Reflection Report
A Trifle Strife?
Public Space, Rituals and Communalism

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MSc Architecture 2022/23, TU Delft
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This reflection report has been prepared to meet the academic requirements of the AR3CS100 Cross Domain City of the Future graduation studio, within the MSc Architecture track at TU Delft.

Cover page: Countercartography of Chamarajpet Maidan.

Undoing and Redoing, Research and Design

<u>Academic Programme</u>

The Cross Domain City of the Future studio engages the other master tracks to provide a holistic understanding of the MSc AUBS program. I have found that, without this multidisciplinary approach, it would have been difficult to analyse the urban complexity of Bengaluru. For example, to isolate the issue of socio-religious infrastructures from water or construction infrastructures would ignore their urban ecological relationships. Though religious communalism and architectural identity is not ostensibly related to water infrastructure, for example, the Bengaluru context is one where now depleted water tanks (*keres*) were sites of Hindu rituals and shrines. Water is also required for Islamic prayer rituals. The studio, by employing this holistic approach, has provided an argument for why an architect with an awareness for all the disciplines in the MSc AUBS track, is becoming ever more necessary. That said however, it has been a staggering challenge to incorporate such research findings in the architectural design project.

With regards to the MSc Architecture track particularly, the main question has been: ***<u>is architecture even a solution to the thesis problem?</u>*** Or is the answer found in landscape architecture or urbanism? Or perhaps it is found in MBE, whereby the various stakeholders in conflict need to be understood through their perceptions and powers within the problem matrix. Throughout the design phase, I found myself jumping across these disciplines.

One of my earlier design proposals was for a massive underground food market. Upon reflection, this proposal, whilst aiming to retain the maidan's activities (e.g. cricket, goat market, social space), was an architectural imposition. Though my tutors discouraged me from this trajectory initially, I pursued it for 10 weeks, only realising shortly after the P3 that I was imposing a neocolonial, infrastructure-architectural paradigm which was at odds with my research conclusion that the maidan needed to be treated with greater sensitivity. I only understood this when I tried to answer the question of who might build my design proposal (i.e. who would want it and who would facilitate it).

This question was uncomfortable. This is one of many research-design overlaps I have found myself in post-P2.

The research revealed a mismatch between my observations onsite and published media/ cartographic representations. My P2 design proposal attempted to address this by installing (a 20th century definition of) a new architectural icon which was inspired by my research on Habib Rahman's address to religious communalism in Ayodhya. But it was jarring to its context and could have been described as an exercise in architect-egotism. Whilst this approach could have proceeded, the socially-focussed base of the research demanded opinions from Chamarajpet locals. After all, for whom was the architectural intervention designed for?

Thus, I have been stuck in a self-made paradox whereby my hesitation to reach out to various stakeholders like the Waqf Board, Hindutva groups and the municipality during the research phase have impeded my design progress. More crucially, this has made it more difficult for me to answer the design question of how to address the current interreligious tension. Ideally, given my pursuit of a decolonial framework, I would have taken the time to develop a thorough understanding of all the stakeholders and their capacities. However, I took this for granted, believing it to be beyond the architect's scope. By not interviewing them and by not being thorough with the stakeholder analysis, I did not set myself useful managerial constraints to design with early on. But, having since been in contact with a Bengaluru-based architect who now runs an urban capacity-building practice, I have realised that the role of the architect is being rewritten. Architects such as Yasmeen Lari winning the 2023 RIBA Gold Medal are testaments to this change. As such, there is further scope for this thesis' stakeholder analysis to drive the design.

When I had begun this project, I had an idealised aspiration of establishing a focus group with Chamarajpet locals and taking a grassroots approach to stakeholder analysis. However, the reality of trying to speak to people on the field was less accommodating. It was found that i) people were very hesitant to engage in discussions about communalism; and that ii) Bengaluru's historic bifurcation as British-run (cantonment) and Mysore-run (pettah) zones have created particularities in Chamarajpet which cannot be accurately

represented by those from cantonment neighbourhoods, or from outside Chamarajpet, for that matter. I have had to make do with many assumptions about them in consultation with my architect contacts in Bengaluru, which have fed into a speculative narrative's design.

That was the first criterion for a socially-contextualised design. The second, and one which lost its place during fieldwork, was rituals in public space. Reflecting on the fieldwork, it was found during a visit to Bengaluru's famous KR Market that as long as people had an economic basis for their religious rituals, there was little room for communalistic sentiments. Whilst I was trying to establish a design brief, I found this view substantiated by a century-old source: the writings of Indian freedom fighter Bhagat Singh. There was a ritual economy that could be tapped into that was based around the trade of fresh produce, food, flowers and other ritual goods, both for Hindus and Muslims. The design proposal therefore aims to provide space where these economies can exist to help the various rituals co-exist, and for the various religious groups to co-exist amicably.

