



3 WRITING THE TRANSNATIONAL: THE DISTANT SPACES OF THE INDIAN CITY

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Introduction

This paper reports “work in progress” on a project which I’ve titled, “The Spaces of Transnational Cultures”. The aim of the project is to build on, but be methodologically different from, my earlier research on the architecture and urbanism of colonial and postcolonial cities in which the principal objective had been to demonstrate the inherently constitutive relationship between the political, social, and cultural regimes of colonialism in specific locations and their urban, architectural and spatial representations (King, 1976; 1990)

In this new project, my aim is to examine different disciplinary as well as popular discourses dealing with the ‘transnationalization of cultures’ (including theoretical ideas and concepts, developed in the last two decades, on, for example, globalization, postmodernism, postcolonial criticism etc.). My objective here is to assess their effectiveness in helping to explain spatial transformations over the last three decades in the realms of architecture, urbanism and the larger built environment, particularly in major world cities. The assumption behind this objective is that if we can demonstrate the existence of specific colonial cultures and the powers and spaces they constitute (and which, in turn, help to constitute them), we can also do the same for transnational, or global cultures.

My paper is in two parts. I first address the larger theoretical frame and elaborate some of the concepts used before discussing the particular instance of transnational cultures as exemplified in specific Indian cities.

I use the term “space” in two senses. First, metaphorically, to refer to the discursive space in which notions of the transcultural are being constructed; but also, in a very materialist, realist sense, to refer to those phenomena that are described and signified by these discourses—physical and spatial urban form, architecture, the larger built environment. “Space” here also implies addressing the *production* of space—to use Lefebvre’s (1991) phrase—and the economic, social, political, and especially, cultural conditions in which space is produced.

“Transnational cultures” is more problematic. If we can accept that transnational means “extending beyond national bounds or frontiers”, *transnational culture* perhaps suggests not only that cultures are normally somehow “national”, that is, that they somehow belong to nations (that is, peoples, not nation-states); but that they are also confined within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. Not only do cultures—by which I refer to socially organized systems of meaning and identity which are not necessarily coherent or even stable—increasingly exist far from their places of origin but, as Gupta

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and Fergusson (1992) have argued, cultures aren't necessarily situated in a particular space or place.

Here it is tempting to explore the now substantial literature which speculates about the existence of "global culture(s)", about which Appadurai (1996), Featherstone (1990), Waters (1994), among others, have written. Yet having addressed some of the issues elsewhere (King, 1997), and in the interests of both space and time, I will resist that. Illustratively, Homi Bhabha (1994) speaks of "locating culture in the realm of the beyond", coming up with concepts like a "third space", and interesting ideas about the "extra-territorial". He does not, however, actually address the issue that I'm interested in: while it is possible for people, ideas, memories, images, or movable objects to be located (almost) anywhere and to move around at will, immovable objects, such as buildings or the spaces of city squares, have to be fixed, to be located. And they're fixed in particular places, most often in cities, which are situated in nation-states.

There is, therefore, a basic contradiction that has to be dealt with, namely, that if there are transnational spaces in a realist, physicalist sense, they're still located in *national* space. Alternatively, we can suppose that national space has become metaphorically, and representationally, if not legally or technically, transnationalized.

There are, therefore, four components to the project. First, the discursive construction and representation of the spaces of transnational culture. This includes the concepts, languages, images, theories, and visual representations, and the meanings which people invest in these: for example, ideas about globalization, as well as all the "posts" (postcolonialism, postnationalism, etc.), about global cities, cultural flows and the rest. These concepts are what people use to talk about the phenomena and, through these discourses, bring the transnational spaces into representation.

For example, to clarify: we can say that "national space" refers to that space which is represented in and by a national cultural tradition ("American architecture"); "international space" is that space constructed by a combination of elements from two or more national cultural traditions (e.g. Maryknoll seminary, built for a missionary brotherhood at Ossining, NY, on the Hudson River, is a robust masonry building in the American Arts and Crafts tradition yet hybridized with Chinese features and roof structure); "transnational space" acknowledges the existence of specific national cultural traditions but either ignores them or attempts to go beyond them.

It could be suggested that such a transnational space is impossible in that every architect, builder or client is a subject of, and every space is necessarily located in, a nation state. However, it may be possible to have a space that deliberately attempts to transcend national cultural traditions, as, for example, was attempted by the so-called "international style", though of course, this also came from particular national traditions, technologies and modes of production (Banham, 1988). This is clearly not the end of this argument but it is all

there is space for here.

