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Artistic Research and Everyday Life in the Asian Megacity

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Introduction

Considering the relationship between the arts and urban development in the Global South, there has been considerable recent research in terms of looking at how cultural districts and other state-sponsored planning initiatives have employed the arts as a means of generating urban development, whether to gentrify neighborhoods or to achieve greater international status (Zielke and Waibel, 2015, Zhong, 2015, Molho, 2015, Zarobell, 2017, Gillman, 2018). These scholars are in accord that such developments do provide opportunities for artists and can help to connect various urban stakeholders through cultural policy but the focus here has been primarily on how government policy, or developers' initiatives, have succeeded, or not, in generating urban spaces that foster community involvement.

The significance of these studies notwithstanding, it is also important to look at the activities of the marginalized residents who seek to find a means of survival for themselves and their families and, in the process, both respond to and generate new forms of urban experience. Many of the innovations of the urban poor in the Global South have been categorized as informal (De Soto, 1989; Roy, 2005, Simone, 2014, Cruz and Forman, 2015), meaning distinct from regulatory norms such as tax in the economy and zoning in the built environment. Taking another tack, Roy defines the informal rather as a "model of urbanization...a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another," (Roy, 2005, 148). This study departs from this new conception of the informal and seeks to investigate how it can guide new policy models that value citizen activation and participation in urban planning.

This brief analysis is limited to two examples of "emerging" Asian megacities, defined as metropolitan areas of more than 10 million inhabitants in Asia that are experiencing rapid, transformative population growth and have not been able to make necessary accommodations for recent arrivals in terms of housing, infrastructure, and provision of services. Delhi and Jakarta are the largest cities in their respective countries as well as the fastest growing. How is it possible to capture the enormous complexity of urban experience in these cities and how are the poor and often invisible residents of these metropolitan areas transforming the city? In this analysis, artists and various forms of their urban engagement that promote visibility of marginalized communities will be the focus.

Delhi

With over 27 million people stretching over 800 square miles, India's capital city is ranked the third largest in the world and many urbanists have lately evaluated its unique urban development (Sundaram, 2011, Srivastava, 2015, Kalyan, 2017). Two organizations are important innovators in artistic engagement with everyday life of the city. The KHOJ artists association is an artist collective and in its 20 years it has achieved many successful residencies and exhibitions, acting as an artist-generated center to promote contemporary art in South Asia (Sood, 2010). KHOJ

promotes public life in Khirkee Village, which has become incorporated into the urban fabric of contemporary Delhi. Through a mural program and educational programs for local residents, KHOJ has directed artists' attention to the conditions of life in their village and promoted artistic collaboration with residents, leading to both public art projects and individual artist projects incorporating the experiences of local residents. One such project, *The Horizon is an Imaginary Line* (Gill & Mahendru, 2017) is a graphic novel on refugees from Somalia living in Delhi, co-created by an academic and an artist worker at KHOJ, Radha Mahendru, who encountered refugees in community workshops that KHOJ hosted.

Another ambitious collective project started by artists and academics at the Center for the Study of Developing Societies is Sarai, a center for Media, Urban Life, and the Public Domain. In the past two decades, Sarai has held an interdisciplinary research residency, leading to the production of much writing on everyday life in Delhi and a number of different points of access between its scholar/artists and the residents of the city. Many of these take the form of a program series, such as the "City as Studio"—which explicitly directs artists to take urban experience as their creative impetus—and "Hinglish"—a program that negotiates between the language of the elites (English) and of the people (Hindi)—to generate dual-use media that serve as a bridge between the various enclaves of the city. Perhaps the most telling example of a Sarai project in the context of this study is *Trickster City* (Sarda et. al., 2010) a publication in English, organized by a Sarai fellow, Shveta Sarda, that features the writings of marginalized residents of Delhi on their everyday lives, translated into English and distributed globally. The result of a writing workshop for residents, this program yielded first-hand evidence of how marginalized residents experience urban challenges, including expropriation ("slum clearance").

