Extraordinary Calcutta

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A recent debate between Amit Chaudhuri and Manas Rayi[2] on the need of rehabilitating the old colonial buildings of Calcutta, summarizes the thorny issues of a wider debate about cities, identities and urban policies, which is largely similar in most cities of the world. Contrariwise to most of the current policies, decent and beautiful cities accommodate both the privileged and the poor. I suggest that the built environment is a part of the cultural heritage of a city, as much as of the living arrangements of people.

I believe that preserving the old city is advantageous to present day Kolkata. As an urban planner, I am naturally biased in favour of maintaining the historical heritage of Calcutta's colonial past. This game of names, between history and policies, reveals that a balance between cultural and social aims is always difficult to achieve. Few cities in the world share this privilege of bearing contested, multiple names; only a truly cosmopolitan metropolis can steadily bear more than one. Thus, I'll refer to the city with its colonial name when I'll be dealing with the shifting meanings of history; I'll use its current denomination when I'll be addressing current political dilemmas.

I cannot deal with all the Kolkatian intellectual tangles when it comes to defend the city from her plights, virtues or priorities. I can only propose a few crucial issues: first, the cost of neglecting the central areas in the development policies of Kolkata; second, the importance of collective identity as embodied in a public shared space; and finally, the value of proximity as a leverage for both economic development and social justice.

First, all governments have or should have prioritized their urban policies, and some of them have agreed that the social agenda should come first; but cities change as a whole, and all city strata and classes deserve some attention. The needs of metropolitan Kolkatians, the large and deprived masses living in the commuter belt, are huge and neglected, and resources are limited. Politics has the moral duty, and the civil responsibility, to intervene and direct investments towards them; but while policies may be selective, changes are social processes that cannot be kept on a tight rein. Changes occur at the same time, in all sectors of cities and societies. And while governments might chose to focus on a main target, they cannot deny paying attention to what is happening, or may soon happen, elsewhere.

Whether governments have sensibly faced the issue of the metropolitan poor people, however, is a matter of a debate that I won't try to deal with here. It is too easy to observe that whatever has been tried, results not to be adequate. Furthermore, I would like to stress that the fate of the economically marginalized population of the villages of the metropolitan fringe is not independent from the process of change in the central districts of Kolkata.

Tackling centers, world cities face a dramatic and increasingly diverging alternative: either a market driven gentrification that will eradicate the poverty and the activities that guarantee their living within central neighbourhoods, building a safe haven for power élites or world consumers, as occurred, for example, in Venice or London; or, on the contrary, an inner city of misery and dilapidation, where crime and despair are the only options, while the well-off flee away leaving behind a

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[2] Amit Chaudhuri, "Transforming its urban spaces requires an acknowledgement of the city's unique character and its history, *The Hindu*, 25 February 2012; Manas Ray, "This London dream has parts missing," 20 February, 2012.

desolate landscape of ruins and ashes, as in Santiago, Baltimore, São Paulo. Festival districts or landscapes of doom, often repeated.

Can we avoid these alternatives? Other options are possible and have been experienced. A mix of housing and offices, a publicly controlled share of social housing, local businesses, a freely available public space… Public policies might lead these processes, regulate market advantages, and guarantee that the resulting place belongs to all citizens. Strategies implemented in some cities, from Bologna to Curitiba, have mitigated the crudest expectations of profit of real-estate developers offering viable living conditions to the middle class, calibrating the presence of office areas and giving shops and craftsmen a chance to thrive. The result is not negligible. Neighborhoods in the city centers are just a part of the whole urban body, but they are also a civic monument to the collective identity of the dispossessed population of metro Calcutta.

Why talking about collective identity, when buildings belong to individuals and stem from a colonial past? Because history, which is not a highway bypass, excavates meanings from a jumble of events with no models or blueprint. My second subject, in fact, is that history and past are the factory of the identity of a "living city", as Kolkata is suitably known. Leaving the built heritage to rot is not different from burning libraries, or banning regional languages.

