City as Archive: Contemporary Urban Transformations and the Possibility of Politics

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"Now let us… suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past—an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one… If we want to represent historical sequence in spatial terms, we can only do it by juxtaposition in space: the same space cannot have two different contents… It shows us how far we are from mastering the characteristics of mental life by representing them in pictorial terms." Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

Cities and Archives

Understanding the relation between the city and the archive poses numerous interesting paradoxes, already signaled by Freud's ruminations on Rome. The question raised most directly is that of the juxtaposition of various temporalities and the possibilities of representing these temporalities and the historical experiences they signal in *spatial* terms. At the most fundamental level, archives have deep and historical connections to memory and in particular, to authoritative forms of memory. The formal characteristics of archives signify languages through which memory is constituted for different groups of people. In this context, positioning the city as a form of archive raises numerous ethical and philosophical challenges that have a bearing both upon how we understand the nature of archives as well as upon how we understand the contemporary city.

The modern city is fundamentally a collection of strangers that exceed the boundaries of any singular form of identity and belonging. Thus the question of what sort of archive corresponds to the city as demographic space is fundamentally connected to the problem of belonging within the city and to the establishment of rights to the city. But because the city draws together disparate groups of people it is also necessary to consider that the city—as multiple forms of media—might serve as an archive actively *producing* connections amongst its residents rather than merely reflecting them. In this paper, I will consider both these aspects through which the idea of city-as-archive can be elaborated. They are in fact intimately connected and have a bearing, as I suggest above, on both our understandings of contemporary cities as well as our understandings of archives.

Metropolis as Media

It is undeniable that contemporary urban experience is a deeply mediated one, conditioned, in particular, through the dissemination of cinematic and other kinds of imagery and sensory stimuli. Georg Simmel's seminal article, "Metropolis and Mental Life," written at the beginning of the 20th century, already explores the sensory impact of the city on the urban resident's perception of space, time and sense of self. "The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected," writes Simmel, "is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli." The metropolis is both the cause and the effect of the forms that social relations have taken in modern times, most notably the transformation of social relations into relations of calculation. Simmel writes, "the relationships and concerns of the typi-

cal metropolitan resident are so manifold and complex that, especially as a result of the agglomeration of so many persons with such differentiated interests, their relationships and activities intertwine with one another into a many-membered organism." For Simmel, this understanding of the metropolis as media is fundamental to his theory of the development of the metropolitan personality type.

The metropolitan form itself corresponds to the money economy and thereby becomes a very particular kind of medium within which social relations are transacted. "A person," writes Simmel, "does not end with the limits of his physical body or with the area to which his physical activity is immediately confined but embraces, rather, the totality of meaningful effects which emanates from him temporally and spatially. In the same way the city exists only in the totality of the effects which transcend their immediate sphere." These effects, connected to the advanced economic division of labor, can be thought of as a form of archive through which the modern metropolis and its residents are constituted. The "external and internal stimuli" that are thrown up by the metropolis have no preordained significance as such but instead work to *produce* connections between residents, however temporary and tenuous those connections might be. They also deeply affect the urban personality. Most fundamentally, they call into question the role of memory in the context of urban identity. What Simmel's understanding of the metropolis foregrounds is the idea that the city is a form of media, which saturates the life of its residents. This space of saturation is one of rapid change and transformation of stimuli and hence has a bearing upon forms of social interaction and the reproduction of socio-spatial forms within the city, better understood as "place."

In most commonsense understandings, archives are directly related to preservation of some parts of the past, collectively deemed of significance. In the case of the metropolis, founded upon the problem of constant new-

ness and temporary experiences, as well as upon the temporariness of the bond between urban residents, this very notion of the archive itself is problematic. Yet, there is always a struggle against this sense of temporariness and transition engendered by the 'metropolis as media.'