Such visibility made possible through publications and other practices by KHOJ and Sarai generates historical records of everyday life. What is missing in Delhi is the connection between these activities of community-based arts and media organizations and the projects of architects and planners. There is not considerable overlap between the nonprofits devoted to urban planning (such as the India Habitat Centre), state planning organizations (whether at the national or local level) and the community-based work being carried out by artists.

Jakarta

With more than 30 million residents in the metropolitan area, Jakarta is now the second largest urban area in the world. Architecture and urban planning have played a role in the city for centuries but, in the postcolonial modern period, Sukarno's interest in these subjects promoted them as a matter of national interest (Santoso, 2011; Kusno, 2014; Simone, 2014).

The use of photo and video recording to make the megacity visible has clear political implications in the work *Pilgrimage to North Jakarta* (2018-19) by the artists Tita Salina, Irwan Ahmett, Jorgen Doyle and Hannah Ekin. In this work two artists from Jakarta (Salina and Ahmett) and two Australian artists (Doyle and Ekin) walked 40 km along the North Coast of the city, littered with decaying colonial-era buildings, but also the site of new high-rise developments and kampungs (urban villages). Over a period of eleven days, the artists took pictures and video, met members of informal settlements, camped along the route and were hosted by residents of the kampungs. This artistic research led to an exhibition in 2018-19 at the

Rujak Center for Urban Studies, a nonprofit dedicated to urban planning and design. Installed in a small gallery at the entrance to the Center, Doyle and Ekin generated a map from satellite imagery that traces the spaces they traversed that included about 50 photographs, from all of the artists, of scenes they witnessed printed on the same fabric (fig. 1).

FIGURE 1: Jorgen Doyle and Hannah Ekin (with Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett), *North Coast Pilgrimage* (2018). Photo: the author, 2019

This research was put to productive use by Elisa Satanudjaja, the Executive Director of Rujak. She seized upon this visual evidence and wove it together with urban and planning theory to develop a more complete academic analysis of everyday life in the North Coast kampungs for the purpose of generating policy alternatives that aim to preserve kampung life and the culture of its residents. A former executive director of Rujak, Marco Kusumawijaya, now working with the Jakarta regional government, collaborated with planners and various stakeholders to generate a development plan for the North Coast Commission, released in summer 2019. He was able to use evidence from this recurring artistic research project to promote tangible policies and limits on further development. Further, in response to the 2019 iteration of the pilgrimage (it is an annual event), an exhibition took place in a more visible venue, the Jakarta History Museum, from May to June, 2019, including other art works, performances, and projects about everyday life on the North Coast.

Conclusion

In the cities examined, artists have demonstrated a strong interest in urban culture and development. Many contemporary artists have participated in public art projects and performances in order to engage a broader population within their urban centers. Forms of participation and engagement are multiple, but the most important discovery of this research has been that artists are deeply concerned about and committed to the development of a collective

culture in their cities. Moreover, many artists have participated in creating institutional structures that seek to integrate their activities into the fabric of everyday life in their own cities. These artists thereby promulgate an alternative model in which urban life can be renegotiated by the public and they have partnered with other organizations and government in order to promote alternatives to the urban development processes currently at play in their cities.

The artists and institutions elaborated here have engaged and promoted an intersubjective method not only for knowledge production and dissemination, but to inform a conscientious approach to planning that could radically expand our notion of who a stakeholder could be. It is not merely a question of top-down versus bottom-up approaches, or comprehensive urban plans versus defending a right to the city. What is at stake with artistic research in the Asian megacity is rather a consideration of how the city is produced and reproduced when 20 million or more residents make their homes in these metropolitan areas. In such a context, every model, every system, is partial and contingent, like the nature of the experiences that we all have in the city. Artistic research offers a new means to allow urbanists to come to terms with the radical contingency that most of the inhabitants of the megacity must embrace daily. These are useful observations, but they are also tools that we can use to reconfigure our practice of imagining the city and planning for its future.

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