

## URBANISATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF URBAN APARTMENT CULTURE: A NEW SITE OF SOCIAL SPACE FORMATION

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**Abstract:** Urbanisation is considered both as an index of economic development and an important factor of social change. The features of urbanisation are formed by the nature of its locale, cultural roles, demography, class organisation and administrative system. The urbanisation process leads to an increase in population density. The character of ecological substructure in urban centres has altered its spatial character to provide residential units to its natives as well as the migrants. A new residential character in the Urban setting is the apartments that have produced social space which act as the site of production of culture.

The apartments or flats are micro-components of a housing unit which is generally considered as a collection of facilities for the exclusive use of a separate social group called a household. The present paper will make an attempt to trace the historical genesis of Urban Apartment Houses, over time and space from the global context in general to the city of Kolkata in particular. It will also try to emphasize the way spatial theory conforms to the production of this new urban character.

### Introduction

Urbanisation is the physical movement of rural peoples to cities and the adaptations of these immigrants to the new environment. It is also the process of social-cultural change that happens in the rural areas due to cultural radiation of traits from the nearby urban areas. Urban Anthropology conceives the process of Urbanisation on researches made in Latin America, Africa and Asia by the British and the American Anthropologists over the

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years. The anthropology of urbanisation emphasizes “the altered social structure, interpersonal ties, associational life and ethnic or tribal identity that develop as tribesman or peasant becomes urbanite” (Fox, 1977).

Urbanisation is considered as both an index of economic development and an important factor of social change. The features of urbanisation are formed by the nature of its locale, cultural roles, demography, class organisation and administrative system. There is a big difference in the concept and manifestation of urbanization between developed and developing nations. West or the developed nations considers urbanisation as a means for a breakdown of traditional social institutions and values but in the developing nations like India ~~situation~~, this ‘breakdown’ hypothesis is misleading. This would make the concepts of urbanisation and westernization synonymous and in turn, ignore the existence of Redfield’s primary urbanisation upon which the secondary urbanisation had its pillars rested. In regard to Urbanisation, a number of structural factors triggered its processual stages which include accelerated demographic growth, land ownership concentration, low agricultural productivity and a certain degree of industrialization. In this write-up, I will adhere to the concept of Urbanization in a match with the ideology of Redfield or the concept as it becomes relevant in India.

Studies on urbanisation over the years have been conducted nation wise, region wise and community wise from the historical past. I will hereby restrict myself to the studies on urbanization conducted in India only. On a nationwide basis, Ashis Bose (1966, 1967, 1970) have covered a wide variety of aspects of urbanisation including detailed mapping and analysis of the pattern of urbanisation, delineation of structural characteristics and some related features. Ashok Mitra (1967) has dealt with issues related to internal migration. Anthropologists and urban geographers have made a maximum contribution to urbanisation studies from a regional perspective (B.N. Ganguli, 1963; L.P. Vidyarthi, 1968). Besides national and regional perspectives, the growth and evolutionary pattern of urban centres were studied by anthropologists over the years (Redfield & Singer, 1954; Singer, 1972).

### **Social Space: The site of production of Culture**

From its earliest definition by E.B. Tylor in 1871, the concept of culture has undergone continuous addition and alternations of character. Better to say, the concept has been redefined times and again. These continuous redefinitions have yielded new characters of culture in forms of culture as a process; culture as a social heritage, culture as super organic, culture as overt and covert, culture as integral, culture as tradition, culture as abstraction, culture as acquired, culture as cumulative, culture as distinct and culture as a standard of society. However, it has never been easy to accommodate all the different features of culture in any single analytical conceptualization (Gupta, 2001). In the words of Zygmunt

Bauman (1973), “the unyielding ambiguity of the concept of culture is notorious. Much less so is the idea that this ambiguity follows not so much from the way people define culture, as from the incompatibility of numerous lines of thought, which have come together historically in the same term.” From the anthropological dimension, the concept of culture draws its definition from the norms and values, which lays significance on the interrelation-interaction attributes in the society at large. In a nutshell, to follow the everyday life of the people, cultural definitions become *sin-qua-non*. However, to deal with the aforesaid ambiguities (contradictions and conformities) in cultural conceptualisations, culture is needed to be considered in terms of root metaphors (Gupta, 2001) that govern social interactions. Now, to understand the root metaphors in the social interaction domain comes the significance of *Space*.