This struggle becomes most visible in contestations over space and the production of place or meaningful socio-spatial form, engaging a different notion of city-as-archive. Here, different actors deploy the creation of an archive through acts of deliberate preservation and memorialization in order to secure their place within the pulse of the city. Acts of deliberate destruction too are increasingly deployed as strategies for creating archives. Indeed, historic preservation can also be viewed as much as an act of destruction as of preservation, as I shall explain further on. In the understanding of 'metropolis as media,' which engenders social exchanges, the archive becomes an emergent notion, a principle of ordering stimuli upon which future transactions are imagined and made present rather than a given notion of the past that has been deemed significant and marked for preservation. This sense of city-as-archive is always in conflict, sometimes productive and sometimes corrosive, with the sense of city-as-archive that emerges in acts of preservation and strategies to inscribe space with particular social and political agendas. I now turn to the built form as another site at which the city emerges as archive.

Preservation and Destruction

Urban environments are always in transition, through incremental additions to the built fabrics, through new infrastructural initiatives and, increasingly, through redevelopment. In the contemporary moment, such transition signifies vitality and the lack of change, sometimes even radical changes, signifies stagnation. Thus, the most 'vital' cities of today such as Dubai, Shanghai and Beijing appear to be in perpetual motion,

covered with both construction sites and, in the case of Beijing and Shanghai, with plenty of demolition sites as well. In other cities, such as Beirut, repeatedly destroyed by wars, the process of reconstruction sparks off debates around questions of heritage and preservation. However, even if a city is not being subjected to dramatic transformations due to war or financial investment, the preservation of the historic fabric invariably alters the built environment of the city by altering its very atmosphere and significance. Preservation is undertaken as a means of creating collective memory by marking out certain places as being of significance.

Yet the significance of historic preservation in the contemporary world is open to debate. As the cultural theorist Ackbar Abbas has argued in several articles about Shanghai, historic preservation functions not to forge collective memory so much as to accommodate and naturalize change. The "image-city" created by these acts of preservation is then retailed to citizens and tourists by politicians, planners and developers as a source of revenue from mass tourism, festivals, rentals and so on. In places like Mumbai, where major transformations are currently underway in an attempt to turn it into a "world-class" city, the nascent heritage preservation movement continues to be dominated by elite citizens. Due to a highly particular rent-control legislation enacted almost six decades ago, a large part of the city's earliest neighborhoods have fallen into disrepair. The same legislation however, prevents the eviction of long-term tenants paying rents at rates determined in the 1940s and therefore has effectively stopped the redevelopment of these neighborhoods.

While developers and politicians have recently found ways to subvert all these regulations and to knock down a number of 19th and early 20th century buildings, the condition of these neighborhoods have also given rise to a vigorous debate over the question of preservation. As early examples of populist and vernacular, native architectural attempts

in a colonial city, these neighborhoods have been home to generations of Mumbaikars with deep historical connections and roots in the city. Yet these citizens today are caught a paradoxical situation of occupying some of the world's most expensive properties, closest to the city's central business district, while also finding themselves rapidly disenfranchised in the ambitious process of redeveloping the erstwhile port and trading city into a global hub for services.

In this context, conservation practices amount to what one Mumbai-based architect, Mustansir Dalvi has referred to evocatively as "architectural eugenics," or freezing the building envelope to conform to some image deemed 'objectively authentic.' Yet this form of eugenics amounts largely to imposing a particular vision and aesthetics based on claims of authenticity that are highly contestable and do not take into account the actual history of these neighborhoods. Treating the building envelope as a guide, conservationists associate these neighborhoods with certain communities even when empirical evidence shows the co-habitation of these areas by multiple communities. Thus conservation strategies sometimes become projects of ethnic cleansing and end up erasing the contribution of certain groups to the production of the city. In this way, authoritative narratives are circulated, based on the so-called historical expertise of particular specialists. This process represents one of ways in which the past is enshrined in the process of erasure through recourse to authoritative narrative. The built environment becomes an archive in which the silencing of multiple pasts and diversity is effectively achieved.

Cities with heterogeneous populations such as Mumbai and Beirut are perhaps in a different relationship when it comes to the production of the built environment as an archive than others such as Dubai, Shanghai or Beijing where the rapid and massive transformations of the built environment sends out other kinds of signals. In these latter cities, architecture often becomes a monumental

tool in an attempt to produce feedback from a new world, forged by the forces of contemporary globalization. What kinds of signals do these monumental new cityscapes broadcast? In the context of speedy physiognomic alterations that are increasingly making different cities alike in appearance, cultural specificity as signaled by the built environment has been called into question.