"Global space" ignores all socially constructed divisions of "the nation", and assumes either a humanistic, tech-nological or anthropomorphic universalism. Again, however, similar objections can be raised. There is no global category which does not have a "lower" categorization of identity.

Second, the realm of "the real", whether economic, financial, political, communicational, technical, and so on. By this I mean the movements of capital, media technology (the internet, the Web), the decisions about investment and real estate. We can cite here Arjun Appadurai's notion of the global cultural flows in their various dimensions—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes (1990).

Third, is what I shall call the "fixed spaces" of transnational culture. A production of space is materialized and located in a particular place and brought together by the combination of 1 and 2 above.

Fourth, the cultures of the people who construct the representations I discussed first. James Clifford (1992), for example, writes of "travelling cultures," the ways people leave home and return, enacting differently centered worlds (made up of) interconnected cosmopolitanisms. These are the people who move between and speak across cultures (such as most of us at this conference).

Diasporic Designs: Constructed Dream Cultures of (or for) the NRI

In order to put some substance into these ideas let me address what I'd suggest is a good example of a transnational culture, as I've described it above. This is the diasporic culture(s) of the "NRI", the Non-Resident Indian. I shall speak about some of its institutions, and also, some of the spaces produced in its name. These are some preliminary observations on this phenomenon as it manifests itself in one of the key institutions of that culture, the bi-weekly magazine, *India Today*.¹

Given my earlier definition, the category of the Non-Resident Indian is one that closely approximates the idea of transnational culture. On one hand, the legal status of the identity is established by the Government of India through various tax, citizenship and financial regulations such that Indian subjectivity is firmly centered in a powerful sense of nation and culture, an essence where the notion of *home* (as residence from which NON Resident takes its logic and meaning) is ultimately located in India. Non-Resident *Indian* refers to a *personal* identity as Indian (to be one, to be able to speak, feel and probably also look like one) but *not*, however, to reside like one. The negation of this particular identity here is in the fact of residence; Indian residence is denied because, just like the definition of transnational, the NRI lives "beyond national bounds and frontiers".²

If living in the USA, the NRI or, for that matter, the British

“global specifications”; Unitech developments offer what they state are “world class homes” “exclusively for Non-Resident Indians”; in Pune, other developments are of “international quality and style”. How is this sense of “international style and standards”, of “global specifications”, being constructed?

The first condition apparently is that one lives in a jet-set world, linked by global airways. Architectural critic Deyan Sudjic (1992) has suggested that the symbolic center of the contemporary metropolitan city has shifted from the city hall and market square to the airport plaza. In India, NRI-favored properties in Delhi are, for example, represented as “ten minutes drive from the IGI Airport”; “close to the international airport in Powai”, in Mumbai; “near the planned new airport in Bangalore”. Prominently featured facilities in these new developments include swimming pools (with spiral splashdowns) or “Beverly Hills style pools”, jogging tracks, tennis courts, croquet lawns, indoor badminton courts, putting greens, discotheques, boat clubs, 18 hole golf courses, private airstrips, shopping malls, multi-cuisine restaurants, laundromats, gyms, table tennis and billiard rooms, party rooms, health clubs, saunas, landscaped gardens, waterfalls, and inside, individual jacuzzis, video entry phone security systems, marble flooring, teakwood floors and doors, designer toilets, and air conditioning. The “international” nature of facilities is matched by the “international” (though mainly Euro-American) signifying nomenclature used to market the developments—Bel Air, La Hacienda, Villa Del Mar, Belvedere, Riviera, Manhattan, as well as a rich sprinkling of Anglicized pseudo-aristocratic names—Burlington, Somerville, Sinclair, Eden Gardens (rather than the Garden of Eden). On this evidence, “international standards” clearly suggests not only those of the world’s wealthiest states but also, those of the most privileged class within them.