The concept of *Space* is multifarious. Like culture, it also cannot be brought into a single analytical conceptualisation. The works of Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Lefebvre are foundational to spatial theory. Foucault (1977, 70) suggests that *Space* is no longer to be treated as “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile”. For Foucault, *space* is both a way of thinking synchronically rather than diachronically and a means for bringing together architectural or physical space and domains of realms of thought. Foucault’s idea of *Space* is thus a blend of material and ideological construction. He used this blend to understand the constitution and operation of power. For Bourdieu, *space* is relational and implies mutual exteriority and difference. It is a “field of power” where individuals or groups occupy relative positions in which difference is symbolically enunciated by the deployment of social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986, 1998). Bourdieu’s approach is useful for understanding the relative positions of individuals and groups within a field, but his emphasis tends to produce a static account of power and status that does not entirely capture the virtuosity of social interaction as it unfolds in specific places over time. Lefebvre’s (1991) work of the “Production of Space” presents a revolutionary form of analysis based on *Space*. For Lefebvre, “The form of Social Space is encounter, assembly, simultaneity. But assembles or what is assembled? The answer is everything that there is in space, everything that is produced either by nature or by society, either through their cooperation or their conflicts. Everything: living beings, things objects, works, signs and symbols” (Lefebvre 1991, 101). He focuses attention on the production of space but constructed a model of various ‘processes of assembly’ (Lefebvre 1991, 31-33) including three elements, viz. ‘representations of space,’ ‘spatial practices’ and ‘representational spaces’. Talking on the character of *space*, Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have opined, “Representations of space in social sciences are remarkably dependent on images of break, rupture and disjunction. The distinctiveness of societies, nations and cultures is predicated on a seemingly unproblematic division of space, on the

fact that they occupy “naturally” discontinuous spaces. The premise of discontinuity forms the starting point from which to theorize contact, conflict and contradiction between cultures and societies. Anthropologists in recent times have realised and acknowledged that *space* has become an essential component in culture studies. The point of realisation lies in the fact that “culture is enlivened in *space* such that without space there is no clear conception of cultural membership” (Gupta, 2001). Present-day anthropologists are therefore rethinking and reconceptualizing culture studies in spatialized ways.

### **Urban Apartment House: Formation of a new spatial setting**

The foundation of Apartment houses was defined by the term ‘housing, which in the broadest sense, refers to something much more complex than mere shelter. Privacy is also bound up with the concept, perhaps even as a matter of definition. A housing unit is generally thought of as a collection of facilities for the exclusive use of a separate social group called a household, and that the set of facilities involved in this concept seems to change in fairly predictable ways as general living standards rise (Smith, 1970). The facilities included in a housing unit includes sleeping place, place of housekeeping particularly for food production, workplace maybe for some family members, recreation place and with private sanitary facilities.

The very genesis of the term housing complex or apartment houses incorporates an unconscious assumption that these are limited or inferior types of dense housing in special areas of the city; more akin to resident clubs, tenements, public housing, or vertical ghettos than to desired homes (Hancock, 1984). The meaning generated from the concept of apartment houses has historical reasons embedded in it.

### **Urban Apartment Houses: A brief historical genesis**

The idea of housing was initiated during the Industrial Revolution. The industrial owners undertook the construction of some ‘model’ community housing understanding the needs of good housing for their workers. One of the earliest of such community housing was built in Bessbrook near Newry in Ireland in 1846 for workers in the linen mills. In 1852, Sir Titus Salt built Saltaire for some 3000 workers in his textile mill near Bradford. In 1879 George Cadbury, a chocolate manufacturer moved his plant from Birmingham to a rural site and constructed the township of Bournville with 1900 dwellings. In 1886, Lever Brothers built Port Sunlight near Liverpool. The site for this project was 550 acres provided with interior gardens and play areas apart from housing provisions, which is no doubt a forerunner of present-day housing architecture. Another project that foreshadowed subsequent developments was Creswell, built by Percy Houfton in 1895 for his Bolsover Colliery. In this project, a hexagonal pattern was used in which the houses faced inward on the gardens.

Sir Joseph Roundtree, the cocoa manufacturer, built Earswick near York in 1905. This like Bournville was made a community trust. The project was planned by Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin, architects prominent in the new direction of the housing. The British Housing Law in 1890 empowered the state and local authorities to condemn land and building dwellings for rent to the working class. In response to the growing strength of the Trade Union Movement in Germany, a law of 1889 granted privileges to co-operative housing developments, using funds derived from social insurance, which had been inaugurated by Bismarck.