If archives are associated with the production and dissemination of particular forms as signifiers of an absent past, the lack of cultural specificity physiognomically signaled, complicates the project of imagining the city as archive, at least at the level of built form. New kinds of signals about emergence, declaration and resistance to global cultural integration are being broadcast by these new cityscapes. In fact, it might be possible even to argue that monumental construction projects, such as those underway in Beijing in preparation for the Olympics signal an intention to harvest a new kind of cultural hermeticism, using an international language of design and style. How does the city emerge as an archive—one broadcasting particular cultural signals— in such diverse contexts as the Asian cities like Mumbai, Beirut, Shanghai, Beijing and Dubai, described in this section? To answer this question, we would need to turn briefly to a theoretical elaboration of the notion of the archive itself.

Navigating Voids

Archives are neither universal forms nor are they uniform institutions that collect particular kinds of information in the service of particular, universal projects of history. Rather, we might think of archives as *languages*, whose formal characteristics constitute memory in different ways for different groups of people. This position assumes that the past itself, as an absence, is inherently unstable and is constantly reconstituted as memory through active forms of recollection and through institutional forms such as archives. The problem of the archive, as numerous

theorists have pointed out, is the assumption of the *a priori* significance of the information gathered within the formal archive, usually considered to reflect something else, something that is less tangible such as cultural genius or a higher truth. The authority of the archive in fact rests upon this assumption.

In the preceding sections, I outlined the fundamentally ephemeral nature of the flows that constitute urban space on the one hand and the problems of locating any archive around what appears to be the least ephemeral aspect of urban space viz. the built environment on the other hand. In the latter instance too, we are forced to confront the fact that urban environments are constituted by a continuous and cumulative process of subtraction and destruction, which forms a crucial layer of the history of almost all contemporary cities. Even historic preservation, I suggested, ends up being a form of destruction.

In considering the relationship between cities and archives, we could do well to explore the built environment itself as an archive *of* the city. But given the complexity of both cities and archives as historical forms, I suggest the alternative concept of city-*as*-archive as a tool with which to explore both the complexities of contemporary cities as well as of the processes by which archives are constituted. To take this a bit further, the concept of city-as-archive suggests an analogical relationship between cities and archives in terms of form and raises the question of the limits of each form. In so formulating the relation between cities and archives, I suggest that we are able to interrogate both the limits of the principles by which archives are constituted as well as the problem of belonging by which the city is constituted as a demographic space.

In particular, if we conceive of archives not just as institutional forms but also as *processes*, this analogical relation between cities and archives begins to acquire a shape that corresponds to the particular conditions of contemporary cities. The idea of the me-

tropolis as media connected to perpetual and ephemeral flows of information and stimuli, explored above, is a powerful reminder that we would need a processual understanding of the archive in order to grasp the nature of these flows. As a principle of order, the archive provides a base upon which history, memory and recollection takes place. Such memory structures relations between strangers thereby producing a sense of urban locality and place. Hence the relationship between cities and archives and the concept of city-as-archive has a significant resonance, especially in the context of globalization, the profound and epochal socio-economic transformation confronting the world today. In sum, I suggest that contemporary urban form can provide a theoretical apparatus to explore the constitution of archives and vice versa.

City Beyond Maps

Maps and mapping have historically provided important functional tools in navigating the relationship between 'reality' and its abstractions. I specifically stress the *functional* aspects of maps because the concept of 'reality' is itself highly contested and philosophical debates on the nature of 'reality' are legendary. In one sense, maps provide anchors for the production of archives as they mirror the transformations of the urban realm. As numerous recent analyses have suggested, the epochal transformation of society into an urban one is taking place at a planetary scale today. Yet the role of architectural plans in shaping contemporary urbanism is receding rather than increasing. As the architect Kazys Varnelis suggests, the workings of the contemporary, information-based economy, obviate "the need for the architectural plan" (Varnelis 2005). In this way, he suggests that a "city beyond maps" has already come into existence, one that cannot be mapped in terms of its visible architecture and infrastructure. This insight, about what we might call "invisible urbanism" is also a phenomenon that has been studied by anthropolo-

gists, who claim that it is necessary to study the city not only in its physical aspects but also by positioning its people and their network producing activities as the infrastructure that allows the city to function (see Simone 2004).

