

Discovering Public Places in the People-Streets of New Delhi

Ranjana, Mital*

School of Planning and Architecture, Delhi, India

Abstract

Urban public spaces, streets in particular have been recognised as major ordering elements in the physical structure of the city. Spiro Kostoff (1992) goes as far as saying that without a street as a public space, there is no city. Indeed it may be stated on the basis of research that links good streets to good cities that a city is only as good as its streets. What then is a good street? And how important is the street in evaluating quality of life in a city.

This paper looks at some typical scenarios on streets in the capital city of New Delhi with the intention of showcasing the all-important though not always visually impressive informal people-places in public spaces. The paper also looks at the margin areas between planned and un-planned Delhi as potential people-places. Through informal market places and life on the streets on the margins, it will attempt to establish that public places are vital as necessary interfaces between the haves and the have-nots and thus vibrant streets/ public places are essential to healthy cities.

The informal and temporary character of street happenings gives the street a dynamism that is almost tangible in its celebration of the citizen. The here-today-gone-tomorrow property of street-plays, market places, chance encounters etc. give the street's or any place's casual public activities constantly changing form. They provide the opportunity for sensitivities to develop that address the feeling of belonging and ownership so essential for good democratic governance of urban centres.

Keywords: *street-as-place, informal-markets, margins, spatial-equity, inclusive social fabric*

Introduction

Historic city, capital city, royal city or people's city, world class city or smart city- be they whichever - none would be truly successful unless they had people-places. "What is a city but the people?" asked Shakespeare. In fact, Shakespeare knew it centuries ago! It is a well-known fact that notwithstanding the eternal hustle-and-bustle and anonymity synonymous with cities, it is the quality of its public places that distinguishes one city from another. Cities have long been celebrated for their public squares, ceremonial avenues, maidans or open grounds and other naturally available spaces for recreation. Thus Delhi has its lawns at India Gate, Mumbai its Azad Maidan and also its beaches and Kolkata its Maidan. Be it a family outing on a public holiday, a

*Corresponding Author: e-mail - ranjanamital@hotmail.com

citizens' protest or an address by a leader- it is at such places that people come naturally together.

At each of these places above, all are welcome. There are no distinctions made here between people nor is there any segregation of groups or activities. They are truly places for people. Today, however, the open *maidans* or lawns are in increasing danger of being cordoned off in the name of security or simply getting too crowded for the growing numbers. In other words, our classic places for people are falling short or even failing the people. The space-crunch in cities like Delhi regularly sees more and more of green areas being built up as it witnesses carriageways eating into pedestrian space. That the space-crunch also elbows out the less fortunate resulting in extreme socio-physical inequality is an uncomfortable truth staring us in the face at almost every turn in the city.

There is little doubt that social inequities are getting worse with each passing day. Each new mall or gated housing project that comes up creates one more place exclusively for the rich while the slums fester without basic amenities. Tall skyscrapers looming over slums only highlight these inequalities. Indeed this shameful social inequality is already threatening India's economic stability (Mukherji, 2006). Arguably, the most recent and the most overpowering illustration of this disparity is the 27-storey skyscraper in Mumbai, believed to be the world's biggest house. Built for the sole occupation of an industrialist and his family, it occupies 400,000 square feet, making it 1,300 times bigger than the average shack in the slums that it towers over! (Beddoes, 2012).

It must be these inequities that has compelled the UN-Habitat to initiate the idea of enhancing the public realm, expanding public goods and consolidating the rights to all 'commons' for all as a way to expand prosperity. The report thus suggests a "fresh approach to prosperity beyond the solely economic emphasis, including other vital dimensions such as quality of life, adequate infrastructures, *equity* and environmental sustainability". Thus, the City Prosperity Index together with a conceptual matrix; the Wheel of Prosperity are new tools meant to assist the making of clear policy interventions.

