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Common accents: Professional practices, indigenous voices and vernacular urbanity in Kutch, India

Introduction

The reconstruction work undertaken by the development practice, Hunnarshala in Kutch, Gujarat, in the wake of the 2001 Bhuj Earthquake, illustrates how professional knowledge was instrumentalized to support indigenous and local knowledges towards improved urban citizenship.

In a context of inequality and framed by a specific trauma, the work of Hunnarshala can be seen to have made normative, organic processes of settlement construction more likely to occur in the face of homogenizing agendas of state and third sector donor organisations. Whilst the earthquake was a particular event producing a particular set of needs, the discrepancies between institutional state, third sector and commercial donor responses and the situated values and modes of behaviour evident in recipient communities – including the provision of new settlements and homes – are visible in urbanizing contexts globally, where marginalized communities are granted rudimentary services according to the value systems of the donor. In the case of post-disaster rebuilding, this most often takes the form of culturally and spatially inadequate urbanism and housing, with rehoused folk deposited in cheap, uniform shelters which bear little relationship to cultural norms, but which operate to impose a narrow democratization agenda which fails to enable indigenous values. Through their work, Hunnarshala sought to mediate this process, to enable ordinary voices and values to be manifest in the spatial and formal character of reconstructed settlements, realised as a coproduced synthetic vernacular architecture.

SLIDE – MAPS OF REGION, CONTEXT

In this paper, I will describe how indigenous knowledge was reframed and amplified by professional practices as a mechanism to support the democratic rights of under-represented communities in the face of a 'mass urbanisation' event. I will outline three case study settlements which describe how indigenous knowledge was supported in this way, and how this can be seen to have simultaneously supported an urban citizenship agenda rooted in local building culture.

Hodka

SLIDE – HODKA

Hodka is an hamlet situated within the Banni region in the north of Kutch, one of about forty hamlets within a 3850 km² semi-arid natural grassland region located between the salt plains of the Great Rahn to the North and the more fecund, urbanised central and coastal region to the south. Banni is sparsely populated - up until 2001 the area did not have stable villages but hamlets occupied by the

semi-nomadic Maldharis, who tend cattle and produce jewellery, cloth and animal products for sale in proximate settlements.

SLIDE – PRECEDENT

Houses at Hodka are composed of a number of well-spaced single-cell units (round *bhunga* and rectilinear *chowk*) arranged on a connecting raised mud plinth (*falia*); clustering specifically indicates familial connections. The edge of the *falia* defines the 'streets' in between and are indicative of wider social structures such as status. Individual units are orientated onto the platform, away from the street, emphasising the nature of the *falia* as a room of the house, rather than a garden or yard. In this sense, the *bhunga* serve as bedrooms, as spaces for private activity. Housing is normally produced by the resident family and the community from a mud-dung adobe, moulded into blocks, rendered and decorated with ornate carving and painted decoration by hand. The conical roof is thatched.

The earthquake in 2001 highlighted the depletion of sources of local knowledge within the community at Hodka, the devastation exposing a poverty of indigenous, building knowledge; buildings appeared to be 'vernacular' and 'of the community' but did not incorporate those indigenous technologies that had evolved over time to address the particularities of the environment including high-stress events like earthquakes, and were therefore technically unable to resist the earthquake.

SLIDE – REBUILDING

In response, Hunnarshālā were invited by the community at Hodka to assist in developing a sustainable, locally-sanctioned redevelopment, one which reinstated a traditional skill base eroded over the years, as well as to re-economize the locale towards diversification, including tourism, with an end goal of persuading the young to stay, rather than to migrate to the cities. To this end, spatial mapping was undertaken by Hunnarshālā in the village prior to rebuilding work beginning which loosely established the original form. This was discussed and modified through discussion and community negotiation so that the reconstructed village complied with both the technical spatial concerns of state agencies, and also their (and civil society) democratisation agenda. Design was driven by local spatial and technical/ constructional precedent (*bhunga* forms) as well as customary building processes, both in the immediacy of building but also with a view to customary incremental development, modified in relation to building regulations imposed in the wake of the earthquake. Construction was undertaken by communities, families building their own homes and assisting others where required, overseen and guided by Hunnarshālā so that new processes and technologies were undertaken to a verifiable standard, and also so that building became a tool for education towards generating sustainable practices. Traditional

building practices were tested to contemporary building codes, with modifications implemented (such as the use of china clay mortar in rammed-earth structures) to ensure regulatory compatibility and community application. The architectural intention for the houses at Hodka produced by Hunnarshala is indicated in the plan and section below, which shows an attempt at the recreation of the traditional cluster form common to Banni, with houses spaced according to new building regulations. Construction was of stabilised rammed earth (SRE) reinforced by concrete ring-beam construction, with Mangalore tile roofs.