The physical transformation of cities in the context of globalization is sometimes accompanied by the massive displacement of people—either physically as in the case of Mumbai and Beirut or intangibly as in the case of the Parisian *banlieues*, whose inhabitants find themselves increasingly disenfranchised and imprisoned in place, displaced by being rendered immobile. The "city beyond maps" thus now includes not only the movement of global economic forces but also the informational layers carried by people as they are being displaced from familiar habitats or dangerous, temporary ones, as they are being rendered mobile. The city itself acquires a new relationship to density, the characteristic relationship between people and milieu, which defines the production of urban locality. Place-based density is transformed into a physically absurd value but is recoded into the stories that people carry with them across urban domains as they struggle to reconstitute their place within the city. For urban research, it becomes necessary to find ways of mapping these invisible and emergent structures of urban information in order to understand the processes by which residents are being re-embedded across diverse geographical spaces and scales into new networks of exchange and interdependency. These kinds of transformations provide a way of exploring the idea of city-as-archive in some depth.

As an example, I will turn here to some of the transformations currently underway in Mumbai as a way of examining the usefulness of the city-as-archive. As is well known, approximately half of Mumbai's population is estimated to be living in informal settlements, which are poorly serviced and largely disconnected from the infrastructural grid. Popularly referred to as slums, by residents as well as planners, politicians and develop-

ers, these settlements occupy a mere 8% of the total space of the city within its municipal limits. However, they are geographically spread all over the city and are often in very close proximity to affluent neighborhoods, forming the very antithesis of the isolated apartheid township, the contemporary Parisian *banlieue* or the ghetto. This to better developed neighborhoods has resulted in inflating the notional property values of the parcels of land on which slums are constructed, even if many of these land parcels only exist as a result of painstaking reclamation or are situated on top of infrastructural facilities and thus environmentally precarious or are lands whose ownership is locked in dispute. As the flow of real-estate capital has been liberalized and development itself has been privatized, these informal settlements have become highly prized targets since they stand as obstacles to the complete 'make-over' of the city along the lines of Shanghai or Dubai. In this context, a new form of struggle has taken shape, one that is different from the struggle to preserve historic neighborhoods in Mumbai, which I discussed earlier.

As the parcels of land on which these informal settlements sit are absorbed into the formal, built landscape of the new city, with its aspirations to becoming the next Shanghai, large numbers of residents have been displaced into new tower-block buildings, built on designated parcels of land, often at a great distance away from their original homes. The slum, in one sense, constitutes a material expression of density in space. But density itself can be reconceptualized, not merely as the spatial occupation of a location by a given population but also as a network of information and relationships, which can also be detached from space. Thus the displacement of these residents can also be seen as a detachment of the density of their informal infrastructure of relations and networks from place itself. While many of the current struggles in the city are articulated around the idea of asserting a right to the city, these struggles primarily function to produce political gridlock and to maintaining status quo.

Meanwhile, speculative capital continues to thrive and even profit from these struggles as bets are laid down on the future shape of the city and profits realized in the present moment, on the basis of anticipation.

In this context, the challenge for both planning and politics is the identification of new forms of general or common interest. Normative notions of urban planning take infrastructure as a point of departure and as terminus, understanding underlying urban conditions in relation to existing infrastructure. Infrastructure is seen as providing the organizational glue for an automatically constituted public sphere and an accurate indication of existing conditions, including demographic ones. But this form of understanding the basis for politics is clearly in danger as urbanism advances, marching to the tune of a "city beyond maps," an invisible architecture of forces. Here, a new concept of urban politics can be usefully articulated by reference to the city-as-archive. Following my earlier analysis, archives can be treated as anchors in the reconstitution of social relations rather than as reflections of an already existing set of underlying conditions. Further, if we can treat density as a reflection of a network of information and relationships rather than as a demographic indicator of the *quality* and nature of the experience of place, then I suggest that these newly mobile forms of density can themselves be positioned as a form of archive. The new city, coming into being, can then be read as an archive, and urban political struggles might be repositioned in the zone of anticipation rather than in the zone of nostalgia.

