without religious frameworks. To explore these frontiers, technology and space (ICT and urban/cityspaces) must function on multi-lateral prisms of affordability, feasibility, quality and longevity (durability). A charter on separate interdependence of the state on its people and people on its spaces (cities) must offer breathable pockets for the future. The presence of multiple activities has densified urban spaces by blurring their boundaries over time. The resistance of these spatial timeframes coincides with physical disruptions in nature. Disorientation of environmental balance with built physical spaces has forced practitioners to think towards reconciliation and reconstruction of an alternative future. Identifying these questions with regards to occupying spaces for posterity possesses a challenge for both the state and space makers.

1.3. Cyberspace as a medium of democracy of space: Impacts and Effects.

Public spaces are the designated built or open spaces within the city limit that connect the citizens to a singular platform. Cyberspace on the other hand, a chained virtual network of environment allows to build potential architecture redefining the idea of open space connecting individuals to multiple platforms. This shift in the medium of educational spaces and the working environment has emerged into a new form of space and architecture. A habitable human architectural space, with the introduction of an online medium becomes multifunctional. “When Bricks become pixels the tectonics of architecture become information” (Novac 1995, p4/4).

The cyberspace has created a new emerging public realm with an unclassified structure. It is used as a collaborative medium of engaging people with non-accessible architectural spaces by giving them a sense of participating in the democratic process thereby not remaining aloof. The digital voices against the demolition of the Hall of Nations designed by Raj Rewal in Delhi, in April 2017 (figure 1) responds to this increasing vocal participation of an architectural consciousness amongst the masses. Many advocates for conservation of buildings have come forward in the recent years, among them is Art Deco Mumbai who have been painstakingly documenting Art Deco buildings through photo documentation and making them accessible through their portal on social media. Their digital presence has created an awareness and a rediscovery of Art Deco heritage in Mumbai. Thus, Digital platforms have been hugely successful in creating an open source accessible portal of information to a diverse demographic.

Figure 1: Hall of Nations, Pragati Maidan, New Delhi by Ar. Raj Rewal, 1970-72.



Reference: Opened 25 years after Independence, Hall of Nations razed to ground | Cities News, The Indian Express, April 25th, 2017.

While digitization offers a desirable global objective of connecting economics with popular cultural heritage by offering increased access to larger groups of people located in different geographic territories. This commercial viability is a great resource for people with limited means to consume architecture at an affordable price, convenience and time. The impact of market economy combined with digital technology platforms to experience architecture has created subtle shifts in cultural narratives.

2 Ownership of spaces and its contested ideas

Traditionally, the ownership of public spaces in cities has been shifting with its occupants. This is evident in the temporary architecture set up during festivals in a city like Mumbai. This flexibility of temporal shift in space overrides the permanent physical spaces available in cities where people and built entities collide for a specific time frame. The impermanence of this space occupation is in a way similar to digital occupancy where time is the major factor connecting people and architecture.

Cyberspace offers a spatial boundary and a temporary digital identity to its consumers (viewers). The perspectives for a visual territory of architecture shift with changing viewer lenses where they absorb details on a minute scale without a time restraint. In a digital occupancy, architecture assumes an interchangeable format where viewers imagine a space minus its physical proximity and intimacy. The nature of claiming such an architectural space is thereby reduced considerably. People's experience of spaces are engraved through an intangible medium of nostalgia, memories and physical documentation such as photographs. The visceral encounter of an individual with a physical space is markedly absent in cyberspace. Who then owns a share in this contestation? Is it the user present in a physical space for a specific time, is it the cyberspace user with more flexible access to the same space or is it the state that controls, operates and dictates the norms for the availability of that physical space in different configurations?

3 Catalyst for spatial shift

The learnings from contemporary Indian Architecture point to two important aspects: accessibility and permeability of spaces. This decisive shift has happened due to the influx of technology in our lives. The way ICT has taken over the formerly monopolized physicality of brick & concrete spaces to open a new alternative for people has been tremendous. Post 2000, in the last two decades our social involvement with public spaces has changed. There is a certainty in which public opinion finds acceptance on digital spaces without a physical intervention.

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has emerged as an influential channel that transmits a diverse array of information to individuals to expand their choices for economic, social and political empowerment. Evidence over the last decades has shown that ICT has penetrated in urban and rural regions of India with the potential to help ease networking throughout the country in regional and global context. Digital technologies stage an interface that conditionally facilitates engagement between individuals and space (Calabrese 2009; Artopoulos 2012).

ICT provides seemingly safe virtual spaces for communication between groups of strangers. For example, social media platforms are today's key resources to broadcast news, share individual opinions, circulate content and establish a virtual presence while providing the freedom to maintain an anonymous identity. Although these digital mediums had been part of the society for the past two decades, the Covid-19 global pandemic has magnified the role of ICT to become an integral part of an individual. The open source platforms have seen extensive usage in the pandemic used by governments, educational institutions, healthcare, industrial and commercial entities.

4. Conclusions

By granting recognition to digital spaces as alternatives in a democracy, we have cemented the people's right to usage of space as a resilient system. The collision of physical and virtual are temporal in current times and the physicality of architectural built and natural unbuilt precedes the knowledge of spatial perception for its users. Urbanscapes must rely on strengthening this recognition in people's conscience by facilitating the accessibility and permeability of spatial experience. Although, the new form of recognised space, in its virtual form has created multiple opportunities and narratives, the core engagement of space, democracy and people can thus be achieved in both virtual and physical space at any given time.

The future trends will trump all previous entanglements of the public memory with this visible contiguous engagement with architecture, both in physical and digital expanse.

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