It further acknowledges that the "growing inequalities between the rich and the poor has generated serious distortions in the form and functionality of cities also causing serious damage to the environment" (UN-Habitat 2012/13). Suggesting remedies for economic disparities is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in the light of the space-crunch and soaring real-estate prices, this paper revisits the common street with the objective of reviewing it as the most economical and useful public place available today. That the bazaar street is as old as the idea of city is apparent from city plans in history. Archeological remains of bazaar streets may be found at the earliest river valley civilization sites, through the centuries right up to the still bustling Shahjahanabad. Indeed, the social fabric obtained on streets like Chandni Chowk in Shahjahanabad or Johri Bazaar in Jaipur gives some credence to the idea mooted here.

Looking at some typical scenarios on streets in the capital city of New Delhi, the paper showcases the all-important though not always visually impressive informal people-places in public spaces. Through observations on informal market places and life on the street on the margins, it will attempt to establish that these public places provide the crucial interface between the haves and the have-nots most vital to healthy cities.

Making a case for the street as a place

No less successful though more frequent than the city-level gatherings are the numerous spontaneous or casual gatherings at a 'sub-city' level: at cross-roads or *chows*, at the local market-place or even on the neighbourhood street. Urban public spaces, in particular, streets have long been recognised as major ordering elements in the physical structure of the city. Using convincing primary studies, Lynch (1960) established the importance of the street in the legibility of the city, remarking that, "*Where major paths lacked identity or were easily confused one for the other, the entire city image was in difficulty.*"

However, the ubiquitous street is not only a determinant of city-form or a connector of places. It can be and very often becomes the 'place' itself. The street may become a stage for a particular activity either structured events as a parade on a high street, or a citizens' procession on a residential street or spontaneous, impromptu performances such as flash mobs, road shows, mobile vendors and other such. Thus the street is as much about the traffic it holds as it is about the activities it sustains along its edges; what happens en-route is as important as the route itself. In other words, these conduits for movement or connectors of destinations come into their own as the first level of public space in the city, the level of activity depending on their place in the hierarchy of the city circulation-network. As a space that is legible as a distinct entity, it sustains a variety of human activities and hence creates a possibility for association and memory. The street qualifies admirably as a 'place'. (Mital 2002)

As soon as the street thus becomes a 'place' over and above its primary function as a conduit for transit, it acquires certain important attributes of a place, namely the social and associative. Thus as the first and most easily accessible public place, the street is also possibly the most important. Spiro Castoff (1992) goes as far as saying that without the street as a public space, there is no city. Indeed it may be stated on the basis of research that links good streets to good cities that a city is only as good as its streets. In other words, the street may be the gauge by which to measure the quality of life in a city.

What then is a good street?

As with a good place, a good street may be recognized by physical attributes that foster and sustain high levels of casual social activity that in turn gives the street meaning and association. This in no way undermines its importance as a transit corridor. Indeed, excluding the essential services and facilities associated with streets is not to deny their importance. On the contrary, it is to underline their importance as a basic necessity. Thus while discussing successful streets, it is presumed that these services and facilities will be available at all times.

For a street to encourage a meaningful social fabric, it would necessarily have to have all the characteristics of a good place: legibility and reference to overall spatial order, distinctive elements, optimum space allocation for all activities, primary and casual; satisfactory formal qualities (Mital 2002). Research has resulted in impressive literature that carries forward the themes set by pioneers like Lynch and Jacobs. Be that as it may, for the purposes of this argument, the focus is on the social fabric as sustained by the physical one. Therefore a satisfactory physical fabric could be presumed, though we shall later see how a strong social fabric successfully overcomes the shortcomings if any in the physical fabric. It is implied that the degree of human activity as a high manifestation of the social fabric defines the success of any place or street. Social interactions and related activities in turn create identities, associations and memories completing the sense of place.

The above definitions would generally provide for a satisfactory classification of places for people. However neither just the above nor any of the later studies have any relevance till at least two important current issues are also addressed - that which is arguably more important than understanding hermeneutics in architecture and the quality of space and its effect on the user.

The first concerns social and spatial equity and the second, environmental sensibility. These are issues that are currently in the forefront of architectural and planning dialogue. A modified definition may then be as follows: A good street as primary public space in a city must have the physical infrastructure required to sustain a social fabric that is inclusive and environmentally sensitive.