SLIDE – COMMUNITY

In addition to the building work, and in collaboration with state and civil society partners, Hunnarshala supported the implementation of state-mandated village-level facilitators, known as *Setu*, to work alongside existing village panchayats. These were designed to oversee and organise relevant actors into a comprehensive development process around the *actual* needs of the community, consolidating community-specific concerns and creating policy feedback to the state. In turn *Setu* enabled the people to become 'self-driven', providing them with a necessary access point to government which was to a relevant scale, thereby emboldening them to demand from the state access to services and at the same time, creating a 'break' between the donor and the community,

Sadar Nagar –

[SLIDE]

Sadar Nagar is a 20 hectare suburb of the Bhuj metropolitan district, established after the earthquake as a temporary site for 3000 families requiring relocation during reconstruction and modernization programmes carried out in the city. Relocated families were divided according to caste and religion by state planners, following loose social boundaries present in Old Bhuj, which had emerged organically over many centuries. This pattern corresponded to socio-economic and cultural needs, with an hybrid architecture in Old Bhuj reflecting the economic reality of everyday life for the city's residents. At Sadar Nagar, the nuanced sociality of Old Bhuj was replaced by visible boundaries and intra-communal discord and violence followed, precipitated by a new economization of illicit alcohol production and sex work.

[SLIDE] Old Bhuj's original form was of specific importance to the development of Sadar Nagar. A complex web of interconnected lanes and alleyways linking primary streets, many of the more major roads did not afford passage out of the area but dead-ended at neighbourhood *chowks*. These spaces were the setting for neighbourhood activities, particularly relating to religious practice around temples situated at intersections and also to the grey-economic work common to the community. The

intersection of smaller roads and lanes would serve the more immediate locality as a place for social gathering. Each 'block' would have been centred on a familial or caste *chowk* onto which a few houses would have opened. Such a group of houses are known as a *falia*. This spatiality revealed a key consideration for Hunnarshala, in that the community's collaborative social form responded to and produced the urban and architectural form. Hunnarshala therefore began their design process at Sadar Nagar from the position that the community's culture – including their social norms - needed to be central to the project and through the enablement of these social processes, an authentic and sustainable architecture would emerge. [SLIDE] Applying an 'owner-driven reconstruction' approach, which organises expert guidance and knowledge around communal and individual needs and capacities, Hunnarshala supported the production of social groups who were capable of self-advocacy, at the level of project brief definition and spatial organisation with institutional and donor partners. In this way, the disparate communities in Sadar Nagar were stimulated to collaborate, producing a common point of interest.

[SLIDE] As a consequence of this more grassroots approach to establishing the design agenda, Hunnarshālā produced a series of masterplan and unit designs that emerged from a synthesis of vernacular and contemporary approaches, and also through dialogue with the community, in the form of workshops, meetings and community design sessions. Aspects of contemporary building practice came from regulatory bodies, who stipulated structural capabilities, spatial characteristics (particularly distance between building units and accessibility by emergency services) and tested and approved new technologies introduced by Hunnarshālā, such as stabilised rammed-earth construction.

The masterplan approximated the principle of community living – following other Indian architects such as Balkrishna Doshi, whilst drawing on the regional tradition of *chowks* as a means towards climate control, privacy and security. This allowed for a replication of the social groupings and contingent sense of community that had existed in the new residents' previous housing, whilst also implying that the networked, porous quality of traditional rural settlements, also perceptible in Old Bhuj.

Nonetheless, the principles of family dwelling arranged around a common external space, the progression of space from public to entirely private (See Fig. 4.18) and facilitation of incremental construction which is characteristic to the region, in Hunnarshālā's model building on a quickly assembled core and evolving from this as needs demand, was adhered to. More particular issues of spatial organisation in relation to use, social forms and the evolution of family structures over

time were not markedly addressed in the core unit model at Sadar Nagar and it was presumed by Hunnarshālā that these will become embedded over time as the house owners developed built.

The materiality (stabilized rammed earth and concrete beam framing) complements the spatiality of the housing, both inviting adoption and re-use towards a situated responsiveness. By proposing a cluster typology Hunnarshālā attempted to reorientate the mechanistic state-designed plan towards one in line with customary forms which are organic, human-scaled and relate to the processes of living as they occur in Kutch.

Junawada – representation, recognition and rights

[SLIDE]

The village of Junawada, is on the edge of the larger town of Bachau. The population has traditionally been involved in animal husbandry, predominantly raising cattle and consuming and trading the produce from these. Lack of legal land rights in the face of flourishing industrialisation, accelerated in the wake of the earthquake, have left the community with too little land for their traditional pastoralist activities and consequently, as elsewhere in Gujarat, many families have left the village to seek employment in the new heavy industries. The village declined accordingly. Even the school closed, and the sense of the village as a place without a future grew.