Housing colonies in America made a rapid spread through the popular concept of *apartment houses*. The term *apartment house* refers to limited or inferior types of dense housing in special areas of the city; more akin to resident clubs, tenements, public housing or vertical ghettos than to desired homes. Since the days of the formation of apartment houses in America in around 1875, it has reflected both persistence and change in American social order, status, bias and opportunity. Both the past as well as present-day residents of an apartment house in America opined to have at least two things in common which are: they are renters and they are considered by society to be in an at best transient social state. The growth of apartment houses in America has its root embedded in industrialization complemented by urbanisation particularly in the period between 1900 and 1940. In this span of time urban space doubled and urban population quadrupled. During this time American cities were divided into two parts, for the managers and the workers with contrasting characters of privileges, services and infrastructure among them. The contrast repeated the characters of European colonies established at the time of the industrial revolution. The characters, which complemented the process of urbanisation, include an increase in ground rents, property taxes and the construction of non-residential structures. This made living unfeasible for most people. An example may be drawn from the city of Chicago where central residential areas disappeared totally, particularly when black Americans and other poor native newcomers began replacing immigrant labour after 1915. Corporate headquarters were separated from factories and relocated in skyscrapers near large department stores, city hall, banks, public media and related special services. Together with corporate buildings came up luxury hotels. Behind the aforesaid non-residential constructions (from a stretch of ten miles) lies the tenement of ghettos, apartment houses and one family homes. The case for Boston manifests similar interesting characters. Here residential segmentation was highly visible during the metropolitan stage of urbanisation. Herbert Gans, 1962, in his study of *urban villagers* observed that the west end of Boston, an inner-city residential district of three to five-storey wooden tenements and brick apartment building walk up, had been generally unchanged since the early nineteenth century. The west end was a second stage living area for low-income immigrants and first-generation

natives from the north end first the Irish, then eastern European Jews, Poles, later Italians and twenty-three nationalities by 1940. The west end, which was bounded by the largest skid row (an area of destitute, homeless, drifters, alcoholics and other social outcasts) on one side and upper-class Beacon Hill on the other was unthinkable as a neighbourhood for the local residents. Beacon Hill had a residence in form of apartments and townhouses were inhabited by upper and upper-middle-class people. As one descends the slope, the status of buildings and people decreases. The back of the hill area once occupied by the servants of hill aristocracy is now inhabited by families who moved up from the bottom of the slope, and increasingly by young middle-class couples in modernized tenements or converted townhouses who are gradually erasing the social difference between the back of the hill and the hill itself. Similar small-scale ecologies of segmentation were evident elsewhere in urban America. The legal character of apartment house zoning started in the year 1926 when the Supreme Court first upheld zoning itself as a proper activity of local governments. In that case, the village of Euclid near Cleveland was allowed to prevent a realty company from building apartment houses on the same legal ground that gave local governments the right to prevent business and related non-residential activity in residential neighbourhoods. The court held that “development of detached house sections is greatly retarded by the coming of apartment houses so that in such sections very often the apartment house is a mere parasite, constructed in order to take advantage of the open space and attractive surroundings created by the residential character of the district”. In America, five major types of apartment housing emerged within this historic pattern of social attitudes, market practices and government regulations. They are palatial apartments for the rich, luxury apartments for the affluent, owner-occupied apartments for the first two groups, efficiency apartments for the middle class and subsidized apartments for the low income and the poor. The characters of income, tenure, building types, chronology, appearance, amenities, unit costs as well as sex, community and stage in the life cycle (like age, family status and health) defined the social map of these apartment houses. The earliest apartment houses exclusively for the rich were built alongside mansions elegant townhouses. Here reference may be made to a five-storey *Stuyvesant* apartment house built in New York City in 1869. This building is believed to be the first apartment house in the United States. The building contained two balconied units per floor, each with a chamber (bedroom) at either end of a long narrow hall from which emerged a common space (living room), a library or another bedroom, a dining room, one bath, a kitchen and a windowless room for the servants. The first apartment house in Chicago had a similar planned architecture known as “*Flat*” built-in 1878. These French flats also appeared in Boston, New York and elsewhere in the 1870s. The first known newspaper reference to this building type was a newspaper advertisement in 1876 for a home in the elegant new