Some typical places-for-people on the streets of New Delhi

1. The local informal weekly market

Informal urban markets are as much a part of Delhi's history as is its enormous treasure of architectural heritage, some of it even recognized as World Heritage Sites. However, when it comes to the not-so-elegant informal markets, public opinion and action varies from concerned NGO initiated awareness programmers to demands for these markets to be cleared out in the cause of city security and beautification. That these markets have persisted and flourished over decades only confirms the fact that they are required by the buyer as much as the seller. If this was not enough, the bustling crowds at these weekly markets would convince any skeptic that considerable section of the city's population patronize these markets for a number of reasons as the best deal in the city.

The following information is based on a study conducted of a few of Delhi's informal markets and interviews with some of the traders there. Informal bazaars or markets are of three distinct kinds; the weekly bazaar, the daily bazaar and the travelling salesmen. The three types differ from each other by their frequency only as the goods sold are remarkably similar. Common across all these markets is their claim that singularly distinguishes these markets from formal ones—the prices here would be the lowest available in the city. Naturally, profit margins are low. Yet with negligible overheads, the seller hardly ever suffers any losses. Labeled 'informal' the traders nonetheless are a well-organized community who has learned to walk the tight rope between various city authorities.

The markets are usually strategically located in urban areas with steady pedestrian flows (Rover, 2012). In Delhi, they may be found just off the main roads, along roads between major intersections and *en-route* for commuters returning home from work by public transport. To be successful, the weekly market must site itself where it is assured of a large middle and lower income clientele. Weekly markets predictably, come up in the same place every week, setting up in the open on rented tables provided with electric lighting. The general layout of the market would be dictated by the site while positions of tables would be decided by consensus or by the *predawn*. The workers from the agency hired to set up the stalls have mastered the motions of speedily laying out the tables and just as quickly stacking them back in the tempos at the end of the day. No sooner have the tables been laid, do the vendors display their wares and wait for the first customer of the evening.

The hectic activity that starts with the setting up of the market in the early afternoon, peaks in the evening after office hours when the maximum number of customers arrive and then

gradually winds down to pack-up time, being 10pm weather permitting. And just as it arrived, out of the blue as it were, the market disappears to reappear on some other street the next day.

To this market come people from all walks of life and levels. While the majority is from the informal sector—the casual workers, labourers, domestic-help etc. there is a sizeable section of customers who are better off financially but patronize these markets simply because they are convenient and within walking distance from home. And who doesn't want to buy her daily needs at the cheapest prices and closest location possible? Here then is a truly inclusive social mix brought together by a common requirement of getting a good deal. If this was not enough reason to see these informal markets as essential to establishing some level of social integration, the following arguments leave no doubt.

Advantage informal market

Looking at the 'soft' advantages of the informal market as a socio-cultural event is better illustrated after a brief mention of the National Policy on Vendors. The Model Street Vendors Bill when passed by Parliament will provide for social security and livelihood rights to the street vendor. It addresses the issues addressed by the earlier National Policy (2009) that provides for visibility and a voice for the vendors and is unique in that it is one of the few policies in the world for Street Vendors.

The policy recognizes the right of the vendor to earn his/her livelihood and appreciates his/her efforts to fight poverty with no official assistance. The policy also recognizes the 'valuable services' he/she renders to the common man by providing for his daily needs in the most economical way. It also recognizes the need for regulations based on objective principles thus providing for the convenience of both hawker and pedestrian and maintaining cleanliness and hygiene.

Thus as a phenomenon, that provides job-opportunities to many of the not-so-skilled and so directly addresses poverty alleviation with next to no public investment, the informal market has finally received the recognition it deserved. However, the informal market is also a valuable socio-economic construct that deals squarely with issues stated earlier, namely social and spatial equity and environmental sensitivity.

Thus the informal market must be seen and valued as:

Heritage: It will not take much to prove that coming down through the ages, the mobile vendor or market is as much a part of our tradition and heritage as, say, the Taj Mahal.