In this symbolic construction of the “international”—presumably meaning *all* the world’s (some 200) nation-states including India—there is a peculiar disjuncture in that “international” and “India” are positioned as being mutually exclusive, rather than inclusive of each other. Thus, advertisements for Unitech’s Manhattan apartments in Delhi suggest “when you come home to India, you don’t have to leave your international lifestyle behind”. “International” here, therefore, is “other” than, or different from, India—and the ads, to use William Whyte’s old phrase, are inherently “other directed”. Take, for example, “Draw the curtains and you could be in one of London’s fashionable designer homes” (but not, apparently, in India), or the Premier Park View apartments in Madras (Figure 2), “that would easily belong in Park Avenue, New York; Mayfair, London and Bel-Air, Los Angeles” (but again, apparently not in India).

In the context of an increasingly globalized clientele, although some of the advertisements are directed, as we have seen, exclusively at NRIs, it is not evident to whom else they’re addressed. They could be institutional or private investors, drug lords, or occupants of any nationality. One might surmise that, whatever their nationality, they are likely to belong to one class, namely, Sklair’s “transnational global elite” (Sklair, 1990). Yet anecdotal evidence from India suggests the

opposite, at least for some properties; the space is bought by members of the new middle class and then split up according to family requirements. Yet, irrespective of who their purchasers are, these new “international palaces” are likely to have a significant impact, as models of domestic consumption, on the new (economically-franchised) upper middle class.

Figure 2 Premier Park View, Madras

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

PREMIER PARK VIEW, MADRAS

APARTMENTS
THAT WOULD EASILY BELONG IN
PARK AVENUE, NEW YORK; MAYFAIR, LONDON AND
BEL-AIR, LOS ANGELES.



Premier Park View...resting regally on a rambling ten grounds of peace, quiet and breeze of the fresh Luz Avenue, Mysapore, Madras.

So near schools, places of worship, shopping arcades, markets and hospitals. Yet so far away from the disturbing din and bustle.

16 limited-edition, ultra-luxury apartments ranging between 2000 and 2500 sq.ft. The options of 3-bedrooms and a study or 4-bedrooms. All adorned with resile flooring (or a floor of your choice) and teak wood-work of exquisite craftsmanship. Echoing a heady combination of class and

fine taste in every corner. With amenities like extra lift, standby generator, telephone and basement parking.

At a pleasantly surprising price of US \$70 per sq.ft. Interior decoration services are also offered at a fee.

Above all, Premier Park View comes to you from a friend called Premier Housing, with a formidable reputation to maintain, tickly merited by its various earlier projects.

Book a Premier Park View apartment right now. And make the best thing money can buy, yours.



Premier Housing
SETTING STANDARDS
Premier Housing and Industrial Enterprises Ltd.

Regd. Office: 'Saurashtra Centre', 4th, Anna Salai, Nandanam, Madras - 600 035. Ph: 91-44-4342193/4345067 Fax: 91-44-4345782
Dubai Office: Bin Saeed Traders, P.O. Box 34913, Dubai, UAE Ph: 971-4-521956 Fax: 971-4-524968

Pac/Indian/Mad/PV115

It is here where financial, economic, cultural, discursive, as well as spatial and architectural manifestations of globalization overlap. “Liberalization” and “globalization”, with increased foreign direct investment has obviously brought more multinational companies into India. Indeed, MNCs and NRIs are acknowledged as the principal forces giving “a new impetus to building activity” (Figure 3); it is these who are associated with “selling lifestyles”. In Madras (Figure 4), “Spencer Plaza is already home to some of the best corporate names like Citibank, Cathay Pacific, American Express, Nestle etc”. According to Delhi’s Ansal Properties, “the country is moving to the central stage of the world-economy. Ushering in an era of plenty and prosperity. Nurturing many new aspirations and many new dreams” which Ansal Plaza, the “international shopping cum-office complex”, is meant to symbolize”.

Appeals to the collective diasporic imaginary fuse luxury with

Figure 3 MNCs and NRIs give a new impetus to building activity.

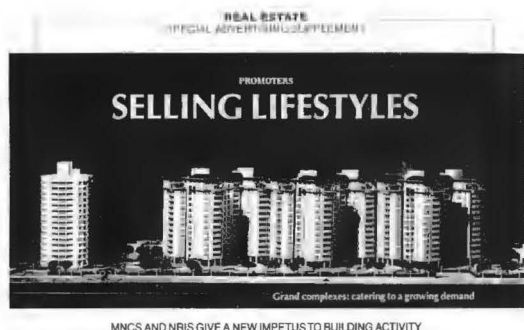


Figure 4 Spencer Plaza, Madras

SPECIAL ADVERTISING SUPPLEMENT

An opportunity of a life time to invest in a premium property in the heart of Madras

Spencer Plaza

The most modern office complex is fast coming up at Spencers, on Mount Road, the main arterial road of Madras. In the best business district, close to major Hotels, Government Offices, Banks and Corporate offices.