The Pedagogy of the Urban

This city-as-archive, which includes the reconstitution of urban density as a key factor, can provide an important counterpoint to understanding how emergent relationships within the new city are to be understood. By providing a means of recording and *including* the fluidities of urban informality as vital

information, the city-as-archive provides a lens into the emergent as much as it indexes historical forms. I suggested earlier that rather than highlight the archive's capacity to accurately represent a past, that we use the notion of archive as a way of navigating the voids of the present, as a practice of intervening into and reading the urban fabrics created by these voids, not for reading the urban fabric as a quilt or a palimpsest of historical forms, preserved within the archive. These voids of the present are created not only by environmental destruction, catastrophes or targeted acts of terror but also by the quotidian transformations of urban space by politicians, developers and planners. In an age marked both by destruction and the stimulation of memory and identities as well as by the massive proliferation of data, information, its collection and its organization, we need to rethink the notion of archive to encompass a dynamic sense of ordering and interpretation, unmoored from the politics of preservation and evidence creation for historical understanding.

In contexts such as Mumbai but also in many other contemporary urban contexts, such an approach is invaluable for it points to the possibilities of a politics based on anticipation rather than one that is based on known forms of place and demographic arrangement. The notion of the city-as-archive enables the production of tools of urban design that take a very different view of demographic density and its relation to urban infrastructure. On this view, density would be seen as part of a mobile and transforming infrastructural landscape rather than as a static indicator to be rearranged through new infrastructural input. In other words, the city's demographic profile, seen through the lens of the city-as-archive foregrounds information that has a bearing on the future rather than information that merely has to be reorganized and purged or, in other words, as information belonging to an archive that merely plots historical transitions by containing information as evidence. Thus, beginning with the simple fact of the centrality of spatial transformations, we move

away from considering these spatial transformations as archival evidence in understanding contemporary urban fabric and politics. Instead, we argue for a new methodological move, to posit the transforming city itself as an archive in the making, a form that will have a profound bearing on our understanding of the past as a history of the present.

Such an approach has practical pedagogical implications, particularly for the design professions, engaged in harnessing creativity for the production of urban futures. At the broadest level, it enables us to rethink the kinds of tools necessary for projects of urban regeneration, itself a constant feature of contemporary cities. By providing a theoretical apparatus for mapping emergent relations rather than isolating and classifying certain forms as belonging to the past and others to the present, city-as-archive also serves as a methodological intervention into the re-creation of everyday relations. In this sense, city-as-archive is fundamentally a pedagogical tool, one that encourages conceptual creativity as the basis for political transformation. Without such conceptual creativity, the analytic basis for political action remains fundamentally conservative. If design as a professional activity is fundamentally connected to imagining and producing the future, then the particular concept of the archive advanced in this exposition of city-as-archive can provide the basis of that creativity. In other words, city-as-archive fundamentally works as a tool refashioning our relation to the future itself through its potential to intervene in the education of urban designers.

Conclusion

Both cities and archives play a central role in constituting our understanding of social life. The modern metropolis *as* media constantly mediates, produces and maintains relations amongst strangers. Similarly, once we free ourselves from the constraints of archives as particular, official institutional forms, we are in a better position to understand the archive

beyond its role as a repository of evidence about the past, always directed toward a putative future. Instead, by taking a more ecumenical view of what kinds of information or activities might be included in an archive, we begin to see an analogical relationship between cities and archives. In the context of the rapid transformation of contemporary cities, it is necessary that we move away from an inherently conservative and preservationist understanding of archives because such a view inevitably influences the way we perceive urban politics. Instead, we might benefit by taking the form of the modern metropolis as media as a prototype for the city-as-archive, a method for navigating the profound social transformations of the present without succumbing to a view of the past as a succession of historical forms, preserved within an archive that is itself detached from the present. Instead, I suggest that the city-as-archive is a way of embedding the past within the present as an absent but ongoing temporal phenomenon, one that does not treat the city as a palimpsest of historical forms and does not take the archive as merely a repository of those forms.

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