apartment house. In spite of continuous construction of palatial and luxury apartments from the 1870s to 1970s in every expensive neighbourhood including downtown Manhattan or along Gold coast in Chicago or even suburban towns, the largest number of multi-family dwellings are middle-class efficiency apartment houses. In fact, palatial, luxury and resident-owned apartments together make up less than a quarter of the total number of apartments built in the United States since 1869. The majority of efficiency apartments are compact one to five-room units in small walk-up buildings, several stories high located in or near the city's middle and lower-income residential areas. Originally they were plain brick, sometimes wooden structures with flat roofs and an overall box look. Efficiency apartments were built in large numbers between the 1880s and 1930s. Chicago provides a very good example as it became an apartment city during this period. In 1883, 1142 apartment houses were constructed in Chicago only which caught the attention of the median it was reported that three to five-storey flats came up as if by magic in every major street and cross street of the city. From all observations, it becomes very much evident that the United States had made a big impact in the development culture across nations.

To talk about the city of Kolkata (erstwhile Calcutta), at the outset I need to say that in its postcolonial years continues the colonial legacy in its urban morphology in two principal ways. First, British rulers have fostered a planning ideology for urban development (based on the British Town and Country Planning Act, 1909; New York ordinance of 1916 on zoning), which can roughly be estimated as a process of secondary urbanisation. In the colonial period, the development of the city as a centre of economic opportunity accelerated the immigration of both landed gentry and the labour force from neighbouring areas and states. Second, it has made the permanent ownership of urban land transferable to the field of real estate investment. In July 1955, the Government of West Bengal set up the Housing Directorate under the Housing Department to tackle the problem of housing shortage in Kolkata and industrial areas of the state. The effort of the housing directorate under the state department to look out for newer alternatives were in full swing and hence it resulted in a change in the pattern of living from privately owned houses to the apartment of the housing complex. This type of residential space conforms to the social housing schemes formulated by the Government of India. These schemes included the following:

- i) Integrated subsidized Housing for Industrial workers and Economically weaker sections of the communities.
- ii) Slum Clearance Housing Schemes, which envisages acquisition and clearance of slum areas in Calcutta and re-housing of the *Bustee* dwellers.
- iii) L.I.G (Low Income Group) housing scheme, the scheme deals essentially with the construction of houses by the State Government for Low Income Group people and

also disbursing loans to L.I.G people for construction of their own residential houses. The L.I.G people were considered to be those whose annual income does not exceed Rs. 7200.

- iv) M.I.G (Middle Income Group) Housing Scheme was introduced in 1959. The M.I.G people were considered as those whose annual income falls within the range of Rs. 7200/- and Rs. 18000/-.
- v) Subsidized Housing schemes for plantation workers.
- vi) Rental Housing Scheme for State Government Employee (introduced in February 1959), the square feet area and salary slabs are mentioned below:
  - (a) Category I: 57 sq. mt (Rs 900/- to Rs. 1350/- per month).
  - (b) Category II: 44 sq. mt (Rs 600/- to Rs 900/- per month).
  - (c) Category III: 34 sq. mt (Rs 450/- to Rs 600/- per month).
  - (d) Category IV: 24 sq. mt (Rs 350/- to Rs 450/- per month).
  - (e) Category V: 20 sq. mt (Up to Rs 350/- per month).

The aforesaid projects of the Government of West Bengal were driven by socialism with the target of providing shelter over every head. A report from the Housing Department, Government of West Bengal (1977) states that from the year 1955 to 1976, the state government have constructed or financed the construction of over 44000 houses or flats or tenements for the people of different income groups all over the state. The beneficiaries are middle and low-income group people, economically weaker sections, refugees etc. Despite this construction rate, the state government has assessed the requirement of the Calcutta Metropolitan area alone at 50,000 per year. At the initial stages, the construction work was taken over by the State Government, Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (C.M.D.A), West Bengal Housing Board and Calcutta Improvement Trust (C.I.T). But, later on, observing the colossal shortage of Government Housing in the State together with meagre resources in the command, the Government realized that it would hardly be possible to wipe out the backlog. So the government decided to encourage private sector companies, cooperative societies, individual promoters to build apartment houses. In the last two decades, the Kolkata skyline has undergone a sea change due to the proliferation of the Real estate industry simultaneously with the increasing urban margin. The principal focus of the then construction bodies was creating human hives, meant for the people of low economic status. The location of the creation of these flats reflects the characters of these hives in the real sense. The government selected the low wetland areas of East Kolkata, some parts of South Kolkata and some parts of not many inhabited areas in North Kolkata. In a nutshell, the not so demanding or the left out places of Kolkata by the