On the other end of the spectrum, the various ritual demands that were set upon the maidan were problematised through a forensic futuring exercise in the research report. I only did this after P2 (i.e. after having started designing). A worst-case scenario of communal violence on the maidan was speculated, based on past cases across India where procession-based festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi are also sites of violence. The maidan's analysis took these speculations as cautionary tales, serving as starting points for the mediation of intermediate spaces between existing Muslim and Hindu infrastructures. With a feeling of empowerment that the design proposal could avert these worst-case violences, I used this exercise to generate designs for calming buffer spaces at key thresholds: namely, the perimeter of the maidan and the space immediately surrounding the Eidgah Wall.

Untimately, the interplay between research and design led to the two main design aims: i) to address the communalism tension and ii) to encourage existing acitivites on the maidan. It was found that for a context such as Bengaluru's, a narrative around building capacity was needed because otherwise the project would be yet another infrastructural development in a city already marred - physically and socially - by development. It needed to be be a citizen-built effort to destroy walls of religious difference in the process of necessary collaboration.

Methodology

Due to my positionality as a Western-educated student, the research began with a decoloniality framework to address my cultural-nonsituatedness. To that end, I would like to reflect upon the question: ***how has the research and design methodology engaged with decoloniality?***

In the research phase, I enlisted the help of Bengaluru-based researchers and architects. However, one of the first things I was told during interviews with them was that historically-bound narratives of decoloniality could be deemed irrelevant in the face of the maidan's everyday life. Though it was true that decoloniality was far-removed from the fieldwork phases, I maintained a 'Decolonising Pedagogy' log (see Research Report Appendix) to understand systemic biases in architectural representations and meanings between Western education and Indian contextualisation. Indeed this was invaluable when the research outcomes demonstrated a need for deworlding our neoliberally-infused and communally-stoked imaginaries of the maidan.

Going one step back, I also ensured that I engaged with postcolonial and decolonial spatial theory, from which I found Gayatri Spivak's worlding theory most fascinating. Not only did this open my eyes to the various implicit biases that I has when I analysed urban space, but it also allowed me to reflect upon how I was (neo) colonially worlding space with architectural interventions, or in this reflection, impositions. Shortly after P3, I realised that my design proposal was indeed a neocolonial imposition. It was i) a megalithic infrastructural undertaking which would colonise the maidan's everyday life for the duration of its construction and ii) It naively assumed that a stakeholder - in this case, the municipality - would magically appear and sponsor the construction.

I felt deeply unconfortable with this discord between my proposal and decolonial ideals. Through faith in the benovelance of authority, I exerted both neocolonial naivity and ignorance towards grassroots initiatives, relegating the latter to something beyond the architect's formal project scope. After P3, I ended up restarting the design process with the aim of deworlding through social consideration. I did so by considering which stakeholders and Chamarajpet locals could and would want an initial architectural intervention on the maidan. I reasoned that the boys playing cricket and the men spectating would want a shelter and a place to sit. From this, I envisioned that I, as the architect, would provide various visions for how they could engage in such tactical, DIY urbanism interventions. This opened up a completely different design methodology which was rooted in decoloniality and which considered the stakeholders as active agents, rather than as passive bystanders, in the design process.

Societal Value

I like to believe that my design proposal has potential to be a benign Trojan's Horse for both Hindu and Muslim groups, given that I attempt to tap into societal and spatial commonalities of both. The design proposal is not only a tool to empower Muslims who are slowly being marginalised by the ruling government on a national scale, but also to empower Hindus who feel that they are unable to celebrate on valuable public space on a local level. Though its intentions are benign, it surely has its biases – both from Hindu and Muslim perspectives. Due to this duality, I imagine that the initial, modular intervention phases of the design narrative could be presented, as a first step in local interfaith dialogue, to both groups as a cause in their favour for them to then discuss and appraise.

On a separate note, I believe that this project has lent me pedagogical value in how I treat architectural projects. My previous tendency was to limit the architect's role to pure design with the assumption of easy top-down facilitation. Having experienced this thesis' research-design overlap, I would urge the architectural community to appraise the title of 'architect' so that it has more societal meaning than merely someone who makes pretty spaces.

<u>Transferrability of Findings</u>

The research outcomes of worlding in action could be highly applicable to other instances of religio-spatial contestations across India, and perhaps even abroad. The conversation within India, however, is most pertinent to this project as such architectural contestations are being heavily politicised for the approaching general elections. Essentially, it helps for everyone – religious or secular, Hindu or Muslim - to recognise the everyday value of these contested spaces, and to assess architectural semiologies perpetuated by (invented) heritage practices, news media, cartography and neocolonial understandings of public space and upon which the masses fixate.

Design-wise, the transferability of the specific proposal for Chamarajpet Maidan is based on the various strategies that address the two design aims of addressing the conflict and facilitating everyday life. The overarching strategy is to create spatial commons which can be shared by Hindu and Muslim groups, irrespective of religious affiliation. Within this overarching theme, three main tools have been implemented on the urban and architectural scales: place creation, thresholding, and indeterminacy. The various architectural translations of these tools could be implemented in religiously-contested spaces across India. Though my knowledge of the other cases is limited (having focussed on the Chamarajpet case for this thesis), I can imagine that, for instance, design strategies which enhance common everyday activities in Shahi Eidgah in North India could avert the public gaze away from the politicised matter of religious spatial affiiliation towards the practical matter of good placemaking practices.