In the liberalised environment, the city is gearing itself towards new business opportunities. With the best of infrastructure, Madras has become an ideal location for business to flourish.

Spencer Plaza is already home to some of the best corporate names like Citibank, Cathay Pacific, American Express, Nestle etc. What is more, investors of Phase I are highly rewarded with whopping rental returns and roaring commercial activity.

RUSH BEFORE THE BOOKING FOR PHASE II CLOSES.

For details, write or Fax: **Mangal Tirth Estate Limited**
749, Anna Salai, Madras - 600 002, India. Tel.: 8522772, 8522700, Fax: 8520899

Bookings now open for Phase II

SPENCER PLAZA INDIA'S GREATEST OFFICE & SHOPPING COMPLEX

dreams. Delhi (despite its record as having the most polluted environment in Asia) is represented as a "dream city" (Figure 5); builders are said to be "cashing in on the NRI need to have dream houses and addresses in India" so they can "come home to luxury". In Madras, another company suggests "We don't build apartments... We build dreams". For the Bombay developer, K. Raheja, the dream is a lifestyle to which one "comes home"—recreational, athletic, muscular and masculine—women's place, apparently, is with the children.

What is also remarkable about all these advertisements is the

Figure 5 Delhi, a "Dream City"



way that the space is gendered. None refers to the domestic realm of eating, dining, or cooking; none make any reference to kitchens, presumably because this does not belong to the spatial realm of the male or, at least, not the socially hegemonic male which is being addressed here.

The principal dream, in fact, may simply be the accumulation of capital. These are "Boom Times in Bangalore", Bombay, or Madras, announce the developers. In Rosewood City, a "luxurious 115 acre English township" in south Delhi, you can "watch your money grow by leaps and bounds"; in the nearby Charmwood Village, prices have tripled in three years. In Bangalore, "investment priorities have shifted from jewellery and stocks to real estate". Throwing the gauntlet to the financial machismo of the NRI, another company challenges, "The true measure of your success lies in how fast you can identify prime real estate opportunities in your homeland" (*India Today*, 1995, 1996 passim).

Other advertising copy constructs a particular type of imperial nostalgia, where colonial mimicry is strong. Here, one of the most frequently used signifiers is Oxford—Oxford Citadel, Oxford Towers, Oxford Hermitage, as well as Oxford Suites, Oxford Studios, Oxford Chambers, Oxford Palazzo, Oxford Ambience, Oxford Manor and—naturally—Oxford Spires. On the outskirts of Bangalore, in the words of this advertisement, in a premier residential locale, "the essence of British Architecture is about to make its presence felt, with Oxford Impero, with motifs and elements from different styles of early 17th century architecture spanning 350 years". This

"mega project...is sprawling across 13 prime acres of which 75 percent is devoted to traditional English style of landscape". The 26 buildings (with 550 premium apartments) sport appropriate signifying labels designed to appeal to the social and spatial memories of the diasporic NRI—in the West End and inner as well as outer suburbs of South Asian London: Hampstead, Regents Park, Royal Crescent House, Bedford, Dorset, but also Drayton, Shelburne and Bristol (though not Dubai, Dharan, Saudi).

These extracts may suggest that the way in which this new architectural culture is being both imaged and imagined for the NRI diaspora is entirely exogenous, exhibiting little of what we might describe as "traditional" indigenous values, and denying the identity from which it originates. This is not entirely correct. Occasionally the plan of a residence will reveal a puja room or in houses in another Bangalore suburb, reference is made to the Rajarajeshwari Temple close by. Other bungalow plots are "developed with Vedic wisdom" according to ancient principles of Vastu Shastra.

Conclusion

If we accept this advertising copy at face value, what meanings can we give to these representations and the reality they purport to describe? My first inclination is to return to my comments at the start; to see these phenomena, as simply another, but quite unique example of how particular spaces are produced and the very historically, culturally and geographically specific conditions which produce them.

Just as the Europeans, or before them, the Moghuls, under different regimes of political power, were the mediators of new, and specifically colonial forms of urban development in India, so today, the global community of the NRI, together with its local agencies, has become a significant force in transforming the space of Indian cities.