Equitable Place-maker: As a place that provides activity, context both physical and cultural and as a sustainable social-event, it qualifies superbly as a place for people. Indeed, as an event that does not rely on the existing physical infrastructure for its ultimate success, the informal market is all the more advantageous in providing satisfactorily for the people. Here is an unusual case of a successful social fabric that overcomes the possible inconvenience of inadequate physical infrastructure.

Above all, these informal markets are a natural meeting-ground between the haves and have-nots. Indeed this much-needed interface must be recognized and encouraged and replicated. At the weekly market may be experienced a degree of social integration however momentary. Indeed it is in such places that concepts like 'integration' and 'inclusive' find meaning. Yet the

market belongs predominantly to a particular social group. All are welcome but it is their space. For this reason too, the informal market is essential to the social well-being of the city. Thus, the traditional, informal market is the very space for creating an integrated, egalitarian, urban social fabric. Here may be blurred the divisions between the two halves of the city. Here is where public space is truly public. This is its biggest contribution to the city.

Environmentally–friendly: The informal market typically requires the absolute minimum in infrastructure and energy. It is this temporary, ephemeral quality of the markets that is their most precious characteristic and cities must be warned against building them as permanent structures by way of up-gradation.

The informal market sets itself up and after its purpose is served, dismantles itself, with every plank and table being re-useable, leaving the area clear for another event on the street. Contrast this to the single-use mall that occupies such a huge amount of space, invariably on prime land. Truly, the informal market's tagline could easily read: Minimal Structure: Maximum Reach. Detractors will speak about the trash left behind after the event or inconvenience to automobile drivers on market days. Indeed, these are trivialities when compared to the huge socio-economic profits the city stands to gain by. Yet, littering is not income-bracket specific and there is a global movement afoot to reclaim streets for walking.

The weekly market is the informal sector's challenge to the unsustainable shopping malls mushrooming all over the city. Unlike the shopping mall that devours electricity and guzzles water and is largely an exclusive precinct for those with deep pockets, the weekly bazaar is accessible to all and requires hardly any infrastructure or energy compared with a contemporary shopping complex. Therefore on at least two major counts, the city needs the informal market more than the converse; physically as a true-green non-polluting yet productive activity and secondly as a theater for the less tangible but more important social-class segregation and integration to play out.

2. The margins

A little more permanent but mostly undefined is another kind of place that has emerged by happenstance on the margins of the planned and more prosperous areas. Delhi grew exponentially in the period immediately following Independence. As it spread, it engulfed every village in the vicinity. Agricultural lands surrounding the villages were either acquired for city development or sold to developers who further sold this area as plots to those who could afford it. The villagers continued to live within their settlement, minus their lands, engulfed by urban development. Thus a peculiar situation was created where the organic layout of the village settlement was confronted on all sides by modern planned plotted-housing schemes.

Today, decades later, the 'urban villages' as they are termed have reinvented themselves such that most have their own distinctions in physical as well as cultural terms. It must be mentioned that the change has been driven by market forces—high and low—and not by development policies or controls. Some have become high-end tourist attractions catering to a cliché clientele with showrooms selling branded fashion wear, jewelry and even art work. Fancy eateries and recreational activities are on offer too.

At the other end of the spectrum, village residents cater to another more imperative demand converting their modest single-storey village houses to buildings of four-stories or more as rentable space. Tenants vary from students and single professionals to whole families belonging

to the informal sector. Since these village rentals provide the cheapest option next to squatting or living in the slums, they are poorly built yet over-crowded with none of the basic amenities of water, hygiene and sanitation available. Needless to say, there is usually nothing that will pass as a public place for these people with the younger children; the worst affected having no place to play (Mital, 2006).

In the context of this paper, 'margins' connotes the physical edge of planned residential areas carved out of the lands of one or more village. This margin could be a road or a wall. Either way, it is impervious to those who do not belong to the planned-city group. It is also no coincidence that the people living or consigned to these physical margins are also marginalized in socio-economic and spatial terms.

