

## P U B L I C S P A C E S :

# The Architecture of Supervised Freedom

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What we know as public spaces today, are largely spaces of *supervised* freedom. Roads, parks, capitols, beaches, zoological/botanical sanctuaries are all public spaces which, in their design and intent, guarantee the freedom of some while denying the freedom of others. This is the first fact one must recognize. One of the well-known icons of modern public space, the highway road was built not by laws/forces of free competition. In the US, the auto giants systematically bought up and dismantled the rail and streetcar networks making such travel unviable. The federal government then built the super highway networks with public funds forcing the automobile culture that is now exported worldwide (*Roads*, Douglas Lummis, *Dictionary for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, forthcoming). It is also a fact that the vitality and relevance of these spaces often arise from uses contrary to their designed/designated intent. For instance, while the Indian state designed the boat club lawns in Delhi as a *cordon sanitaire* around the Parliament, trade unions, peasant organizations and other movements of grieving people frequently turn that into a site for staging their protests. While the colonial regime designed railways as an infrastructure for ensuring the mobility of commodities and incidentally people, Gandhi profoundly altered the meaning of such a public infrastructure by making ticket less travel a popular symbol of protest. Roads are not merely the means of automotive mobility; they are *the* sites of marches, barricades, padayatras and dharnas. In this sense, to talk about public spaces as an architectural project is also to be aware of the politics involved in their actual and potential use. To understand the creation and production of public spaces in modern societies, we must contend with at least three things: the culture of democracy, the metropolitan city with its built in fear of crowds and the politics of totalitarian planning.

## The Insecure Capitol:

The public space par excel lance of our times is the Capitol Complex, the symbolic seat of power and authority of the nation state. According to Lawrence Vale “There is in all probability, no building or building complex that can be considered public in as many different senses as a capitol. They are public owned,

*constructed with public funds, and house publicly funded institutions; they are places to gather with the public and to make public statements; and they are expected to represent the public interest. They are even, in theory much more than in practice, supposed to be open to the public”* - (Architecture Power and National Identity, Yale University Press, 1992). The irony that most capitols are least likely to be under public control or least amenable to public access, is not lost on Vale. Architecturally, most capitols, Vale goes on to add, are *designed with a cordon sanitaire around them*. The limits start with the very location that is usually not in a crowded or densely populated part of the city and the complex is saturated with lawns, fences, guard posts and in the last few decades filled with massive hardware and 'software' for security and surveillance. The persons and the places that are supposed to *represent* people and their land are invariably, in our times, most heavily guarded from precisely what they are supposed to represent. It is a fact of our political life that heads of state usually address the 'public' from the safe confines of a bulletproof enclosure or in front of a secure TV camera.

While there are of many reasons for this state of affairs which may not be directly related to the *design* of the capitol, the paradox lies in the fact that these are by definition, intent and therefore design, *Public spaces* marking a particular culture of government (democracy) and a specific kind of political subjectivity (citizenship) emblematic of nation state building in our times. This symbolism of monumentality is at the heart of nation building and attempts to create a 'national culture'. Capitols built in the modern era, are striking in their contrast to the republican values of equality and democracy they are supposed to reflect. They are very different from the palaces of monarchs of the past. For instance, the Vidhana Soudha (legislative assembly of Karnataka) is far more formidable, intimidating and monumental than the modest palace of Tipu Sultan. Similarly some other public spaces in *free* India are far less 'public friendly' than their colonial predecessors. The colonial prisons of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely more accessible to the 'public'. Their courtyards teemed with various hawkers and vegetable sellers every morning while the inmates freely haggled and purchased their daily necessities (Subaltern Studies VI). Something like this would be unthinkable in today's context, especially when prison building is one of the fastest growing investment opportunities for global capital. Monumental, forbidding and intimidating architecture therefore is a tool of governing perfectly suited to serve the imperatives of impersonal statecraft. And few things can be more impersonal than the *order* of the city, in both senses of the term: as regularity and regulation. This order is the central preoccupation of another modern tradition: Planning.