Yet what these empirical materials also reveal is that there is no singular phenomenon that can be categorized as "international or transnational identity", any more than one can speak, in the singular, about "global culture". International identities, in the plural, are formed and framed from socially constructed historical, cultural, and spatially specific hybridizations. Nor, for obvious reasons, can there ever be "global" or "international standards", defined independently of the distribution of wealth, resources and power of the richest and most powerful states.

Moreover, looked at "internationally", and specifically in relation to the NRI community in either Britain or the United States, it is evident that Indian identities (and no doubt those of others "displaced" abroad) are apparently dependent on their cultural and spatial context, and formed in a dialectical relation (and reaction) to it. In the cultural space of "the West", the formal display is to look, and be, more "Indian", signifying one's own difference in response to the difference of others; in India, on the other hand, the NRI's cultural identity is again signified by showing one's difference to others, though in

this case, it is by being more "Western"³.

This spatially split identity is especially evident when leafing through the pages of *India Today*. Reports of cultural performances in the United States—traditional forms of dance, music, theatre, as well as the Bombay film—are classically (or typically) "Indian". In India, as we have seen, the new domestic architecture of the NRI is typically "international". Identities, social, spatial, and cultural, are being remade from outside.

What the materials also highlight are the complex, interactive conditions under which new (local) class identities are being formed, with the help of new forms of architectural and spatial representations, in contemporary urban India. They are an outcome of the interactions between the "real" as well as the imagined lifestyles of a globally dispersed, diasporic NRI, the local (and also mobile) middle class, developers, entrepreneurs, and the urban policies of the state. In this context, where McDonald's has met with substantial cultural resistance in India (dietary habits touching more deeply sacred and bodily taboos), exogenous spatial and architectural images and the lifestyles they represent have so far sparked off no riots. This is culture building in a transnational context; commodification at a global level, yet carried out with local roots.

From a more political position, however, we can see that this expanding architectural culture emerges from an imagined hybridization of historic time and diasporic space, an imagination of exogenous standards and transnational lifestyles. The existence of the developers' real estate agencies in the USA, UK, Australia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Dubai, or Kuwait, suggests some of the locations from which ideas, finance, and imaginations may arise. But property is also being sold to NRIs from the Sudan, China, Libya, Hong Kong, South Africa, Singapore, France—each group of potential investors and consumers perhaps exercising, if only in theory, something of the expectations and standards of the lifestyle cultures.

Just as economic globalization has, from the mid-1980s, created a market for top-level multinational CEOs, bond dealers, and specialists in international business, simultaneously forcing down the wages of the underclass to a global minimum and increasing the numbers of the unemployed so, in spatial and cultural terms, architectural globalization, on one hand, generates the world's tallest or most expensive building and, on the other, provides sleeping spaces on the streets for the increasing number of homeless.

In India, this globalization of architectural space can, of course, be seen from many different viewpoints. It can be said, for example, that the Indian "City of the Future" is becoming much more cosmopolitan, inter-nationalized by designs for suburban housing from America, Canada, or Britain. This brings a degree of social, spatial and visual diversity to a domestic architectural scene long dominated by the uniformity of government fiat and the equally numbing tradition of the Public Works Department. Yet the most recent

developments show that it is already massively adding to the ways in which different forms of housing provision signal the momentous, and increasingly social and economic as well as shelter divisions between the impossibly rich and the miserably poor, such that the differences one can see in Manhattan will, by comparison, look like a socialist paradise. New Delhi is fast becoming the most spatially re-feudalized city in Asia, with new walled compounds, patrolled by the universal *chowkidar*, sealing off lifestyles of luxury from the surrounding seas of poverty.

Notes

¹ The international edition of *India Today* began in 1981, the American supplement to this in 1992, and the UK supplement, in 1995 (*India Today* April 15, 1995, p.1).

² Ten years ago (1987) the number of NRI's was put at 12.6 million, of which the seven largest populations were in Nepal (3.8m), Malaysia (1.2m), Sri Lanka (1 m), South Africa (850,000), the UK (789,000), Mauritius (701,000) and the USA (500,000). See *Statistical Outline of India* (1995). More recent numbers are likely to be more than double this number.

³ I am indebted to Shelly Ryan and Abidin Kusno for this insight.

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