The more affluent housing colonies, commercial centers and large institutions that often lie cheek-by-jowl with the now overcrowded villages or even slums, provide many employment opportunities for skilled and unskilled workers, the domestic helper, the office peon, errand boys, delivery men, watchmen, rickshaw pullers and so on. Sometimes, small shops come up along the village side of the street for groceries and such that would have the residents of the houses on the other side as their biggest customers. A case in point would be the Zamrudpur (village) and Greater Kailas (planned colony) interface along parts of Nandi Vitim Marg. Commerce on a larger scale may be seen on CV Raman Marge in Bharat Nagar (village) that is surrounded by New Friends Colony (planned).

At other times, as on the margin between New Friends Colony (planned) and Khizrabad (village) a mutually beneficial situation evolves where the initiative of one serves the other too. Here an overhead high-tension cable prevents building anywhere in a certain vicinity of the cables. The Residents' Welfare Association of the privileged class adopted this 'no-man's land and very innovatively planted the entire stretch. Today this park is a veritable oasis in the desert of high density housing accessible to both rich and poor alike. It is likely to remain so, at least till the overhead high-tension cable remains and regulations continue to forbid building in its immediate vicinity.

The two instances described above show how margins can be turned into cultural assets with the margin area becoming the area of mutual trust, cooperation and above all, inclusive. Sadly, not all 'margin stories' are so robust. Driving through or past margin areas, it may be seen how excluded the less privileged can be. The most common is being walled out resulting in the pedestrians often having to take a longer route round the gated colony. Most municipal facilities would be better on the richer side. The most obvious being the glaring inequalities in terms of open-space per person. Thus on the margins between the planned and unplanned in Delhi, the lack of spatial equity is best contrasted.

The Habitat Agenda (2001) states that equitable human settlements are those in which all people "...have equal access to housing, infrastructure, health services, adequate food and water, education and open spaces....."

With sky-rocketing real-estate values and the ever-increasing demand on space, open areas are sacrificed first. In just over a decade from 1999 to 2012, Delhi is believed to have lost forest and green cover and water bodies equal to approximately 23% of its area to 'development' (Dash, 2013). This chilling revelation would be true for many cities in the developing world. Road-lengths in the city of Delhi increased approximately three times from 8380 kms in 1972 to 28,500 kms in 2001 (Govt of Delhi, 2006). Together with the increased traffic, the inevitable road-

widening programmes that take over pedestrian paths come with vehicular pollution. However imperative be the need to 'develop,' it is well understood now that it may not be at the cost of either quality of life or the environment. The concern for widening disparities between the haves and the have-nots is being heard in different forums with greater regularity and intensity.

People-places on public streets and on the margins

Accepting the harsh reality in terms of real-estate values and the power of the market over space requirement on humanitarian grounds, this paper proposes that people-places be encouraged and nurtured in interstitial and left-over spaces, along margins and streets.

Interstitial and left-over spaces like the interface between boundary walls and streets, set-backs, spaces between buildings, pedestrian paths, and street net-works etc. can be designed or existing ones modified such that they become places. One of the ways this could be done is by ensuring 'eyes on the street' or even 'porosity'. In other words, by connecting these places visually, unused spaces may get included into the public realm by casual, spontaneous, human activity. Unused spaces are sometimes so because they are perceived as unsafe. Establishing visual links not only makes such spaces safer but, importantly, they are also perceived to be so making them much more usable. All it requires now is a little activity - a vendor, a spill-out during lunchtime or even becoming a thoroughfare - and otherwise unused areas may be brought to count as usable public places. Thus may be created places for people without adding to the existing built or un-built fabric.

At the margins or boundaries, the same principle of encouraging "a line of exchange along which two areas are sewn together" (Jacobs, 1961) will create the seam that connects instead of emphasizing the edge that demarcates. The social fabric of the city must be stitched together through creating areas of mutually profitable activity either economic or social.

Goodwin takes the idea of retrieving space for the public domain even further. Popularizing the idea of 'porosity' through his writings, his work exemplifies it further as he uses porosity to bring empty and deserted left-over spaces into the public realm (Goodwin, 2011). He sees 'porosity' operating from the 'boundaries applied to public space and architecture' to create a more equal balance between public and private space (Goodwin, 2012).