so-called nobles were selected for constructions. The different localities where such flat constructions were made included Tollygunge, Baghajotin, Jadavpur, and Behala in South Kolkata, Belegkata and Tangra in East-Central Kolkata and Paikpara, Belgachia, Lake Town and Baranagar in North Calcutta. The aforesaid areas witnessed a sudden influx of a low-income group of people at that point in time. This process of apartment expansion went around characterized by an increase in population density over time. The construction of apartment houses expanded multiple times as private sector real estate investors enter the arena. This feature has increased the competition of apartment house production. The present apartment house has incorporated two new characters. One, the then mansion character is incorporated in apartments in the name of the H.I.G. (High-income group) category. Two, the areas of apartment construction are spread to the elite *locales* in Kolkata like Alipur, Ballygunge, Highland park, Santoshpur and the most recent upcoming, the Rajarhat.

But, it is also significant to observe that in the context of the distribution of apartments around the city, the character of elite and mass distribution in selected places in the city is continuing till date by the distribution of apartment buildings (in the majority) in selected locales in and around Calcutta. The areas around Eastern Metropolitan Bypass (especially in between Kasba connector and Garia), V.I.P Road (Laketown, Bangur, Keshtopur, Baguihati, Airport and beyond) proves the case. The trend of expansion is in a rolling process and is expected to do so in the coming future beyond the ambit of Calcutta Municipal Corporation.

### **General Observation**

The process of Urbanisation has remained a global trend with an increase in the formation of new urban centres complemented the presence of increasing population density of at least 400 per square kilometre (1,000 per square mile). This trend gradually leads to shrinkage in city space and an altered ecological substructure (Ross, 1961.) from a traditional rural setting. Horizontal expansion gradually gave way to vertical expansion, in the name of apartments popularly called flats. This new type of spatial creations represents a number of new socio-architectural characters generating a new identity of social space, rather than a blend of material and ideological constructions.

Architecture-Space interaction is manifested in everyday life, which becomes evident from the observations of different scholars. For Kisho Kurokawa (n.d) “Modern Architecture was constructed on the paradigm of clear divisions of space– the interior from exterior, environment from building private from the public, historic from contemporary, a strict order based on dichotomy. Yet what was lost to such dualistic articulation were the ‘in-between’ multivalent ambiguities, that is to say, the human qualities

harboured infringe and median environments. I seek a new symbiotic architectural space, to reintroduce symbiotic spaces between the exterior and interior, symbiotic ambivalences between nature and architecture, symbiotic multivalences between contradictory elements. For Ricardo Bofill (n.d), Architecture defines space. Emptiness does not exist; space does. For Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown (n.d), “You have called Space *primus inter pares*, we have more irreverently said that for Modern Architecture, space was God.”

The subject of modern Architecture is significant for its cultural value input. Not only has it manifested the physical structure of the building but also its cultural structure. The subject of architecture– space is approached in two different ways. One, the significance of building frameworks on cultural values and Two, the significance of cultural values in the physical structure of buildings. In both contexts, building-community interrelationship is the core issue and becomes the real essence of spatial architecture. This dual approach becomes more relevant when it is substantiated by the words of Norman Foster (n.d) who says, “If the spaces that we create do not move the heart and mind, they are surely only addressing one part of their function.” Even Bernard Tschumi (n.d) says “Spaces are qualified by actions just as actions are qualified by space. One does not trigger the other; they exist independently. Only when they intersect, do they affect one another”. The subject of Architectural Anthropology, therefore, interprets physical space in terms of the cultural space of the communities.

These apartment houses which has been a product of urbanisation has bred new cultural characters like the so-called ‘Interdictory Space’ (Flusty, 1994) which was compromised over the concept of ‘Privatopia’ (Mckenzie,1994). With the introduction of multifunctional spatial usage in an urban setting, the concepts of ‘Adapted Space’ and ‘Channel Spaces’ (Lynch and Rodwin, 1958), the apartment houses have bred the ‘Culture of Heteropolis’ with hetero-architecture resulting in mixing categories, transgressing boundaries, inverting customs and adapting marginal usage.

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