This is a quarrel that keeps coming out over and over again. Many would argue that historic centers are a luxury for affluent cities like Paris; or, on the other hand, that each city can create its own image, significantly tailoring a mix of architectural quotes, like Las Vegas, paving the way to the new cities in China.

In short, let me quote the words of an Italian novelist that reminds us, on account of an unusual childhood[3], of the fatal destruction, due to an earthquake in 1967, of the village of Gibellina, a tragedy that moved the whole country. The shameful delay of the reconstruction process marked the political awareness of my generation. However, a long debate investigated the practical options of rebuilding in situ, or building a new town. The ruins of the village have finally been consolidated in white plaster, an amazing maze that materializes the memory and unbinds the grief, while well-meaning planners built a new modern town with the aim of equalizing the space in order to avoid social discrimination.

While this modern utopia quickly turned into a failure, as many other ones in the last century, the novelist sharply points out the hidden truth of the old settlements. In her words, historic cities show the power structure, but with a reverse effect: "…communities growing out of castles, patricians' palaces, the layout of public squares… The sense of history shows off crystal clear, as well as the departed dominance, the vanquished enslavement. One feels stronger because has survived, and therefore has won".

Too often we posit a too direct link between a place and its social meaning. This is not necessarily true. Quite the opposite, some places (the Memorial, the Writers Building) have gone the other way around, incorporating in their material constitution a meaning that is opposed to what they were originally meant to embody. Likewise, the shift between Kolkata and Calcutta makes clear the living pain of colonial domination. But appropriating (or denying) Calcutta, vindicating and imposing Kolkata, is not a question of alternatives; they are rather different

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[3] Carla Susani, 2008, *L'infanzia è un terremoto (My childness is an earthquake)*, Laterza, Bari.

ways of interpreting the victorious permanence of the city, that the long gone British rule makes even greater.

Third and finally, cities change continuously, and this change is only in part due to policies and collective decisions. In particular it results from the sum of millions of decisions; policies address part of these changes, sometimes successfully, yet often they neglect the crucial ones.

But policies do not occur in an empty space. In the last 50 years, Kolkata has received massive waves of refugees, immigrants and re-settlers, often invading the porous space, and the neglected places of the existing neighborhoods, building and densifying railways, vacant lots, public gardens. This has undoubtedly contributed to the growing congestion and overcrowding, perhaps putting a strain on the urban middle class.

This has produced the most extraordinary social mix ever seen in a city. Everyday Kolkata mixes managers and barbers, lawyers and shoe-cleaners, limousines and rickshaws. Hawkers and street kitchens are mostly seen as a source of nuisance, or worse. On the contrary, the benefits of proximity are largely exploited without mention: the abundance of services, the flexibility of the labour market. Can proximity be forced to do better, to improve the quality of life and social cohesion of the city? Can we try to improve rather than annihilate the link between jobs and places? Think of incubators for small business, integrated educational programs for children, public gardens and sport facilities...

Instead, Kolkata's policies seem to deny deliberately all value to proximity. This is particularly perceptible in the formal colonial city, the "vanishing city" that Chaudhuri correctly tries to defend; but it also refers to other central neighborhoods. For fifty years the city has been supporting, and sometimes forcing, the divorce of the middle and upper classes from traditional neighbourhoods: Salt Lake city, the Eastern bypass, Rayarhat are the following steps of a progressive estrangement from the city core. At the same time, the multiple manifestation of street life, its misery or excess, as well as its potential virtues, have been either repressed or ignored.

Thus, push and pull factors cooperate to dismantle a unique feature of Kolkata. Being an historical city, whose public space tells a collective drama, a narrative of empowerment and survival: this is city that is vanishing. This public space and this social mix should be preserved, even if density and congestion are to be tamed. Preserving space for the urban middle class, together with the improvement of slums, should be part of the same agenda for a sustainable city. The time has come to look back at the city core as a strategic asset of the metropolitan area.

Figure 1.

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

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Figure 6.

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