Even if seeking to transform underutilized spaces within buildings such that they become useable as 'new types of public spaces', Goodwin's philosophy finds resonance here because it stems from among other valid issues, an abhorrence for gated communities and walls that have created cities that are less porous to public access. In essence by demonstrating the efficacy of creating public space from erstwhile unused or underutilized areas for a more viable socio-economic and sustainable city fabric, Goodwin's arguments could well be used to ratify the attempts of this paper to claim much-needed people-places from already existing streets and margins spaces.

Till the automobile drove the pedestrian off the street, it was a happening place. Even today, whenever possible, the informal and temporary character of street happenings gives the street a dynamism that is almost tangible in its celebration of the citizen. The here-today-gone-tomorrow property of street-plays, informal markets, chance encounters etc. give the street or any place for casual public activity a constantly changing form and a meaning over and above its functional one, making it a people-place however momentarily. And if for that moment - the

people can experience the activity and a sense of belonging and participation which in turn generates legibility and memorability, the extreme dearth of healthy people-places would be greatly mitigated. To add to the advantages of reclaiming our right to the street, these truly people-places that we have re-discovered on the side-walks and foot-paths of the city will also provide the exact setting for an inclusive social setting. These would be the opportunities for sensitivities to develop on both sides of the economic divide. It is only through mutual regard and a sense of belonging and ownership and participatory processes that people-places can flourish towards that as yet largely elusive greater common good.

To this end, architects and designers will have to be looking at local references and site and context specific cues to provide the potential for people-places in and around the buildings they design. And yet 'greater social and spatial justice in combination with sustained equitable urban development', may only be achieved through 'various levels of governance and increasingly eclectic conditions' rather than the conventional method of relying on elite institutions or empowered professionals (Soja, Kanai, 2007). An example that could be seen as a fairly successful interpretation of these ideas is the *Bhagidari* system that seeks to include peoples' participation in citizen-government partnerships to enrich and give a new meaning to democratic governance (Govt of Delhi, 2003).

Through *Bhagidari*, the Government of Delhi hopes to demonstrate that 'successful and meaningful governance' can only be achieved with the involvement of the people. Thus beginning with issues that require simple solutions and feeding on their success, the government hopes to be able to deal with more complex matters across the city with the peoples' participation.

At another level, the unique initiative by *aapkisadak* to look at alternative mobility solutions and pedestrianization of existing urban neighbourhoods has renewed hope and enthusiasm for a better quality of street experience for the pedestrian. Involving residents and civic authorities, the project headed by a technical team was about reclaiming the street for the pedestrian and improving the quality of life in our neighbourhoods (Khoj, 2013).

Using the informal market as a successful people-place on the streets of Delhi and identifying potential people-places in the existing margins also usually along streets, it has been argued that there is an enormous shortage of vital places for people. The informal markets should be acknowledged and developed not just for the reasons of economic merit cited by the National Policy on Street Vendors but because they enlarge the public realm, paradoxically without physically doing so. In enlarging the public realm, these spaces are also all inclusive, exclusion if any playing out in the reverse with some from the higher income groups opting to keep away. However, as a venue or activity more accessible to most than say the latest mega-mall, they provide possibly the most popular open-for-all place for social integration.

Over and above all, these places by virtue of not requiring built-up infrastructure of massive carbon footprint are environmentally friendly too. The same argument could be used for the margin areas, unused spaces between buildings and other interstitial spaces altogether suggesting that considerable people-places could be re-claimed from the unused and neglected spaces in the city. There is after all considerable potential for healthy people-places on the people-streets.

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Fig 1. Setting up the Weekly Bazaar at Andrew's Ganj, S. Delhi
Source: author



Fig 2. A Typical Informal Bazaar in Delhi
Source: author



Fig 3. The Informal market: People-places
Source: author



Fig 4. The Informal Market: Inclusive Space
Source: author



Fig 5 Margin Area Between Planned and Unplanned in s. Delhi

Source: Author



Fig 6. Margin Area Transformed Every Evening into A
Fresh Vegetable Market Source: Author