## The Totalitarian Plan:

Urban planning, an idea invented in the 19th century in Europe, has proved to be, most insidious and enduring. The invention of the 'economy' and the discovery of the idea of 'population', in the 18<sup>th</sup> century make 'urban planning' possible (*Planning*: Arturo Escobar, *Development Dictionary*, Orient Longman, 1992). The idea of a 'diseased city' with its industrial smoke stacks, overcrowded with uprooted peasants waiting to be retooled as wage labor, streets overflowing with garbage and waste is the central concern of town planning (urban planning is a more with-it phrase). But two centuries of town planning world over has seldom questioned the wisdom of industrial development itself. Few question the spread of rampant tourism in say Ooty or Darjeeling; or the unbelievable pollution of 'chemical' towns like Tirupur. Instead, most lament the lack of 'proper planning' in these places. The city for the town planner is an object to be framed within a grid of regulated traffic and hygiene while being mostly unconcerned with equity, justice and culture. In this exercise, modern planning has found political democracy to be a major constraint. Le Corbusier's core principles of urbanism were, for instance, *the death of the street and the Plan as Dictator*. His model of rational planning was the factory, which stood far above the 'disorderly' chaotic city street and 'jumbled' residences. The factory for him embodies the core principles of urban planning, and the ideal worker embodies the citizen-subject of his planned space where "they accept (to) manage themselves like a colony of worker-bees: (with) order, regularity, punctuality, justice and paternalism" (James Scott, *Seeing Like a State*; Yale Univ Press, 1998). Scott's argument is wide-ranging and formidable. He shows how, the annual census, the permanent fixing of surnames, the standardization of measures, the cadastral surveys, the clearing of crowded cities, widening and beautification of roads, the planning and clearing of forests, every single practice of modern planning had but one goal: improving the legibility, predictability and the control of diverse practices by which people lived, produced and transmitted life and knowledge. It is to this 'enlightenment' spirit that urban planning belongs. It is in this crucible of *vanishing* customs and *emerging* order that our current notions of *Public Spaces* are born

## The City has its order and the Village its custom: *Javanese Proverb*

This proverb serves Scott well in describing the process/politics of urbanization. The association of the term 'public' with city life and metropolitan culture is not easy to shake off. After all the word civilization itself means the history of cities! While the relationship between

the village and the city is too complex to be handled here, in our world it has become a matter of essential opposition. To recall Gandhi's famous words, India does live in her villages, but we might add that her destiny is almost fatally tied to her cities. It is the anxieties and fears of the city that largely inform the Architecture of public spaces. Who ever heard of an 'Architecture of the village square'? What we hear frequently is mostly about regulating public parks, clearing pavements and widening bus terminals. If urban planning aims to transform *custom* into *order*, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it has found solid support for this from the ideology of environmentalism and conservation.

Anand Patwardhan's path breaking film *Bombay Hamara Shehar* in the 80's, posed dramatically the politics of public spaces like the pavement and the street. Are pavements for walking your dog and jogging or are they for those who driven from the village, arrive in the city to only live on its pavements? Is urban space to be reserved first for parks, sanctuaries and industrial expansion or for providing homes for the homeless? These were the polemical questions it dealt with. Two decades later, a vague but discernible consensus seems to be emerging among the elite and the English media. This consensus can be gauged by the strident noises made by the conservation movement which has found support in the new 'judicial activism' that seem to fascinate many Judges these days. The general apathy towards slums that are cleared is matched by the strident empathy to save/restore dying lakes and old buildings (not to mention dogs, cats and horses). Janaki Nair points to the increasing privatization of public spaces like the Cubbon park in Bangalore where gates and fences have been installed with a view of making this park more jogger-friendly and keeping a 'plebian' culture at bay (*Past Perfect: Architecture and Public Life in Bangalore*, Forthcoming in the *Journal of Asian Studies*). If Nair saw a totalitarian mindset in this, she is right. Hitler did justify his autobahn construction by saying that all strategic roads in history were built by tyrants. He disliked the humble path created by custom and use because they 'wind like processions and waste everybody's time' (Lummis).

Nair also cites an interesting incident that is of relevance here. Bangalore has for a long time, had its own version of 'Hyde Park', the famous space of *supervised* protest in London. It is a corner of the Legislative assembly building that over the years has become the favorite spot for agitating or protesting groups. Fasts, *dharnas* and various demonstrations take place here. In an attempt to make this place truly and properly supervised, the secretary of the Department of Environment proposed in 1997 that this be turned into a sort of 'speaker's corner' reserved only for speakers of 'green issues'. Not surprisingly this idea found enthusiastic support from the five-star hotel

Windsor Manor, which even offered to serve tea on such occasions. Along with privatization, the new culture of sponsoring everything from parks, traffic circles/islands to even police vehicles itself, points to the increasing insecurity of the elite and the powers that be. It points towards a republic in search of a public.

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