[SLIDE]

The urban form of the village was a network of interwoven pathways dividing the housing clusters into 'islands', apparently at random. Each island is further sub-divided by fences, demarking the boundaries of family houses. Within each boundary are a number of buildings, ranging from complete houses, to lean-tos and small stores, again apparently at random, but relationally to each other and the open space within the bounding fence and, inversely, the street. As per Kutchi vernacular traditions, the house has to be seen as both the enclosed and exposed spaces within the boundary, many domestic activities, including cooking, sleeping (men) and recreation taking place outside. The domestic and urban forms relate to very complex ideas of dwelling and embody ideas of privacy, hierarchy, gender, family, work, recreation, aesthetics and religious practices and beliefs.

The strategic plan at Junawada was defined by the Gujarat State government directly after the earthquake in 2001 who promoted multi-sector engagement, prioritising home-owner driven processes including community participation, redevelopment through public-private partnerships, an enforcement on building regulations, education and information dissemination relating to the programme, as well as the establishment of a state-level disaster management authority. Civil society

actors were seen as being best placed to ensure that community participation influenced reconstruction objectives, engaged by the local Authority to produce an infrastructural plan, in conjunction with the university at Ahmedabad, Hunnarshala established a design, construction and budget management approach which satisfied community and legislative requirements and which coincided with the NGO's own owner-led reconstruction agenda, which included financial assistance within a "framework of an enabling environment" that provided training, supervision and improved access to materials. [SLIDE] This included a rationalised urban plan which would widen roads to provide easier service provision and limit fatalities in the instance of a subsequent earthquake, and space houses out in accordance with building regulations, and regularise land ownership. This opened-up the community to military oversight too.

The community were free to use savings as they saw fit to improve facilities in the wider settlement. The NGO organised a materials market to keep prices down, and a system of payment to suppliers and builders which ensured honest competition.

[SLIDE] The reconstructed dwellings were again built along a core house model, a complete traditional house which could be developed over time according to need and capacity. Composed of a single storey of rammed-earth with integral concrete framing and a pitched tile roof overhanging at eaves level, the construction satisfied building regulations with only minimal technology.

Conclusion

SLIDE

So, what do I draw from this? What the three cases describe, I think, is an architectural process that enables the development 'from below' of common spaces that provide the forum for collective discourse between competing visions of urbanity and identity, including indigenous voices. State, third sector and communal ideas as to what it means to be modern and to be a citizen are supported through both the processes of architecture and its artefacts too. It does this, I would suggest, by vernacularizing or de-bureaucratizing institutional processes and the knowledge they are founded on.

In terms of local power, firstly coproductive approaches operate at an individual level to redistribute power through the construction of a house. It does this in a number of ways. As the cases suggests, the building of a house can be used to both align contemporary building design, construction and maintenance with the knowledges present in a community, thereby empowering the community to physically build their own homes according to their needs, customs and capacities.

Secondly, coproduction counters top-down approaches to housing provision, operating to educate state and civil society groups to better understand and appreciate the myriad human needs of people both as individuals and as communities.

Thirdly, coproduction permits of multiple interpretations. This is to say, coproduction means different things to different people and groups, is a socially constructed phenomenon, a network of relationships. For community members, coproduction with the state and civil society served to facilitate not only access to better quality housing and assistance but also, perhaps more importantly, to the simple act of recognition and engagement. It did this in part by demonstrating existing, significant and valid knowledge within the communities which could be used to produce both better housing.

For the state the benefits were numerous - undocumented people properly housed away from the city; low-cost urban development with self-sustaining services and the allocation of some service provision to the third sector. In this way, the developments integrated under-represented communities into both a national democratization agenda but also the 'deep democracy' of international development.

For Hunnarshala, the ends were both physical - better quality housing that promoted and maintained the benefits of customary ways of dwelling - and immaterial, pertaining to the psycho-social state of the community as both a single entity and as individuals and families. The community received houses, basic amenities and the promise of citizenship with its associated benefits, not least amongst which is the sense of being legitimated. In addition, Hunnarshala's work as a central organiser within the reconstruction work in Kutch explicitly enabled their engagement with the global discourse on development, per Arjun Appadurai's notion of deep democracy.

As such, this paper suggests, what is visible in the redevelopment of the three Kutchi settlements are common spaces that serve competing visions of urbanity and citizenship. These new spaces derived from synergies that emerged through the active co-production of architectural, urban and spatial form by lay and professional people concerned with the formation of a viable indigenous urbanism for the twenty-first century.